

## INTERVIEW

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### Who is to say?: An interview with Paul Morley

'I am the greatest rock-and-roll writer in the world, for what it's worth. I have also been described as the worst rock-and-roll writer ever'. (Morley, 2003: 122)

'Paul Morley is a 63-year-old English critic best known – still, to his annoyance – as a rock music journalist. He made his name reviewing rock 'n' roll concerts for the (now online-only) British magazine *New Musical Express* in the late '70s and early '80s, and has since broadened his range into his own experimentation (taking part in the first incarnation of the '80s "avant-pop collective" *Art of Noise*), record producing (he co-founded the ZTT label in 1983) and promotion (mostly for the rather cheesy band *Frankie Goes to Hollywood*), and books, including two on *Joy Division*. He still writes about rock today, when asked, but his focus has shifted. His current mission is to inspire rock fans to explore and love classical music.' (Rockwell, 2020)

'Paul Morley is an authority on pop music, and he knows his subject matter. Whether writing articles, conducting interviews, making radio and television shows, running a record label or being part of a group, he has always used his knowledge of music for each role he undertakes, this has made him interesting to read in print and to listen to as a broadcaster in his 36 year career.' (Whitehouse, 2008)

'The Google search engine raked in versions of myself from across the virtual universe, and from the results you could piece together a version of me that is as good a biography as anything.' (Morley, 2003: 119)

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Paul Morley was one of the first people I proposed to interview when I began contributing to *Punk & Post-Punk* journal, one that the editor readily agreed to. I made contact through a mutual friend and despite getting an email reply agreeing to go ahead for some reason or other the actual interview never happened. Although I have heard from Morley since (mostly in bemused response to my review of his David Bowie book [Loydell, 2016]) I've never managed to kickstart the project again. So I decided to use the example of Ted Berrigan, whose interview with John Cage 'is completely a product of its author' (1967), Richard Kostelanetz's 'Composite Interview' with John Cage' (1987) and the work collected in the *Fakes* anthology (Shields & Vollmer, 2012), to create my own.

Daphne Keiller suggests that 'it may be a culturally productive act to simply discover and draw attention to a fragment of text,' (Keiller, 2008: 143) whilst David Shields declares 'collage teaches the reader to understand that the movements of the writer's mind are intricately entangled with the work's meaning.' (Shields, 2013: 161) Of course, you cannot remix or sample an empty page, and I would like to suggest that, as with any interview, this is a kind of collaboration between interviewer and interviewee. I am grateful to Paul Morley for what he has written and hope readers enjoy my version of what he has said.

**Rupert Loydell:** *I had you down as one of the new young guns whose journalism arrived in the weekly music papers as punk swept in, but a quick look back at your work – particularly your first book, Ask: the Chatter of Pop (Morley, 1986) – suggests otherwise. The subtitle kind of gives it away, you were already interested in pop, not rock or punk per se. Would that be a fair assessment?*

**Paul Morley:** 'The first singles and albums I bought were by Bolan's T. Rex and Bowie's Bowie, and I raided every corner of the songs and sleeves, different types of performance, looking for clues to something, although I wasn't yet clear what. I perhaps started writing about pop music first of all in my bedroom at fourteen, in notebooks read by me alone, one way to figure myself out, to keep looking for clues to something, and also to then work out what that something was. Because, it quickly became clear, there was something going on, and whatever it was quickly became the most important thing in my life.' (Morley, 2021: 92-93)

**RL:** *There's little sense of involvement, of you 'getting down with the kids'; from the word go you're slightly detached and aloof, a cultural critic trying to get to grips with your subject in a more – dare I say it – philosophical way.*

**PM:** 'Part of the qualification to be the greatest rock-and-roll writer of all time is a complete lack of modesty. And having an utter lack of modesty as a rock critic is easy if you also have the other necessary qualifications – being shy, antisocial, awkward and desperately in love with your own company. All the things you repress in the real world – confidence, articulacy, charm – you could unleash from the privacy of your writing room'. (Morley, 2003: 120)

'I'm travelling with a plan, booking various places and venues, following a map, if only the map of my own madness, but leaving myself open to unforeseen detours, to be sidetracked by all kinds of curiosities, characters and mysteries, and twists and turns in the river. [...] I'm travelling to be steeped in history, to expand the space that surrounds me, to broaden my horizons. [...] [Y]ou can see what a tiny place you occupy in the world.' (Morley, 2021: 271)

**RL:** *Your wider frame[s] of reference allow you to offer some sense of musical continuity that other critics do not; your books aren't scared to mention historical or alternative precedents, be they avant garde electronics, mainstream classical, progrock or earlier pop music. Did punk and post-punk make any impression on you, or truly change anything at the time? I'm thinking of accessibility, business relationships, gender issues, musical ambition as much as the music itself.*

**PM:** 'When I started discovering new things, changing the entire shape and destiny of music because of some obscure record you had found that you wanted to ram down the entire galaxy's nose, ear and throat, it was a matter of existential urgency. You wanted to be a writer because you believed that writing changed the world and you wanted to be a music writer because you knew that writing changed your own world, and your whole being was fused with this nothing of change, and music, and writing, and change, and making people know that things could be better, stranger, darker, faster, newer.' (Morley, 2003: 114-115)

'Irreverent, playful, ideological, smart, provocative and experimental music papers were then – along with vigilant, loner disc jockeys such as John Peel – here, if you were anything like me, you found and made up maps of fast-moving, fast-changing rock music that enabled you to discover ideas and sounds that fitted into and symbolized your life and mind – the life of your mind. Rock writers, with a semi-crazed, self-regulated sense of responsibility found a new role in sorting through this rapid, regenerating progress, explaining and exploring it as if the music was not only a way of replacing history [...] but of generating the future itself.' (Morley, 2013: 33-34)

'Punk rock erupted, a jagged, domestic intensification of a variety of agitating post-war revolutionary ideas, manifesting itself as a dramatic call to action during a time of intense uncertainty, but also as a tremendously deviant show business.' (Morley, 2013: 36) 'After five years of intensive interviewing [I] decided to pause with the questions, but explore further the dilemmas of critical understanding, public appreciation, business condescension and media tranquilising by'. (Morley, 1986: one hundred and twenty-eight)

*RL: I'm a great believer in hybridity and continuation; there are very few examples of totally brand new genres or forms, the slate is never wiped totally clean. Rap was shocking to middle class white boys like me, but in hindsight it clearly had roots in dub and toasting; new technologies may allow more layering, or different effects, but it's still music in the end. John Lydon admitting on the radio (1977) that he liked Peter Hamill and Can felt like a kind of justification for my own listening habits; the foregrounded synthesizers on early Magazine and Simple Mind LPs was a kind of relief to me, who was still listening to Yes and Van der Graaf Generator, as well as improvised jazz. I mean PIL, not the Sex Pistols, along with the second wave of artier punk or post-punk music, not to mention Television and Talking Heads, were far more important to me in my teens than the first few punk bands making a racket in the basement. Your books suggest you had and have eclectic listening tastes too?*

**PM:** 'For me the sonic future was rapidly opening up in the early 1970s with the likes of Tangerine Dream, Fripp and Eno and Carla Bley, and at the same time, for many different reasons, it was materialising as mind over matter, time times space, in the swooning spaced out rhythms of Lee "Scratch" Perry, whose clairvoyant deep state experiments with electronics and musical form were as extreme and exciting as those being done by Pierre Boulez, Can, Eno, Miles and Kraftwerk.' (unknown author, 2020) '[T]he point is NOT BEING BORED. The search is for the jolt, the *moment*, that comes and goes and must come again. If this entertainer can't make the moment for you, some other must.' (Morley, 1986: one hundred and nineteen)

**RL:** *What's your take on the shift from post-punk – be it, for example, the ramshackle feminism of The Raincoats, the politicised dub-funk of The Pop Group, or D.I.Y. bedroom synth bands – to New Romanticism, perhaps from a focus on music to fashion and image?*

**PM:** 'A lot of the new rock sounded to me, of a certain age, with a certain predilection for the glamorous, the exotic and the experimental, like the same old can of beans, but with a new label, a new product shape, a couple of synthetic extra ingredients. [...] Now and then there could be a sudden shift, a fashionable shift, a hype-able shift in tension and attitude, a change of emphasis in the sound possibility, but essentially it was the same old sound, the same old idea of a sound, in a different time zone, a different context.' (Morley, 2003: 47-48)

**RL:** *Again, you were part of this culture, particularly with your writing for The Face magazine, yet also aloof and detached? I mean as far as I know there are no embarrassing pictures of you looking like a peacock in drag? Or have I just not looked hard enough?*

**PM:** 'If the music I liked was popular, I wanted to think that I was the only person who really understood it, as if it had been specially made to my own specifications. The specialness was important, and I didn't want this spoilt by the thought I was sharing it with millions of others, diluting its private power'. (Morley, 2013: 88-89)

**RL:** *ZTT was in many ways part of this particular pop culture. Did you believe your own bullshit and hype at the time? Were you serious about underpinning contemporary pop with the avant-garde? How did Futurism and Dada actually manifest itself in the music of Frankie Goes to Hollywood or Propaganda?*

**PM:** 'I had a kind of ideological commitment to making pop music stranger, cleverer, more beautiful, more surprising, and record sleeves and associated paraphernalia more entertaining and provocative. I just sort of took this for granted, that this is what you did when you had a label'. (McNamee, 2008) 'I didn't mean to get carried away'. (Morley, 2003: 119)

**RL:** *We're used to, and accepting of, the idea of image and simulacrum now, of bands being built around an image, but at the time there was an outcry that the likes of Frankie Goes to Hollywood and Propaganda did not, indeed were not allowed to, play on their own records.*

**PM:** 'It seemed very natural, this way of working – of advising, suggesting, framing, as though it was a legitimate collaboration, something that was clearly working. There was a very definite group called Propaganda emerging, so that I did not think of it as a classic record-company-versus-exploited-group thing, and was too inexperienced in business to appreciate that they were being practically exploited. I was just interested in the group as a surreal pop object'. (Harrison, 2002)

'To some extent, much of what happened, although I didn't really believe it would, was described in many of the early "what if"/"let's do this"/"we believe this" manifestos I wrote about the kind of label I wanted to design.' (McNamee, 2008) '[A] label wasn't just a machine for producing music but a way of distributing important, unpredictable information and delights that came in all sorts of forms.' (McNamee, 2008)

**RL:** *Could you, if you had been allowed (and funded) to continue your own take on a record company, have marketed anything successfully? I mean could, and would, you have turned Andrew Poppy into a pop star? He stated that in 1998 you told him 'If I'd been running ZTT you'd be on your sixteenth album by now' (Loydell, 2005) and were committed to his music. Was part of the plan to fund more experimental music that would never sell with money from hit singles and albums?*

**PM:** 'The dream of celebrity, the dream of themselves changing the world simply through their fame, can be so strong that sometimes it can actually work.' (Morley, 2003: 216)

**RL:** *How did you feel about Trevor Horn's production skills and values in relation to the values that punk had recently thrown up: the idea of playing music once you knew three chords, of funding your own singles or cassettes, with photocopied sleeves? Or was that irrelevant to your interests and ambitions?*

**PM:** 'It seemed interesting to balance out the fact that in the studio Trevor was clearly ahead of the pack with a label sensibility that reflected that with its overall patterning, sense of presence and play. And I guess that overall sense of presence needed to be post-punk, if still pop, electronic and experimental, if still glamorous, and rooted in avant garde tradition stretching back through the time of Pop Art, Warhol, Fluxus, musique concrète and Serialism to Surrealism, Futurism, Dadaism and the dawn of Modernism. Oddly enough, I was really thinking this way [...] A sort of record label that was around the edges an abstract history of how the 20th Century went from Modernism to Post-Modernism, how the 20th Century created so much artistic and technological information to mix and mangle and mutate etc.' (Harrison, 2002)

**RL:** *Dare I ask about the end of your involvement with ZTT? I know there were personal disputes and disagreements about the direction of the label, and you've been quite disparaging in print about what ZTT later became, but what really happened? Does the fact the business didn't work suggest that the sloganeering and artistic direction was impossible to sustain?*

**PM:** 'The conflict between me and the business at the label was very quickly a problem, a basic battle between dreams and routines', (McNamee, 2008) 'but many of the ideas for the label I set in motion early on lasted long enough to have an impact before I could, to an extent, be removed from a position of power within the organisation.' (McNamee, 2008)

'The problem was, as I had put so much of myself into the label, and for better or worse set it up at least visually and conceptually as a reflection of my imagination, it was hard for me to leave behind, and it's always been a sadness that I couldn't really have run the label, as erratically as that might have seemed from a business side.' (McNamee, 2008) 'I think another problem, for artists on label and label owners, was that the label, as deadly serious as it could be, had an absurdist, subversive, occasionally deadpan even slapstick sense of humour, and this wasn't necessarily the sense of humour of the artists or the owners.' (McNamee, 2008)

'The label started out quoting Theodore Adorno and ended up, er, quoting nobody at all. Not even me.' (McNamee, 2008)

**RL:** *Let's move away from that. I'm interested in your sense of subversion and play. It's there early on in the ZTT slogans & packaging and your journalism, and throughout your career. In my Creative Non-Fiction module I used to teach at Falmouth we looked at your TV Eno interview (Hewitt, 1992), which totally divided the students: some hate it's arch knowingness, others – like me – think the whole thing is witty, clever and informative. In a way your deconstruction of the interview, of music journalism, has now occurred in pop music itself, with X Factor and Pop Idol making visible the whole façade.*

**PM:** 'The alluring, addictive sound of pop does still evolve, but what is sung about remains more or less the same; the poses, controversies and costumes repetitive and derivative. It is machines that are now the new pop stars'. (Morley, 2014)

**RL:** *It's also been suggested that your band Art of Noise were way ahead of the curve in relation to sampling and mash-ups. Did you have a sense of that at the time? How do you see collage and appropriation in relation to ideas of creativity and originality?*

**PM:** '[T]he most significant change in art over the past century was collage, and a word is a word is a collage'. (Morley, 2013: 135-136) 'You borrow a tune here, change it a little, borrow some words, add to them. Other tunes from other places are worked in, other words from other sources, and the songs become a bright tangle of overlapping forms.' (Morley, 2021: 212-213)

'[W]atch as art and entertainment move closer and closer together, pulled towards each other by the rise and rise of technology, and electronic communication, and image fixation, and the wit necessary to deal with the collapse of systems and the evolving extravagance of fragmentation.' (Morley, 2013: 64-65)

**RL:** *Some critics have suggested that Madonna and Kylie are the last two truly great pop superstars, and that it was very much a 20th century phenomenon. Would you agree? Or are U2 and Lady Gaga disproving that theory anyway?*

**PM:** 'For years rock and pop thrived on a kind of energy and madness that predicted the sounds and sights of the future; and then a lot of the more popular rock [...] started to look back, to predict nothing other than the past, the olden days. This all means very little other than what it means unless you believe that something can be better than something else, and that one thing can have greater value than another thing, and that it is worth wanting things to be new, because therefore the future is different and progressive.' (Morley, 2013: 50) 'The wheels on Kylie's car go round and round as they drive on between the past and the future.' (Morley, 2013: 67)

**RL:** *What exactly is your fascination with Kylie? It seems both genuine and tongue-in-cheek at the same time: you seem to truly admire her and her music but also use her as a kind of virtual idea to hand ideas on. I mean in Words and Music your whole history of pop music revolves around her!*

**PM:** '[H]er physical repression of the pleasures of pop that mysteriously shimmer in the spaces between innocence and sensuality, between the natural and the artificial. [...] the sheer professionalism of her presence, a professionalism that can verge on coldness, remoteness, but it captures the ultimate warmth of her absolute need to please her audience, the need of the actress dedicated to success.' (Morley, 2003: 23-24) 'Kylie

sings from the heart of an off-the-shelf machine – but somehow it ends up being as distinctive as anything that has come before.' (Morley, 2003: 27)

*RL: How definitive do you feel your version of things is? Or is it just a personal take and you're happy for everyone to have their own version?*

**PM:** 'There'll never be coherence, completion, consistency; it's just one maddening crush, a jungle of pose, and nobody's better or worse out of it than they've ever been or will be.' (Morley, 1986: seven) 'It's all babble, and it's all exact, and it's all mayhem and it's all deliberate. It's all haphazard, and it's all design. It's all improvised and it's all rehearsed. It's all miscellaneous, fraudulent, incidental, dispensible, and it's all rich, precise, balanced and high. The stories are about something, or they are not about anything at all'. (Morley, 1993: 'owt')

'Sometimes on a journey, it's good to suddenly change your mind about where you are going, and how you are getting there. Even if you do follow an established route, and go straight to where you are heading, the best journey is all about changing your mind, which helps you find out where and who you actually are'. (Morley, 2013: 42)

*RL: Is it important to think about music and cultural links? To understand how society works and the role of popular music within it? There are plenty of people who just want to dance to music or listen to it in the background, not talk or think about it.*

**PM:** '[T]he story of popular music is a story of great change in the way we live our lives, the way we're organised, the way we move, the way we seek pleasure, the way we dream, the way we hear things and the way we imagine the future. It is also the story of why there is something instead of nothing, of how we play and think and feel, of discovery, and of sensation.' (Morley, 2003: 307-308)

*RL: Is it actually music, or culture and fame that interests you? The Guardian website still lists you as a 'rock'n'roll journalist' but others would have you down as a cultural critique, or perhaps a cultural prankster.*

**PM:** 'The self is always evolving into new selves, changing as it is exposed to new experiences and events. The self is a hoax, a passing phase, a form of obedience, an absurd idea. People are not the static, consistent entities they are presumed to be. The self that existed yesterday is not the self that exists today.' (Morley, 2021: 170) 'Since the time I wanted to be anything, I always wanted to be a writer, and writing about music, which is what I knew most about, was the obvious way of becoming a writer. But it was writing, above all, that was of interest to me'. (Morley, 2003: 113)

*RL: Can pop music change the world? Should it?*

**PM:** 'Who is to say that the experience of listening to a piece of great pop music is any less enriching than anything else?' (Morley, 1986: nine)

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## **SUGGESTED CITATION**

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