

## Introduction

KATHERINE WILLIAMS AND JUSTIN A. WILLIAMS

The year 2014 was a good year for singer-songwriters past and present. The most visible in 2014 was Ed Sheeran, whose album *X* spent a non-consecutive twelve weeks at number 1 (the longest run since Adele's *21*), and, perhaps an even better indicator of success in this digital age, was the most streamed album on Spotify in 2014. In fact, 2014 was a good year for British artists in general as it was the only year that the top-10 UK albums chart was entirely dominated by British artists, and the top four (Sheeran, Sam Smith, George Ezra, Paolo Nutini) are often defined as singer-songwriters.<sup>1</sup> The year 2014 also saw two Tony Awards go to the new musical *Beautiful* about the life and work of the singer-songwriter Carole King. King, one of the defining artists of the genre, is becoming part of a history of singer-songwriters as musical genre that arguably lives on with newer artists like Sheeran.

If BBC documentaries are anything to go by, the figure of the singer-songwriter has been firmly planted into cultural consciousness in recent years. In 2011 Morgan Neville's documentary *Troubadours: The Rise of the Singer-Songwriter* aired in England on BBC4 alongside compilation footage entitled 'Singer-Songwriters at the BBC' that featured Elton John's 'Your Song' and other artists such as James Taylor, Cat Stevens, Harry Nilsson, Sandy Denny, Steve Goodman, Joni Mitchell, Neil Young, Judee Sill, Jackson Browne, Neil Diamond, Tim Hardin, Joan Armatrading, Tom Waits, and many others. The documentary chronicles the Los Angeles scene in the 1970s and features iconic figures such as King and James Taylor.<sup>2</sup>

Hundreds of higher education institutions in the UK and America feature songwriting and performance, essentially teaching today's music students to be singer-songwriters as well as to hone and refine existing techniques and abilities. There is a keen enthusiasm for the idiom amongst these students, who often perceive it as a natural and unmediated expression of their emotions through music. Yet despite the four decades of chart success, documentary coverage, biographies, and autobiographies, and the desirability of the idiom to music students, the academic literature on singer-songwriters has been sparse. We hope that this volume begins a wider academic conversation about the phenomenon, genre, performance traditions, and geographical spaces of the singer-songwriter.

[1]

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But what does it mean to be a singer-songwriter? Tim Wise poses a useful definition: ‘Singer-songwriter is a term used since the 1960s to describe a category of popular musician who composes and performs his or her own songs, typically to acoustic guitar or piano accompaniment, most often as a solo act but also with backing musicians, especially in recordings.’<sup>3</sup> Yet he is also right to note the difficulty in considering ‘singer-songwriter’ as a stylistic genre since singer-songwriters draw from a wide variety of styles (for example, Joni Mitchell) and lyrical themes. It is for this reason that artists such as Hoagy Carmichael, Leadbelly (see Chapter 9), Chuck Berry, Barry Manilow, Bob Marley, Dolly Parton (see Chapter 10), Brian Wilson, Paul McCartney, Paul Anka, or Kanye West (see Chapter 14) will not be generically defined as ‘singer-songwriter’ in the media any time soon even though they fit Wise’s (and our wider) definition.

This volume embraces the complexities of such a condition, and in most cases we have been able to look at artists who perform their own material as the starting point. In some cases (as with Adele, or Elton John), the material written is part of a collaborative process, yet audiences associate authorship with the star performer/persona. In Chapter 1, David Shumway sets the scene with the conventional notion of singer-songwriters that rose out of the late 1960s contexts and into the 1970s before moving on to more historical and varied perspectives. As he notes: “‘singer-songwriter’ is not anyone who sings his or her own songs, but a performer whose self-presentation and musical form fit a certain model’. He proceeds to point out that the future of singer-songwriters was not necessarily bound by the confessionalism of the early examples, but that it most certainly retained the expectation for ‘authentic individual expression’. The collection of chapters that follows embraces stylistic variety, musically speaking, and also embraces both the ‘professional’ singer-songwriter (King, Joel, Newman) and those who emerged from less formal training and vocational practice (Mitchell, Dylan, Newsom, and many of the yet-to-be-discovered performers at open mic nights). Although the book takes the UK and the USA as its starting point, many chapters explore perspectives further afield: we offer a snapshot of global practices such as New Zealand (Nick Braae, Chapter 27), Italy, and Greece (Franco Fabbri and Ioannis Tsioulakis, Chapter 28).

A tension emerges with the widening definition of ‘singer-songwriter’ that we have encouraged. We have intentionally kept the definition flexible in order to fully investigate the ideological threads around such a categorisation. First of all, some of the artists within this volume will meet with resistance in terms of their categorisation as ‘singer-songwriter’. The *Companion* is not an attempt at a comprehensive history of the singer-songwriter, nor a list of great men and women who have contributed

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to the genre. Although many of the case studies command the label of singer-songwriters (Joni Mitchell, Billy Joel, Elton John, Tori Amos), they often have a purpose of highlighting wider issues in popular music and its surrounding themes.

The book is not necessarily intended to be read from start to finish (though one could do this and the trajectory is logical). The reader can dip in at any point and work through chapters in any order. We intend to host a companion website which should direct readers to further reading, discographies, and music videos to supplement the journey.

The authors in this collection offer many widely varied analytical frameworks to consider the music and sociological themes surrounding the singer-songwriter tradition. There is a recurring theme of performer persona of the singer-songwriter as unmediated, and a number of chapters discuss the tension between the individualised persona and the (often) highly constructive and collaborative process of creating that persona (with figures like Adele, Elton John, and Bill Monroe). Another theme is the ability of singer-songwriters to defy stereotypes, either in terms of their own gendered identities, or stereotypes associated with their genre (for example, the 'female singer-songwriter' categorisation as 'women's music' and stereotypes attached to such a label). Artists such as k.d. lang, Rufus Wainwright, and Joni Mitchell subvert traditional notions of genre, gender and sexuality through both music and extra-musical factors (see Williams, Chapter 20). Joni Mitchell, though marketed as expressing 'female perspectives' (Fellezs, Chapter 18), tried to complicate female stereotypes of the singer-songwriter which arguably go back into the nineteenth century, as shown to us by Hamilton and Loges in Chapter 2. As they tell us, most singers of German Lied were female: 'the Lied evolved from a technically undemanding type of music largely aimed at amateur (often female) singers', as well as Lieder being appropriate for women in ways that opera was not perceived to be. And yet while physically confined to the salon, the Lied was also a space of freedom, a safe space for women to explore creative, compositional ideas, and as such represented one of the few spaces in nineteenth-century Europe that this had been accepted. In pop today, male producers and engineers grossly outnumber women, and it seems that the singer-songwriter genre is still an (unfortunately) rare space for women to explore their creativity.

The relationship between the old and new singer-songwriter can also be seen in newer artist James Blake performing Joni Mitchell's 'A Case of You' at his 2011 debut performance at the historic *Troubadour* club in Los Angeles (recounted in Bentley, Chapter 6). Mitchell was in the VIP section that night, and despite Blake's stylistic differences to Mitchell, it was clear they were part of a lineage of stylistically eclectic singer-songwriters. Both have an interesting relationship to race, Blake being part of the 'blue-eyed

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soul' British interest in black music seen in a number of white British artists, and Mitchell's interest in black music as well as black identity (even becoming a black man named 'Claude' for a party, as well as on the cover of her *Don Juan's Reckless Daughter* from 1977).

Furthermore, the theoretical frames used in the book will be applicable to cases beyond the singer-songwriters in this book, and beyond the genre as a whole. From the use of Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming other' (in Chapter 17), gender theories (Chapter 22), geographies of the Troubadour (Chapter 6), the Brill Building (Chapter 5) and English localisms in folk (Chapter 4), Allan Moore's distinction between first-, second-, and third-person authenticity (Chapters 16, 20 and 26), Schechner's theories of performance (Chapter 21), liminality and *communitas* (Chapter 25), or Moore's persona–environment model (Chapter 27), the book provides not only historical snapshots but models for analysis and theorisation.

The volume is divided into thematically related sections. Part I explores the birth and establishing of the tradition, beginning with Shumway's exploration of the etymology of the term 'singer-songwriter'. In Chapter 2, Loges and Hamilton return to the German Lied composer-performers of the eighteenth century, demonstrating a way in which the tradition developed outside typically expected norms. In Chapter 3, Mark Finch discusses Bill Monroe as part of the post-war subgenre of country music known as bluegrass. Finch uses Monroe's 'Uncle Pen' (1949–50) as an example of collaborative songwriting in a system that valued (financially and ideologically) individual authorship. What this chapter shows, as does Till's case study of Adele, that 'song authorship is not only determined by creative practice, but is influenced by the mechanisms of the commercial music realm' (Finch, p. 44). Chapter 4 looks at another post-war phenomenon, this time across the pond, of the singer-songwriters of the English folk revival. Allan F. Moore examines themes such as politics, regionality, humour, emotion, the supernatural and the tradition to reveal a diverse group of British artists that fall squarely within a broad notion of folk and singer-songwriter traditions. In Chapter 5, Simon Barber considers the Brill Building and Aldon Music, explaining the practices of songwriting teams and individuals that operated from this important New York centre in the 1960s. Some of the artists that were associated with the New York City scene just discussed, including King, would find their artistry recognised through performances at the Los Angeles Troubadour, and Christa Anne Bentley discusses the origins, geography, and success of the venue in Chapter 6. She shows how the Troubadour 'became the premiere establishment for singer-songwriters', a venue that still has a great deal of importance for up-and-coming acts wishing to add their names to the great canon of King, John, Mitchell, Taylor, and others. In Chapter 7, Michael Borshuk outlines three case studies that help

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debunk the common myth that the professionalised singer-songwriter had gone away by the 1970s. He looks at the stylistic eclecticism of Randy Newman, Billy Joel, and Walter Becker and Donald Fagen of Steely Dan as a cross-fertilisation across ethnic lines. Borshuk notes the importance of professional craftsmanship in their work, while additionally promoting a 'personal' style that fit within the ethos of the singer-songwriter.

Stepping outside a conventional chronological narrative, Part II considers individuals that could be broadly defined as singer-songwriters, covering a range of genres and eras. In Chapter 8, Tōru Mitsui investigates the English singer-songwriter, poet, satirist, and playwright Thomas D'Urfey, whose style divided opinion under the reign of Charles II. In Chapter 9, Josep Pedro considers the outlaw bluesman archetype in the blues musician Leadbelly, and the mutually beneficial relationship he had with John and Alan Lomax in the 1930s and 40s. Place-based narratives in Dolly Parton's concept album *My Tennessee Mountain Home* (1973) form the basis of the analysis in Chapter 10 by Jada Watson. The autobiographical tone of the album emphasised her poor, rural roots and was a crossroads in her career, taking it in a different and more successful direction. Chapter 11 looks at Elton John as author and brand, his performance persona adding to the notion of singer-songwriter although he is only one half of a songwriting collaboration. Joshua S. Duchan analyses three songs by Billy Joel that depict working-class life in Chapter 12. In Chapter 13, Timothy Koozin looks at the body and gesture in the creative process through the guitar tuning and gestural movement of the music of Nick Drake. Lori Burns, Alyssa Woods, and Marc Lafrance step into the digital realm in Chapter 14, investigating the art of storytelling in hip-hop, fitting Kanye West into a broad categorisation of singer-songwriter, connecting closely and intimately with his instrument: the sampler. A multi-media analysis of three West videos demonstrates complex critiques of fame, consumer culture, race, and class. In Chapter 15 madison moore investigates how post-dubstep sounds embrace digital technologies and club culture while fitting into singer-songwriter tropes in the music of London-based artist James Blake. Sarah Suhadolnik (Chapter 16) looks at the confessional songwriting from the 'Queen of Heartbreak' Adele, the 'anti-Gaga', with stripped-down performances such as her appearance at the Royal Albert Hall that reflect a specific artistic persona within the broader landscape of mainstream pop. Chapter 17 looks at the artist Joanna Newsom, including a close reading of her song 'Only Skin'. Jo Collinson Scott reclaims the oft-used concept of authenticity by reframing it within the concept of Deleuze and Guattari's 'becoming other', to paint a more nuanced picture than the usual reception of Newsom as part of 'New Weird America' in folk.

Part III shifts focus to further theoretical avenues in terms of gender and sexuality in particular. Like Newsom's work that arguably works

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against stereotypical ‘female’ singer-songwriter categorisation, Chapter 18 looks at issues of gender and race in Joni Mitchell’s work in the 1970s. Mitchell was not willing to be defined as a ‘female singer-songwriter’, and interviews and early marketing demonstrate these tensions. According to Fellezs, her ‘performance alterity’ was to explore possibilities as well as testing the limits of identity claims. In Chapter 19, Jennifer Taylor discusses the all-female music festival Lilith Fair in the late 1990s. While Taylor argues that the festival did not revolutionise the music industry, it did help female community formation, and the chapter is an interesting investigation of the layout and demographics of the various stages that comprised the festival. Katherine Williams’ Chapter 20 involves three case studies over the past half-century that demonstrate an increase in openness and tolerance of LGBTQ singer-songwriters: Elton John, k.d. lang, and Rufus Wainwright all complicate the heteronormative pop mainstream, and their own openness about their sexuality (in different eras) paralleled increasing visibility in both mainstream popular culture and in musicology as an academic discipline. Tori Amos is the sole subject of Chapter 21, where Chris McDonald discusses her as a shaman figure. Known as a confessional and intimate performer, Amos also draws from mythology and religious symbolism, and is a performer of ‘healing songs’. In this way she mediates between a spirit and material world to a wide and loyal fan base. This extended metaphor and all it entails, as McDonald argues, is a main factor in what gives Amos such legitimacy in the singer-songwriter realm. Chapter 22 discusses gender, identity, and the queer gaze (adapting Mulvey’s concept of the ‘male gaze’) with three artists who destabilise typical binary notions of gender: KT Tunstall (UK), Missy Higgins (Australia), and Bic Runga (New Zealand). Through an analysis of music videos, Megan Berry shows how these female musicians perform distinctive ‘female masculinities’ that appeal to a queer gaze. Chapter 23 focuses on a specific moment in the history of singer-songwriters, the early 1990s and the rise of a highly creative and talented ‘group’ of females, more distinctive than similar yet often treated similarly in the press due to their shared gender. With artists such as PJ Harvey, Björk, Tori Amos and Ani DiFranco, and many others, Sarah Boak explores themes of embodied femininity, sexuality and female power in their work.

Part IV expands the focus and analytical frameworks further to interrogate education, scenes, and emotion. In Chapter 24, Mark Marrington looks at key themes and threads of songwriting pedagogy and the relationship between theory and practice. Marcus Aldredge looks at the ‘open mic’ night as a liminal and ritualistic space. He looks at the social rituals of performing, the musical pilgrim that becomes part of a community as well as a journey (Chapter 25). Rupert Till suggests that the singer-songwriter is a subset of ‘the composer’ in Chapter 26, and uses theories from Nattiez,

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Attali, and Moore, as well as interviews with songwriters, to investigate the term. The chapter closes with an account of Adele's 'Someone Like You', and how subject matter, music and live performances mediate emotion for both performer and audience.

The final section, Part V, expands the geographies away from England and America, as well as embracing digital fan communities and marketing. Chapter 27 looks at local authenticity in New Zealand singer-songwriter Don McGlashan, while Chapter 28 provides a comparative overview of post-war Greek and Italian traditions. As Fabbri and Tsioulakis note, their singer-songwriter traditions sound little alike but both have parallel histories, and in some cases, similar influences (such as Bob Dylan). In the final chapter (Chapter 29), Lucy Bennett looks at singer-songwriters in the digital age. She argues that the confessional and personal natures of singer-songwriters translate well into social media such as Twitter, Facebook and Instagram. From Tori Amos' posted setlists on Twitter, Imogen Heap's request for sounds to become 'song seeds' in her work, and James Blunt's humorous responses to 'trolls' on Twitter, Bennett outlines an exciting and varied space that can only become more utilised by artists in multifarious ways as we progress further into the twenty-first century.

The personal communicative impulse in music is a highly desirable phenomenon by audiences: we want great composers to communicate their feelings via symphony orchestra and we want Adele to tell us about her break-up with her voice and a piano. Both are arguably intensified from a Romantic-era subjectivity, but have existed much longer than that. For many, it is that search for the 'authentic' performer, unmediated by industry agendas and commercial impulses, a chance to experience humanity through music. We hope that this volume begins an academic conversation about a wide nexus of music that we have broadly termed the singer-songwriter. Read, listen, think, debate and enjoy.

### Notes

1 The rest of the list includes Coldplay, Paloma Faith, One Direction, Olly Murs, Pink Floyd, and Take That. Some of these names, and individual performers within the groups, could be interpreted as singer-songwriters in the broader sense of the term.

2 'Singer-Songwriters at the BBC' is just one of a series of compilations created for and aired by the BBC in recent years. Other topics include *Prog at the BBC*, *Synth Britannia at the BBC*,

*Southern Rock at the BBC*, Irish Rock, New York Rock, Hip-Hop, Folk, and Reggae.

3 Wise's excellent dictionary article on the singer-songwriter sets up the 1960s music industry context for the rise of the singer-songwriter as genre. See Tim Wise, 'Singer-Songwriter', in John Shepard and David Horn (eds.), *Continuum Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the Worlds*, vol. 8, *Genres* (London: Bloomsbury, 2012), pp. 430–3.