7.2 The Influence of America on Glaswegian Popular Music

> Shipyard city Glasgow always looked west to America, as underlined by the flood of mid-to-late ‘80s groups that found inspiration in Sinatra (Hue and Cry), Steely Dan (Deacon Blue) and Burt Bacharach (Danny Wilson).[1] As far as north of the border fashions were concerned, the quiff and the black polo neck ruled supreme. In many ways, these stylistic follies have over-coloured the notion of Scottish rock music as a credible entity. And yet, from Primal Scream’s struggle with Love and the Stooges emerged original, club-fecked rock. From Teenage Fanclub’s dallying with Big Star and the Beach Boys came guitar pop that chimed loud and bright. (Doyle, 2000: 81)

The 1980s and 1990s acts mentioned by Doyle were following a Glaswegian tradition of looking west that has existed for decades. In particular, elements of what he describes were discernible in the output and style of earlier ‘indie’ guitar acts based in the city, such as Orange Juice and Aztec Camera. Both these bands initially released records on Postcard, a small independent label based in Glasgow, formed in 1979 by the young music entrepreneur, Alan Horne. The tagline for his influential but short-lived venture was “The Sound of Young Scotland”, a statement of intent that was printed on the centre of all the label’s releases. Leyshon *et al.* (1998: 21), when commenting on the applicability of this tagline to Postcard’s releases, observed that “none of the classic codes for Scottishness were *musically* in evidence”. But a counter argument is that a band such as Orange Juice precisely followed classic codes adopted by many Scottish musicians in the extended postwar period, even if these codes were largely imported rather than native. For example, Hamish Hamilton (2005: 137) writing about the debut concert in 1977 by Johnny and the Self Abusers (the first incarnation of Simple Minds), draws particular attention to their performance of a song which was a pointer to where their chief musical interest lay, the Velvet Underground’s ‘White Light/White Heat’: “The New York connection would grow ever more important to the next generation of Glasgow bands, as they began to turn away from the increasingly self-satirising UK punk scene and instead looked to the New York scene centring on the CBGB’s venue.”

In the audience for that show in 1977 was Edwyn Collins, who went on to form Orange Juice, a band whose output relied almost entirely on American source material for musical inspiration. ‘The Sound of Young Scotland’ that they were at the forefront of promoting was one marked by an askance take on soul music coupled to a fondness for guitar orientated

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[1] Danny Wilson, named after the character that Frank Sinatra played in the 1951 film *Meet Danny Wilson*, were in fact from Dundee, and not, as Doyle implies, Glasgow. Another Scottish band that formed in the mid-1980s and which also drew on Sinatra’s influence for their name were the Irvine based, Trash Can Sinatras.

rock, as produced by New York acts such as the aforementioned Velvet Underground. It was also a musical style that acknowledged the influence of the harmonies of The Beach Boys and the 'wall of sound' production sound associated with Bronx born producer, Phil Spector.[2] Meanwhile, other Glasgow acts that emerged in the 1970s chose to draw on different American traditions, as highlighted by the soft-rock sounds of Gerry Rafferty and the soul-funk of The Average White Band, whilst the singer Alex Harvey drew on rasping vocal traditions associated with Southern soul music, as had, albeit in a different way, Lulu, a singer who first came to prominence in the city in the mid-1960s.

One explanation put forward as to why so many postwar Glaswegian musicians looked west for inspiration concerns social changes precipitated by WWII. Glasgow, like many British cities, hosted thousands of American G.I.s between the USA entering the conflict in 1942 and its conclusion three years later. However, Scottish music writer Hamilton Harvey (2005: 27) asserts that, "with its superfluity of dance venues, the impact on Glasgow was particularly marked, strengthening an already strong cultural link with the States for which the shipbuilding and shipping industries had long been the lifeline." Glaswegians continued to demonstrate their fondness for American music long after the G.I.s departed. The first screenings in 1956 of the breakthrough rock 'n' roll movie, *Blackboard Jungle*, were boisterous affairs in Glasgow: "hundreds of teddy boys and girls danced in Keith Street outside the Tivoli Cinema, Partick after a screening of the film. This joyful reception can be seen as just one moment in Glasgow's long love affair with American music" (*Ibid*.: 30).

This affair is one that has continued to the present, but, as Doyle above suggests, there was a particularly intensity to it in the 1980s when Glaswegian musicians looked to America for cultural guidance and inspiration with even greater frequency than normal. The music journalist Simon Reynolds, writing in relation to pop music in the late 1980s, observed that "all the mature pop groups come from Scotland ... but all their musical reference points seem bound up with American ideas of sophistication and glamour" (Reynolds, 1990: 93)[3] The prevalence of such ideas, which have continued to pervade certain forms of advertising (Figure 7.5), has been interpreted by (Regev, 2007: 135) as being

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[2] This combination of American music styles has been intermittently adopted by Glasgow area acts ever since, as highlighted by the Jesus and Mary Chain in the 1980s and 1990s and, more recently, by the appropriately named, Glasvegas.

[3] 'Mature' here does not refer to the age of the band members themselves but to the groups being at least as interested in cultivating an adult audience as a teenage one. This may provide a reason why such acts, despite their popularity, have received little attention from the academy, given that popular music studies, as a discipline, has often been more concerned with youth culture than adult culture.

an effect of the global cultural industries … a practically unavoidable consequence of late modernity, of the genuine interest of groupings around the world to join and participate in scenarios of 'good life' disseminated from the metropolitan centers and through their prism.

Figure 7.5. Budweiser poster advertisement, August, 2009. Photo taken by author.

In the late 1980s this vision of an American authored vision of the good life was both celebrated and critiqued in British popular music. In particular, the music and imagery produced by many Scottish acts actively engaged with the myths and sounds of mid-century Manhattan. During this time in Scotland a large number of music acts emerged who produced music that was "slick, sculpted and radio-friendly ... their melodic brand of sincere pop music became known as Scottish blue-eyed soul."[4] Glasgow was the centre of this movement and acts from the city one could place in this category included Del Amitri, Wet Wet Wet, Texas and Deacon Blue.[5] It can be argued that one reason for the overt American nature of so much Scottish music is the fact that, in an age of late modernity,

> the cultural uniqueness of nations… is no longer characterized by a quest for exclusive, relatively isolated spaces of cultural content and aesthetic form. The quest for essentialist purism has been replaced by an admitted openness to late modern cultural forms. The orthodox commitment to a rigid form of national culture has been replaced by a fluid conception of ethno-national uniqueness, one that is constantly and consciously willing to implement stylistic innovations in art and culture from different parts of the world. (Regev, 2007: 125)

[4] 'Caledonia Dreamin''. BBC Scotland production, 2008. Director: John MacLaverty.
[5] 'Blue-eyed soul' was a term used to describe music made by white artists that was overtly informed by stylistic conventions associated with black soul music. It was adopted as a genre label in relation to the mid-1970s output of David Bowie, Hall and Oates, and Michael McDonald, a singer whose 1993 album, *Blink of An Eye*, featured contributions from The Blue Nile's Paul Buchanan and Robert Bell.

With regard to the particular case of the incorporation of American musical tropes into much Scottish popular music, Doyle (2000), quoted at the start of this section, whilst acknowledging the role played the close historic relationship of the two nations, suggests that another key reason for the American affectation associated with some Scottish groups was a pragmatic one, a response to London-based record companies traditional reluctance to sign singers with pronounced Scottish accents for fear their material would not be played by broadcasters.[6] Others claim the Americanization of Scottish music has little to do with pleasing London music executives and is, instead, instinctual, a product of upbringing, an argument put forward by Pat Kane, singer with the Glasgow based group, Hue and Cry. Kane's American sounding vocal style has repeatedly been critiqued (Sweeney-Turner, 1998), not least by himself, in his other guise as a journalist:

> Every time I open my mouth to sing I'm American. This is not a matter of choice. My psyche has a long-standing contract with my lips, teeth, tongue and diaphragm; whenever this man wishes to rend the heavens asunder with the sound of angels, he must do so in an accent lost somewhere between Hoboken and Minneapolis ... I know where it all started – on a living-room floor in Hamilton, Christmas 1967, with my father's finger prodding me into performance for the assembled relatives. Out came the number dad had been drilling through me for days: 'I left my heart … in Fran-san-cisco' (sic)... Ever since, a small cornerstone of my identity has remained profoundly American; the tougher the outside world got, the more Fourth and Broadway my fantasies became. Adolescence was most memorably spent mouthing Bobby Darin and Frank Sinatra. (Kane, 1992: 23)

During Kane's career as a professional singer he has, at times, tried to emulate Sinatra's clear delivery style in order to clearly enunciate lyrics he was particularly keen for his audience to hear. A prime example relates to his performance of the protest song, 'Survivors': "I sang in my habitual Hoboken twang, 'Won't pay my poll taxes' – Never have the clicking consonants and controlled melismas of Frank Sinatra been put to such productive, socialist use! To paraphrase the old millstone classic, I do him my way." (*Ibid.*: 25). However, as suggested above it, was not just the technicality of Sinatra's singing that appealed to Kane but also the more general cultural aura surrounding mid-twentieth century America, which Sinatra, and the songs he sang, symbolized. This was demonstrated in an article Kane (1992: 150-151) wrote for *The Scotsman* on the enduring appeal of a well established bar in Glasgow and his evident discomfort at its increasing use as a location for TV productions:

[6] There have been exceptions to this assumption, but acts who deliver their songs with pronounced Scottish accents, such as Alex Harvey in the 1970s, The Proclaimers in the 1980s and 1990s, and Glasvegas in the 2000s, remain a relative rarity.

> In my first eight months living in Partick, Glasgow, I have not yet discovered a more authentic piece of city-culture than the one at the bottom of my road. The Manhattan Bar has not changed one fleck since its inception in 1957 ... A distinctly mid-Forties silhouette skyline of New York behind the bar faced two giant photos of Central Park on the other wall; the whole bar was in wood and illuminated frosted glass. The Manhattan was obviously an extension of his [the landlord's] own theatricality – a small piece of West-of-Scotland utopian Americana forever playing "One For My Baby"… On the wall were stunningly crisp caricatures of all the American presidents since The Manhattan opened – Eisenhower, Kennedy, et al. … The outlandishness of its aspirations – an island of Midtown cool just off dusty Dumbarton Road – are ... more honest than the motives for using it as yet more TV background. If Partick will never be anything more than Partick, why not reach to Manhattan? Better to mentally span the Atlantic and gently enjoy the impossibility of getting there, than being like the media middle-class and only enjoying culture over which you can show mastery.[7]

The bar owner's fantasies, and those of the television producers who wanted to use his bar, both support an observation made by Howell (1998: 373) in relation to landscapes of crime fiction, namely that "while it is well known that what counts as realism for one generation easily becomes false or fantastic to another, this in itself carries valuable social meaning."

[7] The Manhattan Bar has since closed, but New York's influence on that stretch of Partick continues with the opening of a cafe on the same street called Tribeca, named after a now fashionable neighbourhood of Manhattan. A yellow New York taxi is permanently parked outside the establishment, the motto of which is: "a little slice of the Big Apple in the Heart of the Westend": http://www.tribecacafe.com/ – Accessed 16.2.2012.