

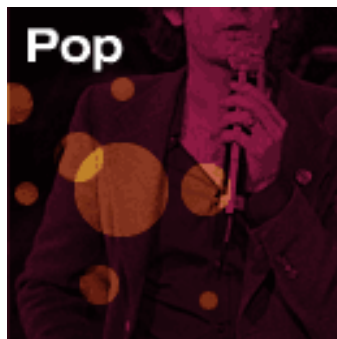


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## The other side of the tracks

Polish jazz-punk, gospel grime, Islamic country and western - you won't find these records in the shops but, discovers Alexis Petridis, a parallel musical universe is thriving in the UK

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In the studios of Radio Orla, Britain's first bilingual Polish radio station, breakfast show DJ and programme director Mariusz Stepinski is wearing a slightly disappointed expression. "You've never been to a Polish rock show?" he asks. I shake my head. He starts reeling off a list of Polish artists, but I haven't heard of any of them. Not Goya, Coma, Brodka or Smolik. Not even Myslovitz, who come from Upper Silesia, play "fantastic music, something like Oasis" and even had an album released in England in 2003.

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Then again, the fact that I haven't heard of this music is rather the point of me meeting Mariusz. I'm here as part of an ongoing project to try and discover more about the secret soundtrack of Britain: music that's hugely popular in the UK, but slips under the media's radar because its audience is confined within various ethnic or religious communities. Some genres have proved rather more resistant to my attentions than others. In recent weeks, I have been introduced to the hitherto-unnoticed urban sub-genre of gospel grime and come across a man trying to spread the word of Islam through the unlikely medium of country and western, but my attempts to penetrate the world of C-pop, a rather cutsey, wilfully manufactured brand of East Asian music popular with Britain's Chinese community, have come to nothing. The messageboard [cpopmusic.co.uk](http://cpopmusic.co.uk) has 56,292 members, but none of them want to talk to me. I post a message, explaining about the feature and asking for British C-pop fans to come forward. It gets nine views and no replies. Rather dishearteningly, a thread about which member of a boyband called Fei Lun Hai is the cutest - the general consensus seems to be that it's Wu Zun - gets 321 views and 58 replies.

Still, if you were looking for a thriving music scene that exists entirely unnoticed by the British public, you could do worse than fetch up at Radio Orla. It's about to launch its own chart, voted for by its burgeoning listenership. The station's two tiny offices are plastered with posters for Polish events in London, featuring every conceivable kind of artist. There are singer-songwriters,

punk bands, and a lot of techno, although Mariusz doesn't seem terribly impressed with the latter genre. "It's popular, but the people who listen to our radio station don't want this music," he says. "The listeners are very specific people, very intelligent, they listen in offices and banks." Apparently, they prefer singer-songwriters: David Gray is big, as is someone called Tomasz Makowiecki, whose appeal seems not unlike that of my old rival Wu Zun: "The women like him," grunts Mariusz. "Very gorgeous."

Sometimes, listening to Mariusz talk about Polish rock and pop, it doesn't seem that different from the British variety. They seem to have their own James Blunt, their charts are plagued by the winners of TV talent shows, the Polish records on his breakfast show don't jar when he plays them alongside the Manic Street Preachers. But sometimes Polish rock and pop sounds very alien indeed. Among the posters on the studio wall, one advertises a show that took place in October. A band called Kult sold out the London Astoria, playing a defiantly odd-sounding blend of Stooges-style punk (they do a Polish cover of Iggy Pop's The Passenger) and jazz, heavy on angry lyrics (in which that favourite bugbear of punk bands, "the system", takes a regular kicking) and, more unusually, heavy on brass: they are perhaps the first punk band to feature a French horn. Judging by the multitude of cameraphone footage on YouTube, their audience is passionate and word-perfect, bellowing along to a song that appears to be called TDK Cassette.

Ordinarily, when a band without a major label deal sell out the Astoria, it's a signal for the media and the music industry to go bananas, as happened in the cases of the Darkness and Enter Shikari. But Kult sold out the Astoria without anyone noticing. No one wrote a breathless article proclaiming them the next big thing or an underground phenomenon. Record company A&R men failed to form an orderly queue with chequebooks at the ready. Mariusz doesn't seem terribly surprised: "Why? Because Polish people never go to shops like HMV or Virgin, they buy their CDs on the internet. Many Polish people think CDs are very expensive here. They're cheaper in Poland."

Wanting to see what happens when the music industry does decide to back a genre of music previously unnoticed by the mainstream, I head to the O2 Arena, and visit Gospel Gathering, a two-day event partly sponsored by Sony BMG. In the US, gospel is huge business - one of Gospel Gathering's headliners, Kirk Franklin, has sold somewhere in the region of 10m albums, won five Grammys and collaborated with everyone

from Mary J Blige to Bono - but it goes largely unremarked in the UK, despite the fact that its tentacles seem to reach into every area of urban music. "The thing that people find confusing about gospel, they see it as a separate music entity, but it's entwined with genres like R&B and house, hip-hop, even dancehall," says Fitz, a DJ performing at the event. "There's a new generation coming through: gospel grime, bassline, all the stuff you'd expect to hear out in a normal rave. There's loads of choice, but that choice isn't being replicated in mainstream outlets."

Now, however, noting that gospel's traditional home, the Pentecostal church, is the fastest-growing Christian group in Britain, Sony BMG has decided that state of affairs should change. "There's a huge Christian market in the UK," says Mervyn Lyn, vice president of A&R and business development at subsidiary label RCA. "We have a huge market share in the US, with artists like Kirk Franklin, Mary Mary and Donnie McClurkin. We found that we needed to create much bigger mainstream demand for them over here."

Watching the acts at Gospel Gathering, you can see why Lyn thinks they're a saleable commodity. The standard of music is unerringly high, and the American performers in particular are impossibly slick. "They're stars, man," nods British DJ and singer Muyiwa Olarewaju, with a chuckle. "Backstage, they were mobbed by people and artists alike. Christian groupies, man!"

There are moments when you could be at an R&B gig. For one thing, the actual music often doesn't sound that different to the work of R Kelly. There's a lot of wave-your-hands-in-the-air, somebody-scream audience participation. There is also occasionally a faint but noticable crackle in the air, not least when Kirk Franklin takes the stage: you get the feeling that some of the ladies present may not be attracted solely by his voice and the good news he has to tell them about the love of Christ the saviour. Equally, there are moments when you're reminded that you most definitely are not at an R&B gig. "We've got some merchandise to give away," offers the event's MC, a perky lady called Abigail. "Who here is a big fan of The Book of Esther in the Bible?" A man who demonstrates his enthusiasm for the Old Testament story of Ahasuerus and his wife by running to the front of the stage and waving his arms about gets the goodies.

Regardless of the music's quality and the major-label muscle, it becomes clear that gospel is going to be a tough sell, not least

because of the artists' aversion to being marketed. For a man who's sold 10m albums, Kirk Franklin seems surprisingly wary of mainstream exposure: "I think the one thing we shouldn't do is try and make gospel big," he says. "I think that gospel needs to stay true to what it's going to be and whatever doors that God allows it to walk through, rather than trying to make these mainstream opportunities happen."

Despite what the artists think, however, there's a distinct chance that gospel won't remain an underground phenomenon in Britain for much longer. Plans are afoot to change the way the charts are compiled, to include CD sales from Christian bookshops. "The gospel initiative is part of a general overview we've been having in the last 12 months in terms of the genres that we cover," explains Omar Maskatiya of the Official Charts Company. "Part of the initiative came from talking to record labels in the UK, who are distributing traditional and contemporary Christian music. They feel that their market is undergoing some definite signs of growth, new shops are opening up, quite a bit of volume is going through these stores. Their question to us was whether we could extend our retail sample to include those stores. There's a lot more media outlets for gospel, now, especially with digital radio and TV. With that in mind, there's also the opportunity to raise the profile of a specialist Christian music chart via those channels as well as trying to cross it over into the mainstream media as well."

If the chart sample can change to include Christian bookshops, says Maskatiya, it's not beyond the realms of possibility that it could change to include other non-mainstream outlets. That would be good news for Awakening Promotions, a company dedicated to "trying to portray Islam in a positive light", via a sizeable roster of artists. A couple of months ago, they held a charity event for Darfur at Wembley Arena - billed as the Muslim Live 8 - headlined by their biggest star, Sami Yusuf, a British-based singer who's managed to sell millions of albums without really registering on the media radar in the UK, possibly because Awakening's CDs sell not in HMV but via Muslim bookshops and the label's website. Low media profile in the UK or not, the event sold out. Outside, a benign bedlam reigned: queues stretched back down Olympic Way; the box office was enveloped in a scrum. Inside, a kind of parallel Muslim musical universe was on display. As well as Yusuf's easy listening, there were Muslim hip-hop acts, Muslim R&B and Kareem Salama, a man ploughing what you suspect is a lonely musical furrow as a Muslim country and western singer.

But the biggest hope for crossover success might lie with Yusuf's protege, Hamza Robertson, who, when I speak to him, is understandably still reeling from the experience of playing Wembley: his musical career began in earnest barely a year ago, and he's still holding down a day job with a telephone company. Born on the outskirts of Oldham, he converted to Islam four years ago, much to the consternation of some acquaintances: "I've had people say to me, why have you taken a Paki's religion?" he says. He is mop-haired, boyishly handsome and given to talking about the positive spiritual effect of music with a strangely familiar wide-eyed wonderment: were it not for the references to Mohammed - "peace and blessing be upon him" - you could be talking to Richard Ashcroft or Ian Brown or any one of those north-western singers of mystical bent.

His debut album *Something About Life* offers soft rock not unlike that of Yusuf - one website describes Robertson approvingly as "a kind of Muslim Phil Collins" - but Robertson has other, rather dramatic, ideas about how to "reach past Muslims". He reels off a list of rock influences that includes Pink Floyd, Thin Lizzy, Audioslave and, perhaps most surprisingly, Iron Maiden: "The music's very heavy but the lyrics of a song like *Wildest Dreams* are really positive," he adds, perhaps concerned that the authors of *Bring Your Daughter ... to the Slaughter* and *The Number of the Beast* might not be considered suitable listening for a devout Muslim.

His next album, he says, is "going to be completely western: guitar, piano, bass, drums - a rock album. It's not been done before, a convert Muslim has never made a rock album. I think it could be quite controversial." This seems a bit of an understatement, given that some Muslim scholars are vehemently opposed to singers using any kind of accompaniment at all, let alone one influenced by Thin Lizzy. "It's the way forward," he insists, audibly excited. "It's the future."

The notion of a Muslim convert rock star seems a strange one. Then again, it's no stranger than French horn-playing Polish punk bands selling out the Astoria without anyone noticing, or gospel artists storming the Top 40. You never know, I tell him, it might work. You might become famous. Hamza Robertson laughs. "If that were to happen I'd be a very, very happy man. It's all about intentions. Are you doing it for yourself, or are you doing it because you think you spread a good message? I could be a role model."

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