

A Mediatized and Decentered Future: Popular Music Studies at IASPM 2025

Xiaodan Zhang
Henan University
zxd-music@outlook.com

Abstract

The 23rd IASPM Biennial Conference (Paris, 2025), themed “Recording Popular Music”, directed scholarly attention from external social crises toward a renewed focus on the medium of recording itself. This review identifies three key intellectual currents evident at the conference: an ontological turn that redefined recording as music’s mode of existence; a technological-historical turn that reframed sound technologies as cultural artifacts; and a continued engagement with identity politics, now turned inward to examine recording as a site of gendered power and decolonial contestation. Together, these shifts established recording as a central object of theory and method. The conference also signaled a move toward a more mediatized and polycentric future for the discipline, exemplified by the growing participation of scholars from beyond the Anglo-American sphere.

KEYWORDS: IASPM, Popular Music Studies, Conference Review, Recording, Global South

The 23rd biennial conference of the IASPM, held at Université Sorbonne Nouvelle in Paris from 7–11 July 2025, served as a pivotal forum for critical reflection within the discipline. Whereas the 2023 meeting in Minneapolis, themed “Popular Music in Crisis”, examined music’s response to social and epidemiological upheavals, the Paris conference turned inward under the banner “Recording Popular Music”. This thematic focus invited a move from addressing external crises toward reflecting on the very medium that constitutes popular music itself—the recording.

The choice of Paris carried both symbolic and historical resonance. As one of the few cities to host IASPM conferences more than once (the first in 1989), it provided a site for critical self-reflection on how the field has evolved over three

decades. France's long-standing traditions in sound studies and the aesthetics of acoustics also made it a fitting venue for a gathering centered on recording, materiality, and the mediated nature of musical experience.

Overall, the conference foregrounded an emerging "media turn" in popular music studies—a perspective that repositions recording as a key site where sound, technology, and culture converge, demanding a renewed ontological reflection on music's existence in the age of digital mediation.

This article reviews IASPM 2025 by analyzing its three key intellectual currents—the ontological, technological-historical, and identity-political—and concludes by assessing how these conversations point toward an increasingly mediatized and decentered future for the field.

The Ontological Turn: Recording as a Mode of Existence

One of the most prominent intellectual realignments evident at IASPM 2025 was a sustained move away from an implicit "liveness-centrism"—an analytical orientation, critically interrogated by speakers such as Antoine Hennion, that has tended to privilege live performance over the mediatized object. Across panels and keynotes alike, the recording was reframed as music's mode of existence rather than its reproduction.

Antoine Hennion's opening keynote, "Recording Music: Saving It, or Making It?", captured this shift with philosophical precision. For Hennion, the act of recording does not merely preserve music but actively constitutes it, turning ephemeral performance into an enduring, mediated object that shapes perception and meaning. This provocation set the tone for discussions throughout the week, inspiring a re-evaluation of how mediation itself produces musical ontology.

This view was echoed in detailed analyses that placed the recording at the center of interpretation. Asbjørn Grønstad's reading of Sleater-Kinney's *Dig Me Out*, for instance, treated the recording not as a static text but as a dynamic site of listening, revealing how timbre, distortion, and production choices inscribe aesthetic and political meaning. Such work reaffirmed the vitality of the recording-as-primary-text paradigm, while extending it beyond formalism into questions of affect, ethics, and mediation.

The Technological History Turn: Rewriting the Genealogy of Sound

A second key reorientation articulated across the conference—the technological history turn—brought renewed attention to the material and ideological histories of sound technology. Rather than viewing technology as a neutral backdrop for creativity, presenters consistently treated it as a cultural artifact shaped by and shaping the values, economies, and aesthetic systems within which it circulates.

The panel "The Fairlight CMI: History, Technology, Ideology" offered the most cohesive example of this approach. Samantha Bennett, Paul Harkins, Leah Kardos, and Manuella Blackburn collectively reconstructed the sampler's history, tracing its

industrial networks, sound library composition, and creative afterlives in popular music production. Their work demonstrated how technological devices carry embedded ideologies—about authorship, authenticity, and innovation—and how these ideologies inform aesthetic conventions.

This historical and media-archaeological turn highlighted that every recording technology, from the tape machine to the digital workstation, bears the imprint of its cultural and economic moment. The recording, therefore, is not only a document of sound but also of the historical conditions that make particular sonic forms possible.

Recording as a Field of Power: Gender, Race, and Decoloniality

A third cluster of interventions extended long-standing IASPM concerns with gender, race, and postcoloniality into the material realm of recording—treating the medium itself, rather than musical content, as the site where power is inscribed and contested.

Gender was one of the most intensely debated axes of this inquiry. Panelists conceptualized the studio as a gendered space structured by asymmetrical access and visibility. Studies such as Francesca Cireddu's ethnography of Rome's alternative scene revealed how informal male camaraderie in rehearsal and studio environments often marginalizes women and queer participants. At the same time, researchers like Miaotong Yuan sought to recover the contributions of early female recording engineers in China, restoring "female figures in the echoes of history". Together, these approaches re-situated the studio as both a site of exclusion and a potential space for feminist reclamation.

From a broader geopolitical perspective, conference papers also reimagined recording as a decolonial practice and an instrument of cultural sovereignty. Agustina Checa's study of Peruvian independent labels, for instance, analyzed how local actors reissue forgotten domestic jazz, rock, and electronic records to reclaim historical narratives long overshadowed by Anglo-American frameworks. Similarly, Adil Johan's work on Malaysian hip-hop demonstrated how artists negotiate between Black diasporic traditions and local sensibilities, thereby challenging the unidirectional flow of influence in global music studies.

In these cases, the practice of recording emerges not only as a site of cultural negotiation but also as an act of epistemic resistance—one that seeks to rewrite who gets to record, who is heard, and whose histories are preserved. Dylan Robinson's keynote with Martin Daughtry, which interrogated the colonial violence of ethnographic recording and proposed an Indigenous ethics of listening, gave this political dimension a moral gravity that resonated throughout the conference.

Conclusion and Outlook

The intellectual trajectory from the 2023 "Popular Music in Crisis" conference to the 2025 focus on "Recording Popular Music" marked a substantial reorientation in the conference's thematic priorities. This shift signaled a turn from music's

external social environment toward an inward interrogation of the very medium that constitutes popular music. This “media turn” crystallized several key trends that may shape the future of popular music studies.

The conference reinforced a heightened awareness that recording technologies, studio infrastructures, and digital platforms function not as neutral tools but as formative agents shaping sound, creativity, and listening. Identity studies have continued their move inward, exposing how power and exclusion are inscribed in the act of recording itself, while historical work increasingly turns to sonic archives and remediations to rewrite the past through sound.

Equally transformative was the widening of IASPM’s geographical and intellectual network. The strong presence of Chinese scholars at Paris 2025 was emblematic of the field’s ongoing shift from an Anglo-American nucleus toward a global plurality. Their contributions introduced new cases and conceptual frameworks that challenged established paradigms and invited mutual learning. Emmanuel Parent of the IASPM Francophone Branch noted that the association now has an opportunity to learn from non-Western cultural powers such as China and India. IASPM Chair Samantha Bennett likewise emphasized that these new voices contribute to making the organization more diverse and more valuable, affirming IASPM’s mission to share knowledge across borders in a divided world.

The Paris conference thus projected a compelling vision of where popular music studies could be heading: toward a more deeply mediatized understanding of sound, technology, and society, and toward a truly polycentric community of research. The dialogues initiated there promise a field that is more inclusive, critically resonant, and globally interconnected than ever before.