LISTENING HABITS

When David Toop came to Exeter to promote his book *Ocean of Sound*, I was surprised to find out that he didn't listen to much music. At the time I was still eagerly in our local indie record shop, Binary Star, every week, chatting to other regulars and seeing what the young owners had ordered in, often with specific customers (me included) in mind. Music was playing most of the time in my lounge or study or studio, had been for decades, since my teens...

Now I seem to be in a similar place to where Toop arrived ahead of me. Part of this is simply changing circumstance: a full-time job, children who needed to sleep without being disturbed, and losing a serious part of my hearing as I get older. But some of is simply the fact that, like reading a passage from a favourite book, I don't need to hear much of it again. A verse, a chorus, a solo, a phrase or instrumental squawk, even an LP sleeve, is often enough to let me recall the music that has embedded itself within me.

I haven't got perfect recall or a photographic memory, and I continue to listen to and download loads of new music, often on the back of friends' email recommendations or articles by journalists whose opinions I trust. The house is still full of music, if that is, you count piles of LPs and CDs (OK, I still have my cassettes too) but I live in a much quieter house these days and find it easier to work with the low burble of Radio 4 voices than with jazz, improv or rock blasting out. Ambient works well in my painting studio, can help me mentally move into a different space, but gone are the days of 18 hours of loud music on the stereo.

Toop and I sat with our coffee and listened to a CD play through, something new he had expressed an interest in that I happened to have. When it ended he said 'Thank you, that was interesting' and we continued our conversation before driving down to Spacex Gallery where I co-promoted music and readings under the Litmus banner. I hadn't listened to anything with that kind of attention for a long time, it reminded me of buying new LPs as a teenager, poring over the lyric sheet, gatefold art as I heard the music for the first time. It was a reminder to listen to, not simply consume, music.

Now I am older, I am faced – as many others have before me – with what to do with my collections. I know that one of my friends simply took his cassette collection to the dump, know another carefully auctioned off his prized jazz vinyl collection, and that others have subscribed to streaming services, where almost everything seems to be available. I'm sad enough to want an artefact, an object in my hand, in the same way I have a stereo and a boombox for my music, a telephone to speak to people on and a camera for taking photographs.

I sold 400 albums 18 months ago, mostly post-punk but also some jazz, to a record shop owner from London. He came and collected them, I got a good price (so will he, when he sells them on) and I have them on CD, but I miss many of them. I can still tell you where I bought most of them, which ones I found in Record & Tape Exchange's bargain basement, the clusters of albums I bought at the same time, and the strange little music shop on the edge of Richmond which had a cupboard full of Anthony Braxton albums I had been searching for for many years. My 10 cent copy of Pere Ubu's *Dub Housing* I brought back from the States, the mint copy of A Tent's *Six Empty Places* album found in a Bath junk shop after years of searching after my cassette copy disintegrated. Many were full of music paper cuttings from the time and, by mistake, I managed to leave a copy of an early Patti Smith poetry pamphlet in one of her albums I sold.

I'm still in touch with two people I met in Binary Star, and also (just about) with two writers it turned out I had unknowingly already met before getting to know them as poets. One worked in the record shop in Hammersmith near my school (and his partner in the record library in the suburb I lived in), the other I had chatted to in the queue at The Venue when a Peter Hammill gig was late starting. Music brings people together, literally. Nowadays of course it's mostly online but the few music forums I contribute to mean I can 'chat' or respond to people in the States, Australia or far flung European countries who share the same kind of musical interests I do.

And of course, if you are persistent, you can usually find a way to contact bands, musicians or authors to interview them. I'm lucky in that I have several outlets I publish in, be they zines, magazines or academic journals, and have learnt that most musicians are interested in talking about their work, as long as it's not all ancient history. Catch them when a new album or book is due, a retrospective box set has been compiled, books are being reissued, or a concert or reading tour is imminent, and Bob's your uncle (no, not that Bob).

I tend to send people an email list of questions they can take time to respond to, suggesting they should digress and tangent as they wish, including answering themselves any questions they feel I should have asked. Sometimes there's further episodes of questions and responses; and I always send them a final edit before I submit and publish. Interviews are best when their subjects tell stories, offer opinions and big up events, connections and the music they make or made. When they try to be diplomatic or analytical it can get dull.

One advantage of academic writing is its reliance on quotations. This means that rather than saying your third album was crap, wasn't it?' I can say '*NME*'s Fred Bloggs suggested that...' and ask for their response, and in a similar way I can ask questions using quotes about musical influences or how a musical genre or scene was perceived at the time. Maybe everybody mellows as they get older but most musicians and authors are friendly and generous with their time. It could be, of course, that they simply like talking about themselves or welcome being distracted from any actual creative work.

The internet has changed how we think about things. It is easier to read about a book than read the book itself. I can search for reviews, summaries and interviews with the author, then follow links to other recommendations or articles I find there. Several hours later I may return to the book I am meant to be reading. In a similar manner, even when I want to listen to a new single or album I often find myself somewhere else – an online video or obscure blog – rather than where I intended to be. I have become totally distractable, busy creating networks of useless information rather than paying attention, something I once used to do.

Rupert Loydell. (1225 words)