Soft/Loud: Form and Meaning in Alternative Rock of the 1990s

From the twelve-bar blue and AABA to the verse/chorus, the history of rock music has featured various song forms that have proven to be durable generic types. In the 1990s, alternative rock ushered in a novel twist on the verse/chorus – a song form often referred to as the “soft/loud” – that became one of the genre’s and era’s strongest sonic markers. With its volatile juxtaposition of restrained verses and explosive choruses, featured most notably on Nirvana’s famed 1991 single “Smells like Teen Spirit,” the soft/loud song form came to signify alternative rock’s rebellious underground ethos and its subversion of popular mainstream standards. Since then, the soft/loud has spread to genres as far flung as rap-metal, emo, indie, and power pop.

Dr. Cateforis’ talk considers some possible pre-cursors of the soft/loud song form, from the classic rock of the 1960s and 70s to the power ballads of the 1980s, as points of comparison, while noting the significant differences the song form assumed in the 19002 – for example in the music of artist like P.J. Harvey and Courtney Love of Hole who employed the soft/loud to reject the compliant sexual objectification of earlier female musicians. Just as the soft/loud became one of alternative rock’s most recognizable socio-cultural and sonic signatures, the paper concludes by arguing that the nuances of this song form can also serve as a means of tracing the genre’s supposed “death” over the course of the late 19090s, when numerous critics bemoaned the ubiquity and commercial saturation of the soft/loud as evidence of the genre’s demise.

Tuesday, September 17, 2019
4:30 p.m. IASH Conference Room LN 1106
FREE