Journal of Aging Studies xxx (xxxx) xxx–xxx

Contents lists available at ScienceDirect

Journal of Aging Studies

journal homepage: www.elsevier.com/locate/jaging

Popular music scenes and aging bodies

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ARTICLE INFO

Keywords:
Aging
Music scene
Popular music
Lifestyle
Identity
Culture

ABSTRACT

During the last two decades there has been increasing interest in the phenomenon of the aging popular music audience (Bennett & Hodkinson, 2012). Although the specter of the aging fan is by no means new, the notion of, for example, the aging rocker or the aging punk has attracted significant sociological attention, not least of all because of what this says about the shifting socio-cultural significance of rock and punk and similar genres – which at the time of their emergence were inextricably tied to youth and vociferously marketed as "youth musics". As such, initial interpretations of aging music fans tended to paint a somewhat negative picture, suggesting a sense in which such fans were cultural misfits (Ross, 1994). In more recent times, however, work informed by cultural aging perspectives has begun to consider how so-called "youth cultural" identities may in fact provide the basis of more stable and evolving identities over the life course (Bennett, 2013). Starting from this position, the purpose of this article is to critically examine how aging members of popular music scenes might be recast as a salient example of the more pluralistic fashion in which aging is anticipated, managed and articulated in contemporary social settings. The article then branches out to consider two ways that aging members of music scenes continue their scene involvement. The first focuses on evolving a series of discourses that legitimately position them as aging bodies in cultural spaces that also continue to be inhabited by significant numbers of people in their teens, twenties and thirties. The second sees aging fans taking advantage of new opportunities for consuming live music including winery concerts and dinner and show events.

Introduction

Since the closing decade of the 20th century it has become increasingly clear that many of the tastes and lifestyle practices once deemed to be the exclusive remit of youth are now, at least in a westernized context, characterized by more multi-age forms of participation. This extends to popular music scenes in western countries with many such scenes, including rock, punk, and dance, comprising memberships spanning several generations (Bennett & Hodkinson, 2012). Although the spectacle of the aging fan is by no means new,[1] the notion of, for example, the aging rocker or the aging punk has attracted significant academic attention, not least because of what this says about the shifting socio-cultural significance of rock, punk and similar genres as multi-generational scenes (Bennett, 2013). Applying the related concepts of cultural aging (Katz, 2005) and lifestyle (Chaney, 1996) the purpose of this article is to critically examine the phenomenon of the aging music fan as a salient example of the more reflexive way in which aging is now anticipated, managed and articulated in contemporary social settings. A key focus will be on how aging members of particular music scenes in the western developed world negotiate a place for themselves through evolving a series of discourses that legitimately position them as aging individuals, and aging bodies, in cultural spaces that also continue to be inhabited by significant numbers of people in their teens, twenties and early thirties. The article will also consider how, as aging audiences for rock and pop have become increasingly larger, the live music industry has responded to this in ways that strive to accommodate the tastes and lifestyle preferences of an aging cohort of music fans through initiatives such as winery concerts, seated dinner and show events, and music festivals that offer a more comprehensive range of amenities geared towards the lifestyle tastes and preferences of aging music fans.

When youth culture meets middle age

> The point is that both rock "n" roll and its little cousin, pop, were made for the young. Old people have opera, [Andrew] Lloyd Webber and theme tunes (Langmead, 1994: 18).

The above quotation is taken from an article entitled "Livin' Dull" published in the British newspaper *Sunday Times* in which journalist Jeremy Langmead expresses his distaste for aging rock and popular music artists. The basis of Langmead's argument is founded upon an

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[1] See, for example, Burland and Pitts's (2010) instructive work on jazz music audiences.

https://doi.org/10.1016/j.jaging.2018.01.007

essentialised – yet often voiced – viewpoint in western cultures that rock and pop are "youth" musics, that is to say, musics intertwined with the cultural politics of the teenage and early adulthood stages of the life course. Despite its often taken for granted nature, however, such an association of popular music with youth is a relatively recent development if one places it in a context of popular music history that extends back well before 1955, a year considered by many as a watershed moment for the socio-cultural significance of pop (see Peterson, 1990). Indeed, earlier manifestations of popular music, notably the British Music Hall tradition of the 19th century (see Laing, 2010), may have appealed to younger audience members, but they were not specifically recognized as youth musics. The same can be said of jazz, a music that at the time of its emergence during the early 20th century, also had an audience that spanned different generations (Lopes, 2002).

The mid-1950s saw the emergence of rock and roll, a genre that, for a number of reasons, is historically acknowledged as the first "youth" music (Shumway, 1992). What set rock and roll apart from earlier moments in popular music history was a relatively unique combination of socio-economic and technological circumstances. The baby-boom and post-war affluence created a new wave of economically empowered teenagers, a social-cultural shift that was matched by a ramping up of mass production and marketing of new objects of mass consumption, including vinyl 45′ records, transistor radios, televisions and other technological goods that would subsequently become pivotal in the mass dissemination of music to a youth audience (Chambers, 1985). Such developments were matched by a shrewd marketing strategy on the part of the music industry that saw the rhythm and blues music of African-American artists such as Fats Domino and Bo Diddley repackaged and sold to teen audiences via new, white artists such as Elvis Presley, Carl Perkins, Jerry Lee Lewis and, latterly, the Beatles. A critical appeal of these and similar artists was their similarity, in age, appearance and apparent outlook on life, to their young audience. As Plasketes and Plasketes observe: "There existed a strong bond between performer and audience, because there was the sense that the stars were not being imposed from above but had sprung up from similar ranks as the audience" (1987: 30).

The evolution of more hard-edged popular music in the later 1960s and the emergence of the term "rock" gave rise to a further, more politically infused chapter in the association of popular music with youth. Artists such as Bob Dylan, Jimi Hendrix, the Rolling Stones and the Beatles, the last having by this time made significant inroads to the rock field with critically acclaimed albums such as *Revolver* and *Sergeant Peppers Lonely Hearts Club Band*, were considered by youth audiences and critics alike as spearheading a new moment in the revolutionary capacity of popular music to bring about socio-political change. Discourses that identified rock as the basis for a new ideological community (Frith, 1981) were bolstered by counter-cultural clashes with the authorities in North America and Europe (Bennett, 2001) with events such as the 1969 Woodstock festival (see Bennett, 2004) being idealized as the basis for a new era of peace, love and understanding fostered by a rejection of technocratic progress (Clecak, 1983) and a back to the land philosophy with rural hippie communes leading the way (Webster, 1976). Significantly, however, the counter-culture was not, in fact, an exclusively youth-based phenomenon. Indeed, various counter-cultural figureheads, among them Alan Ginsberg, Ken Kesey, Abbie Hoffman and Timothy Leary, were some way beyond the then accepted age of youth.

However, a critical turning point came in the 1990s when it became increasingly evident that so-called youth musics and music scenes were no longer the exclusive purview of young people but also displayed a growing presence of "post-youth" individuals (Andes, 1998). Up until this time it had largely been assumed that the appeal of post-war rock and pop had a liminal quality firmly associated with the teenage and early adulthood stages of the life course. Underpinning this assumption was the argument that, given the pressures of social aging, individuals' life course transitions would also see them acquiring new, "age-appropriate" forms of taste in music and other popular cultural forms. Exceptions to this pattern were bluntly categorized as examples of what Calcutt (1998) has unflatteringly referred to as "arrested development", a discourse that also partially made its way into academic studies of popular music as illustrated in Ross's observation: "It is not just Mick Jagger and Tina Turner who imagine themselves to be eighteen years old and steppin' out; a significant mass of baby boomers partially act out this belief in their daily lives" (1994: 8). Again, commentaries such as these could be argued to make sweeping and quite essentialist judgments concerning the legitimate parameters of music fandom, within which conservative notions of social aging and life course transitions are taken for granted as hegemonic benchmarks of age-appropriate social behavior.

Cultural aging and lifestyle

As illustrated above, a general supposition among many commentators has been that physical aging is somehow anathema to any form of meaningful participation in more contemporary popular music scenes. A great deal of the rhetoric informing such a view relates to the perceived limitations of the aging body, both in terms of physical appearance and in relation to the levels of physical stamina typically required for regular music scene involvement. In other areas of aging research, however, there is a keen awareness of the way that notions of aging, physical appearance and general levels of fitness in society are changing as individuals are less prepared to either simply accept the physical limitations of aging as an inevitability (Bowling, 2008) or tolerate the stereotypes that stigmatize anything regarded as age inappropriate behavior (Boudiny, 2013). Katz, in considering the increasing popularity of the term "cultural aging", has argued that while, on the one hand, this term connotes problematic, neo-liberal inscribed notions such as "positive", "successful" and "active" aging, it can also "[cultivate] an alternative politics of representation and living in time rather than against it" (2005: 19). In a further elaboration of this point, Katz notes how "older people [are increasingly seen to] engage in a variety of socially productive activities not necessarily limited to the measurable individual activities promoted by gerontologists and professionals" (2005: 131).

Considered in this way, the concept of cultural aging opens up a new realm of possibilities for understanding how aging adults continue to relate to popular music scenes that they invariably first became associated with during their youth. Indeed, as Bennett observes: "The fact that an individual becomes a follower of a style of music as a "young" person may matter far less than what that music continues to mean to them as they grow older" (2013: 20). Bennett's argument is given further credence via more progressive interpretations of cultural aging and their recasting of the aging process as a socially constructed and continually evolving phenomenon (Featherstone & Hepworth, 1995) wherein challenges to a given hegemonic framing of age and aging are an acknowledged part. One salient feature of this has been a radical shift in the shared perceptions of individuals entering middle age as to what they can and should expect from life in this stage of the life course. Thus, as Hunt suggests: "These are people who know that they have another 30 – 40 years of life expectancy ahead of them. They may see a practically endless future rather than the beginning of the end" (2005: 183). Such new perceptions and sensibilities of aging and the life course are informed in part by a plethora of television, cinema, print and online media that are deeply invested in presenting to aging consumers a variety of lifestyle options and opportunities for such individuals to take advantage of in middle age and later life. Indeed, as Blaikie (1999) notes, since the 1990s across a range of popular media, middle age has been presented not as an end of youthful aspirations but rather a maturation of these in terms of leisure and lifestyle preferences in middle age and later life.

Such work provides the basis for a new, more objective, understanding of the aging fan of contemporary popular music genres such as