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**‘I’m different; I’m tough; I fuck’: attitudes towards young men, sex and masculinity in Nik Cohn’s *Awopbopaloobop alopbamboom: pop from the beginning* (1969)**

**Patrick Glen**

Published in 1969, Nik Cohn’s *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom: Pop from the Beginning* bears all the hallmarks of an author who understood how the changing attitudes, behaviour and styles of young people, pop music and sex sold.[[1]](#endnote-1) Through a history of pop music’s movers and shakers, Cohn explored the stars, hits, forgotten heroes and moral panics of the time, showing a keen awareness of the scandals and perceptions of deviance that drove much of pop’s hype. As is well known, scandal has long served to bring matters of gender and sex to the fore, negotiating new boundaries between the public and private. In public debate, in a society within which youth had grown more affluent and autonomous since the 1950s, scandal provoked ruminations on how sexual norms were changing.[[2]](#endnote-2) This chapter analyses Cohn’s book to understand pop music’s role in shaping and reflecting the social lives of young men and their attitudes to sex.

Teenagers, for a variety of reasons, including a rise in birth rates but also due to increased personal income from work and parental generosity, became a significant market for cultural products post-1945.[[3]](#endnote-3) Pop music was central to this. A sufficient amount of young people gained a greater degree of discretion over spending to require a reaction from the music industry. Indeed, music and music-related industries developed in close vicinity to metropolitan subcultures described by Frank Mort as being at the forefront of the new consumer culture.[[4]](#endnote-4) As a result, more varied and provocative music captured the attention of young people like Cohn, reaching a mass audience.

The music industry consolidated from the 1950s onwards, a reorganisation precipitated by shifts in the economies of Britain, Europe and the US. The industry favoured a process of vertical integration which brought together manufacturing, recording, artist and repertoire (A&R), international distribution and marketing into larger corporations.[[5]](#endnote-5) Competition between the major companies (Britain was dominated by EMI, Decca, Phillips and Pye) also resulted in a significant expansion of A&R expenditure, acquisitions and marketing outlays.[[6]](#endnote-6) Through these changes, record companies presented and marketed new artists to sell records and generate income from publishing rights. Costs therefore increased but the rewards were significant. The number of younger A&R workers grew and, with their increased power, enabled new artists and trends that signalled a partial loss of control (in terms of public messages) for the more conservative tendencies of the music industry. As David Hesmondhalgh and Leslie M. Meier noted:

Popular music’s connections to emotion, sentiment and sexuality made it central to a new political economy based on individualism and consumerism. The links to sexuality and the breaking of boundaries between sacred and profane, and to complex trajectories of ‘race’ and youth, also made certain musical forms the object of a new politicization.[[7]](#endnote-7)

This politicisation included aspects of ‘personal’ political thinking, such as what it meant to be ‘a man’ and about sexual encounters. The classic Frankfurt School analysis that popular music and culture exert a stultifying effect on the public that enforces dominant ideology still has some credence.[[8]](#endnote-8) However, scholars such as Hesmondhalgh show how alternative uses and understandings of music could circulate. David Wilkinson has added that this could provoke a hopeful countercultural approach to developing new forms of political and personal expression, ‘a forum for the exploration of alternative and oppositional freedoms and pleasures’.[[9]](#endnote-9)

Such a focus on the politicisation of popular music and music fans relates to a broader historiographical project to understand gender relationships, masculinity and sex. Since the 1990s, social and cultural historians have more frequently approached masculinity or masculinities as an analytical category.[[10]](#endnote-10) Two approaches sought to locate masculinity within relationships of structural power: one is an analysis of relationships between men and women, exposing and understanding patriarchy; the second differentiates representations of masculinity in relation to social status and class. Both approaches grapple with R.W. Connell’s Gramsci-inspired concept of ‘hegemonic masculinity’ to understand the dominant forms of masculinity in culture and capitalism. These are then contrasted with femininity and men whose personal enactment of masculinity are ‘subordinate’, marginalised or ‘complicit’ in maintaining engrained relationships of power and domination.[[11]](#endnote-11)

A third approach also developed, considering the lived experience of masculinity in terms of psychology, selfhood and subjective experience. Frequently influenced by Michel Foucault’s contention that gender is discursively constructed and/or Judith Butler’s theory of the performativity of gender, such analyses interrogated the concept of ‘man’ or ‘men’ as a site moulded by changing configurations of power and knowledge.[[12]](#endnote-12) All three approaches offer much and this chapter draws from each as it reconsiders how Cohn’s history related individual experience to enactments of masculinity, sexual display and sex.

**A middle-class Ted in the Bogside**

In August 1969, Weidenfeld & Nicholson published *Awopbopaloobop Alopbamboom: Pop from the Beginning* (*Awopbop.*). The book, which became commonly (if erroneously) known as the ‘first book on rock ‘n’ roll’, was a history of pop music written by Nik Cohn, a British journalist born in 1946. Taking leave from London, Cohn wrote the book from a cottage in rural Connemara during the late-1960s. Weidenfeld & Nicholson, the liberal-left publisher, established in 1948, had previously published works by the Russian novelist Vladimir Nabokov, Isaiah Berlin, the noted social and political theorist, and Eric Hobsbawm, the Marxist historian. Cohn’s journalistic history of pop might therefore have seemed a curious choice considering the publisher’s typical remit, but such was the contemporary interest in youth.

Cohn was also well placed to respond to the emerging social and popular cultural changes. At the time of the book’s writing and publication, he wrote about popular music for the women’s magazine *Queen* (later renamed *Harper's & Queen*) and freelanced for a handful of other publications, including *The* *Observer*. *Queen* aimed attention at the young women comprising West London’s affluent ‘Chelsea Set’. It was arguably one of the meeting points of the establishment and so-called ‘swinging’ London; the magazine even hosted a curious moment when Ronan O'Rahilly and Alan Crawford’s pirate radio station, Radio Caroline, broadcast from its offices after Jocelyn Stevens, the magazine’s editor, provided funding. By 1969, Cohn had also written two relatively obscure novels published by Secker & Warburg: the first, *Market*, written at the age of 19, was a modernist-inspired exploration of life in a market; the second, published in 1967, *I Am Still the Greatest Says Johnny Angelo,* was a fictionalised account of the life of an egotistical pop singer based on P.J. Proby.[[13]](#endnote-13)

Cohn occupied relatively unusual social positions throughout his life, which clearly shaped aspects of his writing and views on music, culture and society. Born in London but raised in Derry, Cohn grew up in a predominantly working-class city with a majority Catholic nationalist population in the British-ruled North of Ireland. His father was Norman Cohn, who took up a lectureship at Ulster University when Cohn was a child. His mother was Vera Broido, born in St Petersburg to a Jewish family and historian of the Russian Revolution. Her Menshevik mother was executed for involvement in the post-revolution Social Democratic Party, meaning Broido lived through exile and escape from Siberia before meeting Norman and marrying in 1941. In between, she cohabited with the Dadaist photographer Raoul Hausmann and his wife in Berlin. Norman Cohn himself was from a mixed Jewish-Catholic background; a Londoner who worked as a historian of European fanaticism, millenarianism and anti-Semitism. Secker & Warburg, who later published Nik Cohn’s books, published his father’s most well-known history, *The Pursuit of the Millennium: A History of Popular Religious and Social Movements in Europe from the Eleventh to the Sixteenth Century*.[[14]](#endnote-14) Nevertheless, as Montague Haltrecht observed when reviewing *Market* for *the Sunday Times*, Nik Cohn should not to be underestimated as a writer trading on parental connections:

His nose is particularly keen, and he has no intention of letting us forget that urine and intercourse are of the essence of everyday life. The style is hip, hectic, American-orientated; but Mr Cohn’s stumbling prodigality would make less than a warm response ungenerous.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Such attitude was palpable in *Awopbop*. The book celebrates the modern in style and attitude, encapsulated by Cohn’s enthusiasm for a pop world viewed as intrinsically linked to aspects of US popular culture. Cohn was self-deprecating when, in 1972, he described the book as a ‘cynical’ attempt to ‘buy freedom and a house in the country’, knowing that ‘slagging the Beatles and praising Presley would cause a mild sensation’ in the late-‘60s hippie-days of peace and love.[[16]](#endnote-16) *Awopbop* demonstrates an affinity with – and an empathy for – outsiders and economically/socially marginalised people. It does not shirk from the visceral side of life and provides a relatively candid view of sex, lust and desire in young pop fans. His prose is not sensationalist and his worldview was later rationalised in the 2004 edition of the book, prefaced by Cohn’s reflections on discovering pop music through watching working-class Derry Catholics listening to Little Richard’s ‘Tutti Fruitti’ in a 1950s coffee bar.[[17]](#endnote-17) Impacted by the legacy of British colonialism and sectarianism, the Derry Teds were second-class citizens when it came to jobs and housing. These men, perceived by those in Cohn’s immediate circles as ‘losers’, were to him ‘made heroic by the power of Little Richard: rock ‘n’ roll’. The Teds in the Bogside’s music, style and attitude provided articles of ‘faith’ that made Cohn a ‘traitor’ to his affluent origins.[[18]](#endnote-18) Though he may be accused of exoticising the colonial ‘Other’, he saw this experience as ‘my first glimpse of danger, and sex, and secret magic. I never got over it’.[[19]](#endnote-19)

Cohn’s understanding of himself and the narration of his putative escape from bourgeois norms and expectations resonates with accounts put forward by others in similar social positions. Their views could be understood in terms of what Bourdieu referred to as ‘habitus’: ‘a subjective but not individual system of internalised structures, schemes of perception, conception and action common to all members of the same group or class’; or with regard to Raymond Williams’ concept of a ‘structure of feeling’.[[20]](#endnote-20) Avid music fans, particularly those who became enmeshed in music scenes and the music industries from middle-class backgrounds, often tell a similar story, beginning with a musical encounter that fundamentally alters their life and worldview. For them, that moment is when pop *starts*.

In *Awopbop*, Cohn deems pop to start with Johnny Ray in 1952, a man who’s music, in spite of only moderate vocal abilities, caused riots.[[21]](#endnote-21) In personal accounts, this music is typically African-American but the conduit is often a white person from a marginalised background. This idea of musical epiphany could be seen to include traces of anecdotes offered by African-American blues musicians explaining the disapproval they faced when their families discovered they were playing the blues – with profane lyrics about sex – instead of gospel music. Mick Farren, musician, writer and editor of *International Times*, recounted his ‘origin story’ during an oral history interview:

I was eleven or twelve or ten or something when ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ came out and I managed to listen to it on the radio, Radio Luxembourg at seven o’clock. They used to have the top ten, sponsored by McDonalds biscuit bakery the makers of Penguin, after that they would have ‘Dan Dare: Pilot of the Future’, which was a dramatized version of what was in *The Eagle*. Prior to that they had Perry Como, Doris Day, ‘Que Sera Sera’, or something, then it’s ‘Heartbreak Hotel’! The hairs stand up on the back of my neck; after that Dan Dare was history and so was my job as a bank manager. I mean it was kind of coupled with an extra ethos. It was not just rock ‘n’ roll. There was James Dean and there was Brando; there were the changes that were going on at the cinema. There was the Beat Generation, but you know, if you want to take one crystallising moment it was hearing Elvis Presley for the first time and then Little Richard, and then Buddy Holly, and then Eddie Cochran, and after that there was no turning back ... It is at that moment – I am kind of paraphrasing – almost one minute in to ‘Heartbreak Hotel’ my step-father yelled from the other room: ‘What is that racket? Turn it off.’ From that moment on it is an us and them situation.[[22]](#endnote-22)

Like so many others, the sound of Black America carried by Elvis, a white working-class southerner, is taken to indelibly mark him. In Farren’s autobiography, he explains his transition from a besuited ‘bank manager’ to a scruffy-but-handsome conduit for the styles of Gene Vincent, Miles Davis, Fidel Castro, Doc Holliday and Johnny Cash.[[23]](#endnote-23) Where sex is concerned, Farren describes himself as sexually curious and experienced, but writes lovingly of long-term partners. Like Cohn, Farren’s oral history interview and autobiography locate music as a rhetorical gateway to rebellion from ‘straight’ society. Farren’s changes are entwined with attempts to be a different type of man to the norm; to deviate in cultural tastes, style and politics. But also to be a man more readily available for and open to sexual opportunities.

There is evidence to suggest that music’s power to shape social attitudes had a broader effect on 1960s society. In September 1968, the University of Leicester’s Centre for Mass Communication Research began a study of how school pupils adapted to a media-saturated society. The resulting book devoted a chapter to pop, arguing that music became ‘a central part of many adolescents out-of-school activities’. The pupils’ relationship to pop provided a means to ‘explore their social and personal experience’ in ways not provided in school, the report suggested.[[24]](#endnote-24) Social class was a significant if not entirely determinant factor in young people’s pop tastes and related behaviours. The report found that bohemian ‘underground’ music was favoured by middle-class students, whereas working-class pupils derived ‘their alternative meanings from street peer groups rooted in the situational cultures of working-class neighbourhoods; and consequently, for them, pop music is likely to be either something which is part of the taken for granted background of group activities, or else part of the small coin of social exchange’.[[25]](#endnote-25) Of course, understanding gender and sexuality was an aspect of this.

As candid as Cohn’s account is in relation to sex, some limits must first be acknowledged. The culture of silence around sexual abuse in the music industry prevented any exposé of how changing sexual mores and the empowerment of younger people was exploited by the unscrupulous and abusive. *Awopbop* scolds the British press for negative reporting of Jerry Lee Lewis, an early rock ‘n’ roll musician who wrote ‘Whole Lotta Shakin’ Going on’ and ‘Great Balls of Fire’, during his first UK tour in 1958. As Gillian Mitchell recounts earlier in this collection, the papers criticised Lewis for marrying a 13-year-old and, as Cohn puts it, ‘cried babysnatcher’. Not dissimilarly, Cohn takes Lewis’ contemporary Chuck Berry’s imprisonment for ‘transporting’ a 14-year-old girl across state lines for sex as merely the authentic inspiration for his song ‘You Never Can Tell’, a marker of the ‘vicious, sly cynic[al]’ lyrics that made ‘him so funny, so attractive’.

Chillingly, now, Cohn also devotes around a page to the serial sexual abuser, rapist, paedophile and probable necrophile, Jimmy Savile. Cohn does offer some backhanded compliments in his description of Savile, noting that he ‘isn’t good-looking, smooth, or even very funny’. He explains that Savile, in lieu of talent or even looks, built a career on hard graft and ‘outrage’. As the scandal broke in November 2011, it became clear that Savile was protected by friends in high places as a long-time donor to the Conservative Party and charity fundraiser, and was quick to threaten costly legal proceedings for slander or libel when accused. However, it is telling that Cohn’s book is largely unconcerned with the darker side of power in the music industry and those who used changing codes of sexual behaviour to exploit women and less powerful men.

Silence towards the music industry’s culture of abuse does not, however, mean that Cohn was entirely uncritical. *Awopbop* condemns the ‘assorted greed, snidery and lunacy’ of the pop business, noting how ‘trousers dropped like ninepins’.[[26]](#endnote-26) He twice describes music industry workers by making reference to Sammy Glick, the anti-hero of the novel *What Makes Sammy Run?*[[27]](#endnote-27) The allusion is telling. The book was written by Budd Schulberg and published in 1941; it was inspired by the life of his father, B. P. Schulberg, who worked in the film industry and attempted to found a screenwriters’ union. Glick is amoral, guided only by the accumulation of power and prestige in the film industry. He rejects the close-knit world of his impoverished orthodox Jewish family of recent migrants in the Lower East Side, treating women like they are disposable and his colleagues awfully in trying to get ahead. He is a manipulative individualist who believes any empathy or solidarity to be a sign of weakness. Nevertheless, behind Glick’s flaws is a cruel upbringing of poverty and brutal anti-Semitic abuse, which explains his will to earn security if not pardons his behaviour. The music industry workers in the pop era were less likely to be the high society tastemakers that came before them, but they wielded newfound power, which Cohn locates as a reaction to the privations of war and, for some, the trauma of persecution and the Holocaust.

Cohn’s account also makes little explicit reference to homosexuality which, in spite of sexual acts between consenting men over 21 being decriminalised in 1967, remained deeply stigmatised by 1969. He made no comment on the queer symbolism, performance and styles of musicians such as Little Richard or Johnny Ray, let alone their sexuality (although, in his defence, neither were ‘out’ at the time). He did note that ‘most’ of the new rock ‘operators’ in the music industry were gay, but did not name them in spite of making a passing claim of sexual exploitation: ‘see some pretty young boy singing in a pub and fancy him and sign him up. Bed him and then they’d probably very quickly get bored with him’.[[28]](#endnote-28) Cohn hinted at Brian Epstein’s sexuality, the Beatles’ manager, using euphemisms throughout. His history of Epstein noted his training at the Royal Academy of Dramatic Arts and attempts to become an actor before turning to business.[[29]](#endnote-29) He describes him as ‘intelligent and loyal and neurotic, painfully sensitive, he was nobody’s identikit of a hustler but he was civilized, basically honest, and he had capital.’[[30]](#endnote-30)

‘Sensitive’ and ‘neurotic’ are terms sometimes used by Cohn to stand in for gay or queer. In one passage, he ascribes feminine traits to Epstein, describing him as a ‘mother figure’ who ‘cared for them, reassured them, agonized on them, nagged them, and even wept for them’.[[31]](#endnote-31) Of course, outing a person against their will or posthumously, in the case of Epstein, is ethically dubious and Cohn was writing in the prevailing register of the time.[[32]](#endnote-32) Interestingly, however, the euphemistic terms used to describe Epstein and others are also used to describe heterosexual pop fans and musicians, particularly those from the middle class. Furthermore, in Cohn’s later book on men’s fashion, *Today There Are No Gentlemen* (1971), he made a more explicit link between popular music, youth culture and queer subcultures when describing the ‘New Edwardians’. ‘Bisexual’ clothes and a general relaxation of sexual identity represented for Cohn the ‘willingness of men to accept at last what was feminine in their own make up, so women were less tied down as well’.[[33]](#endnote-33)

**Another loser made palatable**

When it comes to sex in Cohn’s book, there is a recurring subtext: men involved in pop – and fans who give themselves up to its styles, symbols and attitudes – become sexier and have sex. They become more open to articulating and responding to emotions, anguish and desires; they find the symbolic, attitudinal and behavioural means to transform themselves. These individual changes fit with a broader realignment of sexual mores, through which some younger people question the values of their elders. Cohn attributed this to an opening up of expression in white popular music to include more fraught and raw, possibly even slightly discomforting expressions of emotions. He deemed the music of Buddy Holly as the ‘first time white popular music owned up to lust’, grouping Holly with other rock ‘n’ roll artists including Little Richard, Chuck Berry, Eddie Cochran and Jerry Lee Lewis.[[34]](#endnote-34) Each began their career in the late-‘40s or early-‘50s, coming to prominence after 1956. They helped develop what Cohn describes as the ‘teendream’ of sex and consumerism.[[35]](#endnote-35)

However, the music made by southern US African-Americans and whites was viewed by Cohn as too ‘raw’ for the industry. As such, their style and attitude was assimilated by artists more compliant and less personally flawed or problematic to satisfy a mass market. In their place, Cohn argued, came musicians like Elvis Presley (shaped by his manager ‘Colonel’ Tom Parker) and Bill Hayley (an older music industry chancer) who articulated Chuck Berry’s ‘endless teen romance’ in a way that evoked high school desire rather than hint at something darker.[[36]](#endnote-36)

In Britain, Cohn observed how the career of the first British rock ‘n’ roll star, Tommy Steele, was driven (like Elvis) by a manager: John Kennedy, a New Zealander then in his late-20s. Kennedy managed to kid a sufficient number of record buyers into thinking that Steele was akin to a British Elvis, rather than a slick showbiz performer who sought a break in the theatre.[[37]](#endnote-37) At the start of the period, when popular music consumption and A&R expenditure intensified, the post-1945 music industry was concerned primarily with selling a ‘respectable’ form of dominant, patrician masculinity to a market dominated by women. For Gillian Mitchell, Steele served as a conduit between a conservative industry and a potentially racier music genre with its origins in African American culture.[[38]](#endnote-38) Steele was fêted for his ordinariness; he was presented as polite, smartly dressed and having a good relationship with his family who he provided for with his newfound wealth. This presentation was worlds apart from the stereotype of an African American rock ‘n’ roll or blues musician. As Mitchell argues, Steele’s example demonstrates how ‘established interests tried to accommodate this new craze [rock ‘n’ roll] within established norms’, absorbing ‘rock ‘n’ roll into the existing structures of showbiz’.[[39]](#endnote-39)

From viewing the meticulously stage-managed newsreels of Tommy Steele’s public life, it is clear that Steele and his management collaborated with the press to convey a particular image of a man. This comprised a generally accepted sort of masculinity for a public figure, with Steele portrayed as the ‘boy next door’ becoming a ‘family man’. One British Pathé reel from 1957 features Steele moving with his mother and stepfather from Bermondsey to Ravensthorpe Park; he is presented as assured, well-kempt, successful, polite to his star-struck female fans, loyally family-oriented, economically successful and upwardly mobile. His next British Pathé newsreel came in 1960, when he married Ann Donoughue at St Patrick’s Catholic Church in Soho. The short film shows how Steele graciously swerved a crowd made up of adoring female fans – and the sexual opportunities they may have presented – to meet his bride at the altar. They are filmed praying during the service before heading to the Savoy Hotel on the Strand to cut their wedding cake. (The reel did not show Steele’s less aspirational wedding reception in The Bamboo Bar above the Carpenters Arms on Eltham High Street.) Steele was presented as deferential of his elders and their traditions; he was no sexual deviant. He and similar male British rock ‘n’ roll performers of the time encoded very little of the rebellious promise of rock ‘n’ roll to those watching these newsreels in cinemas across Britain.

By way of contrast, Martin Cloonan has noted – in agreement with Cohn –the erratic behaviour and mental health issues suffered by Steele’s contemporary Terry Dene, which precluded him from similar presentation as an ‘ordinary’ man.[[40]](#endnote-40) Cohn described Dene’s talent and background as comparable to Steele, but he was timid and nervous.[[41]](#endnote-41) He married Edna Savage, a fellow singer, in 1958, who Cohn notes was ‘a few years older’ and had a media-attended wedding like Steele. Yet, after getting called up for national service (which summoned comparisons to Elvis, who had won the respect of a previously scandalised adult America by serving in the US Army between 1958 and 1960 with no special privileges), Cohn describes Dene requiring a medical discharge within a matter of months. He was subsequently divorced by Savage, fell into obscurity and ended up ‘standing on a Soho street corner, preaching the gospel with the Salvation Army’.[[42]](#endnote-42)

Artists typically had to negotiate emotional performance, anguish and fragility without transgressing dominant codes of masculinity. Demonstrating conventionally masculine traits and a normative sex life was important to developing an ‘acceptable’ pop identity for a putative female audience. This reinforced broader social anxieties, in which a significant amount of people viewed boys and men of the late-1950s-into-the-1960s who enjoyed pop as being ‘effeminate’. In 1964, for instance, forty people gathered for the National Association of Youth Clubs conference at Bluecoats School in Liverpool, which devoted two days to evaluating young people’s ‘compulsive interest in what they would call their type of music, “pop” and the “beat scene.”’[[43]](#endnote-43) *The* *Guardian* reported a Liverpool-based youth leader proclaiming that music was ‘tending to make boys more effeminate … and it’s making young people suffer from “spectatoritis”’. However, he was given short shrift by other attendees who retorted: ‘a boy’s long hair does not make him less of a man’.[[44]](#endnote-44) The general implication, however, was that they were indeed less of a man.

Of course, there were ‘white’ anxieties about ‘blackness’ as well. Dick Hebdige has noted how in later decades many cultural commentators viewed Black people as the ‘quintessential subterranean’, thereby aligning youth, music and ‘blackness’.[[45]](#endnote-45) White musicians achieved considerable commercial success by assimilating and adapting Black music for commercial performance and release (arguably even more so than those who had adapted jazz before them). The conventional narrative goes that Alexis Korner started the first charting UK blues band, Alexis Korner’s Blues Incorporated, in 1961, and the genre was brought to prominence by the Rolling Stones after they formed in 1962 and took on a rebellious stance which provoked moments of public outrage. Along with the music, they often played with masculine roles in a manner that was informed by their interpretation of African-American culture.

The equation between Black popular music styles, identities and masculinity that crossed the Atlantic to Britain reveals powerful perceptions of the relationship between gender and power in popular music. The supposed maleness and masculinity of the blues is centred at the expense of women’s participation. Beyond a blindness to figures such as Sister Rosette Tharpe in *Awopbop*, Sean Lorre has noted that Ottilie Patterson, from County Down in the North of Ireland and a former student of Belfast College of Art, released the UK’s first blues album in 1961, not Alexis Korner. This was a full five years after she performed for the first time in Britain at the Royal Festival Hall in London on 9 January 1955. As Lorre argues:

Based in part on Ottilie Patterson’s elision from the historical record, academic and popular histories alike typically describe British R&B as stemming first and foremost from the actions of young, white, middle-class British men who turned to the sounds of Black American men for musical motivation. Many scholars relying on this narrative have argued that this articulation to the blues – particularly the ‘downhome’ blues of Mississippi circa 1930 and of early 1950s’ Chicago – by white male Britons represented a desire to identify with and vicariously embody a romanticized representation of Black masculinity.[[46]](#endnote-46)

In spite of music industry collusion with early rock ‘n’ roll musicians to foreground aspects of dominant masculinity, sexuality and sex, fans could interpret pop music to develop symbolic resources and attitudes to create partially or entirely different meanings and behaviours of their own. Cohn, certainly, framed popular music as vital to the formative sexual understandings and encounters of youth. As Adrian Bingham notes, the media was a significant driver of increasing sexual knowledge in society, and although music covered sex in less detail than newspapers, songs and performances expressed sex in more instinctive and emotional ways.[[47]](#endnote-47) Cohn argued that although 17-year olds might only imitate Elvis, younger fans around 14-years old were more impressionable. This is debatable, but the idea of affect and shades of influence is more tenable if coupled with complicated explanations.[[48]](#endnote-48) The way Cohn weaved Elvis fandom into the lives and sex lives of young fans seems plausible and, as an avid Elvis fan himself, personal:

Elvis is their great adolescent hero, he’s central. They buy their first suit and have their first sex and promote their first hangover with him in the background. And then they have the five years in which they can distance him, get him into perspective and absorb him deeply.[[49]](#endnote-49)

Not only was Elvis and pop the soundtrack to sex, Cohn noted that dancing was a prelude to courtship. He described people dancing alone to ‘The Twist’, the Chubby Checker song and accompanying dance that he supposes to start ‘the hysterical adulation of pop singers by the rich and trendy all over the world’, as ‘nothing to do with romance … pure exhibitionism, a free platform for sexual display’ where dancers could ‘stand up and promote their ass.’[[50]](#endnote-50)

Cohn is at pains to suggest that this new approach to sexual display opens, in turn, a new avenue to social acceptance, interaction and thus sex for individuals considered previously as ‘outsiders.’ To use a phrase Cohn reserved for Eddie Cochran, many musicians and fans were ‘another loser made palatable’ by pop.[[51]](#endnote-51) This cuts across many of the men involved in pop music; their sexual attractiveness is seen by Cohn as related to their styles, attitudes and, in the case of musicians, aptitude for making music. The Derry Teds are understood in a similar way to Cochran, Phil Spector (‘huge news for losers’) and even The Beatles, who were described as ‘anti-stars and superstars both’. In Cohn’s later book on fashion, this mode of anti-hero attraction was described by Don McCullin, a photographer and Ted from Tottenham. McCullin reminisced about how as soon as he walked into the Tottenham Royal in the late-1950s, ‘birds [women] would put a price on you’, meaning they would take stock of the expense incurred in buying his outfit.[[52]](#endnote-52) His account is shot through with a sexist subtext that women are especially materialistic, but this subcultural display responds to social attitudes towards the new economic and social opportunities for young people in the mid-to-late-1950s caused by full employment. However, McCullin further builds on this to explain how his style and attitude could be used to attract women:

There was always a greasy comb around. This was a major instrument of attraction. Before you asked a girl to dance, you’d stand in front of her and comb your hair, staring right at her, with sort of hooded eyes.[[53]](#endnote-53)

This form of subcultural courtship seems to celebrate a menacing persona that is starkly different to the boy-next-door and future husband image of Tommy Steele; young people had the intellectual resources to reconsider and respond to images and styles put forward by the music industry.

This sort of sexual menace and outsider image was later adapted by the Rolling Stones. The Beatles were often seen, in Cohn’s words, as ‘teenage property’, who in spite of signifying ‘breaking loose, getting sex’, appealed to almost everyone at a time of ‘splintering tastes’. The Stones, meanwhile, were more provocative, sexualised and morally ambiguous.[[54]](#endnote-54) Andrew August has argued there was a significant tension between the band’s symbolic association with sexual freedom and their use of lyrics that were misogynistic and rejected women’s ‘claims to independence’.[[55]](#endnote-55) In spite of these sexist messages, Cohn claimed the Stones were ‘impossibly evil’, ‘sun gods’ and ‘creatures off another planet’ that used post-Beat generation bohemianism to become ‘the voice of hooliganism’.[[56]](#endnote-56) Again, Cohn implied that outsider men – he describes Keith Richards’s personality as ‘insecure, neurotic’, for instance – can attract women and sex by projecting menace; he describes screaming teenage girls as ‘desperate’ and claims that their female fans at a concert in Liverpool ‘had screamed so hard and wet themselves’.[[57]](#endnote-57) This pull on young people, he noted, ‘made adults squirm’.[[58]](#endnote-58)

Cohn notes that the Stones had closer intellectual ties to Black American blues than their white copyists, not to mention the notoriously misogynistic ‘Beat Generation’ of US writers. Beat Generation and white bohemian approaches to masculinity and sex were arguably shaped by a very reductive view of African-American identity. During the 1960s, journalists and scholars tried to understand the relationship between Black masculinity and the blues, with one scholar from the State University of New York, Charles Kiel, writing a book on how the blues singer was a symbol for the Black community, embodying important attitudes and roles.[[59]](#endnote-59) One such role was ‘manhood’, which Kiel wished to unbind from Freudian or Neo-Freudian ideas predominant at the time.

The Freudian interpretation argued that a combination of poor paternal relationships and ‘loving but authoritarian’ mothers resulted in ‘Oedipal and identity complexes’ which manifested in male working-class African American rituals to compensate for ‘masculine self-doubt’.[[60]](#endnote-60) It followed that these ‘problems’ were overcome by the attention of male siblings, which led to outlaw behaviour defined as street life, hustling and casual sex. Keil, who embedded himself into communities during his research, saw the emphasis of prior white scholars to be misguided, noting that most of the African-American blues musicians he encountered had a ‘lasting attachment and relationship with wives’, as well as living a more sexually free existence in the context of the sexual opportunities presented in the life of a peripatetic musician.[[61]](#endnote-61) The dandyish clothes worn by blues musicians, Keil argued, did not signify a wrestling with masculine insecurity. Rather, they expressed ‘prettiness and strength’ that enhanced sex appeal, suggesting the masculinity of the bluesmen – and their attitudes towards women and sex – were in no way the product of a ‘love-hate ambivalence towards women’.[[62]](#endnote-62) The Rolling Stones ignored this more nuanced understanding, of course, living the myth and contributing to an enduring template of sexualised nastiness and rock star privilege that tainted later decades of popular music.

In time, the perception that middle-class and socially mobile working-class men were likely to use popular music as an intellectual resource led to a rejection of more macho forms of masculinity. For Cohn, at least, Bob Dylan ‘expressed revolt through something more complicated than a big cock’.[[63]](#endnote-63) Keith Gildart, too, argues that mod ‘led to an inversion of existing notions of masculinity and femininity’ through exploration of androgynous or unisex style.[[64]](#endnote-64) This is touched upon by Cohn, who describes mods ‘as small strange creatures’ who made themselves ‘look beautiful’ but were, of course, ‘neurotic’ enough to fit into changing codes of sexual behaviour. Cohn also touches on art school students, who he deems ‘more intellectual and altogether more soulful.’ Simon Frith and Howard Horne’s *Art into Pop* explains the place of art schools in British popular music cultures, one of the formative places that certain mods passed through and a hub for the formation of countercultures. Frith and Horne note how art schools and pop existed within a ‘consumer world’ where roles were learnt from popular performers; thus commodities shaped public selfhood and defined masculinity and femininity along ‘lines of possession and desire’.[[65]](#endnote-65) There was an acceptance within art school and associated bohemian cultures that masculinity was a subjective code and could be experimented with using symbolism from popular cultural products. As this suggests, the myths of popular music served as significant inspiration for emerging values that, in turn, shaped approaches to gender and sex.

**Conclusion**

In *Awopbop*, Nik Cohn authored an effervescent and provocative account of pop and its impact on young people. Philip Tagg once commented that rock criticism by Cohn and his peers could ‘degenerate into exegetic guesswork and “reading between the lines”’ in their speculations about what musical texts meant.[[66]](#endnote-66) Cohn’s efforts to captivate as well as explain might have meant the occasional factual inaccuracy or flight of fancy in his book but preoccupation with its flaws belies something of real worth to those who seek to understand subjective responses to pop and representations of changing ideas about society, sex and masculinity. Popular music both contributed to and represented these changes; the narratives perpetuated by those like Cohn in books, magazines and music papers were, to some, influential in how they understood not just pop but society and their position within it. Cohn perceived pop music to be a broad response to the new consumer society, the tools and symbols of which could be used in varied ways to negotiate social attitudes and life. The ideas of dominant masculinity and sex in his account – and in light of contemporary attention to historic scandals – are coy, but correspond to a moment of social mobility and quick cash for those in the right place that coheres with changes in the economy and structure of the music industry. As we have learnt (or taken notice of) in the past decade, the social standing of men in the music industry enabled them to take advantage of fans who saw them as having special status. Cohn, following the discursive conventions of the time and industry, rarely confronts ideas of sexual abuse and at times makes light of it. Arguably, the social standing and power of youth signified by pop was still trumped by older men with power and influence.

A tension bound into the changing codes of masculine identity and sexual display transmitted by pop music was that ‘outsiders’, those who deviated from masculine or social norms, could be perceived as sexually attractive. This was radical and crossed established gender norms to approach unisex styles. Men with sex appeal in Cohn’s text could be ‘sensitive and neurotic’, as he implies with queer men; they could dress decoratively, embrace emotion and express desire with raw abandon, even if limits were initially applied to those wanting to be ‘a star’ as sanctioned by the music industry. At the same time, in relation to heteronormative dynamics between men and women, menace and ironic detachment to conventional romance was defined as ‘sexy’, reinforcing notions of male sexual dominance (even if the menacing men wore unisex clothes or sang in a falsetto).

Despite such tension, Cohn’s book demonstrates how, at the very least, popular music developed as a driver of social change. When supported by the more systematic research that followed, Cohn’s breathless speculation is correct in observing pop music’s contribution to a broader rethinking of sex, sexual display and masculinity, particularly for young people. *Awopbop* was often inflammatory, at times acerbic towards its subjects. But it was underpinned by an empathy for those who by their class or norms were different. As a result, it helps trace how emergent forms of being a man, of courting and having sex, were discovered at the ‘beginning’ of pop and in the ‘golden age of rock’.

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