

Music Made for TV: Reassessing the History of Pop Music in/on Television

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In his 2003 article, “Look! Hear!: the Uneasy Relationship of Music and Television,” Simon Frith notes that TV has had significant impact on popular music performance, but has never been part of pop music culture. Indeed, for music scholars, popular music has been a curious fit on television, aside from its nuts-and-bolts use in television narrative and programming. Given that some of pop music’s most significant moments – Elvis and the Beatles on *Ed Sullivan*, The Sex Pistols on Bill Grundy’s *Today*, and so on – have occurred on television, how might we further map significant social, cultural, and industrial impacts that the two forms have had on each other? And how can we address significant changes in the distribution of both television and popular music – its technological and aesthetic shifts with the participation of both media in the rise of internet culture and commerce? How can we map the contemporary music and television relationships in an era when so many other media technologies and practices now intervene?

But even if we broaden the frame to include both television and popular music away from its traditional platforms, Frith’s initial arguments must still be addressed. He begins by suggesting that within popular music studies, television has been understood as a “medium of great importance,” in terms of both “starmaking” and “promotion.” (Frith 277) At the same time, he describes the role of music on television as “having little importance,” which Frith argues is evident in a variety of ways – including the fact that the TV audience is rarely also considered a music audience. (278) Music on television matters greatly – it is omnipresent – but at the same time, television holds a precarious place within the context of larger music culture. Frith’s focus on then-present-day televisual forms that featured music included talent shows and what he calls “instant nostalgia” shows, that showcase a given music group or genre, sometimes with a tongue-in-cheek remembrance. And perhaps here is a good place to note some potential slippage in Frith’s paper and our conversation: he moves back and forth from “popular music” and “rock’n’roll” but they are hardly synonymous in Frith’s formulation. Here we should make clear that Frith is mainly discussing rock music as opposed to other more TV-friendly forms of popular music – a distinction that may be difficult to hold in the present day, as rock’s contemporary influence has significantly declined.

Perhaps Frith’s most convincing assertion is that “it is intrinsic to the ideology of rock that it is anti-television.” (282) Compare this with the large historical swath of music known as “pop,” which has tended to more readily accommodate mass cultural tastes and dispositions. Indeed, the musical moments on television that thrill us most are those that break television’s rules in one way or another. Frith rightly suggests that shows focused on youth-based musical trends have often

sought to assuage parental fears. (282) But performances on television may not be as simple as that. Even on youth-oriented shows, it is entirely possible that bands are booked, from time to time, to shock and scandalize – with the host in the role of cultural arbiter, a stand-in for the larger society's codes of conduct. So while Dick Clark's apparent task is to domesticate the likes of Pink Floyd in a 1967 appearance on *American Bandstand*, it may also be true that those booking the acts for the show were expecting (even hoping) for such an outcome. (282)

Reality TV was not the first televisual form to cultivate conflict to attract viewers. I'll close with some contemporary context. Frith's essay was published in 2003 – the same year that iTunes was launched, a year before Facebook's debut, and two years before YouTube. While Frith was addressing previous academic work on the music/TV relationship, the absence of the internet in his analysis seems increasingly untenable. The music and television relationship has changed in recent years with the emergence, return, or redirection of music in and on television and related media platforms. Does Frith's assessment of the music/television relationship still work? Does the relationship remain as uneasy as ever, or is an altogether new relationship emerging? Does it even make sense to think of the two media forms as a duo, when both internet and mobile technologies seem increasingly important to both? Or amidst the rise in influence of the music supervisor on contemporary TV and the proliferation of seemingly endless music-based competition shows? If enough has effectively changed, how can we rethink the music/television relationship as we map various dynamics in an increasingly complex media present?