SUBCULTURES OR NEO-TRIBES? RETHINKING THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN YOUTH, STYLE AND MUSICAL TASTE

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Abstract   Despite the criticisms of subcultural theory as a framework for the sociological study of the relationship between youth, music, style and identity, the term 'subculture' continues to be widely used in such work. It is a central contention of this article that, as with subcultural theory, the concept of 'subculture' is unworkable as an objective analytical tool in sociological work on youth, music and style – that the musical tastes and stylistic preferences of youth, rather than being tied to issues of social class, as subculture maintains, are in fact examples of the late modern lifestyles in which notions of identity are 'constructed' rather than 'given', and 'fluid' rather than 'fixed'. Such fluidity, I maintain, is also a characteristic of the forms of collective association which are built around musical and stylistic preference. Using Maffesoli's concept of *tribus* (tribes) and applying this to an empirical study of the contemporary dance music in Britain, I argue that the musical and stylistic sensibilities exhibited by the young people involved in the dance music scene are clear examples of a form of late modern 'sociality' rather than a fixed subcultural group.

Key words: lifestyle, neo-tribalism, style, subculture, urban dance music, youth.

During the 1970s and early 1980s, sociological explanations of the relationship between youth, style and musical taste relied heavily upon the subcultural theory developed by the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). In more recent years there has been increasing criticism of the CCCS approach from theorists who have argued, among other things, that the Centre's use of structuralist accounts to explain what are in effect examples of consumer autonomy and creativity results in a number of problems. Interestingly, however, the term *subculture* survives in such counter-analytical discourse. Indeed, such is the variety of analytical perspectives in which *subculture* is now used as a theoretical underpinning, that it has arguably become little more than a convenient 'catch-all' term for any aspect of social life in which young people, style and music intersect. In this article I want to examine some of the problems which can be identified with the concept of 'subculture' and to argue that an alternative theoretical framework needs to be developed which allows for the pluralistic and shifting sensibilities of style that have increasingly characterised youth 'culture' since the post-Second World War period.

Drawing upon Maffesoli's (1996) concept of *tribus* (tribes), I will argue that

those groupings which have traditionally been theorised as coherent sub-cultures are better understood as a series of temporal gatherings characterised by fluid boundaries and floating memberships. This argument will be supported with empirical evidence drawn from an ethnographic study of the urban dance music scene in Newcastle upon Tyne in north-east England. The term *urban dance music* refers to contemporary forms of DJ (disc-jockey) orientated music, such as *house* and *techno* (see Redhead 1993a), which, since the late 1980s have broadened the sphere of dance music culture considerably, removing its 'disco' and 'mainstream' connotations and elevating it to the status of a 'serious' music in which debates concerning issues of authenticity (Thornton 1995) are comparable with those which characterised the pro-gressive rock and punk scenes of the 1970s (see Frith 1983; Laing 1985). It will be my contention that the musical and visual style mixing observed at urban dance music events exemplifies the essential eclecticism of post-war youth culture and thus forces a revision of our understanding of the way in which young people have characteristically perceived the relationship between style, musical taste and collective association.

The Birmingham CCCS

As in the United States, early British studies of youth focused on the con-nection between the 'deviant' sensibilities of youth 'gangs' and the localities from which such gangs emerged. Thus, for example, in a study of juvenile delinquency in Liverpool, Mays (1954) echoed Whyte's (1943) synopsis of the Cornerville gangs in Chicago by suggesting that such delinquency was part of a local *tradition* as young males received and put into practice the deviant norms which were a part of everyday life in many underprivileged neighbour-hoods of Liverpool. With the publication of the CCCS research, British studies of youth culture began to change in two significant ways. First, emphasis moved away from the study of youth gangs and towards style-based youth cultures, such as Teddy boys, mods, rockers and skinheads, which from the 1950s onwards rapidly became an integral feature of everyday British social life. Secondly, in keeping with the central hypothesis of the CCCS, the 'local' focus of earlier youth studies was abandoned in favour of a subcultural model of explanation. Using the original Chicago School premise that sub-cultures provide the key to an understanding of deviance as normal behaviour in the face of particular social circumstances, *Resistance Through Rituals* (1976), the centrepiece of the CCCS research, re-worked this idea as a way of accounting for the style-centred youth cultures of post-war Britain. According to the CCCS, the deviant behaviour of such youth cultures or 'subcultures' had to be understood as the collective reaction of youth themselves, or rather working-class youth, to structural changes taking place in British post-war society.

The notion of subcultures as a response to structural changes was adopted from an earlier CCCS working paper, Cohen's 'Subcultural Conflict and Working Class Community' (1972). According to Cohen, youth subcultures were to be understood in terms of their facilitating a collective response to the break up of traditional working-class communities as a result of urban redevelopment during the 1950s and the re-location of families to 'new towns' and modern housing estates. Thus argues Cohen (1972:23): 'the latent function of subculture is this – to express and resolve, albeit "magically", the contradictions which remain hidden and unresolved in the parent culture [by attempting] to retrieve some of the socially cohesive elements destroyed in [the] parent culture'. Cohen's concept of 'magical recovery' is developed in *Resistance Through Rituals* but is posited as purely one of a number of themes around which subcultural responses are constructed. Subcultures are seen to form part of an on-going working-class struggle against the socio-economic circumstances of their existence and, as such, subcultural resistance is concep-tualised in a number of different ways. John Clarke's study of skinhead culture echoes Cohen's view in arguing that the skinhead style represents 'an attempt to re-create through the "mob" the traditional working class community as a substitution for the real decline of the latter' (Clarke 1976:99). Jefferson's examination of the Teddy boy style argues that the latter reflected the Ted's '"all-dressed-up-and-nowhere-to-go" experience of Saturday evening' (Jefferson: 1976:48). The relative affluence of the Teddy boys allowed them to 'buy into' a middle-class image – the Edwardian suit revived by Saville Row tailors in 1950 and originally intended for a middle-class market. Jefferson argues, that the Teddy boys' 'dress represented a symbolic way of expressing and negotiating with their symbolic reality; of giving cultural meaning to their social plight' (Jefferson 1976:86). Similarly, Hebdige claims that the mod style was a reaction to the mundane predictability of the working week and that the mod attempted to compensate for this 'by exercising complete domination over his private estate – his appearance and choice of leisure pursuits' (Hebdige 1976:91).

Criticisms of the CCCS

The CCCS approach generates a number of problems, the first and perhaps most crucial of which is the resulting emphasis upon the role of mass-produced consumer items, such as popular music and visual style, in the articulation of forms of working-class 'resistance'. Certainly, the contention that working-class youth were at the centre of the new style-orientated post-war youth culture is difficult to dispute. During the post-war period working-class youth were the social group with the largest amounts of disposable income and thus the first 'specifically targeted and differentiated consumers' (Bocock 1993:22). By contrast, middle-class teenagers were at this time still

'constrained in their spending' (Benson 1994:165). More questionable, however, is the CCCS's contention that such styles were uniformly used by working-class youth in a strategy designed to resist the structural changes taking place around them. This is because such a contention rests on the rather tentative notion that, having gained an element of freedom to pick and choose between an increasing range of consumer items, working-class youth was somehow driven back to the fact of class as a way of articulating its attachment to such commodities. It could rather be argued that post-war consumerism offered young people the opportunity to break away from their traditional class-based identities, the increased spending power of the young facilitating and encouraging experimentation with new, self-constructed forms of identity. This view is supported by Chambers who argues that: 'In contrast to the anonymous drudgery of the working week, selected consumer objects provide the possibility of moving beyond the colourless walls of routine into the bright environs of an imaginary state' (1985:17). Similarly Miles, in considering the CCCS's equation of consumption with resistance, argues that such an approach 'concentrate[s] on symbolic aspects of sub-cultural con-sumption at the expense of the actual *meanings* that young consumers have for the goods that they consume' (1995:35).

The problems inherent in the CCCS work become increasingly evident with the attempt to include later stylistic innovations, which were clearly not instigated purely by working-class youth, into the resistance thesis. This point is convincingly made by Gary Clarke in his critique of Hebdige's (1979) analysis of punk which is characterised, according to Clarke, by a distinct air of contradiction between its 'metropolitan centeredness [*sic*]' and the emphasis on 'working class creativity' (Clarke 1981:86). Clarke suggests that 'most of the punk creations which are discussed [by Hebdige] were developed among the art-school avant-garde, rather than emanating "from the dance halls and housing estates"' (1981:86). Clearly, it is possible to argue that, as punk styles became more accessible as consumer items, certain working-class followers of punk did in fact articulate their allegiance to this style in terms of a response to the perceived contradictions of working-class life. Such a usage, however, must be read, as must the range of other possible meanings which the punk style assumed for those who appropriated it, as the active decision of individuals rather than the influence of structural conditions.

A further criticism of the CCCS has focused on the Centre's lack of concern with the relationship of girls and young women to youth subcultures. McRobbie and Garber, while conceding the relative absence of girls in subcultural groupings, argue that such absence can be attributed to the stricter parental control and regulation of girls' leisure time. It is further argued that, because of this, 'girls find alternative strategies of that of the boys' sub-cultures' and that a "Teeny Bopper" culture is constructed around the territory available to girls, the home and the bedroom' (1976:219). McRobbie attributes the failure of subcultural theory to acknowledge this

home-centred teeny bopper culture to the selective bias of the researchers themselves. Thus, she argues (1980:68–9):

> while the sociologies of deviance and youth were blooming in the early seventies the sociology of the family was everybody's least favourite option . . . few writers seemed interested in what happened when a mod went home after a week-end on speed. Only what happened out there on the streets mattered.

In later work dealing with fashion and dance, McRobbie (1984, 1994) provides further illustrations of how female involvement in youth culture has been largely overlooked. Indeed, according to McRobbie, through fashion and dance the ability of girls and young women to use style as a form of resistance has often been much more pronounced than male expressions of style-based resistance. Using the example of US beat culture during the 1950s, McRobbie suggests that female beats' appropriation of second-hand middle-class fashions from the 1930s and 1940s 'issued a strong sexual challenge to the spick and span gingham-clad domesticity of the moment' (1994:143). Similarly, referring to the sexual politics of dance, McRobbie argues that the act of dancing 'carries enormously pleasurable qualities for girls and women which frequently seem to suggest a displaced, shared and nebulous eroticism rather than a straightforwardly romantic, heavily heterosexual "goal-oriented drive"' (1984:134).

The Concept of 'Subculture'

> 'Authentic' subcultures were produced by subcultural theorists, not the other way around. In fact, popular music and 'deviant' youth styles never fitted together as harmoniously as some subcultural theory proclaimed.
>
> Redhead 1990:25

While the essential tenets of the CCCS subcultural theory have been variously criticised and largely abandoned, the concept of 'subculture' survives as a centrally defining discursive trope in much sociological work on the relationship between youth, music and style. In my view, however, the term 'subculture' is also deeply problematic in that it imposes rigid lines of division over forms of sociation which may, in effect, be rather more fleeting, and in many cases arbitrary, than the concept of subculture, with its connotations of coherency and solidarity, allows for. Pondering a similar point, Fine and Kleinman argue that the attempt to reify a construct such as subculture 'as a corpus of knowledge may be heuristically valuable, until one begins to give this corpus physical properties' (1979:6). Likewise, Jenkins suggests that 'the concept of subculture tends to exclude from consideration the large area of commonality between subcultures, however defined, and implies a determinate and often deviant relationship to a national dominant culture' (1983:41). In this respect, Jenkins's argument has much in common with

McRobbie's (1984) observation concerning the absence of any discussion of the shifting behaviour patterns of members of 'subcultural' groups as they move between subcultural setting and family home. However, while McRobbie suggests that such omissions from subcultural studies were the product of male sociologists' lack of interest in the home and family environments of 'subculture' members, it is equally possible to argue, in line with Jenkins's (1983) observation, that these omissions also conveniently paper over the cracks in the CCCS's attempts to depict 'subcultures' as tight, coherent social groups. Indeed, at one point in *Resistance Through Rituals*, John Clarke *et al.* come very close to admitting such a point when they suggest that although 'sub-cultures are important . . . they may be less significant than what young people do most of the time' (1976:16).

As previously noted, despite the problems which can be associated with 'subculture' the term continues to be widely used. At the same time, however, 'subculture's' continuing currency as a grounding theoretical base deepens the questioning of the term's sociological validity as it is applied in increasingly contradictory ways. In *Reconstructing Pop/Subculture*, Cagle (1995) takes issue with the Marxist interpretation of youth subcultures employed by the CCCS in view of its conceptualisation of subculture as existing outside the mainstream. According to Cagle, youth groups discounted by the CCCS, for example, glitter rock fans, could also be counted as 'subcultures' despite their mainstream tastes in music and style. In certain respects Cagle has a very good point in that the CCCS did indeed discard a great deal of music and style-centred youth activity, which, in addition to glitter rock, also included 'Rollermania' and heavy metal, presumably on the grounds that its mainstream centredness somehow removed its potential for counter-hegemonic action which the Centre so readily associated with mods, skinheads and punks, etc. However, while Cagle is right to criticise the CCCS on these grounds, at the same time his approach has considerable implications for the term 'subculture' in that it is left meaning everything and nothing. Thus, if we are to accept that there are both *mainstream* and *non-mainstream* subcultures, what are the differences between them, and how do we go about determining such differences?

Thornton's (1995) solution to the mainstream/non-mainstream debate and its bearing upon notions of subcultural authenticity is to introduce the issue of media representation. According to Thornton, 'authentic' subcultures are largely constructed by the media, members of subcultures acquiring a sense of themselves and their relation to the rest of society from the way they are represented in the media. Again, Thornton identifies a very important shortcoming in the CCCS conceptualisation of 'subculture'. Given the centrality of the media in all institutions of late modern social life, there can be little questioning of Thornton's contention that: 'subcultures' do not germinate from a seed and grow by force of their own energy into mysterious 'movements' only to be belatedly digested by the media' (1995:117). It seems to

me, however, that Thornton's work raises a much more fundamental point in relation to subculture and its validity as an objective sociological concept. Thus, if subculture has acquired a plurality of meaning in sociological discourse, the media's borrowing of the term has increased the problem of definition. In introducing the term 'subculture' into the wider public sphere, the media have completed the process begun in sociological work of reducing subculture to a convenient 'catch-all' term used to describe a range of disparate collective practices whose only obvious relation is that they all involve young people.

Neo-Tribes: An Alternative Theoretical Model for the Study of Youth

In critically evaluating 'subculture' as a valid framework for the sociological study of youth, music and style, I have identified two main issues. First, there is a problem of objectivity as subculture is used in increasingly contradictory ways by sociological theorists. Secondly, given that in studies which use 'subculture' in relation to youth, music and style there is a grounding belief that subcultures are subsets of society, or cultures within cultures, such a concept imposes lines of division and social categories which are very difficult to verify in empirical terms. Indeed, at the most fundamental level, there is very little evidence to suggest that even the most committed groups of youth stylists are in any way as 'coherent' or 'fixed' as the term 'subculture' implies. On the contrary, it seems to me that so-called youth 'subcultures' are prime examples of the unstable and shifting cultural affiliations which characterise late modern consumer-based societies.

Shields writes of a 'postmodern "persona"' which moves between a succession of 'site-specific' gatherings and whose 'multiple identifications form a *dramatic personae* – a self which can no longer be simplistically theorized as unified' (1992a:16). From this point of view the group is no longer a central focus for the individual but rather one of a series of foci or 'sites' within which the individual can live out a selected, temporal role or identity before relocating to an alternative site and assuming a different identity. It follows then, that the term *group* can also no longer be regarded as having a necessarily permanent or tangible quality, the characteristics, visibility and lifespan of a group being wholly dependent upon the particular forms of interaction which it is used to stage. Clearly, there is a considerable amount of difference between this definition of a group and that which prefigures subcultural theory. Indeed, the term 'group' as it is referred to here is much closer to Maffesoli's concept of *tribus* or 'tribes'. According to Maffesoli the tribe is 'without the rigidity of the forms of organization with which we are familiar, it refers more to a certain ambience, a state of mind, and is preferably to be expressed through lifestyles that favour appearance and form' (1996:98).

Underpinning Maffesoli's concept of tribes is a concern to illustrate the shifting nature of collective associations between individuals as societies become increasingly consumer orientated (1996:97–8). Thus as Hetherington, in discussing Maffesoli's work, points out, tribalisation involves 'the deregulation through modernization and individualization of the modern forms of solidarity and identity based on class occupation, locality and gender . . . and the recomposition into 'tribal' identities and forms of sociation' (1992:93). Shields, in a further evaluation of Maffesoli's work, suggests that tribal identities serve to illustrate the temporal nature of collective identities in modern consumer society as individuals continually move between different sites of collective expression and 'reconstruct' themselves accordingly. Thus, argues Shields: 'Personas are "unfurled" and mutually adjusted. The performative orientation toward the Other in these sites of social centrality and sociality draws people together one by one. Tribe-like but temporary groups and circles condense out of the homogeneity of the mass' (1992b:108). There is some disagreement between Shields and Hetherington as to how the concept of tribalism can most effectively be used. In his foreword to the English translation of Maffesoli's study *The Time of the Tribes*, Shields argues that *tribus* are 'best understood as "postmodern tribes" or even pseudo-tribes' (Maffesoli 1996:x). Hetherington (1992), however, prefers the term 'neo-tribes'. For the purpose of this article, I too refer to *tribus* as neo-tribes, as this seems to me to most accurately describe the social processes with which Maffesoli was concerned.

Interestingly, in Maffesoli's view neo-tribes are a very recent social phenomenon. Indeed, there is a distinctly postmodernist edge to Maffesoli's 'then' and 'now' comparisons between the 1970s and the 'tribalised' 1990s. Thus in describing the nature of neo-tribal society, Maffesoli (1996:76) observes that:

> This 'affectual' nebula leads us to understand the precise forms which sociality takes today: the wandering mass-tribes. Indeed, in contrast to the 1970s – with its strengths such as the Californian counterculture and the European student communes – it is less a question of belonging to a gang, a family or a community than of switching from one group to another.

It seems curious that Maffesoli should place the development of neo-tribalism beyond the late 1960s and early 1970s, a period when conspicuous consumption became synonymous with everyday life in the West. Moreover, Maffesoli's reference to the counter-culture as a stable, coherent cultural entity seems oddly out of place given the loose affiliation of political, aesthetic and stylistic interests which found a fragile and temporal unity under the counter-cultural banner. Indeed, as Clecak suggests, 'counter-culture' was, in effect, an umbrella term which enabled a wide range of different groups, including college students, musicians, mystics, environmentalists, the human-potential movement, peace and anti-war movements 'to find symbolic shapes

for their social and spiritual discontents and hopes' (Clecak 1983:18). Moreover, much of the counter-culture's oppositional stance hinged on forms of expression articulated through commercially available products, such as music and style, themselves a result of the youth market which had been steadily growing in prominence since the 1950s. In my view then, the process of tribalism identified by Maffesoli is tied inherently to the origins of mass consumerism during the immediate post-Second World War period and has been gathering momentum ever since. That it should become acutely manifest in the closing years of the twentieth century has rather more to do with the sheer range of consumer choices which now exist than with the onset of a postmodernist age and attendant postmodern sensibilities.

Lifestyles

In reconsidering issues of social identity and forms of collective expression within the framework of neo-tribes, the related concept of 'lifestyle' provides a useful basis for a revised understanding of how individual identities are constructed and lived out. 'Lifestyle' describes the sensibilities employed by the individual in choosing certain commodities and patterns of consumption and in articulating these cultural resources as modes of personal expression (Chaney 1994, 1996). In this way, a lifestyle is 'a freely chosen game' and should not be confused with a 'way of life', the latter being 'typically associated with a more-or-less stable community' (Kellner 1992:158; Chaney 1994:92). Certainly, there are numerous instances of lifestyles which are intended to reflect more 'traditional' ways of life, notably in relation to class background. For example, British pop group Oasis and their fans promote an image, consisting of training shoes, football shirts and duffel coats, which is designed to illustrate their collective sense of working classness. Therein, however, lies the essential difference between the concept of lifestyle and structuralist interpretations of social life in that the former regards individuals as active consumers whose choice reflects a self-constructed notion of identity while the latter supposes individuals to be locked into particular 'ways of being' which are determined by the conditions of class. Moreover, in positing experimentation as a central characteristic of late modern identities, the concept of lifestyle allows for the fact that individuals will also often select lifestyles which are in no way indicative of a specific class background. A fitting example of this is the chosen lifestyle of the New Age Traveller which brings together young people from a range of social backgrounds who share 'an identification with nomadism that is seen to be more authentic than the sociality of modern industrial societies' (Hetherington 1998:335).

All of this is not to suggest that 'lifestyle' abandons any consideration of structural issues. Rather, 'lifestyle' allows for the fact that consumerism offers the individual new ways of negotiating such issues. Thus, as Chaney observes,

'the indiscriminate egalitarianism of mass culture does not necessarily repro-duce the structured oppressions of previous social order. Or rather . . . these oppressions can more easily be subverted by the very diversity of lifestyle' made possible via the appropriation of selected commodities and participation in chosen patterns of consumption (1994:81). A similar point is made by Willis who suggests (1990:18) that:

> If it ever existed at all, the old 'mass' has been culturally emancipated into popularly differentiated cultural citizens through exposure to a widened circle of commodity relations. These things have supplied a much widened range of symbolic resources for the development and emancipation of everyday culture.

There is a clear correspondence between Willis's observation and Maffesoli's contention that neo-tribalism involves 'a rationalized "social" [being] replaced by an emphatic "sociality", which is expressed by a succession of ambiences, feelings and emotions' (1996:11). Once again, the central implication here is that a fully developed mass society liberates rather than oppresses individuals by offering avenues for individual expression through a range of commodities and resources which can be worked into particular lifestyle *sites* and *strategies* (Chaney 1996). At the same time, however, Maffesoli's notion of an *emphatic sociality* allows for the fact that such sites and strategies are in no way fixed but may change, both over time or in correspondence with the different groups and activities with which individuals engage in the course of their everyday lives.

Neo-Tribalism and Urban Dance Music

Processes of neo-tribalism, as these relate to sensibilities of style and musical taste among contemporary youth, have been highlighted considerably by the current urban dance-music scene, particularly the musical and stylistic fluidity which underlies this scene. With reference to ethnographic work carried out on the dance-music scene in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne in north-east England, I will now present an empirical illustration of neo-tribalism's relevance for our understanding of the collective sensibilities of taste and style which characterise contemporary youth. My research on the urban dance-music scene in Newcastle was conducted over a twelve-month period between October 1994 and October 1995 and forms one part of a larger research project which also looks at the significance of bhangra, hip hop and progressive rock in a local context (see Bennett 1997a; 1997b; 1999a; 1999b). Preliminary data on the Newcastle dance-music scene was acquired through interviews with staff of local youth magazines such as 'The Crack' and 'zine' projects such as 'NE29'. In the case of the 'zines' several of the people involved in their production were dance-music enthusiasts and acted as gatekeepers, introducing me to other members of the local dance-music scene.

My research methodology was qualitative in nature and incorporated participant observation, semi-structured 'one-to-one interviews' and focus groups (group discussions on set themes).[1] In total, I interviewed around forty dance-music enthusiasts in Newcastle, ranging in age from 18 to 30, and attended sixteen dance-music nights in city centre clubs and eleven house party events.

A Tribal Experience

> Young men with shaved heads and pigtails, stripped to the waist, are executing vaguely oriental hand movements. Freeze-framed by strobes in clouds of dry ice, revivalist hippies and mods are swaying in the maelstrom. Rastas, ragga girls, ravers there is no stylistic cohesion to the assembly, as there would have been in the (g)olden days of youth culture. So what is this noise that has united these teenage tribes?
>
> T. Willis, 'The Lost Tribes: Rave Culture'. *Sunday Times* 18 July 1993

In much of the academic work focusing on urban dance music there is an implication that the style is symptomatic of a 'postmodern' world of fragments in which the arbitrary incidence of signifiers is taken for granted (see, for example, Muggleton 1997; Polhemus 1997). While such references to post-modernism indicate in part a general shift in sociological thinking during the early 1990s, it is arguable that they have also been inspired by urban dance music itself, or rather the way in which the music is created. Through its use of state-of-the-art digital technology urban dance music has facilitated new approaches to musical composition. An important development in this respect is 'sampling' which allows for sound sources to be stored electronically in a computer memory (Negus 1992). By means of sampling, natural and recorded sounds can be removed from their original contexts and reworked into alternative soundscapes (Frith 1988). Clearly then, sampling has far-reaching implications for accepted notions of musical style in that it allows the con-temporary composer to appropriate sounds from a range of musical and other sound sources and to subsequently re-use the latter in creating an entirely new piece of music. Thus, as an amateur urban dance-music composer and producer explained to me:

> When I start to write I try to get a rhythm track down first and then work from there. Sometimes I can get something together myself and sometimes I just take someone else's drum loop. For example, the thing that's playing in the background at the moment is taken from a Black Sabbath song. So, I'm using that drum loop to trigger some of my own samples. Then I'll programme in my own bass line. After that I might add some brass stabs into the track, let's say for argument's sake from an old Motown track. Then I might sample some pan pipes or a good 'sixties guitar break from somewhere and use that a couple of times in the track as well.

Such shifts in the compositional sensibilities of music-makers, it is argued, have elicited parallel shifts in the sensibilities of music consumers. Thus, it is

suggested, the increasing eclecticism or urban dance music is breaking open and redefining conventional sensibilities of consumer taste as the individual enters a 'technological dreamscape of . . . reconstituted sound' (Melechi 1993:34). It seems to me, however, that such new compositional sensibilities, rather than radically altering the way in which consumers respond to music, are themselves rooted in the sensibilities of post-war music consumers. Sifting through various types of music, artists and sounds, consumers character-istically choose songs and instrumental pieces which appeal to *them* with the effect that the stylistic boundaries existing between the latter become rather less important than the meaning which the chosen body of music as a whole assumes for the listener. Arguably, with the development of digital recording technology such forms of musical appropriation have been more forcibly demonstrated as contemporary composers and DJs, who are themselves working out of such eclectic consumer sensibilities, redirect the latter back into the processes of composition and performance. Thus, rather than signi-fying the onset of a form of 'postmodern' musical sensibility, it could be argued that urban dance music draws upon and thus serves to underline an established and fundamental aspect of post-war popular music consumption. Significantly, when the first urban dance-music tracks began to appear there seemed to exist a ready-made audience who displayed no apparent objections to the music's transcendence of conventional style boundaries. Indeed, a major aspect of urban dance music's continuing appeal appears to revolve around the consonance of its blatant appropriation and re-assembling of stylistically diffuse hooks, riffs[2] and melodic phrases with the musical know-ledges and sensibilities of its consumers. This latter observation is supported in the following extracts taken from interviews which I conducted with urban dance-music enthusiasts:

MIKE: There's this club night thing once a week in Glasgow where they have some really good music on, it's more like a kind of acid house kind of thing. I've been there a couple of times. I was up there the other week and they dropped Bob Marley's 'Exodus' in the middle of this fast rave thing . . . it was like 'boom' [stamps foot to indicate a change in music's tempo and sings 'Exodus'] and everybody went 'whoa' . . . and it lasts for a couple of seconds and then the other stuff blasts right back in again. And it's like 'great, what's happening next?'

AB: Dance music DJs put snatches of well-known pop songs into their mixes, don't they?

JOHN: Yeah, such as they'll be playing something quite hard and then they'll put something like Michael Jackson in . . . you know what I mean . . . and it's not like people think 'Oh no', you know, 'Michael Jackson', and clear the dance floor . . . it's just like 'Oh yeah, I recognise that, it's Michael Jackson'.

SUSAN: If it's done well, if it's chosen well [by the DJ] and it fits in with the music, then it's really excellent.

To return to the concept of neo-tribalism, what comments such as those presented above begin to reveal is that musical taste, in keeping with other lifestyle orientations and preferences, is a rather more loosely defined sensibility than has previously been supposed. The nature of musical taste, as with music itself, is both a multi-faceted and distinctly fluid form of expression. Music generates a range of moods and experiences which individuals are able to move freely between. Urban dance music, because of the style mixing involved in its production, serves to provide a series of 'snapshot' images of such shifting sensibilities of musical taste being exercised by consumers. Indeed, in many of the larger clubs which feature urban dance-music nights, the desire of the consumer to choose from and engage with a variety of different musical moods has been further realised by using different rooms or floors as a means of staging a number of parallel events with club-goers free to move between these events as they please. Consequently, the nature of the urban dance-music event is becoming increasingly a matter of individual choice, the type of music heard and the setting in which it is heard and danced to being very much the decision of the individual consumer. Significantly, such factors in turn have a marked influence on the way in which urban dance-music enthusiasts talk about the actual process of music consumption. Thus, for many enthusiasts, 'clubbing' appears to be regarded less as a singularly definable activity and more as a series of fragmented, temporal experiences as they move between different dance floors and engage with different crowds. This is clearly illustrated in the following discussion extract in which I asked a group of regular attenders of a particular urban dance-music clubnight in Newcastle to describe the nature of the event to me:

AB: How would you describe 'Pigbag'? What kind of an event is it?

DIANE: Well, I would say, um, it's a different experience depending upon . . .

SHELLEY: Upon what's on . . .

DIANE: What music's on and what floor you're on as well.

AB: I know there are different things going on on each floor.

ALL: Yeah.

ROB: There's three types of thing going on actually. There's like the sort of café room which plays hip hop and jazz, and then downstairs there's more singing sort of house music . . . and upstairs there's, eh . . . well, how could you describe that?

DEBBIE: Well, it's quite sort of, eh . . . the more housey end of techno music, with sort of like trancey techno . . . the sort of easier, comfortable side of techno.

DIANE: Yeah, and then you'll get people moving between all three floors and checking out what's going on.

A recent study by Thornton (1995) suggests that such patterns of music consumption are actually bound up with the conventions of particular club audiences whose tastes in music fit within a frame of what she terms 'subcultural capital' via which dance music 'clubbers' distinguish themselves from 'mainstream' clubs and their clientele. Given that the styles of music described by my interview group, despite their diversity, have a common thread of 'exclusivity' in that they are produced by club DJs through skilful manipulation and mixing of vinyl records and the use of samples (see Haslam 1997) rather than bought in high-street record shops, it could indeed be maintained that the consumption patterns I describe are limited to urban dance music and have little value as a means of attempting to gauge wider patterns of response to the issue of choice in relation to music consumption. On the basis of my research, however, it seems to me that such fluid and eclectic forms of music consumption, while they may assume particular forms of significance for clubbers, are not in fact restricted to urban dance-music clubs but are also central to other aspects of youth and youth culture. Indeed, as Thornton herself concedes, despite the widespread use of the term 'mainstream' it is impossible to qualify in empirical terms, the 'mainstream' actually comprising 'of many different taste groups [whose] purchas[ing] of a given record may be contextualised within a very different range of consumer choices' (1995:100).

Nor are such fluid sensibilities of music consumption restricted only to white youth. While researching the cultural response of Asian youth in Newcastle to bhangra, a style which has been described as underpinning a new 'Asian culture' in Britain (Baumann 1997; see also Sharma et al. 1996), I discovered that responses to bhangra were actually very mixed with a number of young Asians claiming that bhangra was 'good music [only for] certain occasions'. This view was elaborated on by a young female interviewee who explained: '[Bhangra] is really suited to events where there's dancing . . . and celebratory events like the Mela. On occasions like that it's great. At other times I don't listen to it, I listen to chart music and stuff like Prince. I don't really like bhangra that much at other times.' (Bennett forthcoming) Such accounts are clearly consistent with the concept of neo-tribalism as I use it in the context of this article. Thus, in this particular instance, bhangra is acknowledged as an important aspect of the celebration of 'traditional' Asian identity along with other cultural images and resources, such as traditional dancing and style of dress. As such, the music's appeal becomes fixed within the context of those occasions on which this identity is celebrated. At other times the musical preferences, style of dress and other indicators of these young people's identities orientate more closely around the Western styles and influences with which they daily engage. Horak (1995) notes a similar pattern

of shifting tastes in the musical preferences of young Croat and Turkish migrants in Vienna whose musical preferences also switched between the traditional musics of their parent cultures and Western pop depending upon the particular context in which music was heard.

Style Tribes

Neo-tribalism forces a similar questioning of the relationship between musical taste and visual style, particularly the way in which this relationship has been conceptualised in the work of the CCCS. Thus, Paul Willis has argued that visual style and musical taste are bound together in a homological relationship, homology being 'the continuous play between the group and [those items] which [produce] meanings, contents and forms of consciousness' (1978:191). In noting the visual style mixing which occurred at some of the early raves, several theorists suggested that the arrival of urban dance music had led to a break up of the posited 'subcultural' tradition as young people were seen to become far less concerned with the fit between visual style and musical taste. Redhead, for example, in discussing the impact of *acid house* upon youth, observed how it involved a 'mixing [of] all kinds of styles on the same dance floor . . . attracting a range of previously opposed subcultures from football hooligans to New Age hippies' (1993b:4). It seems to me, however, that, rather than signalling the end of a subcultural 'tradition', urban dance music opens up entirely new ways of understanding how young people perceive the relationship between musical taste and visual style which negates the notion of a fixed homological relationship between musical taste and stylistic preference by revealing the infinitely malleable and interchangeable nature of the latter as these are appropriated and realised by individuals as aspects of consumer choice. While this is not to completely dismiss the idea that a form of symmetry can exist between an individual's image and the nature of their taste in music, what it does serve to illustrate is that the relationship between musical taste and visual image is much less rigidly defined than was once thought. Indeed, as is evidenced by the following account, rather more fluid notions of musical taste and attendant visual image were in place long before the appearance of contemporary urban dance-music forms. Thus, explains the interviewee:

> In the town where I grew up we were all rockers. We were leather clad, we were rockers. But it was during the punk thing and I used to like the Clash . . . eh, and I clearly remember Donna Summer's 'I Feel Love' being one of the best songs of '76 or whenever it was and really, really liking it . . . and a lot of my friends liking it a lot as well, although it was actually still a bit weird to admit it . . . because we were all into Zep [Led Zeppelin] and Sabbath [Black Sabbath] and Thin Lizzy and all the rest. But now you've got people like Leftfield or the Chemical Brothers, who are quite happy to pick up very heavy metal guitar riffs and throw that into a dance mix

. . . or Primal Scream come along and they do a rock album and then other people get hold of that and remix that stuff and, eh, people will go and listen to it and they're quite happy to dance to it . . . I think dance-music culture has allowed people to be quite open about the fact that they actually quite like a lot of different stuff. I've never been able to understand the divisions in music. I'm quite happy to go from Orbital to Jimi Hendrix.

As the above extract serves to illustrate, the relationship between musical taste and visual style, rather than assuming a quintessentially fixed character, has typically been understood by young people as a rather more loosely formulated sensibility. In consuming popular music the individual is free to choose, not only between various musical styles and attendant visual images, but also how such choices are lived out and what they are made to stand for. Moreover, in choosing certain musical styles and visual images, the forms of association and social gatherings in which young people become involved are not rigidly bound into a 'subcultural' community but rather assume a more fluid, neo-tribal character.

Conclusion

During the course of this article I have been concerned to argue that the concept of 'subculture' is essentially flawed due to its attempt to impose a hermeneutic seal around the relationship between musical and stylistic preference. I then put forward a new theoretical framework for the study of the cultural relationship between youth, music and style using the Maffesolian concept of neo-tribalism. I suggested that neo-tribalism provides a much more adequate framework as it allows for the shifting nature of youth's musical and stylistic preferences and the essential fluidity of youth cultural groups. Such characteristics, I argued, have been a centrally defining, if developing, aspect of consumer-based youth cultures since the establishment of the post-war youth market. In the final part of the article I have attempted to substantiate this argument drawing on ethnographic research of the urban dance-music scene in the city of Newcastle upon Tyne in north-east England. I have endeavoured to illustrate how urban dance music and its attendant sensibilities of consumption, although appearing to have inspired a new chapter in the history of post-war youth culture, are actually the product of neo-tribal sensibilities which have characterised young people's appropriation of popular music and style since the immediate post-war period, such sensibilities being an inevitable aspect of late modern consumer society.

Notes

1. During the course of carrying out my research on dance music in Newcastle I conducted a total of four focus group sessions, the size of the groups varying from five to seven members. Each focus group was formed from contacts I made

when carrying out participant observation in dance clubs. The members of the groups were as follows: first group – John, Susan (students), Dave (unemployed), Jill (secretary), Rick (youth club worker); second group – Mike, Sarah, Jason (unemployed), Richard (record shop employee), James (bar worker), Anne (receptionist); third group – Diane, Shelley (unemployed), Rob, Julie (students), Debbie (part-time secretary); fourth group – Paul, Gary, Alice, Jackie, Chris (students), Petra, Phil (unemployed). (Note: the names of all group members have been changed.) The focus group sessions were held over a five-month period between June and October 1995. The sessions took place on Tuesday or Wednesday evenings at the house or flat of one of the members.

2. A *riff* is a series of repeated notes which can be said to characterise the song or piece of music in which it is featured. Examples of *riff-based* songs include the Rolling Stones' '(I Can't Get No) Satisfaction' and Michael Jackson's 1983 hit 'Beat It'.

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