

Total recall: why retromania is all the rage

From synth pop to Hollywood remakes to collecting manual typewriters, we're busy plundering the past. But why the fatal attraction?

By [Simon Reynolds](#), [The Guardian](#), Thursday 2 June 2011



*Spot the difference: Annie Lennox in 1983 and La Roux in 2009.
Photograph: WireImage/Redferns Guardian composite*

There's no single thing that made me suddenly think, Hey, there's a [book to be written about pop culture's chronic addiction to its own past](#). As the last decade unfolded, noughties pop culture became steadily more submerged in retro. Both inside music (reunion tours, revivalism, deluxe reissues, performances of classic albums in their entirety) and outside (the emergence of YouTube as a gigantic collective archive, endless movie remakes,

the strange and melancholy world of retro porn), there was mounting evidence to indicate an unhealthy fixation on the bygone.

But if I could point to just one release that tipped me over the edge into bemused fascination with retromania, it would be 2006's [Love](#), the Beatles remix project. Executed by George Martin and his son Giles to accompany the Cirque du Soleil spectacular in Las Vegas, the album's 26 songs incorporated elements from 130 individual recordings, both releases and demos, by the Fab Four. Hyped as a radical reworking, Love was way more interesting to think about than to listen to (the album mostly just sounds off, similar to the way restored paintings look too bright and sharp). Love raised all kinds of questions about our compulsion to relive and reconsume pop history, about the ways we use digital technology to rearrange the past and create effects of novelty. And like Scorsese's Dylan documentary *No Direction Home*, Love was yet more proof of the long shadow cast by the 60s, that decade where everything seemed brand-new and ever-changing. We're unable to escape the era's reproaches (why aren't things moving as fast as they did back then?) even as the music's adventurousness and innocence make it so tempting to revisit and replicate.

For a moment there, Love looked like it might herald the opening of a new frontier of revenue-generation for rock legends keen to exploit their own archives. Would the Rolling Stones be next, I wondered? So far, surprisingly, the Beatles mash-up has proved to be a one-off, although Kate Bush's "new" album [Director's Cut](#) does rework songs from 1989's *The Sensual World* and 1993's *The Red Shoes* (a disappointing move for an artist once so forward-looking). But Love was a chart success and its platinum sales contributed to a remarkable statistic: the Beatles were the second-best-selling albums artist of the 2000s, shifting nearly 28m units. Indeed the Beatles book-ended the decade with 2000's singles anthology 1 (whose 11.5m copies made it the best-selling album of the 21st century so far) and 2009's massive reissue programme of the entire back catalogue.

Now the Beatles are the Beatles: they tower over the history of pop, so why wouldn't they be giving Eminem (the noughties No 1 bestseller with 33m) a run for his money? But think again, think comparatively: let's contrast pop with other commercial art

forms such as film or fiction. David Lean and Stanley Kubrick's 1960s movies are epoch-defining classics and doubtless tick over nicely in DVD rental and TV airings, but neither dead director was breaking box office records this past decade. The quality fiction bestsellers of the 60s – zeitgeisty novels by JD Salinger, Philip Roth et al – remain a presence in our culture but did not trouble any noughties bestseller charts. Equally, there are no modern directors copping licks from Dr's Strangelove and Zhivago, nor authors styling novels after Portnoy's Complaint. But there are still bands ripping off the Beatles. Some are even pretty great, such as [Tame Impala](#), whose latest LP *Innerspeaker* is a bit like the band decided *Paperback Writer* b/w *Rain* was rock's unsurpassable peak and decided to stay there, for ever.

Cinema isn't immune to retromania. Directors such as Quentin Tarantino and Jim Jarmusch still gamely fly the postmodern flag with films that are pastiche genre exercises or larded with in-joke references to cinematic history. The remake has become a fixture of the movie business, not so much for pomo reasons but because it's what people in the industry call a "presold concept". Unlike with rock, where most of the biggest-grossing tours involve reunions or wrinkly legends from the 60s and 70s, people won't go into the multiplexes to see a rereleased classic or blockbuster from yesteryear. But they will, seemingly, turn up for glitzy, pointless updates of major movies, such as the recent travesty of *Arthur* starring Russell Brand. TV has got in on the remake game, too, with new versions of *The Prisoner*, *Charlie's Angels*, *Hawaii Five-O*, and Britcom faves such as *Minder* and *The Likely Lads*. You also have the retro-chic series *Life on Mars* and its sequel *Ashes to Ashes*, whose appeal depends heavily on the sensation of utter immersion in the past through a fetishistic focus on period details of clothing, decor, food and so forth.

Nonetheless, there is no doubt that pop music is the area where retromania really runs rampant. There is something peculiar, even eerie, about pop's vulnerability to its own history, the way the past accumulates behind it and hampers it, both as an actual sonic presence (on oldies radio, as reissues, through nostalgia tours and now via YouTube) and as an overpowering influence. If you want further proof, there is no better evidence than the record that at the time of writing enjoys its 16th week at No 1 in the UK album chart: Adele's *21*. In the US, her success (No 1 album for nine weeks, No 1 single with *Rolling in the Deep*) is so

unusual for a British artist these days, it's tempting to see it as a flashback to the glory days when the Beatles and Stones sold black American music to white America. Except that those bands were doing it with contemporary rhythm-and-blues. Adele is literally flashing back to black styles that date from the same era as the Beatles and the Stones.

Adele is not quite as retro-fetishistic about it as Amy Winehouse, with her beehive, or Duffy, with her black-and-white video for *Rockferry*, her sample of Ben E King's *Stand By Me* in *Mercy*, and her name's echo of Dusty Springfield. But there is no doubt that her "anti-Gaga" appeal is based around the return to bygone values of gritty soulfulness. Adele's *21* consists of "timeless" songcraft influenced by Motown, southern soul and country, framed by "organic" arrangements featuring horns, banjos and accordions, with the whole package given just the slightest lick of modern slickness. The production involvement of Rick Rubin almost proposes Adele as somehow already an iconic veteran like Johnny Cash, in need of reverent rescue in the form of a "stripped down" sound.

I lived through the first revival of all this in the 80s, with Dexys *Midnight Runners*, *Carmel*, *Style Council*, the *Christians*, and the rest. It seemed corny and retrogressive then. In 1984, should someone have said to me, "If you want a vision of the future, imagine Alison Moyet emoting into a human face – for ever", I'd have laughed at them. I'm not laughing now. And just wait until the industry – desperate and with dollars signs in its eyes – floods the market with facsimiles.

Retro is not a completely new phenomenon, of course: pop has an extensive history of revivals and creative distortions of the musical past. What is different about the contemporary retromania is the aspect of total recall, instant recall, and exact recall that the internet makes possible. Fans can drown themselves in the entire history of music at no cost, because it is literally all up there for the taking. From YouTube's archive of TV and concert performances to countless music, fashion, photography and design blogs, the internet is a gigantic image bank that encourages and enables the precision replication of period styles, whether it's a music genre, graphics or fashion. As a result, the scope for imaginative reworking of the past – the misrecognitions and mutations that characterised earlier cults of antiquity like the 19th-century gothic revival – is reduced. In

music especially, the combination of cheap digital technology and the vast accumulation of knowledge about how specific recordings were made, means that bands today can get exactly the period sound they are looking for, whether it's a certain drum sound achieved by Ringo Starr with help from the Abbey Road technicians or a particular synth tone used by Kraftwerk.

Hence the noughties phenomenon of the 80s revival. It actually started in the later years of the 90s and just kept going: a friend quipped that it has now lasted longer than the actual 80s did. [La Roux's](#) Elly Jackson, whose tunes could be placed right next to Yazoo or Eurythmics without the least bit of temporal disruption, declared recently that "synth pop is so over . . . If I see anything more 80s-themed, I'm going to bust". The gall of the gal! Black Eyed Peas's last big hit [The Time](#) borrowed its chorus from the 1987 smash (I've Had) The Time of My Life by Bill Medley and Jennifer Warnes, suggesting that the 80s-extraction industry has run out of good stuff.

Peas's maestro Will.i.am is also a pioneer of 90s recycling: the non-80s parts of The Time sound like boshing techno-rave from the early days of Berlin's Love Parade. On the radio, every big R&B hit sounds less like R&B and more like Ibiza-trance or circa-1991 hip-house. Guest rappers such as Pitbull or Ludacris are obliged to spout party-hard inanities just like the MCs of Technotronic and CC & Music Factory once did.

Head into the post-indie musical zones of NME/Pitchfork and most of what you encounter is "alternative" only in the sense of offering an alternative to living in the present: [Fleet Foxes](#), with their beards and balladry modeled on their parents' [Crosby, Stills & Nash](#) LPs; [Thee Oh Sees'](#) immaculate 60s garage photocopies; the [Vivian Girls'](#) revival of what was already a revival (C86 shambling pop). In indieland too we're starting to hear 90s vibes creeping in, from [Yuck's](#) grunge-era slacker-isms to [Brother's](#) Gallagher-esque "gritpop".

The deeper you venture into the underground, the more music involves pilfering from the past. This is one of the central mysteries that propelled me through the writing of *Retromania*: how come the very kind of people who would have once been in the vanguard of creating new music (bohemian early adopter types) have switched roles to become antiquarians and curators? In the underground, creativity has become recreativity. The

techniques involved are salvage and citation; the sensibility mixes hyper-referential irony with reverent nostalgia.

Some of the music made in this spirit, from Ariel Pink's Haunted Graffiti to the output of labels such as [Ghost Box](#) and [Not Not Fun](#), is among the most enjoyable and thought-provoking of our time. The book is not a lament for a loss of quality music – it's not like the well-springs of talent have dried up or anything – but it registers alarm about the disappearance of a certain quality in music: the "never heard this before" sensation of ecstatic disorientation caused by music that seems to come out of nowhere and point to a bright, or at least strange, future.

What seems to have happened is that the place that The Future once occupied in the imagination of young music-makers has been displaced by The Past: that's where the romance now lies, with the idea of things that have been lost. The accent, today, is not on discovery but on recovery. All through the noughties, the game of hip involved competing to find fresher things to remake: it was about being differently derivative, original in your unoriginality.

All the cool obscure resources such as Krautrock or acid-folk have been excavated long ago, which is why the likes of Oneohtrix Point Never, Hype Williams and LA Vampires started looking to 80s mainstream pop, megastars such as Hall & Oates, Michael McDonald and Sade. For today's underground bands, enough time has elapsed that the overground sounds of yesteryear seem exotic and mysterious. Certainly it's a lot less obvious to draw on this stuff than the [Velvet Underground](#), [Neu!](#) or [My Bloody Valentine](#). But as even these mainstream resources get exhausted – and when I talk about pop's addiction to its own past, the analogy is less with drugs than with the west's oil addiction – the cutting edge of hip music is looking to the pasts of foreign countries. For instance, the latest crush of Los Angeles cool-hunters such as [Ariel Pink](#) and [Puro Instinct](#) is Soviet new wave music, readily findable on YouTube. Associated with the youth subculture known as [Stilyagi](#), the Soviet new wave offers a slightly askew mirror-image of western pop of the 80s.

The hipster underground is also where musical retromania intersects with the related phenomenon of vintage chic. From the fad for collecting quaint manual typewriters (either as decorative objects or to actually use) to the continuing boom for

vintage clothing, there is a striking parallel with underground musicians's fetish for obsolete formats such as vinyl and cassette and with the antique-like trade in [early analogue synthesisers](#). But the trend that is most emblematic of our time-out-of-joint culture is the vogue for digital photograph [apps](#) such as [Hipstamatic](#) and [Instagram](#), which give snapshots the period look associated with cameras and film from the 70s and 80s. (See also [Shakelt](#), an app that mimics the Polaroid and works faster if you actually shake the iPhone.)

What does it say about our era that so many people think it's cool to place these pre-faded, instant-nostalgia filters on the images that will one day constitute their treasury of precious memories? When they look back to the early 21st century, their pics will look like they were taken two or three decades earlier, summoning up a long-lost era they don't have any reason to feel nostalgic about.

Just like retro video [games](#) such as [Mega Man 9](#) that simulate quaint 8-bit visuals via a modern console, these retro-photo apps embody a central paradox of contemporary pop culture. We have all this futuristic technology at our disposal, endowing us with capabilities that would have seemed fantastical in 1972, but it is getting used as a time machine to transport us into yesterday, or to shuffle and share pop-cult detritus from long ago. We live in the digital future, but we're mesmerised by our analogue past. Hipstamatic-style apps also raise another question: when we listen back to the early 21st century, will we hear anything that defines the epoch? Or will we just find a clutter of reproduction antique sounds and heritage styles?