

Alternative Music

The concept of “Alternative Music” (which will be referred to as “Alt”) continues to fascinate and confuse me. It is not the general idea of “alternative” that I question, since music history is full of legitimate examples of such. In the past, as new styles emerged in both popular and art music realms, they were easily differentiated from their predecessors by their obvious musical characteristics. Listeners (at least within familiar genres) can easily tell the difference between swing and be-bop, hard rock and progressive rock, hip-hop and rap, baroque and classical, classical and romantic, to name a few. In each case, real alternatives to the dominant styles arose, vied for dominance, and in many cases, achieved it. In any case, each found a loyal group of adherents who championed the new style. New names emerged to identify the new styles, which (although never perfect) were generally accurate in their broad descriptions. In most cases, the new styles overtook the old, and history marched forward; the makers of the textbooks were happy.

Enter the last decade or so of the 20C and we find a Brave New Genre coming to the fore...ALT MUSIC. A Wikipedia search for Alternative Music¹ confirmed what I already knew—the term as musical identifier is pure nonsense. The list of bands is long, and one need not venture past the A’s and B’s in order to see that Alt-music is a curious designation. Any list that includes Fiona Apple, Bauhaus, Kate Bush, Alice in Chains, and the Butthole Surfers and attempts to torture a link between them has a very difficult task at hand. And it gets worse when we venture from the A’s and B’s...the list also includes Tangerine Dream, The Wallflowers, and XTC!

The New York Times had this to say about this “new style” of Alt in 1989:²

“On a fringe of mainstream rock, a new style is coalescing...It's guitar music first of all, with guitars that blast out power chords, pick out chiming riffs, buzz with fuzztone and squeal in feedback. Those guitars are topped by regular-guy voices and, very occasionally, a regular gal proclaiming cynicism, confusion, hostility, self-mockery, disillusionment and sardonic humor, along with hints of well-guarded sincerity.”

Power chords, fuzztone, hostility...yes, most definitely describes Tangerine Dream and Kate Bush, doesn't it? (To be fair to the Times, this was early in the life of Alt, when it was, more or less, definable.) Let's also forget about the fact that Bauhaus and Kate Bush were at their creative peak a decade or more before the term “alternative” was commonly used. Categories, of course, always arrive after the style is identified, so the temporal issue is not primary. What is odd here is that these artists were part of a genre that was already well defined a decade or more *before* Alt came along and decided that they belonged in the Alt camp.

Robert Smith, lead singer of The Cure, says as much when he claims that “[he]...can't remember when we officially became 'alt-rock.' ”³ Hell, I can't even remember when

they became rock! Every “rocker” I ever knew would have instantly recognized their new wave/goth proclivities and pummeled them with a baseball bat for being rock apostates.

Do these bands have anything in common? They may have some indie-label roots, but most graduated to major label status at some point and achieved some measure of popular acclaim and success. The same cannot be said of the vast majority of bands listed in *The Land of Alt*—most are indie niche groups that faded as quickly as they appeared, whose quaint postmodern or tongue-in-cheeky B-Movie/Sci-fi/Horror name seems to be their most creative achievement.

A few examples should suffice: How about “Architecture in Helsinki” or “Better than Ezra” (Mr. Pound I presume)? Have a taste for some retro-camp? Then maybe “30 Seconds to Mars” or “...And You Will Know Us by the Trail of Dead” may be more to your liking. Others seem vaguely (menacingly?) Leftist, with a dose of nostalgia for the Five-Year Plan(s), the Cold War, or maybe just Russian ballet (“The Bolshoi” or “Bloc Party” anyone?).

All of this makes one wonder what Alt really means, because, as I am not the first to point out, it means nothing in terms of tone, style, genre, or audience.⁴ My first reaction to the Alt designation was decidedly negative, based on:

- i) a lack of stylistic definition,
- ii) a wanton disregard for history (for example, Nirvana, which began as “grunge” then morphed, retroactively, into an Alt band; or The Cure, who started as a New Wave band and then were suddenly reclassified as an Alt-band some 20 years after the fact),
- iii) a problem with the use of the term “alternative” to classify something that is (or was) entirely mainstream. (This borders on the Orwellian, sort of like “tall” being the small coffee at Starbucks.)

It is, however, fairly easy to determine what is *not* Alt—Madonna is not Alt, Usher doesn’t make the cut, and Britney Spears may be alt-ered, but she definitely is not Alt. The paragons of anti-Alt, however, have to be the cookie-cutter Frankensteins rolling off the American Idol assembly line. Nothing could better exemplify the antithesis of Alt than this soulless parade of musical nonentities who degrade themselves on a weekly basis, pathetically genuflecting in front of a panel of musical nonentities, all for 15 minutes of borrowed fame singing someone else’s song. I may not be sure of what Alt is exactly, but I’m very sure *this* spectacle is about as far away from it as you can get.

Of course, every generation has an innate desire to define itself by its music, clothes, hairstyle, and language. In this sense, every popular style can be seen as cultural identifier, a generational glue, which is born in the teenage years, matures in the ensuing decades, and ripens to become full-blown nostalgia in middle-age. Alt as a genre appeals to the youthful desire to define oneself as being “different” from (or outside of) the mainstream, even while you are hopelessly and completely wrapped up in the mainstream.

The implication here is obvious: by virtue of being an Alt music devotee, one rises above the crass herd aesthetic displayed in mainstream culture. The problem is that when every university and high school student in North America is listening to a band (Nirvana), then they are, by definition, mainstream pop culture, regardless of what the lyrics claim.

The difference is that in earlier styles, you knew what you were getting (musically) and who you were identifying with—not so with Alt. Alt emerged to become all things counterculture to all people, absorbing the entire ethos of rebellious youth and utopian politics into one tidy little package. So far so good—Alt is then, more precisely, the catch-all category for music that people who fancy themselves to be “different” or “enlightened” listen to and identify with. It does then, at the very least, have a thread of continuity that can be gleaned, but it has nothing to do with style or era. It is often a form of social commentary or, in many cases, political speech (mostly of the leftist variety), with its own soundtrack provided by the many different sorts of Alt bands.

Youthful rebellion, politics in music, genre identification as branding tool—none of this is new, nor is any of it problematic as such. What *is* interesting is the way in which this particular name arose in this particular decade to subsume such a wide variety of styles. To be honest, as someone who thinks that words have meaning, I was bothered by the term the moment I heard it. My first reaction to hearing that platinum-selling bands who were selling out the Megadomes and making more in concessions and t-shirt sales than the GDP of New Zealand were being billed as “alternative” was: alternative to what exactly?

If you want to claim that you are different from the unwashed masses, you should at least have to pay for the right by listening to difficult music that really is unpalatable to those teeming uncultured minions. Not so. Alt’s little linguistic sleight of hand makes it possible to be “different and discerning” (MTV and Rolling Stone tell me so, after all) without being remotely different or discerning—you just need to listen to the same stuff everyone else is listening to, and—bingo—you’re Alt!! So, get pierced (or not), get a tattoo (or not), or just download your favorite CD of any era (it’s bound to be Alt of some kind) and you’ve achieved instant individuality.

Our budding contrarians are off the hook—no more listening to music that really is an alternative to the mainstream. For example, jazz and classical music, some of which is very difficult to listen to, come to mind as genres sharing a perennially dismal (less than 5%) share of total CD sales. Wouldn’t then the late music of John Coltrane or anything by Frederic Rzweski *truly* qualify as an “alternative” to the mainstream? Apparently not. Neither is to be found on any alternative list I can find.

Or perhaps there is something else at play here. Why did it appear when it did in the ‘90s to describe (as it continues to do) a staggering array of bands who have nothing whatsoever to do with each other in terms of musical style? I do not think it is a coincidence that Alt emerged simultaneously with the advent of the internet, which was then followed by the onslaught of digital music, MP3s, and iTunes. The “medium” (digital files, easily recorded, copied, and transferred) has had a huge impact on the

“message” (musical content). It has allowed a dizzying array of bands to record and distribute their own music as they see fit.

The end result is predictable—there are so many groups with such a splintered audience base that hardly any achieve critical mass (much less sustained popularity) in the way that, say, Aerosmith did in the early days of Alt (with their “Eat the Rich” t-shirts, they certainly must be Alt too, no?). A positive way of looking at this would be to say that the Alt/internet ethos allows for a world in which everyone has their own niche, with bands and playlists to match, and with little hope or expectation that much of it will be around in five years, much less 50 years. And, I suppose one could ask, “why should it?”

Alt functions as the multi-faceted stylistic arm of the technological upheaval that has, I think it safe to say, leveled the music industry. No longer do record companies hold sway over what people will hear, which must be a good thing. People can listen to, love, identify with, instantly dispose of, or, most importantly, *find* the music that fits their tastes. This has to be good for musicians as well, who now have ample opportunity to make music entirely without interference from a corporate master— it is so inexpensive that there are no longer any insurmountable barriers in the way. All you need is access to a laptop and you can create a product with which to try and build an audience. The creative artists now have complete control over every stage of the process; no groveling, no “selling out” to get a record deal, no cowering in front of Cowell.

This gets us to the *real* essence of Alt in a way that style can’t. It’s not *alternative music*, it’s an *alternative music industry*, one in which the entire process of music making and marketing has been completely decentralized in the digital age. So, even with all of its faux individualism, anti-establishment posturing and complete lack of internal coherence, I’ll take Alt every time, etymological warts and all.

Dr. Kurt Ellenberger
Professor of Music
Frederik Meijer Honors College
Grand Valley State University

SOURCES

¹ URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_alternative_rock_bands

² Pareles, Jon. *A New Kind of Rock*, New York Times, March 5, 1989.

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³ Spitz, Marc. *Robert Smith*. Spin, November 2005.

⁴ Erlewine, Stephen Thomas. *American Alternative Rock/Post-Punk*.

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