

Pop Subsets and Cross Points

By Marco Machera

It might happen these days to come across a podcast and to hear Billie Eilish unexpectedly praise the deeds of the older composer and performer, Thomas Dolby, who is almost an archaeological find, for the listeners of the new generations.¹ What is the connection between a new sensation of contemporaneity and an artist who fully embodies the imagination of the 80's geek, the electronic musician who recalls a crazy inventor, locked up day and night in his laboratory to deal with futuristic devices?

Billie Eilish says she grew up with her dad listening to Dolby's records. It is interesting that the pop star associates the British musician and composer mainly with his latest studio work, the album *A Map of the Floating City*, released in 2011 after a long hiatus, and not with the classics of the eighties (the debut *The Golden Age of Wireless* from 1982, driven the following year by the hit "She Blinded Me With Science," and the second album *The Flat Earth* from 1984). For the person writing this article, that of 2011 is a recent album after all; for Billie Eilish, on the other hand (it can be read between the lines), it is a distant album, both in time and in aesthetics. In fact, she connects Dolby to her childhood, to moments spent with her family. Often it is mothers, fathers, cousins, older brothers and sisters who pass on certain songs. Or some artist of the current scene, who recovers and reconfigures the music of the past (for instance, Mac De Marco, who legitimised the Japanese Haruomi Hosono thanks to his cover of "Honey Moon", and connected him to a more sophisticated indie rock audience, in so much that Hosono's records have become a cult object for hip collectors).

In any case, these "archaeological finds" are considered as bizarre and abstruse products. Billie Eilish often repeats during the podcast that certain Dolby songs are 'weird', referring to both words and sounds. In a positive sense: they are really interesting, strange songs. Here, there is all this emphasis on *weirdness*, when even to a not-so-attentive listener, much of Dolby's material (and other artists of his generation) is pop music perfectly embedded in the mainstream of his time. Even glossy, from a technical and executive point of view. However, there is actually a difference in the writing, in the themes, in the chosen sounds; nuances that distance Dolby's pop from that of other commercial phenomena. Products conceived more "in series" than others existed in the past, exist today and will continue to exist. So, in a sense, listening to Thomas Dolby in 1983 (the year of "She Blinded Me With Science") was not like listening to Spandau Ballet's "True." At least, one would think that most of the time it was not a listening shared by the same group of people (the famous "schools of thought": for instance, David Sylvian's sophisticated Japan vs. the commercial Duran Duran, the latter in opposition to their rivals Spandau Ballet).

Knowing how to discern establishes a strong identity component in the listener. After all, as Simon Frith writes in his essay "Music and Identity,"² identity is not a thing, an object, but a process. In this sense, music is a key element, a tool to understand the world, ourselves and the others, and to understand the individual in their community. Billie Eilish calling Thomas Dolby's music weird is not all that surprising. Eilish is a mainstream product of her time, but *sold*, promoted as a phenomenon on the periphery of the commercial, as it escapes the more immediate and gut

¹ Eyelash Hostage, "Billie Eilish Talks about Thomas Dolby on Me & Dad Radio Episode 2," YouTube, September 30, 2020, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oB2-LC881c&ab_channel=EyelashHostage.

² Simon Frith, "Music and Identity," in *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays* (Routledge, 2007), 293–312.

logic of the record industry of the 2010s. Whoever listens to Eilish is consequently a weirdo, someone who likes strange things, with which they identify. It is an image that is inevitably associated with that type of listener. Perhaps an evolution of those who listened to Dolby in the Eighties? On the one hand, the geek attracted to technology, all science and synthesizers; on the other hand, the teenager who dreamed of committing suicide one night and confessed to it in a song, which based its sound and image on inner and outer discomfort, on being out of the chorus, as well-analyzed in an in-depth study of the *New York Times*.³ Two apparently distant worlds, which however coexist in the listener that we would not define as an average listener.

The author of this text – who is not very old but *only* thirty-five – began listening to Thomas Dolby in middle school, at the end of the Nineties, spurred on by the cassette passed to him by an older friend (the cassette: another archaeological find that recently made a comeback). Of course, it was not exactly the music of the moment, but one could have remained fascinated by it. As an aspiring musician, his ears were starting to get more demanding. With his peers, apart from rare exceptions, it was like he was speaking an unknown language, too old, fallen into disuse. But were not those songs too? Was not it “pop music”? It is a complex question, for which perhaps we should speak of pop “styles”, of subsets that are part of a larger system. As stated by Franco Fabbri: “[...] a certain ‘musical fact’ can be found at the intersection of two or more genres and therefore belong to all of these at the same time.”⁴ Often, however, it is not a question of a simple classification, of belonging to one genre rather than another: paraphrasing Fabbri, once again, he writes – in turn citing the linguistic studies of Roman Jakobson⁵ – that semiotic rules come into play, useful for making distinctions and for which the relationship between the level of expression of a musical fact and its content is fundamental.

For example, in a chapter of his autobiographical book, *The Speed of Sound*, Thomas Dolby (who has meanwhile lived a second life as a Silicon Valley entrepreneur and an ongoing third life as a professor at John Hopkins University in Baltimore) tells of his children, who one day told him, “Daddy, my friend John Bruno says you stole a song from the Backstreet Boys. Did you?”⁶ In reality, the opposite may have happened. Listening to Dolby’s song “I Love You Goodbye” (from the unrecognized album *Astronauts & Heretics* in 1992) and comparing it to “I Want It That Way” (1999), the hit song of the American boy-band, it is not hard to see some similarities, especially for the way in which the metrics of the respective choruses are scanned. In this case, however, there are objective differences. If Thomas Dolby’s song is an inspired storytelling with a cinematic flavor, with a poetic text animated by vivid images (think of the opening line “I would never normally go bowling, on a Friday morning in New Orleans”) and supported by evocative music, radio-worthy while still broadening the sound spectrum just enough to become “other,” the Backstreet Boys song, although flawless from a production point of view, with perfect sounds and artfully tuned voices, is reduced to a surgically packaged product to adhere to commercial standards. Indeed, one was a hit single, the other was not. In conclusion, outside a circle of fans,

³ Jonah Weiner, “How Billie Eilish Rode Teenage Weirdness to Stardom,” *The New York Times*, March 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/11/magazine/billie-eilish-profile.html>.

⁴ Franco Fabbri, “A Theory of Music Genres: Two Applications,” in *Popular Music Perspectives: Papers from the First International Conference on Popular Music Research, Amsterdam, June 1981*, ed. David Horn and Philip Tagg (Gothenburg; Exeter: International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 1982), 52–80, <http://www.tagg.org/others/ffabbri81a.html>.

⁵ Roman Jakobson, “Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics,” in *Style In Language*, ed. Thomas Albert Sebeok (MIT Press, 1960), 350–77.

⁶ Thomas Dolby, *The Speed of Sound: Breaking the Barriers between Music and Technology: A Memoir* (New York, NY: MacMillan, 2016), ch. 13.

listening to the music of an artist like Thomas Dolby is equivalent to finding oneself in a no-man's land: on the one hand, the casual listener who dismisses it as “old stuff”, on the other “the point of view of musicologists [...] who would like ‘consumer music’ to be only Sanremo or the Festivalbar, with television shots of hopping masses with lit lighters or mobile phones in their hands, and who obviously have little or nothing to say about children who listen to an album by Francesco De Gregori with Giovanna Marini in their Walkman, or who avidly download music files from the internet with which to reconstruct the history of rock.”⁷

Probably (speaking from personal experience), if the middle school geek had listened to the Backstreet Boys, he would have had much less trouble integrating, feeling accepted by his peers. In any case, this is a statement without resentment for those who found, and still find, sincere refreshment in the melodies of the Backstreet Boys. According to Luciano Berio, “music is everything you listen to with the intention of listening to music.”⁸ The beauty of listening to music free from social pressures and categorizations is, after all, being able to indulge one's own nature.

⁷ Franco Fabbri, “Categorie e Strumenti Concettuali per Conoscere e Preservare La Diversità Musicale. Per Una Critica Del Fallacismo Musicologico,” *Musica/Realtà* XXIII, no. 69 (2002): 43–54.

⁸ Luciano Berio, *Intervista Sulla Musica*, ed. Rosanna Dalmonte (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1981).

Bibliography

- Berio, Luciano. *Intervista Sulla Musica*. Edited by Rosanna Dalmonte. Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1981.
- Dolby, Thomas. *The Speed of Sound: Breaking the Barriers between Music and Technology: A Memoir*. New York, NY: MacMillan, 2016.
- Eyelash Hostage. "Billie Eilish Talks about Thomas Dolby on Me & Dad Radio Episode 2." YouTube, September 30, 2020. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=3oB2-LC881c&ab_channel=EyelashHostage.
- Fabbri, Franco. "A Theory of Music Genres: Two Applications." In *Popular Music Perspectives: Papers from the First International Conference on Popular Music Research, Amsterdam, June 1981*, edited by David Horn and Philip Tagg, 52–80. Gothenburg; Exeter: International Association for the Study of Popular Music, 1982.
<http://www.tagg.org/others/ffabbri81a.html>.
- . "Categorie e Strumenti Concettuali per Conoscere e Preservare La Diversità Musicale. Per Una Critica Del Fallacismo Musicologico." *Musica/Realtà* XXIII, no. 69 (2002): 43–54.
- Frith, Simon. "Music and Identity." In *Taking Popular Music Seriously: Selected Essays*, 293–312. Routledge, 2007.
- Jakobson, Roman. "Closing Statements: Linguistics and Poetics." In *Style In Language*, edited by Thomas Albert Sebeok, 350–77. MIT Press, 1960.
- Weiner, Jonah. "How Billie Eilish Rode Teenage Weirdness to Stardom." *The New York Times*, March 12, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/03/11/magazine/billie-eilish-profile.html>.