

Polluting young minds? *Smash Hits* and ‘high Thatcherism’

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Abstract

This article is an analysis of the British popular music publication *Smash Hits* at the peak of its commercial power in the late 1980s. Whereas academic attention has been diverted towards its early, more ‘alternative’ period in the late 1970s, as Railton suggests, like many similar publications it has not been widely studied within the academy and particularly not in relation to its engagement with overtly popular music. On the rare occasions it is discussed it is broadly dismissed as being conservative and overtly consumerist, merely a ‘teen glossy’ that provided posters for teenage girls’ bedrooms. Through a content analysis of issues published in 1987, with a specific focus on an interview with Margaret Thatcher conducted by *Smash Hits* in March of that year, this article will attempt to redress this imbalance. It aims to demonstrate that as a guide to the politics of popular music and youth culture at the end of ‘high Thatcherism’, *Smash Hits* deserves to be studied with the same respect as its more credible ‘inkie’ and ‘indie’ peers of the period. It will also suggest that the very nature of *Smash Hits* as a reflection of populist taste allowed it the scope to cover, as cultural texts, a range of musical performers and styles far broader than that seen in the indie press of the time and that, in turn, this allowed it to visualize key youth movements they ignored. Finally, it also hopes to outline how its representation of gender, sexuality and race was very much at odds with mainstream, and specifically Thatcherite, ideals in this period.

Keywords

identity

music press

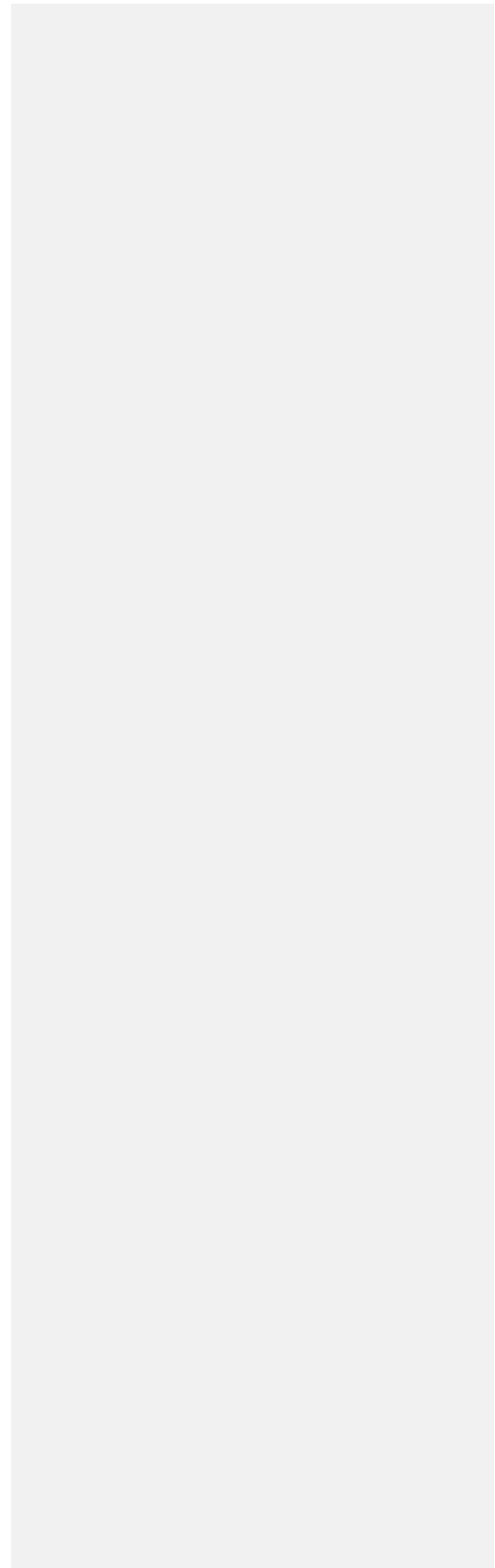
NME

popular music

Smash Hits

Thatcherism

youth culture



Introduction: Britain's physical music press

The British popular music press plays a significant role in the dissemination and analysis of rock and pop culture. However it has not been widely studied within academic discourse and, as Railton suggests, particularly not in relation to its engagement with overtly popular music. For her, 'one of the ironies of popular music studies is that the music that is the most popular, in terms of contemporary chart success, is rarely discussed by academics writing in the field' (2001: 321).

Shuker (2013) studies the types of music press that exist, or once existed, within the United Kingdom. He splits them into six categories. First are independent, fan-produced fanzines, most famously *Sniffin' Glue*, published at the height of British punk in 1976/77, but also the Riot Grrrl zines of the early 1990s. The second is the Metal Press, magazines like *Metal Hammer*, *Raw* and *Kerrang*, which emerged in the 1980s to focus almost entirely on hard rock or heavy metal. Next are 'Style Bibles' or 'New Glossies' such as *The Face*, *Arena* or *iD*, which covered music within a far larger remit to represent a 'lifestyle culture' to a predominantly male readership. Finally come the 'New Tabloids' such as *Q*, *Uncut*, *Vox* and *Mojo*, more mature reflections on a range of music styles, geared towards a more mature consumer. Each of these types are either generically or commercially opposed to what is considered the archetype of this form, the 'inkies' (*NME*, *Melody Maker* or *Sounds*). These were tangible, black and white music papers that left ink on your fingers and had an 'authority' and 'institutional aura' in how they discussed rock, soul and alternative music (Reynolds ~~2014~~2015).

Shuker also briefly discusses the magazines that will be my focus in this paper, what he terms the 'Teen Glossies', and in doing so uses a somewhat withering tone that is not unusual in such analyses. For writers like Shuker, publications such as *Top of the Pops* magazine and *Smash Hits* 'are similar in format, with the majority of coverage devoted to exposing the private personas of current pop stars whose careers are tied to the teenage market' (2013: 90). Citing the work of McRobbie and Garber (1976) he suggests that these magazines are part of a 'culture of the bedroom' and are in effect little more than visual representations to be cut up and used as posters (not then, *serious* journalism). They are teen lifestyle publications that sell a significant number of copies (at its peak *Smash Hits* sold around 800,000 physical issues per fortnight) and are often linked to other pan-media hypertexts (such as TV shows, compilation albums or awards concerts such as the *Smash Hits Poll Winners Party*) (Forde 2001).

What Shuker suggests is not, strictly, inaccurate but nonetheless evidences the tone taken to such publications both in both academic studies and also wider 'rock' or 'alternative' culture. A reason for this may be the tone magazines such as *Smash Hits* employed in covering both popular and also more 'credible' music. Railton notes how it was 'about the humorous undermining of established hierarchies' in that it 'simultaneously constructs a "star" system and undermines the very system it constructs' (2001: 328).

A parallel can be drawn with McRobbie's (1991, 1994) study of the teen magazine *Just Seventeen*, which was aimed at a similar demographic and published in roughly the same time frame (between 1983 and 2004). She outlines and assesses 'changing modes of femininity' to define how, even in the 'adverse political circumstances' of Thatcher's time in office, feminism 'had a dramatic impact on almost every level of social life in Britain'

(McRobbie 1994: 152). *Just Seventeen* is emblematic of this, particularly in the way that it started to lessen its focus on 'romance' and instead, like *Smash Hits*, employed a more ironic, self-conscious tone that challenged stereotypical notions of young female consumption and fandom:

'we know it's silly', is what the editors seem to be saying, when they announce this week's celebrity pin-up, 'but it's fun and it's harmless.' In this sense superficiality and pastiche allow readers to position themselves at a distance from the subordination of being 'just' a fan or just a silly girl. (McRobbie 1994: 157)

Aims and objectives

This article will aim to study *Smash Hits* along such lines, focusing on its ironic, playful tone. It will extend the work of Hill (2008, 2009) and study the publication at the peak of its popularity in the mid-late 1980s, in turn situating the political and cultural context in which it was produced.

In doing so it aims to challenge certain assumptions that have arisen about the publication. These include Shuker's suggestion that it was merely just a 'teen glossy' that provided posters for teenage bedrooms, Hill's implicit proposition that it changed significantly from its early incarnation and focused simply on generic, commercialized chart pop, but most significantly both Hill and Reynolds' (2006) assumption of the Thatcherite nature of the publication in the mid-late 1980s.

However, a broader aim is, in line with Railton, to question the reasons for which I think it has been largely ignored academically. These include not just the triviality of its content and young feminized audience but also *Smash Hits* supposed lack of critical dialogue, both

musical and political. All of this plays into its seemingly Thatcherite approach to an unproblematic consumption of popular music.

I therefore hope to demonstrate that the very nature of *Smash Hits* as a reflection of populist taste allowed it the scope to cover, as texts, a range of musical performers and styles far broader than that seen in the 'inkies' and that this allowed it to visualize key youth movements they initially ignored. I also hope to demonstrate how it's representation of gender, sexuality and race was at odds with mainstream, and specifically Thatcherite, ideals in this period and that it engaged its readers in a dialogue that was denied them by the indie press.

Methodologically, the predominant issue with undertaking textual, content analysis of this type is the sheer scope of primary material available. It is startling, given the way *Smash Hits* is now remembered, to realize that almost every interview, article, or even advertisement said something about the overall aims of the publication, it's readership or the context in which it was produced. To narrow down the breadth of this text in this period, a decision was made to focus only on the British publications of 1987. The choice of year was key for three reasons, but most importantly, it was the date of Thatcher's third successive election win, a culmination of what Jackson and Saunders (2012: 7) refer to as the period of 'high Thatcherism'. In the run up to this success, *Smash Hits* also interviewed her on their very pages.

The emergence of *Smash Hits*

Launched on 10 October 1978 *Smash Hits* ran until 13 February 2006. Initially a monthly publication that later became bi-monthly, it was the project of former *NME* editor Nick Logan, who, frustrated by the influence of publishers IPC, founded the magazine in tandem with EMAP.

Under Logan's editorship it initially competed with the 'inkies' for the same select group of musicians, ostensibly those punk and post-punk acts¹ who had sustained mainstream chart success in the late 1970s and early 1980s. The only noticeable difference appeared to be the fact that *Smash Hits*, unlike its competitors, was published in glorious technicolour.

Hill outlines the several ways in which the introduction of *Smash Hits* 'changed the role of the music press', including aspects that go 'beyond the theoretical conjectures of academics' (2008: 8). It radically altered the way such publications looked, included a far higher ratio of image to text and took its stylistic influence from fashion photography. Its house style was 'was much more seductive than *NME* or *Melody Maker*. In part this can be attributed to the luscious colour and quality of the paper' (2008: 14). In line with the impact of MTV, which debuted on August 1st 1981, this led to performer recognition being 'based upon their appearance rather than name' (2008: 15).

Second, it was arguably music coverage *sui generis*, in that it largely ignored rigid genre boundaries. Mills notes that 'it successfully drew together disparate and even tribal musical forms by simply presenting them as what was fashionable and successful at that particular moment – in this its model was not unlike that of *Top of the Pops*'² (2012: 11). Hill further outlines that because of this, its coverage of diversity, notably female or black performers,

was distinctly at odds with that of the more established music press. The magazine was immediately 'remarkable for the parity in its depiction of gender: a level playing field in which the subject may be sexualized and objectified regardless of sex, race or musical style' (2008: 16). Finally, as Railton also noted, its coverage of these artists was underscored by a knowing, ironic humour. It may have celebrated the 'surface culture of popular music', the '(extra) ordinariness of the commercial mainstream' but it did so in a way that was playful and witty, its postmodern celebration of performative artifice being at odds with the 'bombastic polemicism of inkies' (2008: 12).

Hill's study also emphasizes the tone of the publications early issues, noting that whilst it could be sarcastic, 'the articles themselves are fairly in-depth: assuming high levels of discursive ability on the part of the reader, in terms of both vocabulary and grammatical construction' (2008: 10). However, his primary research was focused around the early years of the magazine in the 1970s for, as he acknowledges, it was about to radically change. Following the tenure of David Hepworth as editor between 1981 and 1983, it started to focus more on a younger, more mainstream 'new-pop' aesthetic. As Alexis Petridis would later write in a *Guardian* article charting the magazines demise: 'out went the marginal stuff and in came blanket coverage of teen pop' (2006).

Figures 1 and 2: The 'schism' in *Smash Hits*' coverage of pop music between its first publication in 1978 and the era of 'new pop'. On the left is issue 4 (1979) with post-punk coverstar Elvis Costello ([scan accessed from http://www.elviscostello.info/wiki/index.php/Smash_Hits_February_1979](http://www.elviscostello.info/wiki/index.php/Smash_Hits_February_1979)), on the right a

famous cover from late 1982 featuring John Taylor of Duran Duran ([scan accessed from http://www.shanemarais.net/smash-hits-magazine/smash-hits-19-august-1-september-1982/](http://www.shanemarais.net/smash-hits-magazine/smash-hits-19-august-1-september-1982/)).

Although arguably ‘too porous to be rigidly defined’, ‘the new pop’ (Harvell 2005; Rimmer 2011) is a term now used to bring together a collection of young, internationally successful British pop acts of the early 1980s. These included ABC, Culture Club, Duran Duran, Spandau Ballet and Wham! and the term was deployed to underline a shift from punk, post-punk and especially the new romantic movement (from which many ‘new pop’ acts emerged). Even though the term had its origins in the ‘inkies’ (via writers such as Paul Morley) such acts were not the true domain of the *NME* or *Melody Maker*. Popularized in part via the emergence of MTV, they could only exist in what Frith (2002) called ‘televsual’ colour and were often depicted by *Smash Hits* in rather sexualized poses for a teenage female (or gay male) readership (see Figure 2).

Such performers were considered too depthless, disposable, commercialized and even Thatcherite for the serious music press: they were, in the words of Jon Savage, an embodiment of the early 1980s as ‘the age of style’ and a ‘vacuous celebrity culture’ (in Gudmundsson et al. 2002: 56). The then Conservative Party chairman Norman Tebbit even praised the industrious nature of such acts³: not the type of recommendation that gained positive traction in the *NME*, which by this point had become staunchly opposed to the Thatcherite establishment (see Long 2012).

What emerges from this is a schism in the history of *Smash Hits*: an initial period, roughly from 1978 to 1983, where it sat alongside and competed with the ‘inkies’ and then a more

sustained period when it focused merely on 'trivial' pop. The true extent of this shift in musical terms is debatable, but either way, it radically effected its sales: whilst in its early years it sold around 166,000 per issue, roughly equivalent to the circulation of the *NME*, by 1985 it was shifting 522,000 copies per fortnight, rising to 800,000 in 1987. In comparison, the *NME* was still around 125,000 and in the first half of 1987 even fell below 100,000 (Toynbee 1993; Hill 2008; Long 2012)

It is this market dominance, coupled with the acts that it featured, which has led to 1980s *Smash Hits* being positioned as a 'Thatcherite' publication. Hill suggests that in this period, the magazine could be viewed, through the work of Stuart Hall, as a 'principal agent in the acquiescence of cultural consent to the wider political hegemony and the climate of aspiration that underpinned free market capitalism' and that the glossy lifestyle appeal of *Smash Hits*' coverage of 'new-pop' reinforces this idea (2008: 2). Similarly, Reynolds (2006) celebrates the political credibility and authenticity of independent artists whilst positioning *Smash Hits* as conservative and Thatcherite.⁴

Thatcherism and culture

Thatcherism has been understood as a political philosophy derived from the economic, social and foreign policies followed by Margaret Thatcher's three successive Conservative administrations between 1979 and 1990. Introducing work that helped popularize the term in the years leading up to her premiership, Stuart Hall defined it as 'ideologically [...] forging new discursive articulations between the liberal discourses of the 'free market' and economic man and the organic conservative themes of tradition, family and nation, respectability, patriachalism and order'. For him, Thatcherism was a 'regressive modernization' (1988: 2).

Friedman (2006: xii) suggests that 'the most prominent component of Thatcherism remains its economic policies'. Under the tutorage of Keith Joseph, her approach to economic freedom was influenced by Adam Smith, Friedrich Hayek and Milton Friedman. In office, Thatcher set about 'rolling back the state' in the United Kingdom, promoting an individualistic, neo-liberal, monetarist agenda that challenged the Keynesian post-war consensus and prioritized widespread privatization of nationalized industry. She routinely clashed with trade unions at home (most notoriously in the miners' strike of 1984–85) and gladly accepted the moniker of 'the iron lady' from her attack of the Soviet Union.

However, as Pilgrim and Ormrod suggest, in the United Kingdom 'Thatcher was adored and loathed in equal measure' (2013). One area in which this loathing was given a voice was in alternative and popular culture, which blossomed throughout her premiership in cinema, comedy, music and television. Tinwell outlines 'the power of popular culture in communicating public opinion and how this communication tool was used to portray people's perception of how Thatcherite policies defined, shook up and constrained society' (2013: 14). In turn, McRobbie defines how subcultural 'self- or semi- employment', which could arguably have been positioned as Thatcherite 'enterprise culture', were in fact 'angry ripostes':

If she said be enterprising then their enterprise would be pursued in precisely those 'soft' art areas, relatively unprofitable but personally rewarding, which have always found little favour with the conservatives. If she abandoned substantial sectors of the youth population to the forces of the free market and thus to unemployment, they

refused such subordination and carved out spaces for themselves in the interstices of the hidden cultural economy. (1994: 157)

Throughout the 1980s, a succession of pop and rock performers, from the post-punk Elvis Costello, 2-tone Mods The Beat and The Specials, to the 'sophisti-pop' act Hue and Cry and the indie darling Morrissey, all overtly criticized Thatcher's policies with a specific focus on unemployment (which routinely stood at over three million in her first two terms), gender, race and sexuality. Such musicians were at times provided a platform for their views in the 'inkies', which, in the case of the *NME*, maintained a staunchly anti-Thatcher stance throughout her first two terms (Reynolds 2006). In line with this, movements such as Red Wedge had been established in 1985 to directly challenge Thatcherite identity politics and use music as a way of communicating an alternative political ideology. Led by artists such as Jimmy Sommerville, Paul Weller and Billy Bragg, by 1987 they were actively campaigning for Thatcher's removal from office (Robinson 2011).⁵

***Smash Hits* in 1987**

To narrow down the sheer range of *Smash Hits* as a primary source in this period, a decision was made to focus only on the British publications of 1987. The choice of year was key for three reasons, but most importantly, it was the date of Thatcher's third successive election win, a culmination of what Jackson and Saunders (2012: 7) refer to as the period of 'high Thatcherism'. In the run up to this success, *Smash Hits* also interviewed her on their very pages.

The 1987 victory was a triumph for Thatcher, giving her an historic third successive, albeit slightly reduced, majority after periods in which she had both trailed Neil Kinnock's Labour Party in the opinion polls and appeared to lack coherence in the campaign itself (Butler and Kavanagh 1988). Her second term had seen widespread privatization and cuts in the basic rate of income tax, but whilst the 1984/85 miners' strike, for many the defining event of her premiership, had ended in victory for Thatcher, as Jackson and Saunders note, the fallout was that it 'entrenched a perception that Thatcherism was socially divisive' and 'undermined any lingering pretensions the government may have had to the mantle "One Nation"' (2012: 8). After the election win however, her grasp on her party, and the country, seemed absolute and in June 1987 a Mori Poll put the Conservatives rating at 50 per cent, the highest of her entire time as Prime Minister (<http://news.bbc.co.uk/>).

Second, 1987 comes at the beginning of a decade-long period which, for writers such as Toynbee (1993) and Forde (2001), saw the music press begin to radically fragment. The first publication of *Q* in October 1986 saw the introduction to the market of the 'New Tabloids', which focused on adult orientated pop and rock music. There was also an increasing tendency in the 'inkies' at this point to overtly champion the 'marginal' (such as the independent 'C86 movement') or emergent American hip hop and house music.⁶ Finally, ongoing shifts in *Smash Hits* itself saw it move far more to a 'pop, word sheet and poster' format.

Third, this all took place in what was a highly transformative year for pop music in the United Kingdom. Although they scored the year's best selling single, the outright dominance of the Stock, Aitken and Waterman production team would not begin in earnest until early 1988 and the 'new pop' acts of the early 1980s had by now all but disappeared. Wham! split in 1986 and in the same year Duran Duran and Spandau Ballet both released albums that

were an artistic and commercial disappointment.⁷ There appeared to be a sense, post Live Aid, that pop music had to be more substantial, to even contain a 'message'. McLeod defines this as 'personal expression' or 'seriousness', something that contrasts sharply with the "vapidity" of critically disfavoured pop acts' (2002: 102–03). This can be seen as inherent across 1986/87 in the rise of album orientated acts such as Peter Gabriel, REM, Sting and U2 alongside a new breed of more 'sophisticated' pop performers.

'Sophisti-pop' (Inskip and Soto 2007) is a term now used, retrospectively, to describe a collection of 'intelligent', lavishly produced British pop acts of the mid–late 1980s. These artists wrote their own material, toured extensively and had a wide-ranging fanbase in terms of age and class demographics. The term also has some overlap with 'White, Blue-Eyed Soul', which was used at the time. In 1987, the most visible of these acts were Aztec Camera, Curiosity Killed the Cat, Deacon Blue, Hue and Cry, Prefab Sprout, Swing Out Sister, Talk Talk and Wet Wet Wet. Their primary influences were acts such as Roxy Music, Japan, The Associates and the albums *Lexicon of Love* (1982) by ABC, *Cafe Bleu* (1984) by The Style Council and *Cupid and Psyche* '85 (1985) by Scritti Politti.

In the British pop charts of 1987, these acts sat alongside a scattering of performers from a disparate range of other genres: classic soul, synth-pop, hip hop, goth, euro-pop and early American house music. Mills suggestion that the initial point of *Smash Hits* was to function as a magazine version of *Top of the Pops*, i.e., that it would simply reflect what was in the charts at that given moment, is clearly very resonant here. However, as a result, the range of artists it covered could be startlingly diverse, unlike, for instance, the 'serious' music press whose content was often driven by the very narrow minded tastes of their writers. What becomes clear was that, first, whilst *Smash Hits* does indeed cover chart music, in 1987 it was

very difficult to refer to this as 'generic' chart pop and it is similarly tough to simply align such acts to the tastes of teenage girls.

For instance, from a short analysis of their the twenty-six cover stars, only eleven can be isolated as 'pure pop music' and these included artists such as Madonna and George Michael, Aha and Five Star, Bananarama and Pepsi and Shirley and the aforementioned emergence of Stock, Aitken and Waterman acts via Mel and Kim, Kylie Minogue and Rick Astley. At the very start of the year you also had Nick Berry, a then star of the BBC's *Eastenders*, symbolizing the later crossover between popular TV and pop music. In addition to this, you also see seven covers devoted to acts who fit the definition of 'sophisti-pop'. What is interesting, however, is the way in which the magazine frames a selection of these artists: two, Curiosity Killed The Cat and Wet Wet Wet, are positioned in the way in which boybands such as New Kids on the Block and Take That would later be sold to a teenage audience across the 1990s. But in the context of the music these acts made (and indeed, the breadth of their audience) this seems highly awkward. Completing the rest of the year are stars from the world of rock (U2 and Then Jericho), goth (The Cure and The Mission), metal (Bon Jovi), hip hop (Beastie Boys), indie/synth-pop (Depeche Mode) and TV (Phillip Schofield highlighting the beginning of the 'pan-media brand extension' highlighted earlier).

The content of the specific issue under scrutiny was in no way atypical of the period, containing seven interviews / features and a similar number of posters. There were also the usual lyrics, news / gossip pages, reviews, letters and RSVP (pen pal) sections. An analysis of these underlines the contradictory nature of *Smash Hits* at this point in its evolution and how it was appealing simultaneously to both young teenagers and older music fans.

The featured artists span a range of genres (goth cover stars The Mission are joined by alternative-country pioneers Lone Justice, prog-rock survivors Genesis and the 'sophisti-pop'

Figures 3 and 4: *Smash Hits sui generis* in 1987. On the left, an interview with goth act The Mission, on the right the alternative country act Lone Justice and SAW pop act Mel and Kim. Interestingly, the first two of these were interviewed on tour and also note the combination of interview and lyrics in Figure 4 ([scans taken from http://www.shanemaraais.net/smash-hits-magazine/smash-hits-25-march-7-april-1987/](http://www.shanemaraais.net/smash-hits-magazine/smash-hits-25-march-7-april-1987/)).

of Curiosity Killed the Cat, all alongside the purer pop of Mel and Kim and the prototype contemporary RnB of Janet Jackson). The letters page also contains discussion of the previous issues' article on Heavy Metal, much of it critical in tone and clearly written by older, male readers, whilst the RSVP / pen pal section consists almost entirely of very young contributors (the average age is 15, but the youngest writers are 11 and 12). There is also a very sustained level of advertising (of the issues' 70 pages, 26 are commercials of some kind) which is in itself seemingly simultaneously aimed at older rock fans (adverts for Bryan Adams, Spear of Destiny) and younger teens (Nat West youth banking, *Looks* and *Just Seventeen* magazines). Whilst the articles themselves are typical of the publication in that they are largely trivial, focusing on inane details, but with an ironic humour, the reviews are sometimes scathing ('this record proves beyond doubt that Grace Jones can't sing for toffee') whilst controversial lyrics (such as Prince's *Sign 'Ø the Times*) are reproduced without any critical dialogue.

Questions of readership and representation

The contradictory content of this issue raises the question of why *Smash Hits* has been simply positioned in line with teenage female readers. The answer to this is most visible through the magazines format, the lavishly produced, colour publications contained posters that conjure up the aforementioned 'culture of the bedroom', something immediately associated with young teenyboppers. However it also derives from the content of said posters and what they suggest about the authenticity and audience of the featured performers. As often, they would highly sexualize and objectify the youthful bodies of male popstars.

Smash Hits would lavishly display the sexualized male body in glorious technicolour. In the early 1980s, pin-ups such as John Taylor of Duran Duran (see Figure 2) would cement their reputation as 'most fanciable male' by appearing in provocative and objectifying shoots for the magazine. This positions *Smash Hits*, alongside other publications such as *The Face* and *Arena* (and films such as *Saturday Night Fever* (Badham, 1977) and *American Gigolo* (Schrader, 1980)), in being central to the shift in the sexualized representation of heterosexual masculinity in this period, something that simultaneously differentiated it from its competitors.⁸ Still, previous analyses of such representations in the 1980s have tended to focus on those titles created by Logan after he left *Smash Hits* in 1981.⁹ But *Smash Hits* itself has a role to play in the changing representation of masculinity and sexuality in this decade and also the renewed focus on female spectatorial viewing pleasures.¹⁰

Railton also suggests that such images 'stand alone: they are there to be looked at, not to illustrate more serious commentary', a comment which perhaps requires clarification. The period in which *Smash Hits* changed coincided with a new found freedom in the expression of hitherto 'deviant' practices in relation to lifestyle and sexuality in popular music. The

visual glamour of new romanticism is often linked to the early success of the magazine (Mills 2012: 14) and in its late 1980s peak *Smash Hits* would front the musical popularity of rave and club culture (having performers such as Mark Moore and Jazzy B as cover stars). Although somewhat chaste, in that they would refer to issues around sexuality and drug culture in a highly subtle way, such representations brought into the bedrooms of teenage consumers ideas around lifestyle, homosexuality and race that differed significantly from the white, family orientated and anti-queer attitude espoused by Thatcherite conservatism (see Robinson 2011).

Even so, *Smash Hits* has struggled to shake the perception that it was little more than a hypertext which simply facilitated teenage female consumption patterns in the vacuous, postmodern celebrity culture of MTV pop across the 1980s. In this sense, it is treated in the same way as those publications analysed by Wimmer (2014).¹¹ For whilst it undeniably influenced modern celebrity culture, it approached the topic in a radically different way to more contemporary examples of the form. In Dyer's breakdown of the star image, the magazine would effortlessly fit into the promotion of the performer / star 'through pin-ups, public appearances [...] interviews, biographies and coverage in the press of the stars doings and 'private-life' (2004: 3). Whilst *Smash Hits* adhered to this template, its satirical slant also served to undermine this system of celebrity. As Railton noted, it 'simultaneously constructs a 'star' system and undermines the very system it constructs' (2001: 328).

Why then, is *Smash Hits* not taken more seriously as a publication in this respect? Two key issues stand out. If we do read it as primarily a publication for teenage girls, as Wald (2002) eloquently surmises in her analysis of boy-bands, there is always a 'tone of mocking condescension [...] facilitated by a gendered hierarchy of 'high' and 'low' popular culture

that specifically devalues' such publications and the music therein. That is, it was not the *NME* and furthermore, it appeared to celebrate and embody Thatcherism in this period. As was noted earlier, for writers such as Reynolds it aided and abetted the export of British pop-acts, something which noticeably conflicted with the *NME*'s notorious and controversial celebration of left-wing politics.

Margaret Thatcher is a serious politician and she wants *your* vote [...]

So it is within this contextual debate around *Smash Hits*' readership, its representation of identity and its overall commercial intent, that we come to the interview with Margaret Thatcher in 1987.

Such an article may seem strange for a publication aimed primarily at a teenage, female readership and concerned merely with the 'trivialities' of popular music. Indeed, when editor Barry McIlheney initially contacted No.10 Downing Street to request the Prime Minister speak to the magazine, he was not expecting a positive response. His aim, he would say later, was to stress the positives (a suspected wider readership of around three million teenagers who would at the very least have an influence on how their parents voted), be officially turned down, then print the refusal letter as a satiric act of defiance.

However, McIlheney was clearly unfamiliar with the methods Thatcher, under the influence of Bernard Ingham, had been employing in the run up to the 1987 election in order to reach out to the wider electorate. As Price (2014) notes, following her successful visit to Moscow in March of that year, 'the softer side of Mrs Thatcher was once more carefully put on display alongside pictures that showed her strength of leadership'. She was pictured 'on the beach

with a cute spaniel' and appeared in a BBC documentary *An Englishwoman's Wardrobe* (Jackson, 1986), discussing 'the problems of choosing what best to wear' whilst expressing a 'fondness for Marks and Spencer underclothes'. She also engaged with the popular press, being interviewed by *Woman*, *Woman's Own* and *She*. Finally, she appeared on *Saturday Superstore* to air her opinions on a collection of contemporary pop promos. Unfortunately, the 'Central Office of Information transcript omitted her observations'.

Figures 5 and 6: *Smash Hits'* interview with Margaret Thatcher. Note the subtle use of imagery and visual style: the punk typeface and the exclamation and question marks, combined with the newspaper headlines ('recession claims more jobs') and images of aged popstars (scans accessed from <http://www.shanemarais.net/smash-hits-magazine/smash-hits-25-march-7-april-1987/>).

Price states that during her run of print interviews 'even *Smash Hits*' was included, suggesting that he does not consider the publication to be a politically viable outlet for Thatcher's opinions. But it was in fact not unusual for it to engage with overtly politicized content in this period. Although appearing to exist in an entirely separate sphere to publications like the *NME*, who by 1987 were under the influence of staff members affiliated to Red Wedge and overtly, some would say controversially, declaring their allegiance to Neil

Kinnock's Labour Party (Long 2012), the magazine was not entirely unused to introducing their young readership to current affairs. In the issue that featured Thatcher, Terence Trent D'Arby was asked a question about the PM's musical taste and in the gossip section, David Steel, then the co-leader of the Liberal / SDP Alliance, was mocked for his failed attempt to meet Mel and Kim. It is also notable that across 1987, 'sophisti-pop' acts such as Hue and Cry, Swing Out Sister and Wet Wet Wet would all make politicized comments in *Smash Hits* interviews (about Thatcher, the Iran / Iraq war and unemployment respectively). After the magazine's demise in 2006, former editor David Hepworth would also claim that they received a number of letters about the 1984–85 miners strike.

What *Smash Hits* did was subtly reference the political context in which the magazine was produced, but cloak any such references in the ironic wit that had become their trademark. They treated politics just the same way as pop music: underscoring its importance whilst simultaneously mocking its pretensions. The Thatcher interview is perhaps the most overt example of this and was conducted by Tom Hibbert, who would later work for *Q* and *The Observer*. Some of his questions are underarm pitches, and do arguably humanize her, but many challenged her on the Tories approach to Band Aid, the then highly visible AIDS crisis, drugs, youth unemployment and also why so many 'left-wing pop acts' wanted her out of No.10 (one Hibbert repeated after she initially dodged it).

Questions about her schooling allowed Thatcher to cloak her political ideology in nostalgia and stress the importance of strong but liberal parenting.¹² She even oddly pre-empted the work of Stacey (1994) by discussing the escapist nature of wartime Hollywood and the star system. In relation to pop music, Thatcher repeatedly stressed the idea that 'most young people rebel and then gradually they become more realistic', highlighting the momentary

nature of youth subcultural differentiation. She didn't directly address left-wing performers at all, preferring to discuss far older acts, but Hibbert did allow her to metaphorically hang herself in terms of credibility by saying the now notorious line 'Cliff Richard has done wonders'.¹³ Across the interview Thatcher is depicted as being rather stuffy and out of touch, calling music videos 'TV videos', even though Hibbert revealed that she had 'a young press officer to lend support on taxing youth-oriented questions' (2013).

Hibbert would later claim that Thatcher demonstrated 'an eagerness to please combined with a skill in evasion' (2013). On the more challenging issues, Thatcher proved herself to be a consummate professional by turning a question on Live Aid and her infamous televised row with Bob Geldof into a lecture on the small state, taxation and individualism¹⁴ and a question about unemployment, AIDS and heroin into statements about youth training schemes and the importance of family (this answer provoked a mocking ('??? – Ed') response).

Finally, for a publication that revelled in giving its interviewees patronizing nicknames,¹⁵ it would have been remiss for Hibbert not to mention Thatcher's most infamous moniker 'Margaret Thatcher, Milk Snatcher'. Again, this was carefully sidestepped, but taken as a whole, Hibbert's questions managed to position the Prime Minister as culturally out of touch, dismissive of youth culture (she may as well have said 'it's just a phase'), unwilling to directly address key issues, particularly where her government had been less than successful, and finally, it highlighted to younger readers that she was once best known for stealing milk from the mouths of schoolchildren.

Despite her responses attempting to turn the interview into a PPB, an analysis of the content therefore shows that *Smash Hits* did take the opportunity to gently mock Thatcher in the same

way that it gently mocked pop stars. It wasn't cruel, there was no 'Margaret on the guillotine', but it's tone and style, notably the punk referencing typeface, was, as Petridis would later say of the publication 'impudent, wry and occasionally merciless' (2006). It also showed that the magazine was willing to raise issues effecting young people and engage in a political dialogue that was being highlighted by certain pop acts of the time.

Conclusion

This article analysed what Shuker (2013) referred to as the 'teen glossies' of the British music press. Building on Hill's work around the earlier years of *Smash Hits* and Railton's analysis of its later period, it situated the publication's mid-late 80s commercial heyday in the context of 'high Thatcherism'.

What it discovered emphasizes a contradictory nature. Alex James once referred to *Smash Hits* as 'a blend of sophistication and stupidity' (2007) and this article aimed to extract the former, whilst still acknowledging the latter. It is undeniable that *Smash Hits* could be 'stupid' – it's ironic tone and the names it gave its interviewees are testament to that – but underneath this surface simplicity was a critical and satirical approach to popular music and its performers. Still, whilst it did acknowledge the wider social and political context of its time, it did so subtly, introducing its readers to issues around gender, race and sexuality without ever addressing them overtly. Similarly, a political discourse was present, but underdeveloped, reduced to a succession of ironic, sarcastic remarks.

Is this, though, reason to consider the publication Thatcherite? To read it, as Hill and Reynolds suggest, as a 'principal agent in the acquiescence of cultural consent to the wider political hegemony and the climate of aspiration' of the 1980s? It is clear that *Smash Hits*,

like MTV, existed to help pop stars sell records and that it did not contain the ideological purity of the *NME* in this period, but this does not equate to fully aligning itself with 'high Thatcherism'. In many ways the interviews conducted with Thatcher demonstrated that: she was treated with the same impudence as any other 'performer' whose 'act' has been rigorously stage managed.

It was highlighted that in terms of methods, the predominant issue with undertaking textual, content analysis of this type was the sheer scope of accessible primary material. This results, however, in several other avenues for research being available, be that around the representation of identity politics in the 1980s, or, in line with Hill and Railton, studies of its earlier publications or later demise.

For the contradictions of *Smash Hits* in the 1980s define a mid-period transition. Having struggled through the relative pop-wasteland of the early 1990s, the magazine found its feet again with the succession of boy and girl bands who dominated mid-90s chart music. However, its decline is often linked to the emergence of *Top of the Pops* magazine in this period: in many ways a more literal version of *Smash Hits*, in that it reflected even more precisely which acts were charting each week, in 1996 it fatally undermined the importance of its predecessor by 'naming' the Spice Girls. All of a sudden, *Smash Hits* was not the primary source for pop news and the gradual rise of online technologies, coupled with an increasing coverage of pop in the now widely available British news press, led to its eventual collapse in 2006 (perhaps unsurprisingly, *TOTP* aired for the final time in the same year).

Of course, teenage pop fandom did not die with *Smash Hits*, it's just that now it is primarily represented through the mass retweeting of messages related to acts such as One Direction.

Interestingly, the participatory nature of celebrity and pop fandom encouraged by the publication lives on in such forums, but we are certainly now a long way away from the ‘institutional aura’ of the printed music press. In all of its forms.

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Notes

¹ Examples include Blondie, The Clash, Elvis Costello (see image 1), Japan and The Skids.

² By this Mills is referring to the British television show that ran from 1964 to 2006, not its print hypertext.

³ He praised them for establishing ‘a very successful British industry: exporting, doing extremely well in overseas markets, generating a great deal of wealth and jobs – all the things I could ask’.

⁴ It is an opinion that existed outside of academic or historical accounts. In 1991, Richie Edwards of the Manic Street Preachers told the *NME* that: ‘*Smash Hits* is more effective in polluting minds than Goebbels ever was [...]’ (Anon. 2009).

⁵ Frith furthers this by assessing localized initiatives around the music industry that developed during Thatcher’s premiership. Initially using the example of Sheffield, he outlines how local (primarily Labour controlled) authorities installed a range of policies around recording facilities, live music venues / concert promotion and training or educational schemes. In doing so, he demonstrates how across the 1980s, ‘there was a burst of state intervention in music-making: popular music became the focus for both cultural and industrial policy’ (1993: 16)

⁶ This would in turn result in the gradual rise of the hip hop and dance press through publications such as *Hip Hop Connection* (1988–2009) and *Mixmag* (1983–present).

⁷ *Notorious* and *Through the Barricades*, respectively.

⁸ As Railton notes:

whereas publications such as *Melody Maker*, *NME*, *Q* or *Select* often publish pictures of artists, these are often only of the head, or of the head and upper body covered by an instrument. By contrast, pictures of both men and women that appear in *Smash Hits* [...] are often full-figure, standing or lying with legs splayed. Clothes may be pulled aside to reveal a bodily adornment such as a navel ring or a tattoo [...] or chests may be bared. (2001: 328)

⁹ Notably the study of *The Face* and *Arena* in Mort (1996), Nixon (1996) and Edwards (1997).

¹⁰ For instance Winship (1987), Radway (1983) and Hermes (1995~~7~~).

¹¹ Wimmer (2014) rails against the ignorance of female consumption patterns in her study of women's cinephilia in 1930s French fan magazines. She sees them as being culturally suppressed under the weight of more academic and masculinized writing on cinema which emerged in France two decades later. In a sense, publications such as *Smash Hits* now suffer the same fate, submerged by the masculine, 'authentic' authority of the 'inkies'.

¹² 'by the time we were six or seven we all knew how to read and write and we knew our arithmetic [...] parents try to give their children the things they didn't have'.

¹³ An analysis of the interview proves, however, that she did not tell *Smash Hits* that her favourite song was the capitalist ode 'How Much Is That Doggy in the Window'. That occurred at the Brit Awards three years later.

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But what fascinated me was this: it was not, 'Why doesn't the government give more?' but 'What can I do as a person?' That was his (Geldof's) approach. And after

all, if government took so much away from young people that they hadn't anything left to give, that wouldn't be much of a life.

¹⁵ One of the most memorable aspects of *Smash Hits* is the nicknames it gave certain stars.

Across the 1980s these included: The Hedge (U2's The Edge), Corky O'Reilly (Kylie Minogue), Snit (Sinnita), The Trout (Terence Trent D'Arby), Fab Macca Wacky thumbs aloft (Paul McCartney), and Kate 'Hello earth [...] hello trees [...] hello sky' Bush. It is rumoured that the final name in this list was not popular with the performer in question.