

## BASS, MIDS, TOPS: AN ORAL HISTORY OF SOUND SYSTEM CULTURE

JOE MUGGS & BRIAN DAVID STEVENS

London: Strange Attractor Press, 2019.

ISBN: 978-1-9072-2277-1 (paperback)

RRP: US\$29.95 (paperback)

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2020.12.01.12>>

EDWARD K. SPENCER

UNIVERSITY OF BIRMINGHAM (UK)

UNIVERSITY OF OXFORD (UK)

Knowing how the world enjoys blackness, and seeing what happened to George [Floyd], we—black people—get the feeling that people want our culture, but they do not want us. In other words, you want my talent—but you don’t want me. . . . You cannot enjoy the rhythm and ignore the blues (Clara Amfo speaking on BBC Radio 1, Tuesday 2<sup>nd</sup> June 2020).

Since this book arrives in the wake of the Windrush Scandal, Black Lives Matter protests in Bristol and now Boris Johnson’s inflammatory remarks regarding the Last Night of the Proms, we must hope that the voices and stories amplified by *Bass, Mids, Tops* reach a wide audience. It does not deal with reggae sound systems in the same way as Henriques (2011) but is instead concerned with a constellation of UK genres that have their roots in black British sound system culture. In a perspicacious Foreword, Mykaell Riley suggests that this oral history is not only about the enjoyment of bass weight but also about “something truly unique to the UK” (11) that is at once personal, cultural and political.<sup>1</sup> Refreshingly, instead of eulogising bass itself in the manner of recent scholarly monographs (Goodman 2010; Jasen 2016),<sup>2</sup> the book comprises twenty-five interviews with a diverse array of people involved in the development of UK bass culture. As Joe Muggs notes in his Introduction, he “can’t claim peer-reviewed rigour” (20), but his transcripts will certainly be of interest to researchers concerned with rare groove, acid house, jungle, drum ‘n’ bass, garage, dubstep, grime and UK funky.

At this point some readers might ask whether Joe Muggs is overshadowed by Simon Reynolds. The short answer is not really. Although his book is inevitably haunted by Reynolds' controversial hardcore continuum,<sup>3</sup> from the outset Muggs is keen to distance himself from a "definitive history" and linear narratives. He stresses that the book is "quite the opposite, in fact: it's deliberately partial, arbitrary, and conversational . . . an attempt to look at multiple interwoven continua: life stories, genre stories, sound stories, all happening at once" (14). Despite this, the interview transcripts are arranged into a roughly chronological order, beginning with Dennis Bovell (writer and producer for the lovers rock anthem *Silly Games*), Norman Jay (a key figure in the rare groove era), Adrian Sherwood (of Dub Syndicate), Youth (Martin Glover, of Killing Joke and The Orb), Tony Thorpe (Moody Boyz), Rob Smith (Smith & Mighty), George Evelyn (Nightmares on Wax) and Nicolette (vocalist for Shut Up and Dance and Massive Attack). This is followed by four interviews with key figures from the jungle and early drum 'n' bass era, namely Dego (of 4hero and Reinforced records), DJ Storm (the self-professed "mum" of Metalheadz), Jumpin Jack Frost (who Muggs casts as "the archetypal jungle DJ") and Krust. The short-lived garage years are represented by Sarah Lockhart (who worked in A&R long before the establishment of FWD>> and her time at Rinse FM), Noodles (of Groove Chronicles along with El-B) and Zed Bias. This last interview segues into Muggs' conversations with the dubstep producers Skream and Mala, before Kromestar is used as another link (with grime, represented by Terror Danjah). Notwithstanding this domino sequence, the book then starts to seem less teleological during the final sweep of interviews (with T.Williams, Cooly G, Toddla T, Samrai, Barely Legal and Shy One).

Sometimes the transcripts become bogged down with details that are interesting but rather trivial. Similarly, the endnotes provide useful track details and demonstrate that Muggs is a true anorak, someone who is utterly devoted to archiving musical heritage. Intermittently, however, the reader can glimpse some heavier themes pertaining to gender, race, timbral politics and subcultural capital. In the first instance, DJ Storm (Jayne Conneely) explains that she always has to "work that little bit harder" as a woman in a scene that is still overwhelmingly male: "we'll always turn up on time and look well-presented because we're women. It's a shame that we're not always given the chances we deserve" (192). Elsewhere, Sarah Lockhart recalls the "intimidating" atmosphere of record shops with a collector mentality and stresses that she "didn't like that it was just boys" at FWD>> (253). On the other hand, Nicolette Love Suwoton appears to embrace longstanding associations between low-frequency sound and maleness when she states that "my voice is so feminine and the bass has a more masculine energy, if you like, so I love that contrast" (145). The timbral articulation of difference is indeed another recurring theme that emerges from the transcripts. Although there is some consensus among the interviewees that the acid house era represents a brief period of total unity (with "people from all kinds of backgrounds, colours, nationalities, all coming together" (207), to use Jumpin Jack Frost's words), George Evelyn laments the advent of "the Italian piano house thing" and the way that "bass took a

back seat in some clubs” (131). For Tony Thorpe, these “progressive” timbral developments “killed the unity, the family kind of thing . . . it’s like they forgot about black music and just went ‘Oh we’re making money now, fuck that’” (95). History repeats itself. Much later on in the book, Tesfa Williams talks about trying to establish himself as a house producer and feeling the need to obfuscate his own identity as a black artist through his T.Williams moniker: “the market is predominantly white male . . . my first name is African and I knew people would associate whatever with that and that might cause barriers as well” (392). The transcripts also demonstrate that UK bass culture has often been characterised by infighting (e.g. Zed Bias on the infamous “garage committee”) and closed-minded snobbery (especially when hijacked by hipsters). One of the most telling anecdotes of all arrives in the interview with Terror Danjah. Hungry to reach a new, youthful audience having been at Coachella 2011, Terror Danjah (Rodney Pryce) worked on an anthemic track titled *Full Attention* with the vocalist Ruby Lee Ryder—one featuring the cardinal sin of a tear-out bass dubstep drop. Kode9 (Steve Goodman) was confused and unable to hide his disappointment. But as Terror Danjah tried to explain, “this is for the people who don’t understand, I’m not known now . . . the people who bought Planet Mu knew, like people that are connoisseurs, sipping their wine like [*comedy posh voice*] ‘Yas it’s Terror Danjah’. But the kids don’t know who I am!” (317). We might conclude that insularity and fear of selling out creates a unique set of problems.

Although Muggs’ material is rich and evocative, some nit-picking is now required. Given the specific focus of his book, I think that including “UK” in its title would have been a good idea. It would also have been useful to see the precise date of each interview at the start of every transcript. More generally, the book would have benefitted from better proofreading and copy editing—its pages are littered with typographical errors and missing words, and there also seems to be an obvious factual mistake in the Nicolette chapter (the title of the Massive Attack track she features on is “Three” not “Seven”). My main criticism, however, concerns Muggs’ distrust of academia and critical interpretation. This scepticism is by no means unfounded, and Muggs may well have Goodman/Kode9 in mind when he writes that “you could pick musicians who help you make a very specific political point, or rave tracks that illustrate your chosen crypto-Lacanian-post-pomo-*contra*-Frankfurt fashion in cultural criticism” (19). But as the interviews make clear, sound system culture is political in every sense of the term, and Riley’s excellent Foreword could have been matched by an essay-length Afterword by a bass music scholar (Monique Charles and Christabel Stirling come to mind, for instance). Overall, the book is stimulating and frustrating in equal measure. As Riley stresses, “formal education about music is vital” (11), and if this “very specific strand of British popular music” (12) is to become a mainstay of undergraduate curricula then I fear that critical, peer-reviewed scholarship is a necessary evil. Nevertheless, Muggs should be congratulated on gathering fruitful source material for this kind of work.

## NOTES

- 1 Riley also reflects on his work with the Reggae Philharmonic Orchestra (RPO) in the 1990s: “It was a political statement, it was challenging the system . . . asking questions about what music is about in the UK” (11). Additionally, it should be noted here that Riley is currently leading an oral history project of his own with the Black Music Research Unit at the University of Westminster.
- 2 For an important critique of Goodman’s impersonal vibrational ontology, see Kane (2015).
- 3 The hardcore continuum debate involving Jeremy Gilbert, Mark Fisher and Simon Reynolds can be found in the inaugural volume of *Dancecult*.

## REFERENCES

- Goodman, Steve. 2010. *Sonic Warfare: Sound, Affect, and the Ecology of Fear*. London: MIT Press.
- Henriques, Julian. 2011. *Sonic Bodies: Reggae Sound Systems, Performance Techniques, and Ways of Knowing*. New York: Continuum.
- Kane, Brian. 2015. “Sound Studies Without Auditory Culture: A Critique of the Ontological Turn”. *Sound Studies* 1(1): 2-21. <<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/20551940.2015.1079063>>
- Jasen, Paul. 2016. *Low End Theory: Bass, Bodies, and the Materiality of Sonic Experience*. London: Bloomsbury.

---

## NIGHT FEVER: DESIGNING CLUB CULTURE 1960 – TODAY

MATEO KRIES, JOCHEN EISENBRAND, CATHERINE ROSSI (EDITORS)

Weil am Rhein, Germany: Vitra Design Museum, 2018

398 pp.

ISBN: 978-3-945852-24-8 (English edition); 978-3-945852-23-1 (German edition)

RRP: €59.90

---

## THIS MUST BE THE PLACE: AN ARCHITECTURAL HISTORY OF POPULAR MUSIC PERFORMANCE VENUES

ROBERT KRONENBURG

New York, NY and London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic

286 pp.

ISBN: 978-1-5013-1927-3 (HB), 978-1-5013-1928-0 (PB), 978-1-5013-1929-7 (ePDF),

978-1-5013-1930-3 (eBook)

RRP: £91.80 (HB), £17.99 (PB), £14.39 (ePDF), £14.39 (eBook)

---

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2020.12.01.13>>

HILLEGONDA C. RIETVELD

LONDON SOUTH BANK UNIVERSITY (UK)

The study of the architecture of music venues is a developing area, illustrated here by two publications, one offering a historical perspective on spaces of live popular music performance, the other specifically on the more recent development of clubs where dancing to records prevails. In the introduction to their substantial exhibition catalogue, *Nightfever*, co-curators Rossi and Eisenbrand explain the focus is on “spaces designed to elicit the after-hour excitement and escape . . . and the design cultures the nightclub has created” (16). Created for the German interior design company Vitra (2000), the book offers graphic design, architectural drawings and interior photography of a wide range of clubs, accompanied by interviews with its architects and designers, and a selection of reflective essays by a selection of club researchers; it includes maps and floor plans of clubs in Belgium, Italy, and in clubbing capitals Berlin, London, New York, and Johannesburg. Kronenburg offers a broader architectural timeline of music venues that historically have enabled the experiential and transience of live music, mainly in West-Europe and the USA. Both publications stress the importance of human interaction, and the social aspects of sharing and interacting with music. For Rossi and Eisenbrand, the club venue offers a type of participatory theatre in which to act out various persona, a carnivalesque space that enables daily identities to disappear. For Kronenburg, music venues offer a sense of synchronicity that is uniquely experienced during a live performance, connecting music makers with their audiences.

*This Must Be the Place* is a continuation of Kronenburg’s interest in flexible and mobile architecture and the experience of music (see for example, his 2012 monograph on live music venues). As the live industry is increasingly dominated by large international promoters,



threatening the livelihoods of “grassroots venues”, Kronenburg’s 2019 publication attempts to salvage their histories, opening with an ode to the more intimate popular music events in the home, followed by an overview of smaller European theatres that emerged during the dawn of industrialisation, during the 1700s and 1800s. While urbanisation slowly but surely intensified during that era, popular theatre venues became part of circuits for travelling shows, and public houses that were popular for their music and theatre programming would metamorphose into music halls. Later in the book, there is a discussion of European social dance venues from the 18th up to the mid-twentieth century, starting with dance pavilions of London’s pleasure gardens, followed by the ballrooms and dancehalls that ultimately swapped their orchestras for DJs during the 1970s and 80s. The historical black and white as well as glossy colour prints, both drawings and photographs, add to a deeper understanding of the look of some of these venues.

Kronenburg further addresses the development of venues in the USA that ultimately became jazz and a dance clubs, including early twentieth century juke joints and blues bars, and a chapter specifically dedicated to the various jazz venues of New Orleans. Supper clubs and cabaret venues, where one could have dinner while watching a show and maybe have a dance afterwards, offered a variety of jazz and popular music. Of particular interest for the design of discos and dance bars are speakeasies, which emerged during the 1920-1933 national alcohol prohibition. Also known as the jazz age, or the roaring twenties, during these thirteen years drinking became an underground activity. Kronenburg’s interest in film leads to a brief discussion of the use of certain music venues as backdrop for a range of film narratives that mythologize the association of Italian-related American mafia with such venues.

In the safety of such secretive clubs, marginalized gendered and racialized identities could be explored and asserted, a theme that Rossi and Eisenbrand identify as an important element of discotheques and nightclubs, where liminality “is explored though the one activity that unites all club culture: dancing” (19). Underground dance styles that use the body musically as an expressive instrument can, according to Fikentscher (2000: 25), “be understood as part of an American continuum of social dance styles that has been marked by a pervasive African American imprint at least since the 1920s”. In *Night Fever*, Catharine Rossi additionally highlights the importance of avant-garde and experimental movements to the development of night clubs as we now understand them, with reference to happenings in New York, and Radical Design architects in Italy during the 1960s and 1970s. In this way, the combination of design and the musical practices of such venues have had an important influence on the development of discotheques and dance clubs from the 1960s onwards. Also contributing to *Nigh Fever*, Tim Lawrence provides an overview of the dance clubs in New York City that further shaped the disco concept, from Mancuso’s home, The Loft, to the extravagancies of Studio 54. For Kronenburg, such venues herald the transition from live music performance to “record scenes”, reviewing a range of DJ-led events and venues where participants dance to recorded music, from influential New York dance clubs in the 1960s and 70s, to the Northern Soul scene in England. Yet, it is important to acknowledge that also the DJ is a musical performer (Rietveld 2016). Such venues are often found in areas that are regarded as undesirable, taking place within the

night-time that make them invisible to everyday society. Yet their pioneering drive can add cultural capital to a neighbourhood and thereby set in motion processes of gentrification that can, ironically, eventually push away these venues.

Both publications give recognition to the multi-sensory aspect of music venues. For Rossi and Eisenbrand mobile theatrical lighting and participatory spectacle are of importance to dance clubs. Kronenburg further emphasises the importance sound when dancing to records, assuming that the staged music performance stops being a spectacle; this holds true for smaller clubs, but less so for commercially driven events (Rietveld, 2013). For both, though, the discussion of music venues mainly focuses on visual aspects rather than the acoustic space in the experience of music. Perhaps this is not surprising. Architecture is dominated by visual design, with acoustic architecture a smaller component in this field. Added to this is the mediation of the story of dance clubs and music venues through text and still images, in which it is a challenge to translate the dynamism of sound and dance. Particularly *Night Fever* showcases a visually lush selection of key dance clubs, including the post-industrial interior design of Manchester's The Hacienda (FAC51) by Ben Kelly, visually echoing the functional modernist interiors by Bauhaus and Gerrit Rietveld; yet despite its visually innovative design it was beset by acoustic challenges. The famously fine-tuned sound system design by Richard Long for Paradise Garage is given recognition throughout the catalogue, but this does not translate well visually, unlike images of Grace Jones being body painted by Keith Haring for a show in that influential New York underground club. A spectacular colour image of the gold-metal coated Despacio sound system seems offered by way of compensation; designed by James Murphy this was inspired by both Richard Long's work and by the chilled out Balearic music aesthetic of Ibiza ("despacio" means "slowly"). Still, Ibiza's clubs are notably absent, despite its influential dance music clubs and party culture. This just illustrates that the richness and complexity of music club history makes it impossible to be exhaustive.

## REFERENCES

- Fikentscher, Kai. 2000. *"You Better Work!" Underground Dance Music in New York City*. Hanover NH, and London, UK: Wesleyan University Press.
- Kronenburg, Robert. 2012. *Live Architecture: Popular Music Venues, Stages and Arenas*. Oxford, UK: Routledge.
- Rietveld, Hillegonda. C. 2016. "Authenticity and Liveness in Digital DJ Performance". In *Musicians and their Audiences*, ed. Ioannis Tsioulakis and Elina Hytönen-Ng, 123-33. New York, NY and London, UK: Routledge.
- . 2013. "Journey to the Light? Immersion, Spectacle and Mediation". In *DJ Culture in the Mix: Power, Technology, and Social Change in Electronic Dance Music*, ed. Anna Gavanas, Bernardo A. Attias and Hillegonda C. Rietveld, 79-102. New York, NY and London, UK, Bloomsbury Academic.
- "Dance! Voices from the Exhibition 'Night Fever: Designing Club Culture 1960 – Today'". *Vitra Magazine*. <<https://www.vitra.com/en-gb/magazine/details/dance>>.

---

## MOON JUICE STOMPER: A NOVEL (GOA 1987-96)

RAY CASTLE

New Zealand: Independently Published, 2019

313 pp.

ISBN: 978-1791998271

RRP: £12

---

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2020.12.01.14>>

GRAHAM ST JOHN

INDEPENDENT RESEARCHER

If dance music scenes have windows of fortune, Anjuna, Goa, in the late eighties was peak oil, and Ray Castle was there to drill it. After three decades, Castle has finally knocked out, psychedelic disco balls and all, what is certain to become the definitive warp and scintillating weft on this “scenius” during its electronic heyday. As perhaps the most influential yet least documented dance music culture in history, this moment has long been an enigma. A Golden Triangle for cultural exiles and outcasts. A haven for human flotsam and jetsam surging up the electric shores of the Arabian Sea, before ebbing into the deep recesses of memory. The absence of reporting on this lost horizon and its discommunitarians would normally be enough to draw the attention of enthusiasts of Goa and its many after parties. Fortunately for us, as the work of a wordsmith with an acute attention to detail, *Moon Juice Stomper* is a literary charm.

Among other aliases, as DJ Masaray, Castle performed in Goa in the late eighties and early nineties, becoming a vocal critic of the industry that emerged in the subsequent decades. Having once elevated ecstatic bodies above the sands of distant languid beaches, Castle now sustains the levitational effect in a narrative at times reminiscent of Castenada or H. S. Thompson. Commanding a white-knuckled ride through the “mystical anarchy” of “Gonzo Goa,” capturing the explosive atmosphere at this freak nadir, his self published intervention in creative nonfiction transports readers inside the minds of the habitués of this remote crossroads ... even as they’re going out of their minds. And in doing so, Castle does what any freakologist worth their beatific bath salts should do: he delivers us into the heart and soul of the matter.

This journey into the many-layered vibe of Goa — the roots of Goa trance and its worldwide psytrance progeny — is no mean feat, as Castle has seamlessly achieved the notoriously difficult and routinely futile task of writing about dancing. This accomplishment stands tall in the history of dance culture narratives. The central characters stand off the page in a third person approach that repeatedly lures readers into the sweet spot. The book is



---

hallucinatory, but also realistic. It conveys the gift economy and music swopping integral to this scene. Goa fans and scholars will be fascinated by the effort to weave pseudonymised figures like Goa Gil, Laurent, Fred Disco, Vath, Raja Ram/TiP and Space Tribe, among many others, into this semi-fictionalised account. Enthusiasts will likewise appreciate how track vocal samples are mixed into the narrative, dada-jockey style, and the way the story builds tension and achieves climax at the full moon party under the Banyan Tree in 1988. Other points of intrigue include the descriptions of drug politics, police corruption, party bans, bar/gambling cartels and various historical anecdotes. Generations of train spotters will be shooting their cosmic load over these pages.

The struggle to sustain “paradise” is an overarching theme, and quite apparent in the efforts to maintain the vibe into the early 1990s as the scene came under growing external and internal pressures. Whether Castle captured this long tail effect adequately is open to dispute, for the book, it could be warranted, drags. Then again, this is faithful to the party-arc of the scene itself: build-up, peak vibe and long come down, with many after parties inclusive. It echoes a movement where parties found ways to survive through the next day and night, and then the following morning, and afternoon... and beyond that, in more remote regions and neighbouring states. As the stakes rose, the illegal parties grew more adventurous with road trips out of Goa to Maharashtra. The buccaneer spirit of making pirate parties by any means (sustaining the addiction and entitlement to the parties) seems to drive the plot. The effort to treat the Goa scene (or “scenius”) like a collective character responding to its own growing notoriety as a nascent global industry and party brand is ultimately commendable.

The book might have done more to address the overall impact on the locals of privileged Europeans making party in the colony. This said, it does end with a neat twist in which an Indian fashion entrepreneur markets the “Goa Psy Trance” brand. It also illustrates one important outcome of the story: how upper middle class Indians are now the primary customers of Goa bar discos, that charge more for entry than a club in Europe, to hear with a beer in their hand dance music that was once banned.

In a world stricken by a pandemic that has effectively closed down dance cultures, the scene captured in *Moon Juice Stomper* appears *even more exotic*. With its alluring wordcraft, this book holds unquestionable cult gravitas. Remixing the music, intrigue, love, bizarre sex, violence and drama of real places, events and figures, not least of all the author himself, the book amplifies a movement in its un/making. Every epic era needs its chronicler, and in Castle, Goa has its Homer.

---

## AVICII: TRUE STORIES

DIR. LEVAN TSIKURISHVILI

USA: Black Dalmation Films, OPA People Production, Piece of Magic Entertainment, and SF Bio, 2017.  
<<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt7357302/>>

---

<<http://dx.doi.org/10.12801/1947-5403.2020.12.01.15>>

GEORGE MUSGRAVE

GOLDSMITHS, UNIVERSITY OF LONDON (UK)

UNIVERSITY OF WESTMINSTER (UK)

It is extremely hard to review a documentary like *Avicii: True Stories* and disentangle myself from the research on mental health and the music industry which I have spent the last four years immersed in (Gross and Musgrave 2016; 2017; 2020). With almost every minute that passes of this profoundly sad, and at times chilling film, I found myself thinking that, in many respects, what I was watching was one of the most extreme case studies imaginable for the conceptual architecture we have developed to try and grapple with the potential for toxicity which a music career presents. Knowing the tragic endpoint, of course, changes the way one watches and experiences the film. On the one hand, it is a simple story of a young man making music and the stresses and strains of his working life which ends in tragedy. On the other, it is an allegorical morality tale, which challenges us to think about themes such as corporate ethics, responsibility, creativity, passion and exploitation.

The film pivots around two central relationships. The first is the relationship *Tim Bergling* has with music making, realised in the spellbinding form of deeply personal, at times even intimate, footage of him in the studio. We see him creating early versions of loops between 2008 and 2010 (which we as fans know will go on to be huge records), or jamming with Nile Rodgers, or creating toplines with Aloe Blacc and Chris Martin; each of these artists seemingly mesmerised at Tim's ability to reformat their different talents within the remit of EDM. The second key relationship is between *Avicii* and the music industry, exemplified and crystallised in his connection with his manager Arash "Ash" Pournouri. It is through this relationship in particular that the moral and ethical challenges of the piece are articulated. At the beginning of the film, it is hard not to begrudgingly admire Pournouri — who embodies the entrepreneurial spirit of spinning gold from thin air — as we hear him on the phone to EMI pushing the deal for Avicii's first major single higher and higher, up to \$500,000. This feeling of respect does not last for long. Thirteen minutes in, still at the beginning of Avicii's career, we hear Pournouri exclaim almost excitedly, in what turns out to be a chilling and prophetic statement: "Tim is going to die. With all the interviews, radio tours and everything, he'll drop dead". As a viewer, this early feeling of discomfort permeates much of the ensuing ninety minutes.

Just a few scenes later, we see Bergling having to cancel performing at the 2013 Ultra Music Festival in Australia — for what we now know was alcohol induced pancreatitis (Ralston 2018) — working on his laptop in hospital and talking about upcoming performances. At this point of the documentary we start to see how his career has become more than just about making music, but is now an infrastructure; with stakeholders and responsibilities and pressures and expectations and dependence. It is in this environment, as those around him make entirely fatuous statements such as “you can do the show if you want to”, that, as a viewer, you start asking questions about whose interests are really being prioritised. Who is working for who? Indeed, perhaps more conceptually; what *is* coercion, what is control, and what does it look like? The subtle operation of a system of exploitation rooted in ideas of guilt and responsibility where, as Bergling himself says he feels “lucky and blessed”, is laid bare before our eyes. Here, and indeed throughout the documentary, you find yourself thinking simply: “who is looking after him?” One day later, we see Bergling looking exhausted — a picture of enervate fragility with his eyes rolling back in his head — being cajoled into accepting a series of interviews with the press. It is frightening to watch. Appalling, honestly.

Ticking in the background like a sombre metronome is the counter of shows performed, which we see rattling exponentially higher as the film progresses. Forty-six minutes into the film, we are now in 2015, and the show counter ticks over 700 towards 775. We hear from Bergling about the enormous stresses and pressures as more and more shows are added to his diary. We hear too from David Guetta about the burden of expectations to deliver a global hit again. The sense of pressure feels intense in these scenes, as we see Bergling sitting in his villa in Ibiza creating the album *Stories*, being reminded by those around him to eat and described by his childhood friend as a “shell”. It is interesting, personally, that I could place my own connection to the music of Avicii, as a fan, at this point in the journey of the film. In August 2015, I saw him play at Ushuaia in Ibiza — the venue which would eventually host his final ever performance. The party was incredible, and just as Bergling talks about finding genuine happiness in moments of those shows, so too from my perspective as a fan, I remember that happiness. The following month, in September 2015, he cancelled all of his future performances. It is surreal to think that standing in Ushuaia at that time, I had no idea about what was happening to him or the pain he was going through.

Within the first minute of the documentary, I was reminded of a quote by an interviewee from my own research who described fame as being akin to sitting in the back of a car that someone else is driving at ferocious speed as the G forces push you back in the seat and the world spins past you. This is perhaps the easiest way to read the heart-breaking narrative unfolding over the course of the documentary: a naive, introverted boy hurtling through a world he did not, or could not, understand, in which all he was searching for was, as he phrased it, “finding a connection with people and being accepted”. The speed at which he goes from sending demos to blogs and eating pasta on his bed to headlining a festival and being introduced by Madonna is frightening. Pournouri has, of course, denied this reading and presentation of events (Ralston 2018). Indeed, reading things purely in this way denies

the very real moments of joy we see in the film: the smile on Bergling's face in the early moments as crowds chant along to his first global hit "Levels"; the stages with all of the crowds and lights and lasers and confetti; the incredible outdoor studio at the top of the Grand Canyon writing songs; the footage of him relaxing with his friends in Malibu, in the mansion that he was finally able to bring them to honour the "contracts" they wrote in crayons as kids (stating that if any of them "made it" they would invite each other along to their mansions); or on the Ile Sainte-Marie in Madagascar after retiring, seemingly at calm. This is the duality of the story, and indeed of musical careers generally; the immense highs and joys, and the indescribable lows. In addition, this reading also denies Bergling any sense of agency, and again, this is not what the film shows either. There is footage showing how acutely aware he is of himself and his personality; at sixty minutes in we see him discussing Carl Jung's conceptualisation of introversion and we learn that he has been in therapy. He is emotionally attuned in a way that is not surprising for a musician; a type of work that is reliant on the understanding of, and connection to, emotion in the same way that a builder relies on and develops physical strength.

Bergling was clearly aware that things were deeply wrong with how he was feeling, both physically and emotionally. At the moment in the film when he announces his retirement, one still, as a viewer, finds oneself asking: "how does it get from here, to his suicide in Oman?". You still hope that perhaps there will be a different ending. At around seventy minutes in, there is a marked shift in the tone of Bergling's voice, as what up until this point has been a kind of resigned acceptance morphs into resentful anger. It is in his realisation and articulation of this anger that we see how the environment within which he lived and worked was reliant on him continuing to run on the treadmill. He tells everyone around him that he just wants the performances to stop, seemingly desperate for people to listen to him. "It's harder to cancel these shows than to do them", we hear someone in his team say. "It would be harder to do them, for me", he says. "Hear me out". "As long as you know it could cost you quite a lot", and they run through each show and how much money would be lost. "It's giving me anxiety", he tells them.

Again, this scene is horrible to watch. We hear the coerciveness of commitments "needing to be honoured", leading the viewer to ask in whose interest it is for Bergling to keep going and whose interests are being represented. We hear his team tell him that he will lose money, but of course what they mean is that they will lose money too. Ten minutes later, there is an exchange which, given where the story concludes, makes one feel slightly sick. His manager, tellingly, says:

He doesn't understand the value of money or that his decisions can have very negative consequences for other people, or that the only reason people care is because he is successful right now. If he stopped being successful a lot of people would jump ship. I'm sure of it.

What is perhaps most unsettling, or frustrating, or dispiriting, or upsetting — I am unsure of the best word to capture the feeling — is how the film concludes. We see Tim in 2016 on a beach, retired from performing live, having separated from his manager, apparently

---

healthier and feeling stronger and working on new music; in theory doing the thing he loved most. By April 2018, he would be dead having taken his own life whilst on holiday in Oman. As a viewer, you are left devastatingly unclear how he arrived at the point of such despair. Perhaps no one will know. What the documentary appears to show, to my reading at least, was the tragic story of a shy and anxious young man, who loved making music and the deep, meaningful joy it brought him, propelled into a world reliant on the ever more avaricious exploitation of his labour in order to support the development of an economy which had formed around him, where simple human care and compassion had been decimated by the compulsion to keep going and market his music, and against which he tried to fight back. Certainly, this is just one reading, and it is important to note that many of the individuals whom the film appears to point fingers of blame at have disputed their representation. Nonetheless, it is hard to watch it and not feel that Tim had been profoundly let down by many of those around him.

RIP Tim Bergling / Avicii: 1989-2018

## REFERENCES

- Gross, Sally and Musgrave, George. 2016. "Can Music Make You Sick? Music and Depression. A Study into the Incidence of Musicians Mental Health. Part 1: Pilot Survey Report". *Help Musicians UK/MusicTank*.
- . 2017. "Can Music Make You Sick? Music and Depression. A Study into the Incidence of Musicians Mental Health. Part 2: Qualitative Study and Recommendations". *Help Musicians UK/MusicTank*.
- . 2020. *Can Music Make You Sick? Measuring the Price of Musical Ambition*, University of Westminster Press.
- Ralston, William. 2018. "Who Really Killed Avicii?" *British GQ*.  
<<https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/article/who-really-killed-avicii>> (Accessed 1 September 2020).