

## RETROMANIA

Simon Reynolds is the author of seven books about music and pop culture, including *Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978–1984*, *Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture*, and *Blissed Out: The Raptures of Rock*. Born in London, resident in New York for most of the nineties and noughties, he now lives in Los Angeles.

Further praise for *Retromania*:

‘Looking back over the last 25 years you’d be hard pressed to name a music journalist more adept at tracking and defining the zeitgeist.’ Dave Haslam, *Guardian*

‘A provocative and original inquiry into the past and future of popular music.’ *Booklist*

‘Absorbing, brightly written . . . Reynolds fears that our obsession with the recent past has become a structural part of rock music . . . Important—and alarming—reading for pop-music aficionados.’ *Kirkus Reviews*

‘Reynolds’s mix of canny erudition, critical theory, stylish prose, and vibrant evocations of bands both famous and unheard-of, nails the appeal of retro almost despite himself; as he deplores musical nostalgia, he reminds us why it mesmerizes us.’ *Publishers Weekly*

‘This is a magical mystery tour through the retroscape, and Reynolds finds plenty that’s interesting and, dare I say it, new among the second-hand detritus.’ Kevin Courtney, *Irish Times*

‘Already one of the greatest pop commentators of our time . . . Reynolds doesn’t feel the need to batter you over the head with his intellect, opting instead for a conversational style that’s not afraid to go off on seriously wild tangents.’ Stuart Clark, *Hot Press*

‘If anyone can make sense of pop music’s steady mutation from what George Melly noted as its ‘worship of the present’, to its current status as a living heritage industry where past, present and what the author calls a nostalgia for a lost future coexist, then you’d have to trust Reynolds. He’s a top-table critic whose keen ear is matched by a sharp eye for cultural context . . . An erudite study of pop’s eternal lock groove.’ Mark Paytress, *Mojo*

‘The book is long awaited, and not just because Reynolds’s great studies of post-punk (*Rip It Up and Start Again*) and dance culture (*Energy Flash*) consolidated his position as the ultimate philosopher-fanboy. There has also not been a comprehensive study of our collective desire for the past until now, and how endemic it is in both mainstream and alternative culture . . . His explorations are, as always, breathless and readable, a mix of enthusiastic self-analysis and academic theory . . . A work that is vibrant and vital.’ Jude Rogers, *New Statesman & Society*.

‘If pop is suffering from a fossil fuel crisis due to a perceived lack of fresh resources, the sense that there are no new sounds under the sun, then its global warming is retro sounds . . . and this book is its *An Inconvenient Truth* . . . A hugely interesting and useful debate starter.’ Emily Mackay, *NME*

*by the same author*

Blissed Out: The Raptures of Rock

The Sex Revolts: Gender, Rebellion and Rock ’n’ Roll (with Joy Press)

Energy Flash: A Journey Through Rave Music and Dance Culture

Rip It Up and Start Again: Post-Punk 1978–84

Bring the Noise: 20 Years of Writing About Hip Rock and Hip Hop

Totally Wired: Post-Punk Interviews and Overviews

**SIMON REYNOLDS**

# **RETROMANIA**

**Pop Culture's Addiction to  
Its Own Past**

**ff**

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In memory of my brother Tim.

And with love to my surviving brothers Jez and Hugo.



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# INTRODUCTION

## The 'Re' Decade

We live in a pop age gone loco for retro and crazy for commemoration. Band reformations and reunion tours, tribute albums and box sets, anniversary festivals and live performances of classic albums: each new year is better than the last one for music from yesteryear.

Could it be that the greatest danger to the future of our music culture is . . . *its past*?

Maybe that sounds unnecessarily apocalyptic. But the scenario I'm imagining isn't a cataclysm so much as a gradual wind-down. This is the way that pop ends, not with a BANG but with a box set whose fourth disc you never get around to playing and

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### THE RETROSCAPE

2000/April: The Smithsonian Institution's Memphis Rock 'n' Soul Museum opens >>>>>>>  
2000/May: Julien Temple's Sex Pistols doc *The Filth and the Fury* is released, kicking off a decade-spanning trilogy of punk documentaries by the director of *The Great Rock'n'Roll Swindle* >>>>>>> 2000/June: The Experience Music Project, a huge rock'n'pop museum founded by billionaire infotech mogul Paul Allen, opens in Seattle >>>>>>> 2001/July: Garage-rock revivalists The White Stripes release their commercial breakthrough album *White Blood Cells* to huge acclaim >>>>>>> 2001/November: Here and Now, a nostalgia revue offering 'The Very Best of the 80s', tours the UK, with reanimated stars Paul Young, Kim Wilde, Curiosity Killed the Cat, Heaven 17, Go West, T'Pau and Nick Heyward performing to 60,000 across seven arenas >>>>>>> 2002/February: *Spring Term*, a compilation spinning off the seventies/eighties nostalgia club School Disco, hits no. 1 in the UK

an overpriced ticket to the track-by-track restaging of the Pixies or Pavement album you played to death in your first year at university.

Once upon a time, pop's metabolism buzzed with dynamic energy, creating the surging-into-the-future feel of periods like the psychedelic sixties, the post-punk seventies, the hip-hop eighties and the rave nineties. The 2000s felt different. *Pitchfork* critic Tim Finney noted 'the curious slowness with which this decade marches forward'. He was specifically monitoring electronic dance music, which all through the nineties had been pop culture's vanguard, hurling forth a new Next Big Thing every season. But Finney's observation can be applied not just to dance music but to popular music in its entirety. The sensation of moving forward grew fainter as the decade unfurled. Time itself seemed to become sluggish, like a river that starts to meander and form oxbow lakes.

If the pulse of NOW felt weaker with each passing year, that's because in the 2000s the pop present became ever more crowded out by the past, whether in the form of archived memories of yesteryear or retro-rock leeching off ancient styles. Instead of being about itself, the 2000s has been about every other previous decade happening again all at once: a simultaneity of pop time

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>>>>>> 2002/April: Release of *24 Hour Party People*, a sort of 'collective biopic' focused on Factory Records boss Tony Wilson but including Joy Division, Martin Hannett, Happy Mondays and the Hacienda >>>>>> 2002/May: Mash-up craze reaches the mainstream as Sugababes' 'Freak Like Me' hits no. 1 – it's their 'cover' of Richard X aka Girls On Top's 'We Don't Give a Damn About Our Friends', a mash-up of Gary Numan's 'Are "Friends" Electric?' and Adina Howard's 'Freak Like Me' >>>>>> 2002/July: School Disco's nostalgia festival *School Fields* on Clapham Common draws 40,000-strong crowd, many wearing school-uniform-style ties and pleated skirts >>>>>> 2003/March: Young British artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard's *File Under Sacred Music*, an event at London's ICA, is a re-enactment of a 1978 show by The Cramps at the Napa State Mental Institute, California >>>>>> 2003/March: 251 Menlove Avenue, John Lennon's childhood home in Liverpool, is opened to the public, having been acquired by Yoko Ono, donated to the National Trust and painstakingly restored to fifties style >>>>>> 2003 November: *Let It Be . . . Naked*, a version of the final Beatles album stripped of Phil Spector's added-on-after-the-fact or-

that abolishes history while nibbling away at the present's own sense of itself as an era with a distinct identity and feel.

Instead of being the threshold to the future, the first ten years of the twenty-first century turned out to be the 'Re' Decade. The 2000s were dominated by the 're-' prefix: *revivals*, *reissues*, *remakes*, *re-enactments*. Endless *retrospection*: every year brought a fresh spate of anniversaries, with their attendant glut of biographies, memoirs, rockumentaries, biopics and commemorative issues of magazines. Then there were the band *reformations*, whether it was groups *reuniting* for nostalgia tours in order to *replenish* (or to bloat still further) the members' bank balances (Police, Led Zeppelin, Pixies . . . the list is endless) or as a prequel to *returning* to the studio to *relaunch* their careers as recording artists (Stooges, Throbbing Gristle, Devo, Fleetwood Mac, My Bloody Valentine et al.).

If only it was just the old music and old musicians coming back, in archived form or as reanimated performers. But the 2000s was also the decade of rampant *recycling*: bygone genres *revived* and *renovated*, vintage sonic material *reprocessed* and *recombined*. Too often with new young bands, beneath their taut skin and rosy cheeks you could detect the sagging grey flesh of old ideas.

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chestral overdubs and embellishments, is released >>>>>> 2003/December: The Doors of the 21st Century – Ray Manzarek and Robbie Krieger plus The Cult's Ian Astbury as ersatz Jim Morrison – play Wembley Arena, the climax to a year of touring and legend-milking. Original drummer John Densmore and the Morrison estate are not happy and eventually win an injunction against the use of The Doors' name >>>>>> 2004/spring–summer: The Pixies re-form for a tour that takes in the US, Europe, Brazil and Japan, an emotionally fraught reunion documented in the rock doc *loudQUIETloud* >>>>>> 2004/September: Brian Wilson releases SMiLE, his attempt (with Van Dyke Parks) to complete the legendarily unfinished Beach Boys album *Smile*, which was started in 1966 >>>>>> 2004/October: *Chronicles, Volume 1*, the first instalment of Bob Dylan's memoirs, is published to much acclaim >>>>>> 2005/February to November: Mötley Crüe's reunion tour grosses almost \$40 million and becomes the eleventh most lucrative US tour of the year >>>>>> 2005/March: Queen embark on a massive world concert tour, with deceased frontman Freddie Mercury replaced by Paul Rodgers of Free/Bad Company >>>>>> 2005/July: No

As the 2000s proceeded, the interval between something happening and its being revisited seemed to shrink insidiously. The *I Love the [Decade]* TV series created by the BBC and adapted by VH1 for America hurtled through the seventies, eighties and nineties, and then – with *I Love the New Millennium*, which aired in the summer of 2008 – wrapped up the 2000s before the decade was even over. Meanwhile, the reissue industry's tentacles have already reached the late nineties, with box sets and remastered/expanded versions of German minimal techno, Britpop and even Morrissey's lamest run of solo albums. The rising tide of the historical past is lapping at our ankles. As for revivals, the music scene mostly abided by the Twenty-Year Rule of Revivalism: the eighties were 'in' for much of the 2000s, in the form of the post-punk, electropop and most recently Goth resurgences. But you also had precocious glimpses of nineties revivalism, with the nu-rave fad and the rise of shoegaze, grunge and Britpop as reference points for new indie bands.

The word 'retro' has a quite specific meaning: it refers to a self-conscious fetish for period stylisation (in music, clothes, design) expressed creatively through pastiche and citation. Retro in its strict sense tends to be the preserve of aesthetes, connoisseurs and collectors, people who possess a near-scholarly depth

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*Direction Home: Bob Dylan*, Martin Scorsese's two-part rock-doc mini-series about Dylan in the sixties, is a global event >>>>>> 2005/August–September: The first 'Don't Look Back' season of classic albums played in their original order includes The Stooges doing *Funhouse*, Gang of Four performing *Entertainment!* and Dinosaur Jr playing *You're Living All Over Me* >>>>>> 2005/October: Cream play three shows at Madison Square Garden and gross \$10.6 million >>>>>> 2005/December: Coldplay release the single 'Talk', which recycles the chord sequence from Kraftwerk's 1980 'Computer Love', with the German synth-pioneers' permission and blessing >>>>>> 2006/January: *Rock of Ages*, a musical that does for eighties Sunset Strip hair metal what *Grease* did for fifties rock'n'roll and *Mama Mia!* did for ABBA, premieres at The Vanguard, Los Angeles. MTV smashes by Journey, Bon Jovi, Twisted Sister, Poison, Whitesnake et al. soundtrack the story of a 'legendary Hollywood rock club facing its demise at the hands of eager developers'. What the *Los Angeles Times* hails as 'a burst of retro adrenaline' then moves to Las Vegas for a sell-out run at the Flamingo Las Vegas Hotel and Casino, and then on to New York and Broadway

of knowledge combined with a sharp sense of irony. But the word has come to be used in a much more vague way to describe pretty much anything that relates to the relatively recent past of popular culture. Following this looser common usage of the word, *Retromania* investigates the entire range of contemporary uses and abuses of the pop past. This includes phenomena such as the vastly increased presence in our lives of old pop culture: from the availability of back-catalogue records to YouTube's gigantic collective archive and the massive changes in music consumption engendered by playback devices like the iPod (which often functions as a personal 'oldies' radio station). Another major area is the natural greying of rock music some fifty years into its existence: performers from the past who stick around, continuing to tour and record, as well as artists who mount comebacks after a long period of retirement. Finally, there's 'new old' music made by young musicians who draw heavily on the past, often in a clearly signposted and arty way.

Earlier eras had their own obsessions with antiquity, of course, from the Renaissance's veneration of Roman and Greek classicism to the Gothic movement's invocations of the medieval. But there has never been a society in human history so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of *its own immediate past*. That is what

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>>>>>> 2006/March: Having already re-formed to play concerts, the surviving members of the original line-up of The Stooges release their first studio album in over twenty years, *The Weirdness* >>>>>> 2006/March: VH1 Classic sponsor a joint tour by Blondie and The New Cars (featuring Todd Rundgren on vocals as a prosthesis for the unwilling Ric Ocasek). Blondie's latest greatest-hits package is promoted by the single 'Rapture Riders', a mash-up of their disco-rap hit 'Rapture' with The Doors' 'Riders on the Storm' >>>>>> 2006/June: Cirque du Soleil's Beatles extravaganza *Love* opens in Las Vegas >>>>>> 2006/July: VH1 Classic airs a documentary on Platinum Weird, a legendary lost soft-rock group who paved the way for Fleetwood Mac. The doc features Mick Jagger, Elton John and Ringo Starr, but the band is fictitious, a concoction of Dave 'Eurythmics' Stewart and Kara DioGuardi's launched earlier in the year with fake fan sites on the Web. The album *Make Believe*, ten recordings 'from 1974', is released in the autumn >>>>>> 2006/August: MTV celebrates its twenty-fifth birthday by re-broadcasting the entirety of its first twenty-four hours output from 1 August 1981 >>>>>> 2006/September: Elton John and Bernie

distinguishes retro from antiquarianism or history: the fascination for fashions, fads, sounds and stars that occurred within living memory. Increasingly, that means pop culture that you already experienced the first time around (as a *conscious*, pop-aware person, as opposed to stuff that you lived through unaware as a small child).

This kind of retromania has become a dominant force in our culture, to the point where it feels like we've reached some kind of tipping point. Is nostalgia stopping our culture's ability to surge forward, or are we nostalgic precisely because our culture has stopped moving forward and so we inevitably look back to more momentous and dynamic times? But what happens when we run out of past? Are we heading towards a sort of cultural-ecological catastrophe, when the seam of pop history is exhausted? And out of all the things that happened this past decade, what could possibly fuel tomorrow's nostalgia crazes and retro fads?

I'm not alone in feeling perplexed by these prospects. I've lost count of the number of hand-wringing newspaper columns and blog posts that worry about what happened to innovation and upheaval in music. Where are the major new genres and sub-cultures of the twenty-first century? Sometimes it's the musicians themselves who sound a note of weary *déjà vu*. In a 2007

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Taupin release a sequel to the 1975 semi-autobiographical concept album *Captain Fantastic & the Brown Dirt Cowboy*. It's titled *The Captain & the Kid*, and although the title track warns 'and you can't go back, and if you try it fails', its sales figures are nearly twice those of its immediate precursor, 2004's *Peachtree Road*, described by Elton as 'probably one of my lowest-selling albums of all time' >>>>>>> 2006/November: *Love*, a collection of remixed and mashed-up Beatles classics, wrought by George Martin and his son Giles as the soundtrack to Cirque du Soleil's Las Vegas stage show of the same name, debuts at no. 4 in *Billboard* and no. 3 in the UK charts >>>>>>> 2006/winter: Lou Reed performs his classic *Berlin* album in its entirety for the first time; Martin Stephenson and the Daintees also perform their 'classic' *Boat to Bolivia* album in its entirety for the first time >>>>>>> 2006/2007/2008: Having re-formed once already in 1996 for the Filthy Lucre tour, The Sex Pistols reunite again for five UK gigs and several European festivals >>>>>>> 2007/February: Young British artist Jo Mitchell stages a re-enactment at London's ICA of *Concerto for Voice and Machinery*, a notorious 1984 performance-cum-riot involving members of Ger-

interview, Sufjan Stevens declared: ‘Rock and roll is a museum piece. . . . There are great rock bands today – I love the White Stripes, I love the Raconteurs. But it’s a museum piece. You’re watching the History Channel when you go to these clubs. They’re just reenacting an old sentiment. They’re channeling the ghosts of that era – the Who, punk rock, the Sex Pistols, whatever. It’s been done. The rebellion’s over.’

This malaise is not restricted to pop music, of course. Look at the Hollywood mania for remaking blockbuster movies from a couple of decades earlier: *Alfie*, *Ocean’s Eleven*, *Bad News Bears*, *Casino Royale*, *The Pink Panther*, *Hairspray*, *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, *Fame*, *Tron*, *True Grit* . . . The near future promises remakes of *The Fly* (yes, it’s being made for the third time), *The Incredible Shrinking Man*, *The Dirty Dozen* . . ., while Russell Brand is due to star in remakes of *Arthur* and *Drop Dead Fred*. When they’re not revamping proven box-office successes of the past, the movie industry is adapting much-loved ‘iconic’ TV series for the big screen, like *The Dukes of Hazzard*, *Charlie’s Angels* and *Get Smart*, along with bygone kiddie cartoons like *Yogi Bear* and *The Smurfs*. Somewhere between the two is the *Star Trek* that hit cinema screens in mid-2009: not strictly a remake but a pre-quel (the ad slogan drips with unintentional irony: ‘The Future

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man metal-bashing ensemble Einstürzende Neubauten which also took place at the ICA >>>>>> 2007/March: Retro-rap outfit The Cool Kids release their debut EP *Totally Flossed Out*. Their big anthem is ‘88’, a celebration of hip hop’s wonder year – which also happens to be the year that the younger half of the duo, Mikey Rocks, was born. The *New York Times* reveals they are part of a back-to-the-golden-age-of-rap, lo-fi-sounding movement alongside Kidz in the Hall and The Knux, whose Krispy Kream says, ‘We recorded songs in the worst way possible so you get a certain feel from it, like an old hip-hop record from 1990 or whenever’ >>>>>> 2007/April: Rage Against the Machine reunite to headline the final night of the Coachella Valley Music and Arts Festival in California >>>>>> 2007/April: Theatre of Hate’s *Westworld* twenty-fifth anniversary tour >>>>>> 2007/June: Paul McCartney releases his twenty-first album, *Memory Almost Full*, full of elegiac songs like ‘Ever Present Past’, ‘Vintage Clothes’, ‘That Was Me’ and ‘The End of the End’. ‘All you’ve got is the past, really,’ he tells one interviewer. 2007/September: Held at a Scottish castle, Retrofest is the UK’s first eighties-themed music festival. Promising ‘the Biggest 80s Line-

Begins') featuring the young Spock and Kirk. This movie trades off the generation-spanning cumulative affection created by the original sixties TV series, the eighties film versions and the subsequent *Star Trek: The Next Generation* TV series.

Theatre has a long tradition of reviving canonic plays and much-loved musicals, but here too you can see the remake and the spin-off catching on with productions like *Spamalot* (based on the movie *Monty Python and the Holy Grail*) and 'jukebox musicals' written around golden oldies by legendary bands or drawn from vintage genres: *We Will Rock You* (Queen), *Good Vibrations* (Beach Boys), *The Times They Are A-Changin'* (Bob Dylan) and *Rock of Ages* (eighties hair metal). There's even 'jukebox TV' with shows like *Glee* and *Pop Idol/American Idol* (with its Beatles nights, Stones nights et al.), which fold rock and soul back into the non-threatening tradition of showbiz/light entertainment/variety. Television has even got in on the remake action, albeit with generally less success than Hollywood. People in the industry describe the contemporised version of the classic TV series as 'a presold concept', but so far the attempts – glitzy remakes of *The Prisoner*, *The Survivors*, *The Rockford Files*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Dragnet*, *The Twilight Zone*, *The Fugitive*, *Kojak*, *Bionic Woman*, *Hawaii Five-O*, *Beverly Hills 90210*, *Dallas*, plus Britcom favourites like *Minder*,

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up since Live Aid', it features The Human League, Spandau Ballet's Tony Hadley, ABC, Howard Jones, Kajagoogoo and Bananarama, among many others. 2007/September: *Control*, Anton Corbijn's biopic of Joy Division's Ian Curtis, is released >>>>>> 2007/winter: Treading the UK boards again are Madness, Happy Mondays, Hugh Cornwell and band, The Stranglers (Not Featuring Hugh Cornwell), Ian Hunter, New Model Army, The Men They Couldn't Hang and the movie-fictional Irish soul band The Commitments. There's also The Pogues doing their twenty-fifth anniversary tour and The Wedding Present doing The George Best 20th Anniversary Tour, while tribute band The Other Smiths embark on a Strangeways Tour devoted to The Smiths' last album *Strangeways Here We Come* plus 'Best of Most of 1984–2006'. In a competitive season, though, the Pure Sadness Prize goes to the twenty-two-date tour by From the Jam, which is Bruce Foxton and Rick Buckler but not Paul Weller >>>>>> 2007/2008: The Police Reunion Tour plays 159 arena-size concerts across the world between 28 May 2007 and 7 August 2008, grossing over \$340 million and becoming the third most lucrative tour of all time >>>>>> 2007/2008: Sonic Youth

*Reggie Perrin* and *The Likely Lads* – have not ‘sold’ especially well in terms of ratings (indeed, in America these remakes often get cancelled before the season is through). Still, people keep trying: the logic of renovating the tried-and-true, of milking the cult status of the original, seems an irresistible pitch.

Then there’s fashion, where rummaging through yesterday’s wardrobe closet has been integral to the industry for some time, but whose recycling of old ideas nonetheless seemed to reach a frenzied rate of rotation this last decade. Designers like Marc Jacobs and Anna Sui ransacked the styles of previous epochs almost as soon as they ended. The market for vintage clothing boomed (‘vintage’ now meaning as recently as the eighties, with designers like Azzedine Alaïa in huge demand), and this was paralleled by the ‘antique-isation’ of furniture and artifacts from the second half of the twentieth century, as the shelter magazines went nuts for mid-century modern furniture.

Those are just some of the most visibly fevered zones of retro-mania. But there’s also retro toys (crazes for everything from the View-Master to the Blythe doll of the early seventies) and retro gaming (playing and collecting old-school computer, video and arcade games from the eighties). There’s retro food (sandwich chain Pret A Manger offers ‘Retro Prawn on Artisan’, a sort

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perform their hallucinatory, epoch-defining 1988 album *Daydream Nation* at twenty-four concerts in the US, Spain, Germany, France, Italy, the UK, Australia and New Zealand >>>>>> 2008/February: Tribute bands The Clone Roses and The Smiths Indeed team up for a double bill that never happened in historical reality (The Smiths played their last UK concert on 12 December 1986, when the Roses were unknowns). Keeping the theme Mancunian is the night’s DJ, Clint Boon of Inspiral Carpets, who are actually embarking on their own Return of the Cow tour the following month >>>>>> 2008/February–March: Betty Swann-abe Duffy is number one in the UK for five weeks with ‘Mercy’, a slice of retro-soul whose intro samples the opening bars of Ben E. King’s ‘Stand By Me’ and which ends up the third-best selling single of the year >>>>>> 2008/February–March: The Mission play a four-date concert series at London’s Shepherd’s Bush Empire, performing ‘an entire album’ per night ‘plus all B sides from the singles of that time’ >>>>>> 2008/April: Mudcrutch, Tom Petty’s not-actually-fake ‘lost group’ from his pre-Heartbreakers early-seventies period, re-form, tour and record an album of their vintage material. Petty: ‘We left

of poshed-up sandwich version of that seventies fave the Prawn Cocktail), and there's also retro interior design, retro candy, retro ring-tones, retro travel and retro architecture. You even get retro-style commercials on television now and then, like the one for Heinz Baked Beans that mega-mixes snippets from vintage UK ads from the sixties, seventies and eighties, capped off with the imperishable slogan 'Beanz Meanz Heinz'. But strangest of all is the demand for retro porn: collectors who specialise in erotica and skin mags from particular periods; websites with scores of specialist categories such as 'retro face-sitting', 'retro big tits', 'natural' (breasts from before boob jobs became widespread) and 'vintage hairy' (porn from before the era of the Brazilian wax). Phone-line ads on cable-TV porn stations are punctuated every so often with interludes from black-and-white stag movies and nudie reels from the fifties (or even earlier), inviting the melancholy thought that the lascivious ladies cavorting in them are now either in assisted-living facilities or – gulp – food for worms.

For all its ubiquity across culture, retro-consciousness nonetheless seems most chronically prevalent in music. That may well be because it somehow feels especially *wrong* there. Pop ought to be all about the present tense, surely? It is still considered the domain of the young, and young people aren't supposed to be nostalgic;

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some music back there and it was time to go get it' >>>>>> 2008/May: Public Enemy perform their incendiary, epoch-defining 1988 album *It Takes a Nation of Millions to Hold Us Back* at London's Brixton Academy, Glasgow's ABC1 and the Manchester Academy >>>>>> 2008/May: Sparks trump everybody else in the play-your-classic-LP-in-the-right-order stakes by performing all twenty of their albums over twenty nights at the Islington Academy, London, climaxing on the twenty-first night with the unveiling of their new and twenty-first album at the Shepherd's Bush Empire >>>>>> 2008/summer: A decade after disintegrating My Bloody Valentine re-form for a worldwide tour, playing to a legion of *Loveless* lovers who never saw them the first time plus long-term fans back for punishment after being deafened in 1992 >>>>>> 2008/September: Late-eighties/early-nineties retro infiltrates prime-time TV: *Gossip Girl's* middle-aged alt-rocker dad Rufus Humphrey re-forms his one-hit-wonder grunge-lite band Lincoln Hawk for a support-slot tour. 'Oh my god, I just got the call. We're opening for The Breeders. I guess the Luscious Jackson reunion didn't work out' >>>>>> 2008/September: Echo and the Bunnymen perform their

they haven't been around long enough to build up a backlog of precious memories. Likewise, the essence of pop is the exhortation to 'be here now', meaning both 'live like there's no tomorrow' and 'shed the shackles of yesterday'. Popular music's connection to the new and the now explains its unparalleled capacity to distil the atmosphere of a historical era. In period-drama movies and TV shows nothing conjures the vibe of an epoch more effectively than pop songs from that time. Nothing – except maybe fashion, which, intriguingly, is the other area of popular culture that's utterly rife with retro. In both cases, this very topicality, this date-stamped quality is what causes it to become quickly dated and then, after a decent interval, so potently epoch-evoking, so *revivable*.

In terms of mainstream pop music, many of the 2000s' most commercially prominent trends involved recycling: the garage-punk resurgence of The White Stripes, The Hives, The Vines, Jet et al.; the vintage-soul style of Amy Winehouse, Duffy, Adele and other young white Brit females who pass for black American lady singers from the sixties; eighties synth-pop-inspired femmes like La Roux, Little Boots and Lady Gaga. But where retro truly reigns as the dominant sensibility and creative paradigm is in hipsterland, pop's equivalent to highbrow. The very people who you would once have expected to produce (as artists) or champion (as

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fourth album, *Ocean Rain*, in its entirety and in its original sequence at the Royal Albert Hall >>>>>> 2008/autumn: Conde Nast's/Vogue's Fashion Rocks supplement: Dhani Harrison dressed and moustached as father George c.1968, with blonde model Sasha Pivovrova playing the Patti Boyd role in luxe-bohemian look of wide-brimmed hat and furs >>>>>> 2008/December: The Rock and Roll Hall of Fame Annex opens in downtown Manhattan, a New York-focused branch of the Cleveland-based Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and Museum >>>>>> 2009/February: In synch with Black History Month, VH1 Classic launches a four-part series called *Black to the Future*, a celebration of African-American pop-cult ephemera in the kitschadelic vein of their *I Love the '70s/'80s/'90s* series >>>>>> 2009/February: ArtCore – an exhibition of the 'visual culture' of acidhouse and rauri-at

consumers) the non-traditional and the groundbreaking – *that's* the group who are most addicted to the past. In demographic terms, it's the exact same cutting-edge class, but instead of being pioneers and innovators, they've switched roles to become curators and archivists. The avant-garde is now an arrière-garde.

At a certain point the sheer mass of past accumulating behind the music began to exert a kind of gravitational pull. The sensation of movement, of going somewhere, could be satisfied as easily (in fact, *more* easily) by going backwards within that vast past than by going forwards. It was still an exploratory impulse, but now it took the form of archaeology.

You could see this syndrome starting to emerge as far back as the eighties, but it's really escalated in the last decade. The young musicians who've come of age during the last ten years or so have grown up in a climate where the musical past is accessible to an unprecedentedly inundating degree. The result is a recombinant approach to music-making that typically leads to a meticulously organised constellation of reference points and allusions, sonic lattices of exquisite and often surprising taste that span the decades and the oceans. I used to call this approach 'record-collection rock', but nowadays you don't even need to collect records any more, just harvest MP3s and cruise through YouTube. All the

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Look Back'-style performance of his classic 1968 LP >>>>>> 2009/March: A state-of-the-art, hi-tech rock'n'pop museum, the British Music Experience, opens at the O2 in London >>>>>> 2009/April: A reissue programme for Nick Cave's entire discography kicks off. Every deluxe repackaging includes the CD plus a DVD containing a film about each album made by re-enactment artists Iain Forsyth and Jane Pollard >>>>>> 2009/April–May: The Specials' original line-up (albeit with the singular exception of leader/founder Jerry Dammers) re-form for a thirtieth-anniversary reunion tour >>>>>> 2009/May: The Breeders, who haven't technically re-formed because they just went very quiet for a very long time but never actually split, curate the All Tomorrow's Parties festival, featuring reactivated post-punkers Gang of Four, X and Wire, plus late-eighties/early-nineties alt-rock warhorses Shellac, Throwing Muses, Teenage Fanclub, Giant Sand and Th' Faith Healers >>>>>> 2009/May: Great Gig in the Sea, the first Pink Floyd-themed cruise to the Bahamas, sets sail, promising two full shows by tribute band Think Floyd USA, including a track-by-track rendition of *Dark Side of the Moon* >>>>>> 2009/June: Neil Young releases

sound and imagery and information that used to cost money and physical effort to obtain is available for free, just a few key and mouse clicks away.

It's not that nothing happened in the music of the 2000s. In many ways, there was a manic bustle of micro-trends, subgenres and recombinant styles. But by far the most momentous transformations related to our modes of consumption and distribution, and these have encouraged the escalation of retromania. We've become victims of our ever-increasing capacity to store, organise, instantly access, and share vast amounts of cultural data. Not only has there never before been a society so obsessed with the cultural artifacts of its immediate past, but there has never before been a society that is *able* to access the immediate past so easily and so copiously.

Yet *Retromania* is not a straightforward denunciation of retro as a manifestation of cultural regression or decadence. How could it be, when I'm complicit myself? As much as I've written as a journalist about 'brave new frontier' musics like rave and electronica, and as much as I've celebrated at book length movements like post-punk that were all about futurism, I'm also an avid participant in the retro culture: as a historian, as a reviewer of reissues, as a talking head in rock documentaries and as a sleeve-note writer.

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the first volume of his long-awaited *Archives* project. The ten-disc box *Archives, Vol. 1: 1963–1972* is just the first of four such sets and contains unreleased music plus twenty hours of video, the 1974 Young doc *Journey Through the Past*, photos, lyrics, letters, memorabilia, a replica journal and audio of interviews, radio spots and concert raps >>>>>> 2009/July: Release of *Horehound* by The Dead Weather, a retro-rock supergroup featuring Jack White of The White Stripes and The Kills singer Alison Mosshart (whose image/voice channels Patti Smith). Meanwhile, Kills guitarist Jamie Hince (whose playing channels Dr Feelgood's Wilko Johnson) starts thinking about forming a group with his girlfriend Kate Moss >>>>>> 2009/August: Forty years to the minute after The Beatles crossed Abbey Road on 8 August 1969 for the front-cover photograph of the *Abbey Road* LP, the owner of The Beatles Coffee Shop, Richard Porter, conducts a special Beatles tour across the road >>>>>> 2009/August: Ang Lee's movie *Taking Woodstock* is released on the fortieth anniversary of the 1969 rock festival >>>>>> 2009/September: Richard Hell, the man whose haircut and ripped T-shirt Malcolm McLaren ripped off for The Sex Pistols,