

Popular Muscapes and the Characterisation of the Urban Environment

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Landscape & Environment



Popular music has been described in academic book titles as 'The Sound of the City' and as 'Urban Rhythms'. The urban environment has symbolic significance within popular music culture and has been represented through musical sounds, lyrics and visual images, and through oral and written narratives. This is evident in the urban dystopias of industrial music, post-punk portrayals of urban decay, the nostalgic urban landscapes of so-called 'Britpop', the upbeat images of downtown promoted by 1950s crooners, the inner city 'hoods of rap, and in the garages, cellars and lofts of alternative or bohemian culture. Moreover, whilst popular music is a global, 'travelling culture', it is also commonly perceived as being fixed to place, and urban environments are commonly believed to have a deterministic influence on musical performance and creativity.

This project aims to examine critically the relationship between popular music and the urban environment (particularly built and sonic environments). It will consider the influence of music-making on the character of the urban environment and on how that environment is used, experienced, interpreted and represented, and in turn the influence of the urban environment on music-making. In doing so the project seeks to contribute to and inform topical and pressing debates about changes to the environment of European and North American cities brought about by economic restructuring, and the impact of those changes on creativity, cultural diversity and local distinctiveness.

The project will involve comparative, ethnographic research on musicians and music-making and will focus on rock, country and 'hip-hop' music. The city of Liverpool has been chosen as a case study for this research in order to take advantage of heightened activity and debate concerning culture, landscape and the urban environment provoked by its status as European Capital of Culture 2008. The research will be conducted through a partnership with National Museums Liverpool, which will be staging a major exhibition on Liverpool popular music in 2008, and with English Heritage, which is currently supporting innovative research on historic landscape characterisation. The implications of the research for an understanding of the relationship between music-making and the urban environment will be considered through published scholarly outputs. Ways of disseminating the research findings to a wide range of audiences will also be considered in order to provoke public reflection and debate on music and place and new perspectives on the urban environment. The project will explore, for example, ways of digitally mapping the practices and perspectives of musicians in order to represent, through audio-visual means, characterisation of the urban environment and cultural and historical change.