

**PUNK AESTHETICS IN INDEPENDENT "NEW
FOLK", 1990-2008**

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree nor has it been submitted as part of requirements for a degree except as fully acknowledged within the text.

I also certify that the thesis is all my own work. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

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Abstract

Various commentators on punk (e.g. Laing 1985, Frith 1986, Goshert 2000, Reynolds 2005, Webb 2007) have remarked upon an essence or attitude which is much more central to it than any aspects of musical style. Through the analysis of specific recordings as texts, this study aims to deliver on this idea by suggesting that there is an entire generation of musicians working in the independent sphere creating music that combines resonances of folk music with demonstrable punk aesthetics.

Given that the cultural formations of folk and punk share many rhetorics of authenticity – inclusivity, community, anti-establishment ideals and, to paraphrase Bannister (2006: xxvi) ‘technological dystopianism’ – it is perhaps not surprising that some successors of punk and hardcore, particularly in the U.S., would turn to folk after the commercialisation of grunge in the early 1990s. But beyond this, a historical survey of the roots of new folk leads us to the conclusion that the desire for spontaneity rather than perfection, for recorded artefacts which affirm music as a participatory process rather than a product to be consumed, is at least as old as recording technology itself. The ‘new folk’ of the last two decades often mythologises a pre-industrial past, even as it draws upon comparatively recent oppositional approaches to the recording as artefact that range from those of Bob Dylan to obscure outsider artists and lo-fi indie rockers.

This study offers a survey of new folk which is overdue – to date, new folk has been virtually ignored by the academic literature. It considers the tangled lineages that inform this indie genre, in the process suggesting new aspects of the history of rock music which stretch all the way back to Depression-era recordings in the shape of Harry Smith’s *Anthology of American Folk Music*. At the same time, it attempts to steer a middle course between cultural studies approaches to popular music which at times fail to directly address music at all, and musicological approaches which are at times in danger of abstracting minutiae until the broader frame is completely lost. By concentrating on three aspects of the recordings in question - vocal approach, a broad

consideration of sound (inclusive of production values and timbre), and structure as it pertains to both individual pieces and albums – this work hopes to offer a fresh way of reading popular music texts which deals specifically with the music without losing sight of its broader function and context.