

## Chapter 6

# POSTMODERNITY and MUSICAL GENRE

post·**mod**·ern·i·sm (n.) a wide-ranging cultural movement which adopts a sceptical attitude to many of the principles that have underpinned Western thought and social life for the last few centuries.  
(adj. post·**mod**·ern)

- *Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, Ed. Stuart Sim, Second Edition (London: Routledge, 2005)

## Genre Implosion: A Radio Experiment on CFMU 93.3FM

In direct reference to this project, *Genre Implosion* is the name I gave to a weekly 30-minute radio show which I developed, pitched and have subsequently written, produced and hosted on CFMU 93.3FM in Hamilton since November 2005, with the specific intent of portraying a wide range of music crossing age, style and genre based on a single programming theme for each show. I deliberately select broad-ranging themes applicable to a wide range of music each week, such as 'introductions', 'endings', 'colour', 'place', 'winter', 'ostinato', 'the high female voice', 'the violin', etc..., and illustrate them across the genre divides within 7-10 minutes of commentary and 20-23 minutes of music. Accompanying the show is a website which I host at [www.genreimplosion.ca](http://www.genreimplosion.ca) where I am chronicling the show process as well as the theoretical work that has gone into this paper.

Conspicuously absent from the show's commentary is any discussion like that found in this paper, on the actual subject of musical genre: indeed, only rarely does it refer to a musical

genre by name, other than in an attempt to locate a selection for the benefit of listeners unfamiliar with it. The implicit message intended by this is genre's problematic nature, its non-necessity to listening and evaluating music according to our tastes and indeed, its impact upon those evaluations and those tastes. Where they exist, references to genre on *Genre Implosion* are designed to communicate an understanding of music's substantial non-musical content, and that content's necessity to *understanding* music – not to *enjoying* it and not to the subjective *imputation of meaning* inherent on some level to all listening. I strive imperfectly in some limited way to excise genre from listeners' reception of music, not by way of suggesting it shouldn't be there, but rather as a fresh perspective that might impact their relationship with music, hopefully moving towards ways of understanding music less constrained by genre than that encouraged by the music industry in general, and conventional radio in particular.

In the same vein, also conspicuously absent from *Genre Implosion's* commentary is any explicit attention to the well-known and popular problem of music not fitting into defined genres, appropriately bemoaned by artists who resent inaccurate categorisation of their music, and increasingly by individuals and groups similarly pigeon holed on the basis of musical genre stereotypes (i.e. African heritage = taste for hip-hop/R&B, etc.). Notwithstanding that in keeping with the show agenda of a limited excision of genre from musical reception I don't address this subject directly, much of the music I select fits into two non-genreal categories of my own invention: those pieces which in some sense typify a musical genre, and those which cross genreal lines or otherwise defy genreal classification.

For the show's theme music, used always at the beginning of each episode to underscore the opening commentary, and usually reprised at the end, I selected *Rain Dance* by U.K. "new age/progressive" (now *there's* a problematic genre name...) band Adiemus and trans-genreal musician Karl Jenkins. From an introduction of eerie rain sticks leading to an ambiguous percussion groove, a quasi-ethnic lyric (which is entirely instrumental, and which despite the implication of some 'African-ness' means nothing in any language) a prominent celtic-sounding flute, symphonic brass section and then the rest of the London Philharmonic, the piece thwarts genre detection, or at least tends to lead one away whenever you think you 'have it'. The band name "Adiemus", by the way, is not actual Latin - it too is entirely made up.

The show disclaimers were important. The 30-minute format, the limitations of my own and CFMU's recording libraries, and my own limited time available to put the show together would never let me discuss any show theme and illustrate it in anything more than a broad, survey context. Even suggesting that any episode was an actual survey of its topic, as I discovered, was going too far, as lively listener feedback often pointed out aspects of a show theme which had gone untreated for reasons of time. While I tried to illustrate musical themes crossing into a wide, balanced and non-ordered or privileged set of genres which spanned an enormous range, there could be no promise to address broad categories like 'classical', 'popular', 'jazz', etc. in any democratic way: there was just no time, nor obviously did all lend themselves equally well to every show theme. The longest track that has appeared on Genre Implosion to date was just over seven minutes (a necessity of the 30-minute show format, and the need to make succinct points in the commentary which listeners could quickly find in the music itself), a

standard which effectively excluded huge parts of the musical repertory. Perhaps most importantly I tried to make it clear that I was sharing a highly subjective set of perceptions of meaning which I hope listeners would find interesting and useful, rather than alleging them to be in any sense universally, uniquely or unequivocally 'true'.

One interesting and unexpected challenge that came of the technical process of recording and editing a collection of such divergent content was that of audio level. The between five and seven musical tracks on each show typically include radio-produced pop, jazz, hip-hop, etc. with equalized (and maximised) levels throughout, traditional folk, classical and world musics recorded at very low, simple levels, and symphonic contemporary and other styled selections containing both extremes. The dilemma that emerged was of how these levels should interact in a non-hierarchical way (i.e. not privileging music designed and produced for radio play over that which was not), and just as interestingly how they should interact with a single host's voice, which would seem unnaturally loud next to soft selections and soft next to loud. While the practicality and the classical format standard of maximising the louds just below peaking levels, and never adjusting the internal balance of any track (i.e. allowing the softs to go as soft as they would, even to the point of near-disappearance) usually prevailed, it couldn't escape my attention that the maximised levels of studio-processed pop tended to be privileged in the overall impression, giving a sense of more sustained force and impact, as compared for example to generally loud symphonic music, of which sudden drops in volume are a defining feature.

The question of the host's voice then led me to wonder what 'genre' of radio host is indicated by a non-genreal show. In the industry standard of format radio, adopting a genreal

format brings with it certain stylistic patterns of DJ practice and assumptions about listener expectations. The alternative (CBC/CFMU, et al.) to this is multi-format radio in which individual shows and their hosts deal mainly with one genreal category or set of categories: in this case while a show's genre may suggest a certain 'type' in DJ practice a broadcaster like the CBC with an all-professional staff will respect these differences while nonetheless ensuring that there is some commonality of 'hosting style' across its offerings (whereas a broadcaster like CFMU using nearly all volunteer hosts will on principle and out of necessity reject this notion). Again – a pragmatic solution dictated that I be my relatively scholarly classical-format self, although it seemed necessary and appropriate to balance my knowledge and opinions with a healthy dose of humour at both my own expense and that of the music comprising the show's "world."

A brief word of reference to the Genre Implosion online survey at [genreimplosion.ca](http://genreimplosion.ca) (see Appendix) will suffice: the device of a listener survey was never expected to (nor did it) attract a large enough sample to be empirically useful; nor was it ever intended to simulate any statistical study of listener/surfer concept or use of musical genre. Indeed, even had it aired on a more widely-heard medium than CFMU's student-run, low-power and Niagara Escarpment-contained station, a show-conception like *Genre Implosion* was unlikely ever to attract a truly broad listener base, requiring a certain level of knowledge of, curiosity about, and engagement with the genre system in order to sustain interest. Rather it was included on the website as a way of allowing listeners to interact with the concept of genre in a direct way the show itself would by definition not provide, and to encourage feedback into the show production by way of 'genre tips' – that is, listeners' conceptions of pieces falling into my own two über-genreal categories: namely those

that *really work* with the genreal system by typifying a category, and those that *really don't*, by defying classification.

Indeed it was the request for these “genre tips” (genre-typifying and genre-defying pieces) that for me returned the most lively and interesting response content. While, as I understand to be true in many surveys, respondents typically tended to leave a few questions/fields blank, these ones – despite being located at the end of the survey (along with the easier “Favourite Genre” question at the beginning) – were completed in 100% of responses.

I provide the following results only as a matter of interest to the reader, rather than as anything more significant about the general musical public.

- Question 8: while predictably (considering the presumably multi-genre-inclined following of a show-concept like GI) no respondent could limit their musical taste to a single genre, most respondents reported just one or two genres as the upper limit to their musical preference. While it should be remembered that the flexibility of scope inherent to the word ‘genre’, this points either to a narrower-than-expected general taste in music or else a tendency to define genres in somewhat broad terms (such as ‘jazz’ and ‘classical’, each of which encompass a great deal of diversity)
- Question 1: The case of respondents referring to the problematic ‘classical’ genre was interesting, and outlined many of the classifying parameters and levels typically used to subdivide it. “Favourite genres” falling under this über-genreal classification referred to by name included ‘classical’, ‘baroque’, ‘baroque French opera’, ‘early music’ and ‘symphonic tone poems’. In the realm of genre tips the largest proportion of respondents chose classical pieces as being able to both to typify a genre and to defy classification (in the latter case, John Cage’s *4’33”* was cited a number of times).
- Question 7: While a significant majority of respondents professed some difficulty in the genreal classification of the music *that they like*, they tended to profess some ease with the classification of music in general. This complex indicator points, at least, to understandably higher stakes (and thus more care in generalisation) in the music that one ‘likes’, and a corresponding greater comfort with simplification of other types.

While listener feedback was very appreciative and pointed to some having experienced an opening out of their understanding and perception of music more independent of genre, *Genre Implosion* was ultimately an exercise in my personal freedom from some of the genre paradigms that have attended my own thought. Some have misconstrued a GI 'message' that "genre doesn't work" or "genre doesn't matter" – indeed it does both. My version, if à la McLuhan there must be a message for this medium, is "genre doesn't define music: it only imitates and mocks it." As the slogan that begins every show runs: "They're your ears: believe them."

## Conclusions: Pragmatism and Postmodernity

In his essay, *Postmodernism and Music*, Derek Scott refers several times to the notion of musical meaning -- most substantially under the heading "Styles as Discursive Codes."

Musical meanings are not labels arbitrarily thrust upon abstract sounds; these sounds and their meanings originate in a social process and achieve their significance within a particular social context. Musical signifiers develop in tandem with society.<sup>112</sup>

Scott argues that meanings accorded to musical sounds are devised and implemented by both the producers and consumers of music. The same could be said of the meaning level represented by musical genre: a piece written with a musical genre in mind, even if it neatly fits that genre for the purposes of the composer, is in no way guaranteed of conforming to or

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<sup>112</sup> Scott, Derek B. "Postmodernism and Music" in *The Routledge Companion to Postmodernism*, ed. Stuart Sim. (Oxford: Routledge, 2005). p.127

communicating that genre in the ears of a given listener. Semantic disputes that cloud and weaken music's impact break out: some form of mediation seems in order.

In a 1904 lecture, early pragmatist William James recounted a dispute among his friends about a person on the side of a tree opposite to a squirrel. This person ran around the tree in an unsuccessful attempt to catch a glimpse of the squirrel, while the latter fled around the tree trunk, always staying opposite his pursuer and thus evading his sight. The dispute was over whether or not the person 'went around' the squirrel, and the disputers sought James' help in settling the question. James picks up the story:

The resultant metaphysical problem now is this: Does the man go round the squirrel or not? He goes round the tree, sure enough, and the squirrel is on the tree; but does he go round the squirrel? In the unlimited leisure of the wilderness, discussion had been worn threadbare. Every one had taken sides, and was obstinate; and the numbers on both sides were even. Each side, when I appeared therefore appealed to me to make it a majority. Mindful of the scholastic adage that whenever you meet a contradiction you must make a distinction, I immediately sought and found one, as follows: "Which party is right," I said, "depends on what you practically mean by 'going round' the squirrel. If you mean passing from the north of him to the east, then to the south, then to the west, and then to the north of him again, obviously the man does go round him, for he occupies these successive positions. But if on the contrary you mean being first in front of him, then on the right of him, then behind him, then on his left, and finally in front again, it is quite as obvious that the man fails to go round him, for by the compensating movements the squirrel makes, he keeps his belly turned towards the man all the time, and his back turned away. Make the distinction, and there is no occasion for any further dispute. You are both right and both wrong according as you conceive the verb 'to go round' in one practical fashion or the other."<sup>113</sup>

James then went on to offer his solution as a simple application of a *pragmatic method*, and it is this way of thinking that lies at the heart of pragmatism:

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<sup>113</sup> James, William. "What is Pragmatism?" in *William James: Writings 1902-1920*. online document, (accessed [3 March 2006]) <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/james.htm>.



Is the world one or many? – fated or free? – material or spiritual? – here are notions either of which may or may not hold good of the world; and disputes over such notions are unending. The pragmatic method in such cases is to try to interpret each notion by tracing its respective practical consequences. What difference would it practically make to any one if this notion rather than that notion were true? If no practical difference whatever can be traced, then the alternatives mean practically the same thing, and all dispute is idle. Whenever a dispute is serious, we ought to be able to show some practical difference that must follow from one side or the other's being right.<sup>114</sup>

Even the newcomer to pragmatist philosophy will note the preponderance of the word 'practical' and its derivatives in the above definition, and recognise the pragmatic movement (an American one, which dates from the last quarter of the 19<sup>th</sup> century) as being a non-determinist one based on the principles of practicality, plurality and, well, peace. And while much of this study has been couched in theoretical constructions inherently critical of genre, the pragmatic view seems a constructive one to apply to the subject, which in some ways provides as many questions to postmodernity as postmodernity provides it with answers.

However one chooses to view genre's construction, function and purpose, it exists ultimately because we ask a form of order of the world around us: at times the world obligingly complies with our request – at times, not. Richard Rorty positions our tendency to locate somewhat organic phenomena like musical genre within the paradigm of science by explaining the logical empiricist position that gave rise to a "philosophy of science:"

...since man was a rational animal and science the acme of rationality, science was the *paradigmatic* human activity. What little there was to say about other areas of culture amounted to a wistful hope that some of them (e.g. philosophy) might themselves become more scientific.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>114</sup> James, William. "What is Pragmatism?" in *William James: Writings 1902-1920*. online document, <http://www.marxists.org/reference/subject/philosophy/works/us/james.htm>. (accessed 3 March 2006)

<sup>115</sup> Rorty, Richard. "Is Natural Science a Natural Kind?" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. p.46

Much of this study has been positioned in terms of a 'natural' phenomenon of musical genre finding itself trapped at the end of modernity in the 'unnatural' world of science. Is musical genre a science, or is it not? I believe that, while it is hard to imagine even the most scientifically-oriented 20<sup>th</sup> century musicologist or music theorist hoping (wistfully or otherwise) that musical genre as a particular "other area of culture" might become more scientific, the axiomatic assumptions of science as scholarly determinant have dictated too much about the genre system of today, and indeed underlie a great deal of current scholarly work. Might, for example, the familiar micro-concentration on individual historical genres and the resulting preponderance of work so intimately engaging specific nuances of music history in fact be created at the expense of any more broadly-conceived investigation of the terrestrial history and trajectories of music as cultural presence and practice?

So, as this study has endeavoured to do, instead of arguing any specific 'nature' of musical genre (i.e. whether musical genre is system, phenomenon or construction) the pragmatist concentrates on its impact upon the world: seeking models of understanding rather than positing any inherent nature. Instead of seeking to argue any form of universality of application of postmodern thought to the totality of musical genre I have sought applications that are instructive and intriguing in a postmodern context. Instead of entering the still-active minefield of the autonomous/textual and the encultured/contextual models of musical study, I have sought more to embrace both (as James did the proponents and opponents of the 'round-the-squirrel' debate) contending that both can be in some sense 'right.'

To carry the pragmatic method to its full consummation... do the studies (or as McLuhan would have preferred, the probes) of musical genre in this paper make any practical difference? If the concepts of Adorno, McLuhan and Baudrillard do indeed map convincingly onto musical genre, and possibly suggest emergent postmodern understandings that better frame genre than those we have inherited from modernity, what have we gained?

An Adornian reading of the relocation of the Anglican chant genre as artwork may help to explain the “nut cases” from which Neil Colliers claims to make his living. McLuhan’s model for the behaviour of media may provide some insight into why the sacred songs of old time country music seemed to effect their own popular retrieval after having been ‘driven back into the hills’ by Nashville and syndicated radio. My reading of contemporary worship music as a Baudrillardian simulacrum in the traditional church musical milieu may account for what appears to have been a certain subversion of reality as its attractive properties failed to materialise for churches who chose to engage it. But even if none of these is “true” (and indeed none is invulnerable to critique), each represents, I would argue, some enrichment of understanding – a more colourful picture of phenomena and events dulled and obscured by history, and by no means a modern-style pronouncement upon the ‘truth’ of that history.

One thing we have not gained from (nor was it ever on the agenda of) this study is any fuller, more factual understanding of any individual musical genre than could be gained from the many more exhaustive musicological studies now filling the bookshelves and journal pages of musical academia. Musicology, and its recent interest in the ‘popular’ musics of the world (and in particular in Europe and North America, where a ‘classical canon’ paradigm has previously

discouraged study into this area) is reaping rich rewards for our understanding not just of those in places and traditions unfamiliar to ourselves, but also of our own places and traditions, and by extension, ourselves. Philosophical accounts and interpretations of reality such as this one carry with them the risk of being more interesting than definitive, more open than concise, more gentle than forceful in their particular version of rational persuasion... but postmodernity has confirmed that they have their place. Turning once more to Rorty, he suggests that rationality can locate within not simple assessments of reasonable 'truth', but within a spirit of inquiry and persuasive arguments rather than legalistic proofs:

On a pragmatist view, rationality is not the exercise of a faculty called "reason" – a faculty which stands in some determinate relation to reality. Nor is it the use of a method. It is *simply* a matter of being open and curious, and of relying on persuasion rather than force.<sup>116</sup>

All three accounts I have proposed deal with a genre's movement or relocation under conditions of change. Arguably, these genreal migrations have the potential to reveal more about the flexible and evolutionary nature of musical genre than older, more static models which might imply that genres are fixed and immutable types consecrated by history. In the case of Anglican chant's shift from a Reformation-devised medium of congregational psalmody into a choral work of art, the change is found within the ultra-standardised genre's service (as Adorno posited concerning the popular music of his time) in the stead of a repertoire of individual pieces. The relocation of this 'artwork' has less to do with production and social control as in Adorno's model than it does, perhaps, with similar migratory phenomena such as jazz's expansion from the

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<sup>116</sup> Rorty, Richard. "Is Natural Science a Natural Kind?" in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. p.62

night club into the concert hall. In the case of old-time country religious songs' migration to and subsequent transformation in the urban radio space of the 1930s and the glitter and authentic pretence of Nashville (only to be retrieved in the "roots revival" in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century), the movement is found in the genre's behaviour as a medium after McLuhan, manifesting extension, obsolescence, retrieval, and reversal within its cultural milieu – or more generally, as a dynamic entity both influenced by and profoundly influencing media and the humanity those media seek to extend. In the case of mainline churches' less-than-successful adoption of Contemporary Christian Music for use in otherwise traditional worship, the change reveals evidence of a Baudrillardian simulacrum, in which the desirable signifiers of youthfulness, energy, rebellion and social justice refer to imagined (but non-existent) communities of worshippers, and replace more demonstrable commodities such as the 'real communities' in which churches work and live.

This study has sought within the phenomenon of musical genre patterns of activity and behaviour, and models of understanding posited by some of postmodernism's formative thinkers, in partial tribute to their originators, yes, but more pragmatically in search of a greater understanding of a dimension of musical life whose significance has greatly increased in musical production and reception even as its efficacy has declined under the weight of what I have argued to be an implosive system. It would be my hope that new understandings of musical genre – such as those I propose – may be gained by considering the ideas of Adorno, McLuhan, Baudrillard, might lead to ways of improving its systemic value, or at least discourage its being mistaken for a more scientific device than it is. While genre's process of signification will always be problematic, its referent, music, is a beloved and celebrated presence in the lives of many

people, and a significant tool in constructing individual and communal identity. Music will always ‘work’, no matter the trouble we experience in classifying it, and the obstacles that process erects in accessing it. Moreover, when the limitations of musical genre in conveying meaning about music are as widely understood as I argue they are experienced, it might be hoped that music’s *actual sound* could be foregrounded in its consumption over the many other images and ideas such as criticism attached parasitically to it: not just via the subjectivities of producer and consumer, but more troublingly by mediators such as corporate profits, propaganda, and power politics. “They’re your ears: believe them.”

Returning one final time to Rorty, and to this paper’s opening epigraphic framing in “truth,” contemporary pragmatism suggests that while there is a version of absolute truth such as the squirrel-debate protagonists sought, it is based not on reality but on our *understanding of* reality. If postmodernity illuminates some “truth” about musical genre it lies surely in the latter.

The pragmatist wants to derelativise both [ethics and science] affirming that in both we aim at what Williams thinks of as “absolute” truth while denying that this latter notion can be explicated in terms of the notion of “how things really are.” The pragmatist does not want to explicate ‘true’ at all, and sees no point in either the absolute-relative distinction, or in the question of whether questions of appraisal *genuinely* arise. ...the pragmatist sees *no truth* in relativism.<sup>117</sup>

What is the truth about musical genre? Just as Rorty breaks with James’ relativist view, if genre is better to serve a postmodern world it too must break with its modern legacy and reach deep into the sound and soul of the music it presumes to represent, just as that music reaches deep into the souls of those who hear it.

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<sup>117</sup> Rorty, Richard. “Is Science a Natural Kind?” in *Objectivity, Relativism and Truth*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991. p.59