Music consumption has long been viewed as central to youth cultures and teenagers, both in an academic and popular sense. Until recently, this preoccupation has remained largely unchallenged. Rock music, for instance, has often been portrayed as youth music and closely associated with juvenile angst (e.g. Frith 1983; Berger 1999; Weinstein 2000). Whilst this was once historically accurate, a number of demographic and social changes in recent years suggest that we should question the common supposition of music fandom being intimately linked to youth.

Currently, we inhabit an aging population; globally, life expectancy is increasing while the birth rate is in decline (HelpAge International 2009). A report published by the United Nations suggests that population aging is unprecedented, pervasive, enduring, and will have profound implications for many aspects of human life (World Population Ageing 1950-2050, 2002). One of these aspects is the production and consumption of music. In light of these recent social and demographic changes, we need to consider the ways in which aging shapes music consumption and the notion of music as a means of providing a sense of belonging, identity, and style, not just during a person’s youth, but also throughout adulthood.

In the Western world, mass consumption has increasingly permeated people’s everyday lives since the 1950s. Thus, a number of living generations have grown up in an era of mass consumption with momentous popular music periods playing a significant role in fashion, style, politics, and signaling the zeitgeist of the era. One can consider this in the context of the UK, for example: From rock ’n’ roll in the 1950s, psychedelic rock and hip hop culture in the 1960s, the punk movement of the 1970s, to the outbreak of electronic dance music in the 1980s, older generations are likely to have been exposed to a particular popular music “moment.” Moreover, consuming music and other associated cultural forms such as fashion and style, are likely to have played a role in the construction of a person’s sense of past, and present, “self.” Sales of popular music records and the decline of singles charts (which are traditionally linked to the consumption practices of youth and teenagers) reflect this increasing aging popular-music consumption base. Furthermore, the institutional BBC music chart television program Top of the Pops (TOTP) ended in 2006 after 42 years of weekly episodes. Its sister show Top of the Pops 2, however, which features vintage 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s performances from the TOTP archive, continues to flourish. Although these trends are undoubtedly symptomatic of the digital age—its impact on the music industry and sales of records in CD format (e.g. Michel 2006)—they could also be seen as a manifestation of the demographic changes in society since older generations may prefer alternative music formats and differing modes of consumption.

In sociological accounts of popular music, it has been suggested that music evokes memories and is often used as a method of “organising our sense of time” (Frith 2004). The importance of music as offering us an experience of time-passing has also been noted (Frith 1996). “In the most general terms,” Frith argues, “music shapes memory, defines nostalgia and programs the way we age” (1996:149).

In her empirical study of music and everyday life, DeNora (2000) similarly notes how respondents used music to remember key people in their lives, for example, loved family members who had died, or more commonly, people they had been romantically and intimately involved with (63). For a number of DeNora’s interviewees, “music was linked to a ‘reliving’ of an event or crucial time, linked often to a relationship” (54) and also as a reminder “of who they were at a certain time—a moment, a season, an era—and helps them to recapture the aesthetic agency they possessed (or which possessed them) at the time” (65-6).

Music can be viewed as symbolic of a person’s sense of “self”; it can also serve as an “aide memoire” in terms of a person’s significant interactions throughout their life. Current academic research has failed to broadly investigate such issues, and there is a dearth of literature concerning how aging shapes music consumption, the fabrication of a past and present “self” pertaining to music, or how growing older affects involvement in music scenes more generally.

Some theorists have recently begun to explore the social uses of music in respect to how growing older might affect the consumption of music and its associated cultural practices. My doctorate thesis (Gibson 2010), for example, demonstrates that, contrary to the popular and academic association of music fandom with youth, fandom often persists in adulthood, and that youth cultural identities are frequently extended and reworked in adulthood. Other research has explored older punks’ experiences of aging (Bennett 2006; Davis 2006), and Kotarba (2005) argues that “rock ‘n’ roll music continues to serve as a critical-meaning resource for its adult fans as they continuously experience the becoming-of-self throughout life” (2005:513). While such research has provided a valuable insight into the long-term social uses of music, given the fact we now live in a globally aging population and that people aged over 60 will outnumber children aged 0-14 by 2050 (HelpAge International 2009), further research into how aging shapes music consumption is clearly required.

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WORKS CITED
9. HelpAge International HERE