

“And I shall never not return”: Philip Tagg, Liverpool, and the Paris Connection

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RESUMO

"A Diretoria da IASPM está triste ao saber do falecimento do membro fundador da IASPM e pioneiro dos estudos de música popular, Philip Tagg". Desde que a notícia foi divulgada, em 9 de maio de 2024, muitos de nós insistimos no fato de Philip ter defendido o estudo da música popular no meio acadêmico, ter lançado as bases para essa meta-disciplina como a conhecemos hoje e ter contribuído para trazer a musicologia para o primeiro plano. Este breve artigo presta uma homenagem a ele e compartilha memórias pessoais, relembrando seu papel no estabelecimento de estudos de música popular na França na virada dos anos 2000.

PALAVRAS-CHAVE:

Philip Tagg; *popular music studies*; *musiques populaires*; França.

ABSTRACT

"The IASPM Executive is saddened to hear of the passing of IASPM founding member and popular music studies pioneer, Philip Tagg." Since the news broke out on May 9, 2024, many of us insisted on Philip's championing the study of popular music in academia, his laying the groundwork for this meta-discipline as we know it today, and his contributing to bringing musicology to the fore of the latter. In this short article, I pay tribute to him by sharing personal memories, and recalling his role in establishing popular music studies in France at the turn of the 2000s.

KEYWORDS:

Philip Tagg; *popular music studies*; *musiques populaires*; France.

I first got to meet Philip Tagg in 1996–1997. At that time, I was in the early stages of writing a PhD thesis on the Beatles' sound at the Sorbonne. This thesis was to be the first French doctoral thesis to address popular music from a musicological perspective, and, to tell the truth, I did not know where to start. Until then, I had mainly been trained as a so-called "classical" musicologist. Having written an MA thesis on *Revolver* (1993), I was certainly aware of Mark Lewisohn (1990), William J. Dowling (1989), Tim Riley (1989), Hunter Davies (1968), and Philip Norman (1981), not to mention George Martin's autobiographies (1979; 1994), and his "Guide to Writing, Performing and Recording" (1983). This list of references, however, lacked the scholarly edge that might have rooted my research in a genuine academic tradition, be it nascent or well-established.

My supervisor, Danièle Pistone, was a renowned specialist of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century French music (Gabriel Fauré, Maurice Ravel, Claude Debussy). In other words, she felt as helpless as I did. For some strange reason, she was into the Internet long before I even knew what an e-mail address was. Worried about my slow progress, she had taken it upon herself to do a Yahoo! search with keywords that had led her to the homepage of the University of Liverpool's IPM (Institute of Popular Music). Following her advice, I wrote a letter explaining that I was looking for a musicologist who might help me with my research and sent it to the physical address she had found at the bottom of the page. A few days later, I received a reply from the IPM's secretary, who told me she had passed my letter on to the Institute's musicologist. This was how I first got in touch with Philip.

We began exchanging by fax, by telephone, and e-mail, then he invited me to spend a week in Liverpool in the spring of 1997. With the benefit of hindsight, it is no exaggeration to say that this stay marked a turning point in my doctoral journey. Thanks to Philip, I discovered a world I did not suspect to exist in academia. On my first day, he introduced me to established scholars like David Horn and Dave Laing, to younger scholars on the verge of a brilliant career like Sara Cohen, and he also put me in touch with students of his like Serge Lacasse, whose thesis on the evocative power of vocal staging in recorded rock music he was supervising (2000). More importantly, he granted me access to the IPM library, where I became aware of the extent of the research that had actually been carried out on "other musics" (Tagg and Clarida 2003, 21–2) in the English-speaking world.

In between those hour-long reading—and photocopying—sessions, we had several meetings in Philip's office on the first floor of the Roxby Building. The room was furnished with typical office furniture, but I still can see this postcard on the wall near his desk representing a punk with a thought bubble coming out of his head that said it all about his so English wit: "Too cool for school, too stupid for real life... maybe I'll start a band!" On the right-hand side was a cupboard where he kept copies and offprints of his many publications in suspension files. In one of these were an early version of "The Göteborg Connection" (1998), "Towards a Sign Typology of Music" (1992), and one of the few essays he had published in French, "La musicologie et la sémantique de la musique populaire" (1985), which he gave me to read as an introduction to some of his ideas about the semiotics of music. I did not know it yet, but I would come to realize over the years how influential his "interobjective comparison" method (1979, 76–9; 1982) had been while listening to presentations by the likes of Franco Fabbri and Alf Björnberg, who we would invite for special talks at the Sorbonne in the early 2010s (Björnberg 2013; Fabbri 2010). Finally, this drab room was where he made me understand what it truly meant to engage in doctoral research, drawing my attention to the work of another of his PhD students, Gary Tamlyn, who had been listening to "thousands of records" to address the "origins and development of snare backbeat and other accompanimental rhythms in rock 'n' roll" (1998).

On a more personal level, I have fond memories of my dining with Philip in his Liverpool apartment. We first shared a bottle of wine I had brought from France listening to an album by Röda Kapellet, one of the progressive rock bands he used to perform with when he lived in Sweden (figure 1). Then he took me to his kitchen and showed me how to cook a typical English meal with veal chops, mint sauce, and gravy ("this is how my grandmother cooked it"). After having spent the dinner drawing bold parallels between flavors and sound treatment techniques such as double tracking, flanging, phasing, and slap echo, we went back to his living room so that he could have a look at the few pages I had already written. At that point, I was mainly concerned with justifying my focus on sound on the grounds that the Beatles' formative years had been shaped by a particular relationship to the recorded medium. As Paul McCartney put it, "records were the main objective. That was what we bought, that was what we dealt in. That was the currency of music: records. That's where we got our repertoire from" (quoted in Lewisohn 1988, 6). Basically, my point was that this had led the band to develop an approach to recording that epitomized their belonging to what I

called a "phonographic tradition. And, in such a tradition, analyzing the sound of a band [came] down to addressing the concept of style" (Julien 1998, 27, 342–5).

Figure 1: *Röda Kapellet: Party Music* (1976)¹



Source: Discogs n.d.

Philip skimmed through the pages, looked over his glasses, then he stood up, went to his bookshelves, and began fondling the bindings with his fingers. After a couple of minutes, he took out Richard Middleton's *Studying Popular Music* (1990), which he told me was a must-read for all his students ("some parts might be difficult, but this is actually the best book for anyone studying popular music"). Among the other books he held out to me were Steve Jones's *Rock Formation* (1992), Wilfrid Mellers's *Twilight of the Gods* (1973), Sheila Whiteley's *The Space Between the Notes* (1992), and the first edition of Allan Moore's *Rock: The Primary Text* (1993). I remember, as if it were yesterday, this volume with its red and blue cover, and those words, on page 32, that resonated so deeply with me:

The primary medium of transmission of music throughout the European art tradition is and always has been stave notation. The primary medium of transmission of rock, since at least mid-1950s' rock 'n' roll, has been the recording. The distinction is fundamental. European art music is performed with reference to a pre-existent score, which is accepted as an encoded

¹ Philip stands on the right-hand side of the picture.

version of the sounds intended by the composer. The rock score, where one exists, is actually a transcription of what has already been performed and produced. Therefore, although the analysis of art music is, normally, the analysis of a score, an analysis of rock cannot follow the same procedure. It must refer to the primary text, which is, in that case, what is heard. (Moore 1993, 32)

Back then, we were a handful of French doctoral students aiming to specialize in a music whose name was anything but consensual in our home country. G r me Guibert and the people who were just about to launch *Copyright Volume!* used institutional terms such as *musiques actuelles* and *musiques amplifi es* (Seteun 2002). Catherine Rudent—who was also on her way to completing a PhD at the Sorbonne—would soon be advocating for *musiques populaires modernes* (1998). As for me, I discovered this evening that I was in line with Allan Moore’s use of “rock” to name a music in which sound, that was “initially secondary,” had become one of the “prime carriers of musical ‘meaning’” (1993, 33).

Resuming a conversation we had had in his office the day before, Philip insisted that I should try and articulate these ideas within the broader concept of popular music. Being a true polyglot, he was of course aware of the problems caused by the term *musique[s] populaire[s]* in French—as early as 1979, he had pointed in the first pages of his PhD that “Popular music as a term should not be confused with *musiques populaires* or *musica popular*, both of which are translated as ‘folk music.’” (23) Yet in the wake of the creation of IASPM (The Association for the Study of *Popular Music*) and the launch of the journal, *Popular Music* (both of which he contributed to in the early 1980s), he was also concerned with establishing a global network of scholars who would identify themselves with a term whose meaning was already well established in the English-speaking world (Tagg 1979, 20–32; Middleton 1981; Middleton and Horn 1981; Hamm 1982). In this sense, he was certainly instrumental in the first generation of French popular music scholars’ adopting, at the turn of the 2000s, the now common expression “*musiques populaires* in the sense of popular music” to define the musical object that brought them together.

It has been almost thirty years since this evening when Philip planted those seeds in my mind—thirty years during which our paths crossed again in Italy, in Britain, and then again at the Sorbonne, where I invited him, fifteen years after my viva, to give a three-hour presentation on the “Scotch snap” in April 2014. I never felt the urge to listen to Swedish progressive rock again, but I am still using his grandmother’s gravy recipe. And I am also

still referring to his work in my research and teaching, especially when it comes to explaining my students the reasons for this French turn of phrase, "*musiques populaires au sens de* popular music," or whenever I am addressing the history and early developments of popular music studies on a global scale. As Apollinaire writes in *Alcools*,

We hurry since everything hurries
And I shall never not return
Memories are all archaic horns
Silenced by the wind (2012, 159)

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