

Impact case study (REF3b)

Institution:	University of Northumbria at Newcastle
Unit of Assessment:	29 - English Language and Literature
Title of case study: Litpop: Changing Understandings of Writing and Music for Readers and Creative Practitioners	
<p>1. Summary of the impact</p> <p>Dr Adam Hansen’s interest in the links between writing and popular music led him to set up a monthly ‘Litpop’ bookclub at The Sage Gateshead, the primary music venue in the North East of England; to deliver a workshop for writers and musicians at the Star and Shadow Cinema; Newcastle; and to organise a series of public talks. These events helped the Sage in particular to diversify its programme and audiences. Participating readers benefited in terms of greater appreciation of the relations between writing and popular music and between ‘low’ and ‘high’ culture, while the event at the Star and Shadow stimulated new forms of creativity amongst local writers and musicians.</p>	
<p>2. Underpinning research</p> <p>Dr Adam Hansen (Senior Lecturer, 2007- present) is a Shakespearean scholar with a longstanding interest in Shakespeare’s representation of places and the phenomenon of social mobility in early modern England. He has always been interested in the low-born characters, the rogues and beggars, in Shakespeare’s plays, rather than the rulers and courtiers. This fascination with distinctions of rank and value has recently extended into a different type of research project, combining Hansen’s academic expertise on Shakespeare with his passion for popular music. When it came out in 2010, <i>Shakespeare and Popular Music</i> attracted wide interest from academic journals and the music press. It was praised in the TLS specifically for its success in bringing together ‘two ostensibly mismatched cultural phenomena’. The book explores the adoption of Shakespeare’s words and themes in popular music, asking:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How and why have people tried to define high culture, including ‘literary’ writing like Shakespeare’s, by <i>contrasting</i> it with low or popular culture, including popular music? • How and why have people tried to give value to popular culture, by <i>linking</i> it with ‘high’ culture, like Shakespeare? • If we say ‘literature’ has more value than popular culture, what effects might this have on the way that readers, writers and audiences of writing and popular music value <i>their own</i> understanding of writing and popular music? <p>Hansen’s research involved gathering responses from both producers and consumers of popular music about how they understood the connections between Shakespeare and popular music. What he discovered was a general unwillingness, amongst critics as much as ordinary readers and listeners, to accept connections between ‘literary’ writing and popular music. Even consumers of popular music linked to Shakespeare queried the existence of any such connection, while musicians, though more ready to accept the benefits of using Shakespeare’s work, still doubted any natural fit between what they did and what he did. What Hansen deduced as underlying this resistance were a set of preconceptions about the relative value of high and low culture. <i>Shakespeare and Popular Music</i> tries to confront these preconceptions, questioning whether the value-based separation of literature and popular music is possible or defensible.</p>	
<p>3. References to the research</p> <p>Hansen A. (2007) ‘Shakespeare and the City’, <i>Blackwell Literature Compass</i> 4 (April). DOI: 10.1111/j.1741-4113.2007.00452.x</p> <p>Hansen A. (2011) ‘London and its Others in Timon of Athens’, <i>Shakespeare Jahrbuch</i> 147, pp53-68. Available from Northumbria University on request.</p> <p>Hansen A. (2012) ‘Cities in Late Shakespeare’. In <i>Late Shakespeare: Texts and Contexts 1680-1613</i>, Power A. and Loughnane R. (eds.) pp187-208. Cambridge UP. Output listed in REF2.</p>	

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Hansen A. (2010), *Shakespeare and Popular Music*, Continuum. Output listed in REF2.

Hansen A. (2011) 'Shakespeare and Popular Music'. In *Shakespeare and the Arts*, Thornton Burnett M., Wray R., and Streete A. (eds.), Edinburgh UP, pp. 219-236. Available from Northumbria University on request.

Awards

1. Litpop Workshop (2013) funded by a Higher Education Investment Fund award

4. Details of the impact

The Litpop bookclub at The Sage Gateshead has run continuously from 2011, connected to the Sage's education programme. It was set up with the intention of raising appreciation amongst a non-academic audience of the findings emerging from Hansen's 2010 monograph. In particular, participants were encouraged to jettison their preconceptions and to consider afresh the distinction and barriers between different forms of culture. Hansen encouraged those involved to value their own responses to popular music influenced by the work of literary figures, as well as to 'literary' writing influenced by popular music. The club has also branched out recently with a spin-off meeting at the Darlington For Culture Festival (May 2013) and a Litpop Workshop delivered at the Star and Shadow Cinema, Newcastle upon Tyne, April 2013. Hansen has also delivered public talks at The Sage Gateshead as part of their 'Exploring Music' series in April 2012 and February 2013, and in May 2011 delivered a lecture on Shakespeare and popular music at Newcastle's Literary and Philosophical Society to an audience of 30 (the subsequent podcast has received 86 plays and 9 downloads (source 8)). All these events have created an opportunity for him to engage audiences with the ideas at the heart of his study on *Shakespeare and Popular Music*: namely the links between writing and music, and the popular and the elite. His research has impacted upon readers, writers and musicians in the North East of England in these **two** ways:

- **The Litpop bookclub benefited its host institutions' engagements with their audiences, while also improving public understanding of the links between literature and popular music, and high culture and popular culture.**

The Litpop bookclub was never intended to be a standard reading group. Established at The Sage Gateshead, one of the premier musical venues in the UK, and appealing to an audience with musical tastes as much as bookish ones, it attempted to bring the worlds of literature and music together. Sessions featured music playlists brought in (and heard) by participants and often followed participants' recommendations for books. The books also needed to have musical references or themes, ensuring that the relation between music and writing was constantly stressed. The sessions were participant-led, but discussion was framed and underpinned by Hansen's work on the relations between writing and popular music. The bookclub has been of particular benefit to The Sage Gateshead in terms of diversifying its programme of events: since the club's inception 168 people (Oct 2011 to August 2013: figure from the Sage) have attended at least one session, of whom 10% have been classed as new bookers or non-regular attendees. This has helped the Sage meet its strategic objectives. The Cross-Strand Programme Manager at the Sage affirmed that: *'The Litpop Book Club has helped to expand the [Sage's] education programme...by offering participants a unique forum to combine their interests in literature and popular music – we are not aware of another book club of this nature in the region – and to help fulfil The Sage Gateshead's mission: to entertain, involve and inspire each and every person we meet'* (source 1). The Chair of Darlington For Culture Festival, echoed this perception of the value of the bookclub for his Festival: *'Book clubs are a key part of any literary festival and the Litpop one added something extra'* (source 2). Reflecting on the Litpop workshop and performance, The Star and Shadow Cinema confirmed that *'several performers...had never been to the...Cinema before, and having new artists come to the cinema is crucial to the survival of our venue'*, since one of the *'strategic aims of the cinema'* is *'to...help with the creation of new and challenging work'*. The Cinema reported that attendance for the evening performance was *'very good'* because *'many members of the audience had never been to the cinema before'* and in that sense, *'this event greatly helped the cinema to grow and diversify its audience'* (source 3). The bookclub has had beneficial impacts for participants, in terms of fostering new appreciation of the links between writing and popular music and of the complex relation between elite and popular culture. One Sage

bookclub participant observed that *'[my] view has changed positively towards associating writing with music'* and that the book club has *'broadened my knowledge'*. Another affirmed *'I enjoy the opportunity to develop my thinking on the linkage between words and music'*. One comment summed up much of the feedback: *'The books chosen have helped me discover writers I probably never would read otherwise, & discover new perspectives'*. Responses after the Darlington book club similarly indicated that the event *'Developed my understanding of how poetry operates within music'* (source 6).

- **The Litpop workshop, performance and public talks helped musicians and writers to generate new forms of creative expression, in doing so enriching the imaginations and lives of individuals and groups**

The Litpop workshop at the Star and Shadow Cinema brought together a small group of local musicians and writers in order to share their practice. The event was designed as an experiment in music speaking to writing. Guided by resources provided by Hansen, the seven writers and musicians worked together on a new verbal and musical composition, subsequently performing this in public at the Cinema. Participants noted changes in their own creative practices as a result of the workshop, and due to specific exercises involving musical adaptations of Shakespearean sonnets: *'I can see clear links between how writers may use music either as inspiration for pieces of writing or as accompaniment to writing'*; *'I have new ideas for pieces of music related writing'*; *'My understanding of how others relate to music and how they go about writing the content of their songs has been greatly expanded'*. One participant said they would try *'experimenting more within my writing – using musical forms'*, while another asserted that the event had the benefit of *'boosting my confidence, widening my creative perspective'* (source 7). They also benefited from the opportunity for collaboration: *'it was good to meet collectively'*; *'[I benefited] by having time & opportunity to work with other writers & musicians, observe their creative process and be inspired by their work'*.

Hansen's public talks at The Sage Gateshead (as part of their 'Exploring Music' series in April 2012 and February 2013) involved working with people in non-HEI contexts to illuminate and challenge cultural values and assumptions. These talks addressed popular music and literature, particularly the writings of Shakespeare: 42 people participated of whom a fifth were new bookers or non-regular attendees (source 1). Subsequently, 17 out of 19 questionnaire respondents from the audience for the 2012 talk affirmed that their view and/or knowledge of Shakespeare and/or popular music had changed as a result of the talk; and the same number agreed that the talk had had a 'positive impact' on their understanding of Shakespeare and popular music. Comments suggested respondents recognised what they termed the *'connectivity'* and *'juxtaposition'* because the material was *'original'*, *'thought-provoking'*, and *'awakened unexplored thoughts'*, by presenting ideas participants *'hadn't previously considered'* or *'would never have linked'*. This included the notion, for example, that *'maybe rappers have an insight'*. Where one respondent noted the talk *'challenged me to examine...more deeply'*, another summed up the majority of responses: *'It has made me consider how 'elite' Shakespeare is viewed which perhaps intimidates people – can popular music break through this fear?'* (source 4). By beginning to ask these questions, participants showed evidence of the impact of the research undertaken. Questionnaires collected after the 2013 talk affirmed the session had benefited the way attendees saw the links between writing and popular music and that the talk would change the way they read about and listened to music. One noted that the talk had *'Enhanced my thinking on the links between music, writing and identity'*; another suggested the talk *'Made me re-evaluate the way I connect lit/music'* (source 5). Reflecting on the impact of these talks, combined with the book club, the Cross-Strand Programme Manager at the Sage states that *'Adam's involvement with The Sage Gateshead has been beneficial to both the programmes and participants – both the Exploring Music talks and the LitPop Book Club, led by Adam's specialist knowledge and enthusiasm, have engaged with new audiences who have continued their own musical journeys by attending other programmes'* (source 1).

5. Sources to corroborate the impact

1. **Testimonial:** Cross-Strand Programme Manager, The Sage Gateshead corroborates claims about impacts on programming and participation from 2011-2013.
2. **Testimonial:** Member (Chair) of the Festival Committee (and Media Officer), Darlington for Culture, corroborates claims about impacts on programming and participation in May 2013.
3. **Testimonial:** The Star and Shadow Collective, the Star and Shadow Cinema corroborates claims about impacts on programming and participation in April 2013.
4. **Public Feedback:** from 'Shakespeare and Popular Music' invited talk by Adam Hansen as part of Sage Exploring Music series in April 2012. Corroborates claims about impacts on public perceptions of cultural value and the relations between 'high' and 'popular' cultures.
5. **Public Feedback:** from 'Writing and Popular Music' invited talk by Adam Hansen as part of Sage Exploring Music series in February 2013. Corroborates claims about impacts on public perceptions of the relations between writing and popular music.
6. **Public Feedback:** from participants in the Litpop Bookclub at The Sage and from the Darlington for Culture Festival. Corroborates claims about impacts on public perceptions of cultural value and the relations between writing and popular music.
7. **Public Feedback:** from participants in the Litpop workshop (2013). Corroborates the impact on facilitating debate about the relations between 'writing' and popular music on creative practitioners.
8. **Online resource:** Adam Hansen, 'Shakespeare and Popular Music' (2011), podcast of talk delivered at The Literary and Philosophical Society, Newcastle upon Tyne.
<http://soundcloud.com/litandphil/adamhansenlecture120511>.