

“Once the word ‘sound’ was in the title, it opened up a kind of door”: A Conversation with Eric Weisbard

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Abstract

“Eric Weisbard” by Flickr user Joe Mabel undre Creative Commons 2.0 License Last March, I attended the first Experience Music Project (EMP) Pop Conference in New York City. (See my pre-conference round-up for SO!, and my blog post for IASPM-US on my post-conference impressions.) Post-conference, I had the opportunity to interview Eric Weisbard, co-founder and organizer of EMP Pop Conference.

Keywords

Music (Subfield), American Studies, Article, Conferences, Interview, Listening

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Last March, I attended the first Experience Music Project (EMP) Pop Conference in New York City. (See my [pre-conference round-up for SOI](#), and my blog post for IASPM-US [on my post-conference impressions](#).) Post-conference, I had the opportunity to interview Eric Weisbard, co-founder and organizer of EMP Pop Conference. One late March morning, we talked via phone about the story behind Pop Con, rock critics and academics, and the intersection of Sound Studies and Popular Music Studies.

Weisbard is currently [a professor at the University of Alabama’s American Studies department](#). In addition to organizing Pop Con, he is also the Vice President of the [International Association for the Study of Popular Music \(US Branch\)](#) and Associate Editor of the [Journal of Popular Music Studies](#). He has also edited three collections of essays drawn from Pop Con presentations: *This Is Pop: In Search of the Elusive at Experience Music Project* (2004), *Listen Again: A Momentary History of Pop Music* (2007), and *Pop When the World Falls Apart: Music in the Shadow of Doubt* (2012).

In 2001, Weisbard was invited, along with his wife (rock critic and journalist [Ann Powers](#)), by the [Experience Music Project Museum](#) in Seattle to organize their first rock music conference. “I was a grad-school-dropout turned New-York-media-rock-critic-guy” Weisbard explained, “and when I was asked to work on a conference my one framing idea was we will mix academics and non-academics.” The conference has been going strong for ten years now, and has expanded from Seattle to Los Angeles and, this year, New York City.

Part of Weisbard’s approach to Pop Con is rooted in his move from self-declared “grad-school-dropout” to music editor at [The Village Voice](#) and [SPIN](#). Weisbard created the well-known *Village Voice* column “[Sound of the City](#),” which he admits was inspired by Charlie Gillet’s [1970 book The Sound of the City](#). (Gillet’s book also inspired the theme of this year’s conference.) Weisbard saw in the conference a place where academics and non-academics alike could converse together about music. He pointed out, “this is a place where there’s room for enthusiasm, for intellectual work, but we call it a pop conference; we won’t put barriers to the ability of the ordinary person to come and put something out. The last few years it’s become a free conference, an important step to making it accessible and not just for academics.”

Considering the location of the conference, I asked him what the soundscape of this year’s Pop Con sounded like to him, in retrospect. Three things stood out to Weisbard: the collision of cultures in New York City’s soundscape, the sound of media (embodied in the voices present at the conference), and the music that came from the conference rooms. Weisbard reflected:



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“For me, I might point to three things: the most familiar and most cliché is the cultural collision side of the New York City soundscape. You’d have a conference panel at 905/907 [at the Kimmel Center, where the conference was held]; every time I was there I’d hear music from below [....] Another aspect, which is more specific and maybe undertheorized, is the sound of media. I don’t mean media as abstract tools for disseminating information but media in terms of people who have to say clever things on a regular basis and who have to use words all the time. To me, that’s a very particular kind of sound. One of the things that’s interesting of being in New York, and having the non-academic side of the conference (which had been ebbing and is suddenly coming back full swing) is that from academics to journalists to people in the business, [it] was a loud version of my sonic memory of being a media guy in New York. Media chatter, a kind of chatter that’s loudest in New York. New York allows you to be face to face with people all the time [....] Number three is how music itself floated through the other two realms. You might hear a song, as an example, or one night I saw vaudeville songs of the bowery, a late night offering. [This could be in reference to [Poor Baby Bree’s presentation](#) during the conference.–Ed.] We’re not a music conference, we are a music writing conference, but nonetheless music is at the core. That would be third thing; typically you listen to music at a conference, at home, in car, and there are all more directly ways of listening to music. Music permeated things but at intervals. It’s appearance was not predictable. You didn’t know where it would pop up.”

Yes, music was everywhere, and so was sound. The title of this year’s conference opened up the conversation to Sound Studies Scholars. Weisbard pointed out, “when we came up with the theme, which is a riff on Charlie Gillett’s line on “the sound of the city,” we recast it as ‘Sounds of the City,’ in keeping with what we’ve always wanted to do at the conference, which is emphasize different

kinds of music. In an interesting way, once the word ‘sound’ was in the title, it opened up a kind of door: in exactly the same way that being in New York we think about the city, when you think about cities you think about sound.”

From the beginning of the interview, Weisbard explained that he was still trying to understand what Sound Studies comprises and where it intersects with Popular Music Studies. More importantly, Weisbard pointed out that some may talk about Sound Studies to avoid associating with Popular Music Studies, which may point to a tension between the fields: “My biggest concern about the phrase ‘Sound Studies’ is that it is a defensive way for critics who think that if they talk about ‘Popular Music Studies,’ they won’t sound as serious.” Weisbard acknowledged that these questions of legitimacy have plagued Popular Music Studies for a while.

When I asked Weisbard about what Sound Studies can learn from Popular Music Studies, he admitted that he still didn’t have a clear grasp of Sound Studies to be able to offer a strong opinion. However, he shared an example of what he thought was a strong contribution to the field that was, also, accessible to people outside of the field: “The latest pop music collection, *Pop When The World Falls Apart*, has an essay from [Martin Daughtry](#) on listening as it’s undertaken by soldiers in Iraq. That was a presentation. When I saw the presentation as a 20-minute talk, I remember feeling more moved than any presentation on music I had ever heard. That’s where I feel like Sound Studies work can be as satisfying as any work on music [...] Daughtry wrote with a sense of almost confronting something terrifying, while trying to understand how people listen.”

The tension between the academic and the popular is something Weisbard grapples with in his own work. (He stated, “Anything that’s a purely academic version of how to present work is flawed and has to be challenged”). At the moment he is working on a book on commercial radio formats. He describes it as such: “I’m interested in how formatting music (different from genres) creates parallel mainstreams. I’m interested in how every button can represent a different construction of the middle.” For Weisbard, his academic work and the work he does as a rock critic bleed into one another. “It’s about using the rock critic’s ability to enjoy cultural weirdness” he said, “and the historian’s tendency to keep on digging and get to the bottom of it. I definitely see my work in conversation with people who are grappling with the nature of pop music in general. I love that the word “pop” emphasizes the commercial, trashy, places where it’s least likely called authentic, or [seen as an] embodiment of progressive values. It simply has to live or die on its own. I think academic work should too.”

What’s next for EMP? It will return next year to Seattle, but the theme has not yet been decided. In fact, Weisbard says that EMP’s return the year after is never a sure thing: “There was no guarantee in 2002 that we’d become big [...] The provisional nature [of the conference] is one of its best qualities. There’s absolutely nothing guaranteeing whether it comes again. There’s no organization attached to it, you don’t have a job from it. It depends on the people working. A gathering doesn’t work if people don’t come.”

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