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# **“Keep it Simple, Make it Fast (KISMIF). Crossing Borders of Underground Music Scenes”, 13-17 July 2015**

**Heroically Reinventing the Academic Conference for the Twenty-First Century**

*“Keep it Simple, Make it Fast” : réinventer héroïquement la conférence universitaire pour le XXI<sup>e</sup> siècle*

**Christine Feldman-Barrett**

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## ***Keep It Simple, Make It Fast (KISMIF), 13-17 July 2015, "Heroically Reinventing the Academic Conference for the Twenty-First Century"***

In the days following David Bowie's passing, it was nearly impossible to miss hearing his 1977 "Heroes" as it circulated through both social and broadcast media. A quintessentially anthemic song, and even more so in light of Bowie's passing, it speaks to both the adversity and victory that come with being authentic to oneself. As neo-liberalism sinks its teeth ever more fiercely into all sectors of cultural life, including the Academy, it can be challenging to stay true to one's own scholarly "sound and vision." In a world where research in the arts and humanities is often coarsely critiqued because such areas of study are viewed as "impractical" or not overtly of "market value," it stands to reason that the academics who pursue this line of scholarship are indeed heroic in their determined efforts to champion the matchless value of understanding the (cultural) world we inhabit. In this respect, the 2015 Keep It Simple, Make It Fast

(KISMIF) conference, which was held from 13 to 17 July in Porto, Portugal, and convened by Paula Guerra (University of Porto) and Andy Bennett (Griffith University), offered academics from around the world a truly salon-like space that put all emphasis on *ideas* and *community* rather than scholarly "products" or careerist networking.

The conference, which also included a pre-emptive "summer school" for higher degree students, attracted a mix of PhD candidates, lecturers, and professors from across the globe to present papers on the theme "crossing borders of underground music scenes." The ideas presented in many of the papers spoke to how popular music narratives most always address broader cultural issues such as gender, sexuality, race, or politics and history writ large. The presentations also underscored the variety of disciplinary approaches taken when examining anything from punk in Argentina



to breakdancing in Canada. Whether situating topics in the past or present, all scholarship shared at KISMIF was not just of the highest, most rigorous quality, but also audacious and daring in its authenticity and passion. There was a sense of joy and genuine thoughtfulness in every paper presentation I witnessed. In these ways, the mere existence of KISMIF, which will be in its third year by July 2016, acts as a kind of herald or clarion call. It asserts that the most enlightening academic work is always already imbued with the excitement that comes with discovering and sharing new insights and ideas. In the recent past, the scholarly world

has functioned most interestingly and innovatively when it has been outside of mainstream, corporatized culture—when it remains true to intellectual life and the cultural impact that it can have as a result. The community that KISMIF brings together—at least for a few days—is unapologetically progressive. It is “punk” in the best sense of the word. It is heroic.

The pre-conference summer school exposed junior scholars to many innovative concepts as presented by first-class scholars. The notion of “punk pedagogy” was presented by British scholars Alistair Gordon (De Montfort University) and Mike Dines

## Keep It Simple, Make It Fast (KISMIF)

(Institute of Contemporary Music Performance—London). American sociologist Ross Haenfler (Grinnell College), known for his work on youth culture, particularly the straightedge scene, also gave an excellent presentation about youth, music, and masculinity. French composer and sociologist François Ribac (University of Dijon) spoke about the DIY ethos and actively questioned if it was a “punk invention.” Conference co-convenor Andy Bennett gave a discussion lecture which looked at the contested, but still commonly used term “subculture,” and what the current state of play is around that concept given that scholars are now even moving beyond the more recent term of “post-subculture.”

Given the progressive and innovative dynamic at KISMIF, it is little wonder that many of the keynote speakers invited for the 2015 conference are scholars who have motivated countless others to pursue innovative research in areas such as popular music, youth culture, and subcultural studies. Dick Hebdige’s *Subculture, the Meaning of Style* (1979) is one of the most cited works in this particular cross-section of academia, so it was highly meaningful for many in attendance to finally encounter the man behind the book. Dave Laing and his body of work, notably his landmark *One Chord Wonders: Power and Meaning in Punk Rock* (which celebrated its 30<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 2015) remain inspiring to new generations of scholars. Sociologist Andy Bennett’s many influential books and articles have resonated with those scholars looking to better understand the roles of music and leisure in young people’s lives. Matthew Worley (University of Reading) is a leading voice

in the history and politics of British punk and is also on the steering committee for the Interdisciplinary Network for the Study of Subculture, Popular Music and Social Change. His talk focused on the political divide between British punks during the late 1970s. Paul Hodgkinson (University of Surrey), whose seminal work on the goth scene foregrounded the insider-as-scholar perspective, spoke to the rising tide of hate crimes against subcultural teens in Britain. Mary Fogarty (York University) gave all conference attendees a potent reminder that popular music scholarship is not just about the music per se, but the activities—such as dance—that it inspires. KISMIF co-convenor Paula Guerra and Carles Feixa (University of Lleida) offered fascinating discussions on Portuguese punk and Spain’s “new new” social movements respectively. In sum, KISMIF’s featured speakers, and their chosen topics, continued to inspire those listening.

As a first-time participant at KISMIF in 2015, it was especially impressive to witness the integration of the conference activities within the city of Porto itself. While most daytime activities, such as keynotes, plenary lectures, and paper panels were held at the University of Porto campus, book launches, film screenings, art exhibits, concerts, and a DJ-ed dance night all took place in a variety of beautiful and dynamic venues throughout the city. In this sense, there was a natural and seamless synthesis of the conference events and the city’s ongoing cultural life. This is a strong statement in and of itself: that scholarly work is not outside of and only observant of culture, but is absolutely integral to the healthy cultural life of any city or nation.

Without any reservations, I can state that KISMIF is currently unparalleled in how it showcases excellent scholarship, creates an authentic, intellectual community, and integrates conference events into its host city's cultural life. The only minor critique I have is that there was so much scheduled that it was tricky to participate in all of the very appealing conference activities and events. It was inevitable that one would miss something, as there were many events going on at parallel or overlapping times. However, I think this is a case of an embarrassment of riches, rather than something which detracted from the whole

KISMIF conference experience. Overall, it is thanks to the initiative, drive, and follow-through of Paula Guerra, Andy Bennett, and their supportive team, that KISMIF has managed to reinvent and reinvigorate the academic conference for the twenty-first century. It is my sincere hope that their heroic efforts continue to be rewarded, that scholars of popular music keep attending and supporting the conference, and that KISMIF continues to thrive and enrich the academic community for many years to come.

Dr. Christine FELDMAN-BARRETT

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