

“Surely people who go clubbing don’t read”: Dispatches from the Dancefloor and Clubland in Print

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Abstract

In the context of the UK dance club scene during the 1990s, this article redresses a presumption that “people who go clubbing don’t read”. It will thereby test a proposed lacuna in original journalist voices in related print media. The examination is based on key UK publications that focus on the musical tropes and modes of the dancefloor, and on responses from a selection of authors and editors involved in British club culture during this era. The style of this article is itself a methodology that deploys ‘gonzo’ strategies typical of earlier New Journalism, in reaching for a new approach to academicism. In seeking to discover whether the idea that clubbers do not read is due to inauthentic media re/presentations of their experience on the dancefloor, or with specific subcultural discourses, the article concludes that the authenticity of club cultural re/presentation may well be found in fictional responses.

Keywords: music journalism, gonzo journalism, chemical generation literature, electronic dance music culture (EDMC).

Welcome to the disco-text

This article will interrogate the claim made in 2000 by writer and editor Sarah Champion regarding a lacuna in auteur journalist voices, in relation to club culture media products. Her broader reports about a perceived unwillingness amongst clubbers to read at all — “surely clubbers don’t read” — form part of Steve Redhead’s collection *Repetitive Beat Generation* (2000: 18). Within this title, Champion further asserts about the genre-specific media of this subcultural scene that, “There should have been some kind of ‘Gonzo’ journalism to capture the spirit but there wasn’t”. Whilst a definition of gonzo journalism will follow, it is these two central comments that will be principally explored over the course of this article. Firstly, can we test whether the Chemical Generation (a term now broadly applied to this group of writers and readers, playing on notions of drug consumption associated with the rave scene) did or did not read; and further, can we evaluate whether what they read was, or wasn’t, gonzo-oriented? Finally, the article will make a case for the eventual reappearance of the gonzo spirit; shape shifting, now taking on a different literary form.

Let us first define some of the terms that will be used in this article, and set out the parameters of its focus. The spirit Champion refers to was born of the ‘Second Summer of Love’ in 1988, in reference to the first Summer of Love, 1967, itself associated with that decade’s countercultural music scene. In this second summer, a ‘cultural tsunami’ of effects broke over the UK and took many young people willingly in its wake. Imported house music, defined by a stripped-down, electronic beat, fused with a new drug (first patented as Methylenedioxymethamphetamine or MDMA, street-level marketers later settled on the name ‘ecstasy’). As the socio-political impact of this nascent ‘rave’ scene was felt across the country, this new subculture inevitably came onto the radar of writers and journalists, who were all keen to use contemporaneous cultural concerns as source material for their output and, from a publishing and economic standpoint, thereby profit from this interest.

In this context, Rupa Huq (2006) has made useful inroads to UK subcultural studies.

Huq foregrounds ethnic and gender considerations within a club scene that, during the early 1990s in the UK, prided itself on what seemed to be an egalitarian dancefloor. I argue with Redhead (1990, 1997), however, that the older subcultural or tribal affiliations — often with quite proscriptive and rigid codes that characterised so much British youth activity in the 1960s and 1970s — were significantly displaced by the practices of club culture from the late-1980s. In this new cultural formation, social divisions — cornerstones of pioneering subcultural analysis (see, for example, Hebdige 1979 or Hall and Jefferson 1976) — appeared less relevant. However, Huq’s work is no doubt important in pushing the subject ‘beyond subculture’ (much as the work of Muggleton and Weinzierl (2003) within the study of post-subculture), defining a subculture group as ‘one that differentiates itself from dominant culture through its distinct attitude and lifestyle’ (2006: 18); I will use this definition as a starting point from which to build my argument.

The participants of the UK dance scene were self-defined as ‘ravers’, appropriating a 1960s term sustained within the UK reggae sound-system vocabulary: here ‘rave’ becomes at once verb, noun and locus for this new subcultural scene. Ravers were characterised by hedonism, drug consumption and weekend long parties. Such behaviour provides context for Champion’s observation to Redhead (2000: 18):

I don’t know who said it now but someone had said ‘surely people who go clubbing don’t read’. I can’t remember now where it came from but there was a general assumption and I think it’s partly to do with the fact that electronic music doesn’t have words and therefore it can’t be ‘intelligent’.

Let us now consider what Champion means by the term ‘gonzo’. As defined by Douglas Brinkley (2000: xiv), editor of a collection of Hunter S. Thompson’s letters, gonzo journalism “requires virtually no rewriting: the reporter and his quest for information are central to the story, told via a fusion of bedrock reality and stark fantasy in a way that is meant to amuse both the author and the reader”, whilst Hollowell (1977: 52) details the extremity of its tone, “since it calls for the writer to provoke many of the incidents that he describes”. Arguably its greatest proponent was the American journalist Hunter S. Thompson, according to Marc Weingarten (2005: 8) one of journalism’s “literary rock stars” who placed himself at the epicentre

of his stories, thus bringing down journalism's hitherto slavish devotion to distance and impartiality. Hollowell (1977: 52) similarly states that Thompson was "idolised as a rock star", adding, "(t)he star status of the new journalist meshes perfectly with the personal style of his reporting".

Thompson's incendiary style of gonzo journalism sits rather neatly within a broader school of New Journalism, a broad church encompassing those writers who utilized a more participant-based, subjective form of reporting as defined by Tom Wolfe in the celebrated 1973 collection *The New Journalism* (Wolfe and Johnson, 1990). New Journalism theorist Marc Weingarten (2005) estimates the form to have developed in America between 1962 and 1977, popularised by writers such as Wolfe himself, Joan Didion, Gay Talese, Terry Southern, Norman Mailer and Thompson. So, on the one hand, there was a writing style popularized in the US during the 1960s and 1970s, and, on the other hand, a subcultural music scene that became popular in the UK from the late 1980s. Do the two relate, or is Champion right in her assertion that the rave scene, as bright as it burnt and fantastical as it was, did not produce the gonzo chronicles that one might expect? One further term: we now have the benefit of a body of both academic and consumer literature around the rave scene that emerged during the late 1980s. In academic publications, such as the journal *Dancecult*, this phenomenon was later referred to as Electronic Dance Music Culture, or EDMC.¹

In seeking to discover whether the apparent lacuna lies with inauthentic media re/presentations of EDMC, or rather the subculture itself, this article will investigate whether the dancefloor was too vibrant and colourful a locus to be restrained by the limits of journalism. Instead, did the limitations of journalism leave the culture ripe for fictional accounts? Certainly, writers like Thompson or Lester Bangs who emerged from rock journalism in the 1960s, and those who followed from the new wave in the 1970s, revealed new voices that can still be heard in literature today. One might even argue for a cultural coronation of 1970s UK journalists — Mick Farren, Nick Kent and Charles Shaar Murray — as well as those they influenced, such as Julie Burchill, Tony Parsons and Paul Morley, many of whom went on to enjoy long

and successful writing careers. So, who were the key club culture writers and did they enjoy the same career trajectory? It seems that this progression has not taken place for those who chronicled the club scene that followed new wave in the UK, when arguably the rave scene was more penetrative, both culturally and audibly. Addressing, therefore, questions of both canon and music genre, and a critical analysis of this music journalism, this article will examine key EDMC-related magazine titles in the UK that focus on the musical tropes and modes of the dancefloor — Mixmag, DJ Magazine, Ministry — as well as fanzines and other niche media, and explore what voices rang out within their pages, and whether these voices were ultimately silenced.

The keys to the subcultural kingdom

Moving on to thoughts of methodology. In the first instance, textual analysis might reveal a great deal about what broadly might be described as club culture journalism. In the micro sense of decoding the words on the page, this methodology will lean heavily on literary techniques based on post-structuralism. However, in order to respond to these issues, this article will further hold this question up against the arguments of commentators such as Redhead (2000), Hollowell (1977), Hellman (1981) and Weingarten (2005, 2006). The main thrust will draw on the primary input of the editors and journalists embedded in the culture during this period of music reportage, particularly through interviews and a questionnaire², conducted between June and September 2013, with several key industry professionals in the field of club culture journalism. Sarah Champion was interviewed in 2013, which enabled her to revisit her earlier remarks in the light of the passing of time.

When moving the discussion from New Journalism to a consideration of club culture journalism, a new approach is necessary by which to decode this material. This must necessarily become subjective, in order to push the conversation forward and break scholarly ground. By placing the author at the heart of the story, New Journalism

suggests an immersive framework for creative communication. So to interrogate club culture authorship fully, it will be necessary to develop a parallel academic framework for this article, to argue for what Simon Warner, during a conversation in 2013, termed “a new academicism”. As with journalism, one of the tenets of academic inquiry can be to demand distance, perspective and objective impartiality. Switching to writing in the first person, I find it necessary that I must not only ask the question but also implicate myself in its answer, in confronting notions of the liminal. This way I argue for a new approach to academicism, embedded in participant observation and sufficiently elastic to enable a fresh subjective discourse.

To refer back to the ‘cultural tsunami’ of acid house culture, I was one of those many young people willingly taken in its wake. Finding myself in a position to bring an academic training in literature to reporting on this scene and its pulsing soundtrack, I was able to forge a living by working within television, radio and the print media, and given the keys to explore this electronic kingdom as far afield as Beijing and Brazil, Moscow and Marrakech. My embedded reports from the subcultural trenches took the form of two long-running columns for the internationally distributed DJ Magazine. Titled ‘Dispatches From The Wrong Side’, my columns (1998–2006) were collected together as the book *Discombobulated*. A second column, ‘Around The World in 80 Clubs’ (2006–2008), allowed privileged access to the music scene in territories such as Antigua, Kosovo, Indonesia and the United States. *Discombobulated* ended its publishing journey on the shelves of a tucked-away section of the Waterstones bookstore, titled ‘Club & Drug Literature’. In itself, the discovery of this section seemed to provide a portal to a nuanced area of the subterranean and subcultural, a possible new academic area that might consider a subculture by reference not to the culture itself, but the secondary, literary re/presentations of that culture: club fiction as cult fiction.

In terms of a subculture so rich and colourful as EDMC, we might deconstruct two methods by which one might report on the scene: fiction and non-fiction. This is the very abrasive territory that will be investigated by this piece of gonzo academia — these poles themselves, and the distance between — the friction between fact and

fiction. Building on my own retrospective participant observation, and that of my peers, and incorporating existing theory, the key focus of this article will therefore form a consideration of this club scene via the journalism and literature that reported it. Let us now, then, lift up the red rope that protects the inner sanctum, the VIP room of Dave Haslam's 'disco-text' (1998: 157), allowing the reader to decode the disco from the very epicentre of the dancefloor.

The friction between fact and fiction

Having identified the relevant subcultural terrain, let us now consider media responses to electronic dance music culture in the UK. The role, and the meaning, of the media for a subculture can be described in two ways. Firstly, the mass media have their own rather regimented and predictable response to the underground, low-fi rumble of society's subcultural basement. During the late 1960s, Stanley Cohen (2002) researched 'moral panics' in response to media identified 'folk devils'. A similar panic occurred in the UK during the late 1980s and early 1990s in response to acid house and rave parties, the strange behaviour of participants and, stranger still, their St Vitus dances. On June 24th, 1989, The Sun newspaper ran the headline 'Spaced Out', with an accompanying image of 'ravers'; the sub-head ran '11,000 youngsters go drug crazy at Britain's biggest- ever Acid party'. As ever, the mass media fulfil their cyclical role (Rietveld 1993: 45), this moral panic ultimately translating into fantastically effective PR, as Thornton (1995) shows. The louder the opprobrium, the more the young subcultural participants felt that they had succeeded in 'annoying the parents', whether their actual parents or dominant society playing the role of parents, writ large.

Secondly, the characteristics of the mass media dictate it must necessarily move on, to consider the next moral panic. What follows is an information vacuum. In a pre-digital age that, I argue, prioritised and valued information much more highly than our own, niche, trade and fanzine publications were able to fill this void. This media

formed a portal for information — an insider’s guide to this new scene, offering readers the keys to this subcultural kingdom. Street style press such as i-D and The Face were quick to pick up on this new sound. Sarah Thornton (1995: 158) comments: “Throughout the early months of 1988, i-D ran stories on aspects of what would come to be clustered under the rubric of acid house”, whilst other trade publications found themselves caught up in the moment, as their sales seemed to build exponentially. Consequently, more corporate publishing houses began to divine that there was a market for magazines that might describe this new cultural phenomenon, and appropriately mediate responses, ultimately benefitting economically by the upswell in interest and demand for information.

To briefly consider a taxonomy of such publications, we might start with Mixmag and DJ Magazine, two of the original beneficiaries of this interest, and both still in publication today. Tony Prince, a Radio Luxembourg DJ who established Disco Music Club (DMC) as a sideline in the 1980s, explains:

When I left radio after 18 years, to start DMC, I decided not only to provide the world’s first mixes for DJ’s ONLY but to provide them with a monthly newsletter which accompanied their recordings. That turned out to be Mixmag which I edited and published. ... As success embraced us, so I brought in more writers and, eventually, a full time editor. Dave Seaman became editor, my son Daniel became Clubs Editor. (2013, questionnaire)

During the same decade, a trade magazine for mobile DJs titled Jocks enjoyed a similar rush of interest. Editor at the time, Chris Mellor, recalls: “the beautiful thing was the publisher had no idea what we were on about. He thought the thing would fail but it kept growing and making money so he let us get on with it. Simple as that”. (2013, questionnaire)

Beyond these two key titles, we might mention London superclub Ministry of Sound’s in-house magazine and brand extension, Ministry, as well as IPC’s³ title Muzik and Future Publishing’s i-DJ. Moving on to more independent publications we might list Jockey Slut, Sleaze Nation, Wax, M8, 7, Knowledge and One Week To Live. In addition, many of these publications had their own offshoot publications in

Ibiza⁴ and we must also consider fanzines such as Boys Own. To give a flavour of readership numbers, Ministry sold close to 100,000 copies each month at its height at the end of the 1990s (Manson 2013, questionnaire), while Mixmag sold 92,516 copies per month in 1997 (Audit Bureau of Circulations 2013). We can therefore immediately question the accusation of adopted illiteracy on behalf of Champion's now forgotten 'someone', as also confirmed by respondents to the research questionnaire. Blogger, DJ and founding features editor of Muzik, Jonty Skruff replies: "Ridiculous. And ignorant" (2013, questionnaire). And Tony Prince states, "Why would they say clubbers don't or can't read, that sounds very snobbish? Most people are clubbers. Some of the world's most intellectual people like getting down (and up!)", while his son Dan concludes: "Some of these people were lawyers, teachers, accountants and doctors. Case closed"(2013, questionnaire).

Clubbers certainly were reading, in their multitudes.

Form to the floor

Before we focus on the central aspect of this article, and the form of this club culture journalism, let us now pause for a moment to consider the function that this very specific area of the media served. Centrally, these magazines enabled participants to connect to their subculture whilst away from the scene, via the media that surrounded it and fed from it. Stan Beeler (2007: 25) usefully describes how club culture products have two important functions: "the first is to describe the subculture to the mainstream and the second is to allow the members of the subculture to celebrate their participation in ways other than clubbing". As Huq (2006: 104) comments in her analysis of club culture, "These publications, implicitly aimed at men, contain lifestyle articles and personal profiles on 'name' DJs in much the same way as girls' teen magazines".

Certainly, these publications disseminated intelligence and thereby armed these subcultural 'weekend warriors' with the linguistic, musical and fashion munitions to

take to the frontline of the dancefloor, each and every weekend. This nuanced media thereby provided the necessary responses that bestowed cultural significance, in the process articulating ideology and defining the scene in terms of its fashion, argot, drugs and politics. These titles played on notions of authenticity, representation, belonging, and at least in the early stages, were demonstrably not corporate media creations, or in the service of larger publishing concerns. Again, in a pre-digital age, they defined the cultural landscape, a guide to identity and a source of intelligence: where to gather, what to wear, how to behave.

When interviewed in 2013, Sarah Champion spoke plainly when she said that “a magazine’s job is to review the records”, and certainly these titles would typically feature reviews of both music and club events, interviews with DJs and producers, and listings for where to go each weekend. However, is this rather prosaic impulse all they were about? Might therefore the restrictions of function — and the black on white limitations of the page — be our first clue as to this lacuna in auteur voices? So, we have the media, we have the message, but what about the manner in which that message was conveyed? Was EDMC media only about the location of this weekend’s party, its opening times, and the price required to gain entry?

If we now open up these media products in order to analyze content and draw closer to the text, we necessarily invoke the precision of semiotic analysis. Ferdinand de Saussure’s groundbreaking 1916 work *Course In General Linguistics* is of special interest here, as regards his notion of language divided into two functions: firstly as a means of communication, and secondly as a written series of signs. Saussure argues “language has an individual aspect and a social aspect” (1983: 9), and that is key, in terms of the culturally communicative aspect of this media, and how the signs of a subculture are referenced and reformed in linguistic terms. Language and argot are of course used to drive narrative, but more importantly they are deployed naturalistically to keep close to the object, in order to engender proximity for the reader. Further — and resisting the scientific rigidity of structuralism — relational theory suggests language, writing and meaning is fragile, brittle. Communication is determined by a priori associations and assumptions about language and meaning, not simply by

having the right box by which to decode the enigma code you receive. Club culture journalists are writing for individual readers, yet creating codes to be decoded and reformed in literary terms, by a community.

Our conversation of 2013 further enabled Champion to revisit her remarks, and interestingly she foregrounds her own love of slang, of the argot of the dancefloor:

It's about capturing a subculture ... it's about capturing the dialect and the slang and street culture and the atmosphere and the vibe of the whole thing, in print. That's what I wanted to do. What defined it as a movement would be the use of dialect, the use of slang, the use of made up words, the use of street speech, the use of very experimental punctuation.

This is central to club culture communication, which deploys another level of code, by which to obscure clarity and conceal meaning for the cognoscent-participant, to the bafflement of the casual cultural voyeur. The same, of course, holds true for the 1960s counterculture, and the Beat Generation that preceded it, each subculture forming its own language and codes, in order to coalesce into a 'scene'.

Go go gonzo

Gonzo journalism, as we have seen, is necessarily personality journalism. At this stage it might be useful to re-appropriate the term 'auteur' from 1950s French cinema, at a time when the Cahiers du Cinéma publication argued certain directors were able to impress their own individual personality upon their cinematic products. Here, however, we have authors as auteurs, their presence felt in every word, directing the story from the very heart of the action. In our interview of 2013, Champion re-iterates: "I was interested in New Journalism ... that's what inspired me to want to write because that was the first movement away from factual journalism towards the kind of gonzo thing." Having explored the notion that 'clubbers don't read', let us now interrogate what Champion might be suggesting in this further remark about gonzo voices within the club culture media. We must not treat Champion's comments as necessarily pejorative, though, as there are varied opinions that circle the subject. First we must test the assertion; second, consider some of the

reasons for this lack of a gonzo tradition in EDMC media reporting; and finally, consider what might have replaced it.

It should at this juncture be acknowledged that something approaching the gonzo sensibility might be found within the synchronous emergence of ‘lads mags’ in the 1990s, within titles such as *Loaded*, *FHM* and *Maxim*. Even then, however, the impulse was more behavioural than stylistic, and it would be hard to argue for the foregrounding of the names of many journalists, beyond the iconic presence of the magazine names themselves. Moving on to the structure of the dance music media industry, Scott Manson, ex-editor of *Ministry* (and onetime editor of *Loaded*), recognises a gonzo tradition and reports: “Absolutely. Getting wasted and causing trouble was a big part of club writing” (2013, questionnaire), although James ‘Disco’ Davis, Manson’s long-time club scribe, responds, “I think with gonzo the experience of the journalist was central with the story taking a back seat. In club journalism there was plenty of messed up stuff but the story usually came first.” (2013, questionnaire) Within his response, Duncan Dick — Deputy Editor of the UK’s leading EDMC magazine *Mixmag* — carries on that thought:

[D]rugs have been assimilated into the mainstream now. What’s interesting about a chemical viewpoint at a club or a festival in 2013? Most people there are already wasted, what special insight does that chemical viewpoint give you? Too many aspiring journalists thought and still think that getting wasted and copying the cadence and hyperbole of *Fear And Loathing in Las Vegas* makes them special. (2013, questionnaire)

Jonty Skrufff, now editor of *skrufff.com*, identifies with this perspective: “I am well aware of gonzo journalism and I am well aware of many journalists who’ve partied as hard as anyone. But few then write about it, wisely, in my view” (2013, questionnaire).

Why did these writers resist what might seem an obvious stylistic path? Journalism, or reportage, implies the contemporaneous presence of the journalist, perhaps too close when authentic rendering requires distance, time, reflexivity; a more controlled mechanic by which to detail events. Was the dancefloor in itself so colourful and

vibrant that it was problematic to further bend it out of shape using the techniques of gonzo journalism?

Towards a new approach to academicism

In answering these questions I must reach, again, for the virgin tenets of a new, perhaps even gonzo, approach to academicism. We must therefore segue briefly back to the personal for the purposes of illustrating this argument with retrospective participant observation, as this was precisely my central, ideological impulse. For centuries, newspaper journalists have studied their particular craft and followed regimented rules by which to channel their prose. In his column for *New Statesman*, the editor of *The Independent* newspaper, Amol Rajan, remarks that “journalism is a street: we are on one side; the people we write about are on the other. It’s our job not to cross the street” (2013: 20). It might be agreed that there is a long white line in the middle of the road, but clubland, and the music journalism that reported upon it, seemed to me about transgression, about crossing that line. It was not enough to report on a party; the writer should be part of the party.

My columns for *DJ Magazine* between 1998 and 2006 formed an overt, ideological mechanic for using the methods of gonzo journalism to better decode the machinations of club and drug culture. At times this might have been thematic, for instance my obituary for Hunter S. Thompson, ‘Fear and Loathing in StalyVegas’; at times stylistic, for instance in describing the process of playing George Michael in a recreation of the video for ‘Club Tropicana’; or gate-crashing Kylie Minogue’s birthday party (Morrison 2002). The ideology might best be described in a passage from my final ‘Dispatches’ column, from San Francisco, in which I wrote:

All I ever wanted to do with these Dispatches was to try (try, dammit, I’m not saying I succeeded) to do what Kerouac did with pot and bebop; what Hunter did with rock and LSD; what my generation did with rave and whatever else was left in the medicine cabinet...to chronicle the culture for the people that grew up with me on the

dancefloor.

Certainly, in a review of the collection of these columns, *Discombobulated*, in EDMC journal *Dancecult*, Bina Bhardwa (2012) recognises this gonzo impulse:

Enjoying the ride is not viewed as a distraction or something to be editorially cut from his clubland tales but instead forms an integral part of his adventures. Often discussed in relation to drugs research is the tendency for writers to produce sanitised accounts of their fieldwork whilst neglecting the role of pleasure (Holt and Treloar 2008); this aspect of clubland is a feature most definitely not omitted from Morrison's accounts.

Hollowell (1977: 54) discusses New Journalism's "growing tendency towards exhibitionism in all aspects of culture", so is it possible to carry that impulse from journalism to the academy, and let the ego roam free across the campus? Hollowell (1977: 52) remarks: "Since the writer is often a participant in the events he depicts, his tendency for self-display and exhibitionism becomes 'part of the action'". Certainly it was my intention to destroy the distance between object and subject, the author placed in the middle of the dancefloor, to experience the detail: the colour, the noise and chaos unfurling around.

Hellman channels Zavarzadeh in his assertion that "nonfiction novelists are uniformly absurdists in their intention" (1981: 22). The dancefloor is absurd. Dancing is absurd, when considered pragmatically. Why must humans feel this need to rhythmically move in time to an electronic beat? And why must they gather in designated buildings to do it with other people that they do not already know? Many worthy studies have analysed that anthropological habit but it is for this article to step one further step back and ask — that being said, it must logically be further absurd for a third party to then report on that process so that others, so removed they were not even there, might read about it? Hellman (1981: 23) suggests "New journalistic works share a factual subject matter and an aesthetic form and purpose", and certainly, gonzo journalism must be seen as the most elastic and egotistical of literary forms, where the object is always subservient to the course of language, to the poetic whims of the writer.

Barthes acknowledged this, as he made his own journey from structuralism to post-structuralism, recognising in *Mythologies* (2009: 152) “the journalist who starts with a concept and seeks a form for it”. Barthes was, of course, fascinated by myth, and understood it to be a slippery rather than solid ideal. He says (2009: 153) “myth is neither a lie nor a confession: it is an inflexion”, and his work on myth and the construction of persona, for instance, is particularly important when one considers the louche aesthetic of gonzo and its subscribers. Barthes continues (2009: 131): “since myth is a type of speech, everything can be a myth provided it is conveyed by a discourse”. Meaning is therefore compromised, and complicated, by the gonzo poeticism of the prose, and the at times impregnable argot of the subculture. Meanwhile, the obligation of the gonzo journalist is to the poetry of the language, not the facts.

Faction into fiction

Let us now push this discussion further and examine, if Champion is at least partly correct in her reading of the situation, where the trail might now lead. Music journalism is looser than news reporting — club culture journalism even more so. My instinct is that in terms of the literary and linguistic impulses, the friction between fact and fiction became so frantic in the 1990s that in fact the spirit of gonzo sparked completely over — into the realms of fiction. After all, both remain mediated versions of reality; we cannot entirely trust either. Consider the following three statements, first from self-declared gonzo-journalist Hunter S. Thompson: “I heard the music and I wrote to it. Some people beat drums. Some people strum guitars. It’s all in the music you hear” (in Jenkins 2005, online). Next by clubland novelist Trevor Miller: “Originally I wanted to write the whole thing with a 4/4 rhythm to mimic House beats” (in Baron 1989, online). Finally, cult author Irvine Welsh: “I used to do loads of clubbing and that’s what I wanted to capture – to get that perpetual movement into my writing, the beats and rhythms of the language” (2001, interview). Through these intertextual connections, from the American author Hunter S.

Thompson through the more recent work of British writers Trevor Miller and Irvine Welsh, we can detect the same intermedial impulse, a kind of cultural synaesthesia by which fiction authors reach for the rhythms of music as literary muse.

Intertextual articulations — the way these accounts coalesce into a cult cannon of club culture literature — are crucial in joining the subcultural dots; as, indeed, is intermediality, in considering the ways in which these writers have each attempted to write about music. My broader research (Morrison 2013) focuses on this articulation, and further will trace this back to the Beat Generation and Jack Kerouac's attempts to mimic the rhythms of bebop jazz in his spontaneous prose. Certainly this aesthetic seems perennial, as is the gonzo impulse to write in the spirit of fiction and push the boundaries of non-fiction from within, even whilst behind the lines — or at least under the covers — of an ostensibly non-fiction publication. However, if such spirits found their ambitions ultimately bowed by the restrictions of EDMC media, then perhaps EDMC writers were more successful in fiction itself, as this subcultural rave terrain itself became a literary locus. Here we must necessarily move the linguistic argument on from the rigidity of the structuralism school, with which Saussure is associated, in accepting the argument (Huq 2006; Muggleton 2003) that, especially in a more mutable, postmodern context, subcultural meaning is more fluid than that that might be suggested by a sometimes too rigid application of structuralism.

As we have seen, the connection between sign and signifier is blurred in club culture writing by the smoke machine of argot and concealed meaning, perhaps rendering it only immediately understandable to a cognoscent reader. EDMC writing is important because of its referent — the tropes and modes of the dancefloor and the clubland milieu from which the fiction derives. Structuralism holds that only the text matters. However in club culture fiction it is merely the starting point to decoding the context — the scene signified — and, beyond that, the intent of the creator-auteurs who hover permanently above their texts. It is not enough, therefore, to decode the sign — one must have the tools to connect it to the relevant signifier or else be left floundering; dancing awkward and offbeat, on the periphery of this literary dancefloor.

Perhaps the covers of a magazine proved ultimately too flimsy to contain the gonzo spirit, which instead was funneled into the slightly sturdier realms of the paperback? And, perhaps, the question is not whether clubbers read — which demonstrably they did — but rather, what they read? Hunter S. Thompson, drawing on William Faulkner, famously observes on the jacket cover for the 1979 edition of *The Great Shark Hunt* that “the best fiction is far more true than any kind of journalism — and the best journalists have always known this” (original italics). Redhead brings this slippery idea to club culture in asking novelist Alan Warner if fiction is “a way of telling contemporary history better” (2000: 128).

According to Redhead (2000: xxii), the UK’s style bible magazine *The Face* asserted: “you wouldn’t think [...] that dance culture would be well suited to literature. While dance music may be fluid and ephemeral there’s few things more solid than 200 pages of paperback”. Again, one must respond that clubbers did read and, moreover, found a necessary distance, and perspective, maintained within a fictional context: the practice of reading so far removed from that of dancing. For clubbers, to read about their culture is to take a kind of linguistic holiday on its shores, bathing in stories they might associate with, and yet were not their own. Can either fiction or non-fiction really be trusted to tell the truth, or are both necessarily mediations of the truth? Journalism purports to be closer to the truth but perhaps, and especially with the benefit of passing time, we might imagine fiction, ultimately, to be the more beneficial.

As a slight aside, in reaching for the naturalistic, and authentic, it is interesting to note how frequently these authors name genuine media titles — product placement within the prose. Playing on Barthes’ notions of mythmaking, in his 2002 novel *Glue*, Irvine Welsh refers to actual magazines such as *DJ Magazine* and *Mixmag*, to confirm the media are complicit in the fabrication of reputation: “Fuckin shite. All the dance press: fuckin mythologising shite” (2002: 473). Trevor Miller, in his 1989 clubland novel *Trip City*, discusses the lifecycle of a club, *The Underground*, and the influence of the media: “Articles in *The Face* and *i-D*. Big money taken on the door. Then it crashed” (1989: 23).

If we reverse the polarity, Champion herself has asked, “Why didn’t Mixmag, and DJ, and these magazines, publish short stories?”(2013, interview) A fair question — after all, Hunter S. Thompson’s most celebrated work of gonzo journalism, *Fear and Loathing in Las Vegas*, was originally published in two parts within the pages of *Rolling Stone* (issue 95, November 11, 1971, and issue 96, November 25, 1971). “That was the big missed opportunity”, Champion continues. Interestingly — and despite their protestations about the viability of club writing — in 1997, *The Face* magazine did publish *Nightfever: Club Writing in The Face 1980-1997*. In the same year, an important collection of short stories, *Disco Biscuits*, edited by Champion, was published. Subtitled *New Fiction from the Chemical Generation*, it was a publishing phenomenon, according to Champion (2013, interview) immediately selling 60,000 copies in its first few months of publication. Nicholas Blincoe, club culture author and contributor to the collection, recalls the incongruity of seeing the book for sale in HMV, with launch parties in nightclubs, a marketing campaign that hinged on flyers, and an accompanying CD soundtrack (2013, interview). Champion was able to fuse the worlds of the literary and musical in a way that had not happened since bebop and Beat culture of the 1950s.

Describing a cultural context

As overtly factual as journalism purports to be, might the truth of the matter, therefore, be found in literature? Perhaps Thompson was right in channelling Faulkner — the best journalists have always known this — frustrated by the shackles of deadlines, word- counts and house styles; the reason why Hollowell, in the title of his account, refers to ‘New Journalists’ simply as non-fiction novelists. Further, we might bend Norman Mailer’s own sub-title for his 1967 reportage novel *Armies of The Night* (Mailer, 1970). Mailer described his work of reportage as ‘History as a Novel / The Novel as History’; so, are we dealing here with Journalism as Fiction or with Fiction as Journalism? Like shy boys and girls at their first dance, club culture journalists approach the dancefloor from one side with the tools of the novelist. From

the other side, we find the novelists, approaching the same dancefloor, using the techniques of journalism to describe these real-world clubs. The dancefloor remains the same, populated by real people, dancing to real music, under the influence of genuine pharmaceuticals. It is merely the method of reportage that changes.

We must now introduce into this heady cocktail the trajectory of time. Once the needle has metaphorically left the record in our fictional discotheque rendered in the paragraph above, what endures? Again, let us return to parameters of the physical product: the flimsy pages of the magazine set against the sturdier stock of the bookshop novel. Much journalism has a life span for as long as that magazine is on the shelves of a newsagent, words then pulped into their afterlife.⁵ Does fiction therefore endure, whilst journalism is ephemeral? As I have argued, beyond the primary participants of a scene, the light of the spectacular is bestowed upon a subculture via these media representations. They form a literary — and literal — paper trail, a historical archive, by which we can consider and reflect upon this scene, as we move forwards. When a subculture dies, we are left with two things: the music and the cultural artifacts that surround it; in other words, the musical texts, in the first instance, and the literary context that provides a linguistic device by which to decode the subculture. We know about bebop from the music of Thelonious Monk and the novels of Jack Kerouac; we can divine what life was like in San Francisco in the late 1960s from the music of Jefferson Airplane and the words of Hunter S. Thompson. It might follow that we can understand the rave scene via its pulsing ‘four-to-the-floor’ soundtrack and the words of authors like Irvine Welsh, Nicholas Blincoe and Jeff Noon.

In conclusion, I contend that these club fictions coalesce to form a cohesive EDMC archive, a cult canon of club culture literature, and necessary for EDMC to fully register in the broader cultural sphere. Moving forwards, the discussion of such a canon may then inform a fresh rubric by which we can decode a subculture, via reference to these secondary literary re/presentations; these books that orbit a scene like cultural satellites. When music-orientated writers emerged from the subcultural trenches to make their fresh charge on the rave scene, the terrain was no longer suited

to the kind of gonzo- guerrilla warfare that had been waged before; those tactics now outmoded for tackling the dance floor; the 'New' no longer new. Instead, the response was to bring up the big literary guns of the past — naturalistic, realist fiction — to wrestle some kind of narrative order on what was always an unwieldy, shape-shifting dancefloor. The answer to the issues raised by Sarah Champion's now forgotten critic that clubbers do not read, is therefore multiple. Clearly clubbers did, and do, read; EDMC magazines and novels are published to this day. As regards the gonzo tradition, while some of us within this media scene certainly tried, we must objectively agree that a subculture so apparently ripe for gonzo treatments seemed ultimately bereft of such attention.⁶ However, within what I have called dancefloor-driven fiction, that relationship between music and the literary, between beat and written word, endures, because the printed page is so far removed from the dancefloor. In a mutable, post-modern environment, perhaps we need to reach for new terms entirely; perhaps the twin poles of fiction and non-fiction are too polarised to be useful, when so many grades exist in between.

This is certainly treacherous cultural terrain. To write about the sonic, or to describe the transgressive experience of drug consumption in words, is a laudable endeavour, but the results rarely sell well. Despite the importance of such attempts, perhaps the central issue might best be described by Irvine Welsh, during a conversation we had in Molly Malones pub in Glasgow: “There's nothing you can do in fiction, that does justice to the experience of going to a club” (2013 interview).

Acknowledgements

I thank the editors for their helpful editorial support. I also thank everyone who responded to the questionnaire and for revisiting past adventures that we have often shared together. As ever, I would like to thank my lead PhD supervisor, Dr Simon Warner, for his input, support and advice. Finally, thank you to the New Journalists, and especially Hunter S. Thompson, for demonstrating, with sometimes

pharmaceutical — and often explosive — consequences, that there is always a different way to write.

Endnotes

¹ EDM is used as an abbreviation of Electronic Dance Music in academic work, and refers to a much broader range of music than the stadium dance music genre that is currently known as EDM in the USA.

² See Appendix for the questionnaire, responded to by well-known club culture media figures, as described in the article.

³ International Publishing Corporation, a UK publishing house now a subsidiary of Time Inc.

⁴ Simon Morrison edited Ministry of Sound's Ibiza publication, Ministry in Ibiza, 1999- 2000.

⁵ It is worth pausing here to mention the phenomenal work of rocksbackpages.com in creating a digital archive of music writing.

⁶ After our meeting, I gave Champion a copy of my book, *Discombobulated*. She subsequently read it and on 25 June 2013 sent the following text message: "Did i tell you how much i love your book. That's gonzo".

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Questionnaires (See Appendix A)

Dick, Duncan, deputy editor of Mixmag, September 16, 2013.

Davis, James 'Disco', ex-clubs editor of Ministry, July 11, 2013.

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Skruff, Jonty, editor of skruff.com, July 15, 2013.

Appendix A: Club Culture Media: Questions

- . 1 What writing experience/training did you have, before you started writing about club culture?
- . 2 What inspired you to get involved, and how did you get your break?
- . 3 Did you find it easy to write about the club scene, or conversely, was it hard to get down in words?
- . 4 Specifically, how did you write about a) the music and b) the chemical indulgences of those listening to it?
- . 5 Was there ever any top down editorial pressure at your publication as to what could be said, or how it should be said?
- . 6 Did you feel able to get your own personality over in your writing, or did you feel that you should always keep a more objective distance?
- . 7 As a follow up, is the story of the dancefloor told from its more sober fringes, or inebriated heart?
- . 8 Why do you think club culture journalists weren't able, on the whole, to go on and develop media careers to the level that, for instance, the new wave journalists such as Tony Parsons and Paul Morley were able to?
- . 9 Do you feel club culture suited personality journalists or was the dancefloor a great leveller, with its own hierarchies and scant respect for media personalities?
- . 10 Are you aware of the Gonzo tradition of writers like Hunter S. Thompson? Do you think that spirit functioned at all with club culture journalism?
- . 11 'Clubland is already too grand a carnival to communicate in colour, it's best

explained objectively in black and white'. Discuss.

- . 12 There was a lot of club culture fiction at the time, from writers like Irvine Welsh... do you think that, in a way, the scene suited fiction even more than non-fiction, journalist reporting? Did you ever merge fact with fiction, to tell the story more effectively?
- . 13 Do you think the scene was ever effectively captured by cinema? Could you name any good, and bad, examples of clubland in the movies?

Someone once said "surely people who go to clubs don't read?" Do you think this is fair?