



Popular Music and the Myths of Madness

Nicola Spelman

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What informs an understanding of madness is often based on behavioural stereotypes promoted by the media, personal experiences or on a perceived notion of normality. Society and the state have clear definitions of what constitutes normality and deviancy, sanity and madness. In her book, *Popular Music and the Myths of Madness*, Nicola Spelman provides a detailed analysis of madness as it is portrayed within popular song. She examines five songs and an album from the late 1960s to early 1970s that thematise the condition as well as its societal treatment. What combines these songs is their critique of mainstream psychiatry, particularly involuntary treatment.

The introduction includes a comprehensive literature review discussing the key scholars of the anti-psychiatry movement and their outputs: Szasz, Laing, Cooper and Goffman. Spelman outlines the main themes that the anti-psychiatry movement focussed on and how these themes are reflected in the songs that she discusses. Szasz's (1961) *The Myth of Mental Illness: Foundations of a Theory of Personal Conduct*, in which he questions the existence of madness, is the starting point for the book and lends it its title.

Spelman's musical analysis of songs by David Bowie, Lou Reed, Pink Floyd, Alice Cooper, the Beatles and Elton John is very thorough. She considers musical gestures, melody, harmonisation, instrumentation, changes in timbre, tempo and rhythm, and production techniques. In addition to this, Spelman provides biographical information on the artists/ songwriters and how their experiences are reflected in the lyrics. Finally, the songs are socially and historically contextualised by showing how they refer to particular practices of treatment or a shared imagery of madness. As well as drawing on scholarly work of the anti-psychiatry movement, Spelman makes use of sources from literature and film that question notions of madness and their treatment.

Chapter One discusses David Bowie's *All the Madmen*. The song is an appropriate starting point for a discussion on madness as it reflects Szasz's questioning of its existence. Spelman argues that Bowie cleverly exposes madness as a myth by using role-play in the song. Madness can be understood as a role, and Bowie treats this role positively. Spelman shows how Bowie's madman is both enlightened and creative, and his portrayal of the madman as a "tortured genius" (34) does not require psychiatric treatment.

Lou Reed's *Kill Your Sons* is the most autobiographical song in Spelman's selection and the background information provided is very useful for the interpretation of it. Although the song does not explicitly state homosexuality as the reason for involuntary confinement, Spelman suggests that this song, released a year after homosexuality was removed from the list of sexual deviations considered to be mental disorders, tells Reed's own story. The analysis of the song has two very interesting outcomes. First, Spelman argues that by drawing on his own story of involuntary confinement, Reed becomes a martyr for his fans. Second, she shows that Reed cleverly avoids putting himself into the role of a victim through mocking the psychiatric establishment.

In Chapter Three, 'Revising Us and Them: Anti-Psychiatry and Pink Floyd's *The Dark Side of the Moon*', Spelman turns her analysis to a whole album. She suggests that another way of questioning the use of madness as a label for deviancy is role-reversal: the songs on the album all feature an 'us-against-them' dichotomy in which the morality of normal societal behaviour is challenged. Interestingly, Spelman presents the album as an appeal to its listeners to "wake up" and see the world as what it really is:

In drawing our attention to the collective significance of every thought and every action, the enormity of individual responsibility becomes clear, and once more we are reminded of the choice that must be made between a life of sublime ignorance or pained awareness (71).

Alice Cooper's *The Ballad of Dwight Fry* is used by Spelman as an example to show how Cooper's characterisation of stage personae is much more complex than commonly assumed. Relating the family setting of Dwight Fry to Cooper's comments on madness being defined by social relationships and group behaviour, Spelman argues that Cooper successfully critiques the practice of involuntary confinement. She goes on to say that part of the attraction of madness for Cooper was also the confirmation of a hard rock identity – rebellion and deviant behaviour on and off stage. As with Lou Reed, to thematise madness might not necessarily be seen as a completely selfless act. The topic lent itself to promoting Alice Cooper's image of the rock rebel at the same time as he was able to take a stance towards involuntary confinement.

The final two songs that are discussed in Chapter Five, *The Fool on the Hill* by the Beatles and *Madman Across the Water* by Elton John, are compared with regard to their portrayal of the fool. The distinction between the natural and the artificial fool is used to show how both of the songs critique social exclusion but in different ways. The natural fool is often seen as an innocent, naïve character who articulates God's message directly. The artificial fool is a more complex character with high mental capacities who is able to analyse the world and mask his criticism with humour. Spelman argues convincingly that *The Fool on the Hill* is a natural fool, whereas Elton John's artificial fool is a wise man whose articulation of hidden truths have led to *The Madman Across the Water* being locked up in a mental institution.

The conclusion pulls together all of Spelman's themes, for example the questioning of the existence of madness, role play as a form of raising awareness, particular practices as well as romantic notions of madness. The commonalities of the musical structures and topics of the songs are made explicit and the significance of the book spelt out:

It is thus possible to argue that the songs featured in the previous five chapters mark an important development in the ascension of the 'mad' character within popular music, as each asserts its own particular challenge to the psychiatric establishment through musical and verbal texts that are inextricably linked to convey a sense of the personal endeavour and defiance (134-135).

Spelman concludes the book by providing possible reasons for both the interest in anti-psychiatry at this time and its subsequent demise as a movement. Spelman shows that the portrayal of madness in popular music during the 1960s and 1970s was not just popular because of the period's countercultural activities but also because of developments within popular music such as the emergence of new musical styles or madness being removed from the clinical context.

Spelman's methodology allows her to move the songs beyond the themes of madness in themselves to the wider political and social issues raised by the anti-psychiatry movement. Her close reading of key texts is appropriate and adds to her musical analysis.

This book would be of special interest to musicologists, as a close reading and interpretation of the notation and performance are necessary to understand Spelman's analysis. As a musicologist myself, I would have liked to see more examples of musical notation rather than the often lengthy musical descriptions presented in the book, but, of course, the issue of how to present music in this kind of book where readers may have different levels of musical training is always an issue of compromise.

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