

Coming to Kylie

How I Learned to Embrace Pop Culture

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By way of an introduction to the writings in this section, I thought I would tell you a little about how I discovered Kylie Minogue. Everyone has their own story. For some it opens their eyes to something new and is therefore a landmark --- if they take their music as seriously as I do. For others it is a casual discovery which does not resonate as anything special, and life goes on as before. I write this for the former, for I not only discovered Kylie, but also a completely different way of looking at pop culture. It opened my eyes to the importance, or at least the significance, of that culture.

I am a snob when it comes to music. If a song does not exploit polyrhythms and complex extended harmonies, I tend to dismiss it out of hand and pop a Frank Zappa CD into the player. My heroes tend to be those shady, oblique artists who throttle their instruments in search of that apocalyptic industrial jazz chord resonating only in the souls of their tortured initiates. Ecstasy for me has always been that irretrievable moment in a King Crimson concert when Adrian Belew pinches off an infernal sonic artifact on his Roland 350 synth guitar, when Al Dimeola's Gibson-Marshall-configured digits glide through 8 bars of 128th notes. I follow in the wake, proud to be a musical snob.

This snobbery is a function of something I call the "Sphincter of Youth". It's a doughnut-shaped muscle that closes tightly around the happy void of acceptance as you take on the prejudices of your teenage friends. They tell you that that singer is cool, that guitarist hot, that group over there as interesting as a sealed tuna sandwich. It never ceases to amaze me the capacity of young minds to be governed by the dominant

baboon. I considered myself an individual, but all those long-haired monkeys monkeyed with my happy void of acceptance. I could not make a decision about what I liked without first consulting hipper primates.

Liberation came late one August afternoon in Rome after picking over the ruins of the forum. The heat was such that I had to go back to my hotel room, shower and throw myself on the stone-hard mattress. I lay there gulping less than frigid air from the substandard central air conditioning, trying to determine if the moisture dribbling down my body was from my pores or the shower. As torpor set in, I made one last effort worthy of an ancient Roman general to get up and grab the remote control for the vintage color TV. I flipped through the channels looking for something that vaguely sounded like English, because Italian gave me a headache and all I wanted to do was emulate an eggplant in exquisite repose.

Eventually, the greasy remote buttons landed on Italy's version of MTV. I saw this blonde coming down the stairs banging on the walls. There were computer generated grids flying around her head and music playing in the background that sounded like someone's three-year-old son had screwed around with the home equalizer. As the blonde reached the last step, the music equalized and she stuck her bobbing face in the camera and sang, "Thought that I was going crazy..."



You remember the Grinch with the heart two sizes too small? At the moment of the Grinch's revelation when the sled full of goodies with the little Who girl perched on top started teetering over the edge, his heart suddenly grew five sizes, bursting through his Santa suit. That's what happened to my Sphincter of Youth. It relaxed five sizes. I was hooked. I missed half the song waiting to read the title and artist

flashing on the screen. KYLIE MINOGUE. Love at First Sight. Never heard of her, but the title of the song certainly described what I felt.

But this is silly, I kept telling myself. I had abandoned all hope of being enriched by pop music about the time Michael Jackson had his first dimple implant. Pop was as intellectually satisfying as a shuffleboard game and as intricate as a pattern of pale pink polka dots. It was a music born not of creative mysteries, but of marketing surveys and computer readouts graphically representing the catchiest hooks. It was a thing to be reviled, danced to, and disposed of like a designer iced tea bottle. Nothing more. In the relentless closing of the joyful aperture of acceptance, I had blocked out even the possibility that pop could be exciting, and a pop princess could catch my eye.

This self-criticism forced me to deal with my newfound love in the only way an embarrassed convert can: I listened in my room late at night where no one could see the CD cover. I locked my door when I popped the DVD of the Live in Sydney tour into the player. I secretly bopped in back seats when one of Kylie's songs came over scratchy cab radios. I kept MTV on in the background while writing, hoping to see a video of Kylie, and quickly switched the channel to CNN if my girlfriend came into the room. One close call was diverted when she walked in and said, "I'm confused. I thought I heard you playing that idiotic 'Cheeky Girls' song, but I see George Bush on the TV." I answered, perhaps a bit too defensively, "What do you expect? He's a Republican!". I behaved like I harbored a secret perversion, perhaps one involving rubber underwear and sophisticated hydraulics, forced to indulge my damaged sexuality under cover of darkness.



Then my bi-monthly issue of Book Magazine arrived, which featured an interview with Umberto Eco, a literary hero of mine (yes, no pop bestsellers for Peter, the snob). In the interview he talked about the mythos of the hero, citing his love for Spiderman comics and American pop culture. More telling than his

words, however, were his activities during the interview. While pontificating on Spiderman, the hero and villain archetypes, he took bites of a Big Mac and pensive drags on a Marlboro cigarette. My hero had embraced pop culture; indeed, he was eating it, making it a part of himself. And was no worse for it. Intellectually at least. Well if he had embraced it, so could I. Here was a higher primate worth the deference. I thought, well, if I could process the experience of watching and listening to pop, to Kylie, through the printed word I could somehow legitimize that voyeurism, kind of like the pimply adolescent who buys Playboy for the articles.

I joined the kylie-minogue.com forum several months ago, searching for a place to call home, and was asked to do this series of articles and reviews for the main website. I was reluctant at first because my real job involves writing and there's nothing worse than doing for a hobby that which you do for a living. I came to realize that it would be fun to do it, a sort of literary drag show. Perhaps it may serve to open that joyful aperture of acceptance that closed tightly long ago.