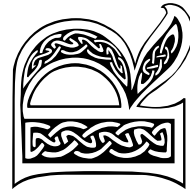


Tartan Boys – Scottish Popular Music Stardom in the 1970s¹

Janne Mäkelä

University of Helsinki, Renvall Institute



Relatively little has been written on modern Scottish popular music and its relationship with national identity. Whereas we have been abundantly served by accounts of the history of Scottish ballads and their contribution to how Scotland and Scottishness have been understood, historians and musicologists have ignored the role of modern popular music. The lack of a historiography of Scottish pop and rock can arguably be traced back to the tradition of mass culture criticism, that is, to a certain academic paradigm which in the mid-20th century emerged to condemn cultural phenomena such as popular music as too ‘low’ to be taken seriously. It was particularly the commercial intent in making, performing and distributing music that was generally seen as dubious and scorned at. Although this paper shall not dwell upon this discussion, a short overview of the relationship between Scottishness and modern popular music is needed.

A recent report on the music industry in Scotland argues that ‘while some Scottish music has been sold for its Scottishness (in folk and traditional music markets, for example), other music made in Scotland cannot be understood culturally or economically in national terms’. The most successful Scottish performers currently have been successful in music worlds, which are ‘not in any sense Scottish’ (Williamson, Cloonan & Frith 2003, 126).

This is a simplified statement. It has been widely accepted that music is an important vehicle for the construction of the objective reality of the external social world and that it can represent the constructed national or ethnic collectivities. This not only applies to traditional forms of music but also to modern popular styles such as pop, rock, hip hop, and so on (Regev & Seroussi 2004, 5–6). Even though music often may not have clear sonic references to what is understood as ‘national’, it still may be considered as something that represents a sense of community and nationality. Current pop names such as Travis and Texas do not

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sound particularly Scottish or Celtic, but marketing strategies and the media reception have made it clear that they do not appear out of nowhere but are 'local Scottish groups' who have made it big in international markets.

In most countries, modern popular music has emerged as a result of interaction between national traditions (such as language) and international (mainly Anglo-American) influences. What can be generally said about modern Scottish popular music during the past fifty years is that musicians have identified themselves with American music styles and on the other hand exploited the British (i.e. English) music industry. A strong sense of being located somewhere between America and England has characterized Scottish pop and rock (Wilkie 1991, 14; Hogg 1993, 369). It was not until the 1980s that groups such as Runrig and Big Country developed formulas, which distinctively took musical influences both from the rich tradition of Scottish folk songs and modern rock styles. Yet sounds themselves are only one element of how identities are represented in music cultures. In Scotland, already in the 1970s there were artists and groups, even stars, who were keen to blend the local and the global.

Weenybop stars: the Bay City Rollers

Stars are individuals who, as a consequence of their public performances or appearances in the mass media, become widely recognized and acquire symbolic status (Shuker 1998, 282). Whereas the *star* is a conspicuous person who appears and becomes available in the circuit of a number of mass communication modalities, *stardom* is an expression of a larger entity referring to the cultural dimensions of the phenomenon and modes of star visibility. The concept of stardom also implicitly raises questions about the ways stars function within popular music culture (Mäkelä 2004, 18–19).

In light of these definitions, there is not much to say about 1970s Scottish pop stars and stardom. We basically have five names: Derek, Alan, Eric, Les and Wood, that is, the classic line-up of the Bay City Rollers. We might of course consider several other names. With the Bay City Rollers alone, 27 members had passed through its ranks by the early 1970s and many more were to come (Hogg 1993, 132). We also have Slik who in the wake of the 'Rollermania' phenomenon took their piece of teenybop cake before the frontman of the group, Midge Ure, called it a day and formed a new group, Ultravox. In the field of blues rock, hard rock and heavy rock, there were several performers who enjoyed critical acclaim and cult status in the 1970s: Average White Band, Frankie Miller, Maggie Bell, Stone the Crows, and, most notably, the Sensational Alex Harvey Band and

Nazareth, both of whom also had a following among Finnish hard rock fans. Yet the Bay City Rollers remain the only true Scottish star name of the time.

The Bay City Rollers were established in 1965. The group, then known as the Saxons, soon attracted following in the Edinburgh area. The defining moment of their career happened in 1970, when the group came under the wing of manager Tam Paton. His first task was to suggest that the band should change their name to something that would sound more American. Someone suggested the 'Rollers', which referred to American roll-skate fashion, but that did not wholly satisfy Paton and the group. Legend says that eventually the boys stuck a pin in a US map and out came Bay City in Michigan. Thus, the Bay City Rollers (Rogan 1988, 212–214; Wilkie 1991, 113).

The Bay City Rollers, often shortened as the Rollers, had their first hit, 'Keep on Dancing', already in 1971. For a moment it seemed that the group would remain just another pop novelty and sink back into obscurity. Deciding that the band would require a gimmick, Paton then elected to play on their nationality. He hit the right chord. The group began to wear tartan-edged ankle-freezers with bell-bottom trousers at half-mast, striped socks and baseball boots. It was especially the use of tartan scarves, often tied around the boys' wrists that became the celebrated trademark of the band and, as a matter of fact, of the whole Rollermania phenomenon which burst in 1975.

It should be remembered that The Rollers were not the first pop and rock performers identifying themselves with visual signs of Scottishness. In 1958, one-hit wonder Jackie Dennis was marketed as a kilted Elvis (Hogg 1993, 22). In the early 1970s, another group of Tam Paton's, a short-lived Bilbo Baggins, sported with tartan fashion (Rogan 1988, 215). Yet it was the Rollers that really embraced the clan uniform, becoming the first Scottish pop group to make their identity and cultural background a fundamental part of their fame. Opposing the standard practice at the time, they even refused to move to London.

Of course, it was not only tartan scarves that earned the Rollers their nine Top 10 UK hits (e.g. 'Bye Bye Baby', 'Saturday Night', 'Give a Little Love') in two years time and an international fan hysteria not seen since Beatlemania. Tam Paton organised a clever publicity campaign and sent postcards to those teenage girls who had had their names and addresses printed in pop and fan magazines. He also used the services of professional songwriters (Hogg 1993, 133; Brownlee 2003, 63). Most notably, Paton presented his boys as stars who refused to play with whacky imagery of rock'n'roll excess that had dominated popular music in the early 1970s. According to the official Rollers image, Paton's protégés were clean-living bachelors who had fun and smiled so much that it made them look 'much

more radical than Zep [i.e. Led Zeppelin] or the Grateful Dead’, as one Roller fan recalls (Sullivan 1999, 32). This zaniness was accompanied by the statement that the members of the group were too dedicated to their work to have time for girls.

The Rollers’ puritanical image clearly attracted young female fans around the world, including fans in Finland, but, of course, it could not last. Paton’s strategy was a throwback to the 1950s ideology of teenybop stardom. Such manoeuvres were not meant to build lasting pop star careers in the 1950s, and they certainly did not do that in the 1970s.

One of the main dilemmas of stardom is control. The whole star phenomenon is based on public discourses on the star’s role in society. These discourses on the star overlap, compete and may also collide. Stardom is about different players attempting to gain control over the main product, the star. Stars themselves, promotional machinery, the media, and fans form a web-like texture of definitions and power relations, and if one of these players attempts to dictate the game, problems soon rise. It is particularly in the field of teen pop stardom that different interest often conflict to profound effect (Mäkelä 2004, 24).

This is exactly what happened to the Bay City Rollers, too. Tam Paton was caricatured as a ruthless puppeteer while his boys were seen as puppet musicians directed by the Svengali-like manager. The boys were rumoured to be merely the private sexual plaything of another gay pop manager. The latter, however, was untrue, as became evident in later years when the boys confessed their bedroom secrets (Rogan 1988, 216). Furthermore, a certain disparagement shaded the group from the beginning of Rollermania. Rollers’ fans, for example, were caricatured by the serious rock press as mindless young girls whose enthusiasm were compared to Hitler’s rallies (e.g. Charlesworth 2004, 132). What followed was that the greatest teenybop – or weenybop – story of the 1970s eventually collapsed under the intolerable pressures and criticism brought by success.

Wannabe-Scot: Rod Stewart

Although they were a major commercial phenomenon on both sides of the Atlantic from 1975 to 1977, there has been a temptation to ignore the Bay City Rollers. The Rollers clearly purveyed the ultimate youth image but they were also perceived as victims of another image, musicians sacrificed at the altar of greedy managership (Wilkie 1991, 111). The Rollers’ success reflected ideas and practices, which have traditionally been considered inauthentic in rock culture. For many, they represented uninspired and manufactured pop, that is, they did not seem to exercise control over the star production process. It is mainly this lack of

‘credibility’ that has prevented the Rollers from entering the pantheon of Scottish pop and rock history.

In addition to the authenticity of pop and rock stars, the other problem of evaluating Scottish music stardom in the 1970s – or Scottish stardom any other time – applies to the question of what Scottish music might be. Or who counts as Scottish? Which brings us to Rod Stewart. When I told my friends that I shall give a lecture and subsequently write an article on 1970s Scottish pop stardom, most of them replied something like: ‘What would that be? Ah, now I know: Rod Stewart!’ Or: ‘Don’t forget Rod!’

There certainly are phases in Rod Stewart’s career that, according to many, ought to be forgotten. The common view is that Stewart betrayed his talent, most famously manifested in his 1971 folk rock masterpiece *Every Picture Tells a Story*, when he started to fancy disco music and tight leopard skin jumpsuits. It is typical for rock histories to cherish the early 1970s Rod Stewart as a ‘real thing’ and condemn the 1980s Rod Stewart as a caricature of a spoiled jet-set rock star. The novelist Nick Hornby writes in his collection of essays on pop songs that, before everything went wrong, digging Rod Stewart in 1973 was approximately the same thing as digging Oasis in 1994 (Hornby 2004, 42).

Rod Stewart is still a star and he is not forgotten – except in certain accounts. Brian Hogg, a historian of Scottish pop and rock, provides an endless list of people who in one way or another have contributed to popular music in Scotland. Rod Stewart is not on that list. The same applies to Jim Wilkie’s account of the ‘secret life of Scottish rock music’. For him, Rod Stewart seems to be a secret far beyond national imagination. A recent list of *50 Best Scottish Band of All Time* (2005) includes a few individuals such as Fish, Eddie Reader, Lulu, but no Rod. Thus, what we have here is an old dilemma of who or what can be counted as representative of the nation and nationality.

Rod Stewart is not counted as Scottish obviously because he was born in London. Stewart is a London Cockney. His father, however, was a true Scot and Rod himself has announced that his family is directly related to the Royal Stuarts and that the spelling of the name was changed by Mary Queen of Scots’ mother because there was no ‘e’ in the Celtic vocabulary. Rod Stewart has certainly sympathised with Scotland. In the 1970s, it was difficult to spot him without his trademark, the tartan scarf. In his music, Stewart used Celtic-sounding instruments such as the mandolin. He was and still is very proud of his Celtic roots. When his daughter was born he described it as an amazing experience, nearly as good as Scotland beating England in football. It has also been said that Rod Stewart’s view on spending money is (stereo)typically Scottish: he can acquire mansions without

hesitation but when it comes to his turn to buy a round in the pub he suddenly disappears (Ewbanks & Hildred 1991, 224; Bradley 1999, 16).

In terms of cultural identity, Rod Stewart fell between two stools. He remained a ‘wannabe-Scot’. It is somewhat strange that compared to his full-blooded 1970s Scottish rock colleagues he seemed to be much prouder of his Celtic background than they were. When I was young, I always thought that Rod Stewart was a Scot and Nazareth a band from somewhere in southern England. Nazareth did not talk about their background and cultural identity whereas Rod Stewart appeared to me as an ambassador of all things Scottish.

Geographical shifts

The question of Rod Stewart’s cultural identity (which today is even more complex since he has for years lived in California) goes back to the peculiar relationship between England and Scotland. In popular music culture, this relationship has produced ambiguous star images and identities. Donovan, the famous 1960s folk hero and singer-songwriter, has often been regarded Scottish even though he has been living in England ever since he was ten. The great names of the 1980s Scottish pop and rock, Stuart Adamson of Big Country and Lloyd Cole, were not born in Scotland, yet they have been placed in a Scottish context.

Not only has this relationship between England and Scotland produced confusions in star identities but interesting imageries of localities as well. During the beat boom in the early 1960s, the geographical locus of pop music in England moved from the South to the North, especially to Liverpool. The basic structure of the entertainment industry remained intact, however, and when the Beatles moved from Liverpool to London, so did the pop focus. The Mersey beat was replaced by Swinging London and the South’s position as a promised land for musicians wishing to gain wider attraction was reinforced. By the late 1960s, the trickle of Scottish rock performers leaving for London had become a major haemorrhage (Hogg 1993, 102).

London represented a major option in popular music. Alan Gorrie of the Average White Band remembers: ‘I loved London. There was a buzz about it. After all, what should we stay for? Another week in Aberdeen?’ (Ibid, 113). It was joked in the late 1960s and early 1970s that there were three major Scottish rock scenes: Edinburgh, Glasgow, and Finsbury Park in London. The majority of the acclaimed Scottish rock musicians chose London.

The heydays of the Bay City Rollers and Rod Stewart meant a second geographical shift in the history of British popular music. If the first shift took place during the early 1960s beat boom, the second shift occurred in the mid-1970s and

went further up North. It is apparent that the second shift was not as powerful and visible as the first one but it was a shift in any case. It did not change the music industry but it signalled that there are unexplored connections between modern popular music and local identities.

We can now regard the second shift as an overture to the late 1970s punk and the way London's control over popular music in Britain became for the first time seriously challenged. Punk meant an emphasis on local music cultures. It created the music industry in Scotland or at least produced local fanzines, important record labels such as Zoom and Postcard Records, and, of course, a plethora of bands. Some of these groups (Simple Minds, Orange Juice, Aztec Camera, Josef K) became influential in the UK scene during the indie and post-punk period in the early 1980s and even received international recognition. One of the consequences of this development was that Glasgow became a hugely fashionable pop city in the mid-1980s.

Some final thoughts

In Scottish history books on pop and rock, the Bay City Rollers and Rod Stewart have not been considered performers essentially representing Scotland and Scottishness. Whereas the Bay City Rollers have been perceived as a manufactured and inauthentic pop group under the control of their paternal manager, Rod Stewart has not been counted as Scottish mainly because he was not born in Scotland and, to this day, has never lived there.

To challenge this view, it should be noted that the late 1970s meant the rise of nationalism in and new international recognition towards Scotland. It is perhaps an exaggeration to say that the Bay City Rollers and Rod Stewart pre-represented the feelings of national revival and the emerge of creative industries in Scotland. Or is it? For example, maybe there is a link between the Rollermania and the rise of tourism that occurred in 1970s Edinburgh? At least the Rollers attracted their fans to such an extent that many of them ran away from home and fled to Edinburgh to see their idols live...

In any event, the Bay City Rollers and Rod Stewart signalled the sense of difference from England. They were internationally successful performers who through their star images and representations of Scottishness certainly drew attention to what was happening in Scotland and how Scottishness was understood. In this sense, they both arguably played important roles in marketing – if not making? – the new and more youthful Scottish popular culture that was to emerge in later years.

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