

# **POPULAR MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY BULGARIA**

## **EMERALD STUDIES IN ALTERNATIVITY AND MARGINALIZATION**

Series Editors: Samantha Holland, Leeds Beckett University, UK and  
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There is growing interest in work on transgression, liminality, and sub-cultural capital within cultural studies, sociology, and the social sciences more broadly. However, there is a lack of understanding of the problem of alternativity: what it means to be alternative in culture and society in modernity. What 'alternative' looks like is often left unexplored. The alternative is either assumed unproblematically, or stands in for some other form of social and cultural exclusion.

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# POPULAR MUSIC IN CONTEMPORARY BULGARIA: AT THE CROSSROADS

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

I dedicate this book – my first monograph – to my incredibly inspirational rock'n'roll father Chavdar Draganov and to my special, artistic, and caring mother Svetlana Bogdanova. Thank you both for the encouragement, support, love, and devotion which have enabled my creative and professional practices, ambitions, and confidence.

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# Contents

Acknowledgements	<i>ix</i>
<b>Introduction</b>	<i>1</i>
1.1. Setting the Scene: Terminology and Research Objectives	<i>3</i>
1.2. An Outline	<i>6</i>
<b>Chapter 1 Critical Themes in the Cosmopolitan Field of Popular Music</b>	<i>9</i>
1.1. A Space of Transformation: Studying Popular Music	<i>9</i>
1.2. Place as Context	<i>22</i>
1.3. Chapter Summary	<i>37</i>
<b>Chapter 2 Methodological Reflections</b>	<i>39</i>
2.1. Overview	<i>39</i>
2.2. ‘Get the Seats of Your Pants Dirty in Research!’ Collecting Data in the Field	<i>43</i>
2.3. From Data Analysis to Interpretation	<i>52</i>
2.4. Chapter Summary	<i>59</i>
<b>Chapter 3 Trajectories of Emergence: Mapping Out the Post-communist Popular Music Field</b>	<i>61</i>
3.1. Amorphousness vs Structure	<i>61</i>
3.2. Popular Music ‘Power Relations’	<i>76</i>
3.3. Chapter Summary	<i>96</i>
<b>Chapter 4 The Soundtrack of Transition: Exploring the Cultural Politics of Rock and Pop-folk</b>	<i>99</i>
4.1. Music and Change: Rock, Post-punk and Protest	<i>100</i>
4.2. Pop-folk as the ‘apple of discord’ and a Product of Transition	<i>122</i>
4.3. Chapter Summary	<i>136</i>

<b>Chapter 5 Popular Music on the Periphery of Europe: Negotiating Perceptions of the ‘Global’ and the ‘Local’</b>	<i>139</i>
5.1. Folklore, Language, and Identity in Popular Music	<i>140</i>
5.2. Imagining Place: Bulgarian Music and Balkanism	<i>162</i>
5.3. Chapter Summary	<i>178</i>
<b>Chapter 6 Popular Music at the Crossroads: A Summary of Leitmotifs</b>	<i>181</i>
6.1. ‘The Crossroads’ as a Unifying Concept	<i>181</i>
6.2. Bulgarian Popular Music from Hypercontrol to Fluidity	<i>182</i>
6.3. Power Relations, Majors, and ‘Locals’	<i>183</i>
6.4. Rock Music Alternativity, Resistance, and Continuities	<i>185</i>
6.5. Commercialising the Crossroads of Identity: Bulgarian Pop-folk	<i>187</i>
6.6. Folklore in Contemporary Popular Music	<i>189</i>
6.7. Language and Symbolic Dialogue in Popular Music	<i>190</i>
6.8. ‘Balkanism’: Designating Marginalisation	<i>191</i>
6.9. Reflections on Research Methodology and Continuity	<i>193</i>
Bibliography	<i>197</i>
Index	<i>231</i>

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# Introduction

Popular music operates within a web of complex relations of social, cultural, and political contexts. Studying the processes and infrastructures of music creation and articulation in contemporary Bulgaria, I present in this book qualitative findings relevant to the academic disciplines of media and cultural studies, popular music studies, cultural sociology, and youth studies. To be able to do so, I have accessed detailed empirical data by employing an inductive methodological approach, ethnographic strategies in interviews and observations, and empathetic relationships of trust with participants, who are music artists, producers, critics, business figures, copyright specialists, and young audiences. Insight into multiple positions has constructed an 'ethnographic mosaic', allowing for both theoretical interpretation and 'voicing' of the field (Blackman, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 1997).

I am interested in developing the metaphor of the 'crossroads', to use conceptually in describing the realities of a 'cultural field' (Bourdieu, 1984), particularly Bulgarian popular music. The book suggests that the local music sector is characterised by the notions of amorphousness, fluidity, and marginalisation, rather than by clearly defined structures, especially as it has developed amidst the prolonged transitions that followed a repressive communist regime. Popular music, especially scenes broadly associated with the rock spectrum, have developed a symbiotic relationship with struggle for change, protest, and resistance. At the same time, the new market environment has created opportunities for popular music, such as the pop-folk genre, to form an entertainment business monetising on standardised and formulaic hypersexual content. The book seeks to demonstrate that contemporary Bulgarian popular music asserts local specificities but operates through the expressive tools of a global dialogical platform, where folklore references and language are strategic markers of identity (Levy, 2005). A crossroad between East and West, the Balkans, where Bulgaria is situated, is a melting pot of music traditions, but is also framed as pathologically different, peripheral 'Other' within Europe (Todorova, 2009). Exploring the notion of Balkanism, the book suggests that an internalised negative stereotype adds tacit complexities to the participation of Bulgarian popular music in the globalised cultural exchange.

While this book is informed by research which took place in Bulgaria and makes statements directly linked to the fieldwork, it also presents discussions, methodological reflections, and findings relevant to the broader, cosmopolitan

## 2 *Popular Music in Contemporary Bulgaria*

field of studying popular music. For example, the relationship between popular music and the social, political, and historical contexts of place are central to understanding the processes of creation and articulation of cultural meanings. These discussions also facilitate the interpretation of the mechanisms of cultural translation within contemporary popular music, which enable the symbiosis of globalised characteristics and local specificity in popular music. Furthermore, this book contributes to the ‘tradition’ of interpreting popular music as a transformation, rather than rigid phenomenon, as it proposes that the notion of the ‘crossroads’ can be useful in studying how popular music interacts with social, political, and economic change; the complexities of incorporating globally recognisable and locally derived markers of meaning; and the relationships between cultural concepts of centrality and peripherality. The notion of the ‘crossroads’ is well known within the histories of popular music. In his ‘Cross Road Blues’ (1937), Delta blues musician Robert Johnson famously sang about a cathartic, soul-sinking experience at the crossroad, where the protagonist is at a liminal space looking ‘East and West’ for a merciful resolution.

In this book, I explore the conceptual device of ‘the crossroads’ as a metaphor to identify multiple levels of change and struggle within popular music, particularly in the context of contemporary Bulgaria. The crossroads have rich connotations within popular music and particularly in blues. They are the unearthly places where the blues protagonist meets ‘the devil’ who questions the very nature of their soul. This metaphor is useful to this book, because popular music in Bulgaria and beyond the specificity of the fieldwork focus, stands at the crossroads too, though in ways different to those described in blues. The crossroads of Bulgarian popular music are both a symbol of possible change and a reality where opportunity and uncertainty intertwine. They are embodied in the fluid ways in which popular music is created and articulated. The same transitionality defines broader contexts – social, political, and cultural – within which Bulgarian popular music operates. The music itself, in its dialogic nature, is also a crossroad, where diverse cultural influences meet and interact.

In the book, the crossroads are found to be a near-permanent rather than an ephemeral state of being. The focus is on the contemporary cultural and structural characteristics of the environment in which popular music operates and how they have evolved under the influence of the democratic transitions that followed Bulgaria’s communist regime. The study addresses a variety of genres in popular music including rock, post-punk, and pop-folk. Embracing my research position of a critical insider – a Bulgarian and musician who has grown up experiencing post-communist transitions – this study has employed a qualitative ethnographic approach incorporating interviews and observations. The book presents findings derived from accessing diverse positions towards the studied popular music field, including those of 32 interviewed artists, producers, business figures, critics and 135 young audience members who took part in an open-ended questionnaire. The intensive phase of the fieldwork in Bulgaria took place in 2013 and 2014 and has been updated regularly since, during my trips home, which often revolves around musical experiences. This research is itself a crossroad, where different academic disciplines intersect as evident from the rest

of the Introduction chapter which sets out the focus and aims of the book and outlines its structure and chapters.

## **I.1. Setting the Scene: Terminology and Research Objectives**

In this section, I address key terms, concepts, research aims and objectives that act as guidelines to my study of popular music and its Bulgarian contexts for creation and articulation.

Popular music, the category upon which my research has focused, is a phenomenon which has received varying definitions across literature and research and is understood as both an economic product and a set of cultural meanings (Shuker, 2002). While research in popular music has focused on diverse cultural phenomena using a spectrum of critical approaches, there is an overall discourse of studying popular in relation to the profound tensions between commerce and creativity. This relates to the key works of cultural theorist Theodor Adorno, who outlined debates around artificiality and authenticity, or the interests of industries in ‘opposition’ to popular music artistic diversity. Here, popular music is treated as an umbrella term which includes diverse genres such as rock, pop, dance, hip-hop, and so on, and is distanced from ‘classical’, folklore or ‘academic’ music, while at the same time capable of drawing some inspiration and ideas from them. In the context of this study, popular music is an inclusive rather than a ‘populist’ term that relates only to maximum mass appeal; commercial success resides outside the criteria for subjecting a particular style to exploration (Frith, 1996, p. 15). A ‘populist’, or ‘positivist’, approach to popular music is quantitative and tied to indicators such as sales and generated profit (Middleton, 1990). It neglects the qualitative aspects to popular music as a heterogeneous platform for channelling diverse sets of meanings, whose products allow for multiple interpretations in relation to the specificities of individual and social contexts (DeNora, 2000, p. 20; Middleton, 1990, p. 33). Furthermore, an approach focused solely on economic aspects devalues the innovative, cultural, and social potentials of popular music.

An essentialist, or single definition of the character of popular music would be detrimental to the understanding of its complexities. For Frith, popular music practices can take place in mundane situations but can also acquire a revolutionary significance; resistance shifts its meanings with circumstance as would popular music (Frith, 1996, p. 20). To Stuart Hall, popular culture, in which popular music participates, ‘is neither, in a ‘pure’ sense, the popular traditions of resistance [...] nor is it the forms which are superimposed on and over them. It is the ground on which transformations are worked’ (Hall, 1981, p. 228). Therefore, this study seeks to embrace the sophisticated complexity of popular music as a ‘transformative’ cultural field where multiple factors interplay to deliver diversity (Bourdieu, 1984). According to Middleton, ‘no longer can we draw a distinction between popular and traditional, between serious and popular – no longer (is popular music) a residual category, referring to what’s left over, after art and

#### 4 *Popular Music in Contemporary Bulgaria*

folk are excluded' (Middleton, 1990, p. 4). Rather, popular music is a diverse field that communicates meanings and constructs identities.

This research seeks to present new insights in relation to the creation and articulation of popular music in contemporary Bulgaria and, through those, produce discussions relevant to the broader field of studying popular music and the cultural practices it accommodates for. Therefore, it is key to discuss the meanings invested in the two processes – creation and articulation. Within the book, popular music creation is considered to consist of practices and structures directly involved with the production of music and the formation of its cultural connotations (Hesmondhalgh, 2012, p. 12). It relates to the artistic processes of generating new musical material, which includes aspects such as music composition, lyrics writing, and the construction of styles attached to music products. Through ethnographic strategies, the study has accessed the positions of people actively involved with popular music production such as artists, composers, performers, lyrics writers, music producers, executive producers, and those at strategic management positions in music labels (Rutter, 2011). While focusing on music professionals, when carrying out the fieldwork, I have also recognised the significance of popular music audiences as producers of meaning.

My study considers the creation of popular music to exist in a symbiotic relationship to its articulation. For Stuart Hall, articulation is the form of connection that can make a unity between different elements under certain conditions (1996, pp. 6–17). Academics such as Middleton (1990), Grossberg, Nelson, and Treichler (1992), and Negus (1996) highlight that studying popular music should go beyond messages from producers to consumers and should instead entail examining processes of 'articulation' in which particular sounds have to seek out, be sought by and connect with specific audiences. The concept of articulation has been central to academic explorations concerned with the relationships between popular music and cultural practices, meanings, and styles (Hesmondhalgh, 2007b, p. 37, 2007c). Among the notable examples are the 'classic' *Resistance through Rituals* (Hall & Jefferson, 1975), *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (Hebdige, 1979) and Middleton's *Studying Popular Music* (1990). In the contexts of this research, articulation is focused on the creation of connections between the music product and its audiences. Throughout the book, it is suggested that articulation is a holistic term which covers processes of dissemination, popularisation, and intermediation of music through diverse music media platforms and cultural production outlets. In the fieldwork, different aspects to popular music articulation have been represented by participants involved with music media and their management, but also with music content monetisation through the mechanisms of copyright management.

The book argues that the exploration of contexts which define the creation and articulation of popular music in contemporary Bulgaria can act as a lens for observing the processes and issues that define broader social realms. Rather than an ephemeral form of 'entertainment', popular music is a socio-cultural force, whether this is measured in the economic terms of wealth creation, employment, and investment as well as in the anthropological terms of its importance for our everyday lives, identities and patterns of sociability (Frith, 2000a, p. 291).

Within popular music, as in other areas of culture and media production, an ‘underlying hegemonic dynamic’ can be recognised (Curran & Park, 2000, p. 18). This dynamic has to do with the consolidation of a centre-periphery model, where the economically prominent popular music industries and related cultures, such as those in the US and the UK, are treated as ‘elite’; whilst others, like those of Eastern Europe and the Balkans, remain understudied (Pilkington et al., 2002). It would be an exaggeration to argue that Bulgarian popular music has been neglected by academic interest: for instance, themes such as the cultural connotations of the pop-folk genre and the participation of Balkan and Bulgarian folklore music traditions in contemporary popular music have been studied by both Bulgarian and international scholars such as Claire Levy (2004, 2007, 2012a, 2012b), Rosemary Stelova (1990, 1999, 2008), Ventsislav Dimov (2001, 2010), Donna Buchanan (1995, 2007, 2012), Carol Silverman (1983, 2004, 2007, 2011), and Timothy Rice (1980, 1994, 2004). At the same time, there is an ongoing necessity for drawing a more comprehensive picture of the environment, within which popular music is created in contemporary Bulgaria. The book aims to contextualise the field of Bulgarian popular music as it identifies and critically assesses its features and relates them to the traditional models, tendencies, and issues experienced across the perceived ‘global’ music industries. Popular music is interpreted as a platform where local and global identities interact in ways which contain powerful metaphors of cultural exchange. This book, therefore, alludes to and extends the notion of cultural translation (Asad, 1986, pp. 141–143; Bhabha, 2000, pp. 304–305; Maitland, 2017), emerging from disciplines such as anthropology and applied linguistics, which has been used to refer to the processes that inform how a set of cultural markers and practices travel from their perceived spaces of origination to become incorporated into new environments. More specifically, this research accesses insight into contextual factors which make a popular music style and its related cultural practices a relevant platform for projecting locally informed, yet outward-looking meanings.

To pursue an in-depth exploration of Bulgarian popular music, the book has employed qualitative research methods and grounded theory. Access to a variety of viewpoints has been enabled through participatory interviews and observations. As a researcher who is also a guitarist and singer, I have been able to embrace a critical insider position has enabled me to build empathetic forms of contact with a diverse range of musicians, producers, music journalists, copyright specialists and audiences (Blackman, 2007, p. 699). The research aims at developing an emergent language of description derived from qualitative and ethnographic data. These terms are explored in subsequent chapters where they are key to the interpretation of data and the articulation of findings.

The unifying concept and terminological foundation at which this research has arrived relates to the conceptually employed metaphor of the ‘crossroads’ which, throughout the book, describes the different levels of transitionality, within which popular music operates in Bulgaria. In popular music, the ‘crossroads’ are associated with blues music where they construct a myth of liminality, mystery, danger, and catharsis. The blues crossroads are famously associated

## 6 *Popular Music in Contemporary Bulgaria*

with Robert Johnson's 'Cross Road Blues', covered and referenced by artists including Jimi Hendrix, Cream, The Doors and Tracy Chapman. The Balkans, where Bulgaria is situated, are also a crossroad, right on the edge of Europe, where East meets West. This makes them a melting pot of influences, which are articulated through artistic dialogue, but which also raise issues about the complexity of identities. The crossroads, with Bulgarian popular music, are interpreted as a permanent rather than a temporary state, a persistent order rather than an exception (Kristeva, 1994, 2014). The symbol of the crossroads corresponds to the turbulent processes of struggle and change which have historically defined the Balkan region (Todorova, 2009). The book identifies three key levels of crossroad-like context, within which popular music in contemporary Bulgaria operates. The first one is concerned with the characteristics of the music sector, the second – with the influence of post-communist transitions on the politics of music meaning and practice, and the third focuses on Bulgarian popular music in relation to cultural interactions and translations between the perceived global and local.

### **1.2. An Outline**

The current section introduces the rest of the chapters, of which the book consists.

'Critical Themes in the Cosmopolitan Field of Popular Music' examines the key areas of debate and conceptual devices in popular music research, outlining the spaces of contribution to this research. It addresses the transformational character of the popular music field alongside the persistent dichotomy around creativity and commerce which informs critical approaches to cultural production. The chapter also provides background for the research findings through exploring the specific historic and contemporary contexts for popular music in Bulgaria.

'Methodological Reflections' focusses on the research design and the processes of fieldwork data collection, analysis and interpretation. The chapter presents a set of ethnography-related methodological opportunities which can be applicable beyond the context of my study. The concept of an ethnographic 'mosaic' incorporating diverse participant voices and positions is central to the fieldwork that informs this chapter. (Blackman, 2010; Denzin & Lincoln, 1997). This is the fabric for constructing a thick description (Geertz, 1973) which enables the development of grounded theory based on empirical data (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The aim of my methodological reflections is to employ the 'ethnographic imagination' (Atkinson, 1990) to demonstrate how my research position promoted and sustained empathy with research participants, which offered space for detail and nuance to emerge in the study.

The following three chapters articulate issues and arguments emerging from empirical data. The interpretation of data is organised within the three chapters

so that they structurally embody the notion of three key levels of crossroad-like contexts for Bulgarian popular music. The first empirical chapter is focused on the characteristics of the local popular music sector, while the second is concerned with the cultural influences of post-communist transitions, and the third examines the cultural context of the crossroads, where global and local identities interact.

‘Trajectories of Emergence: Mapping Out the Post-communist Popular Music Field’ presents insights into how local contexts inform the formation of cultural fields production. It focuses on the features of the Bulgarian popular music sector, outlining its key characteristics and comparing them to the suggested models representing the perceived ‘global’ music industries. It is argued that it is amorphousness and fluidity rather than the structure that define the Bulgarian popular music sector. The chapter explores the implications of the marginalisation of Bulgarian music within the local music media platforms, the lack of effective politics for the development of cultural production, and the copyright management sphere as a metaphor for the economic interests affecting the production and articulation of music. This chapter sets out the argument that the Bulgarian popular music sector lacks tradition and stability because of its roots in post-communist transition.

‘The Soundtrack of Transition: Exploring the Cultural Politics of Rock and Pop-folk’ examines the ways in which popular music has evolved in the contexts of protest and post-communist transitions. Drawing on observations and participation in recent demonstrations and campaigns for reform, this chapter discusses how popular music can take on an active role in social processes and the formulation of a culture of critique, articulated through rituals of resistance (Hall & Jefferson, 2006, pp. vii–xxxiii). It is argued that genres associated with the holistic spectrum of rock music and the local post-punk scenes have become inseparably bound to the notion of rebellion and struggle for social change in Bulgaria. At the same time, the new market environment in post-communist Bulgaria has allowed for framing popular music as an entertainment business: an approach employed by the commercial local genre of pop-folk, which the chapter approaches critically.

‘Popular Music on the Periphery of Europe: Negotiating Perceptions of the ‘global’ and the ‘local’” suggests that folklore heritage and the use of Bulgarian language are significant markers of local identity within contemporary music. Simultaneously, Bulgarian popular music seeks to attain universality through the adoption of internationally recognised musical genres and through using the English language as a platform for participating in a desired cultural dialogue. This chapter articulates the implications of Bulgarian popular music’s positioning on the periphery of the cultural constructs of the East and the West (Todorova, 2009). It is suggested that the creation and internalisation of a regional stereotype adds tacit complexity to Bulgarian popular music.

## 8 *Popular Music in Contemporary Bulgaria*

'Popular Music at the Crossroads: A Summary of Leitmotifs' brings together the findings presented by this book to describe their inter-relatedness, facilitated by the crossroads as a unifying concept. The chapter discusses the fluid character of the local Bulgarian popular music sector, the power relations which define its dynamics, the impact of post-communist transitions on music meanings, and the complexities that derive from Bulgaria's position between the cultural constructs of the East and West. Highlighting the value of strategic methodological choices, this chapter discusses the inter-disciplinary implications of the findings from the research.