

Studying historical scenes

Media constructions of the Aarhus music scene in the 'long 1970s'

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Morten Michelsen & Bertel Nygaard

Media is often overlooked in the analysis of music scenes. In this paper we would like to make a small contribution to change that by offering a case study of how the Danish written music press understood the Aarhus music scene. Our research question is: How did contemporary, national media contribute to the construction of the Aarhus music scene(s) in the “long 1970s”? We ask this because we are conducting a larger study of this historical scene and because the answers may identify a few elements of a scenic identity as they appeared in the contemporary media narratives looking at Aarhus from the outside – from Copenhagen, the national capital.

In the long 1970s a “progressive” music scene emerged in the port city of Aarhus, Denmark’s second city with slightly less than 200,000 inhabitants, about a fifth of the size of the capital city of Copenhagen. Apart from a few institutions of regional significance within classical music – a music conservatory, a city orchestra and an opera company, founded in 1927, 1935 and 1947, respectively – its music scenes prior to the long 1970s had only local or, at most, regional impact. The dominant local newspaper, *Aarhus Stiftstidende*, was conservative in outlook yet catered to a broad, local readership and thus managed to outrival its local liberal and Social-Democratic competitors through the 1960s and 1970s. For a long time, it was rather hesitant towards the local music environment outside of its official institutions, but by the late 1970s it had accepted the new musical culture – just like the rest of the Aarhusian, cultural establishment. National public radio and television, having a monopoly of nation-wide transmissions in Denmark and thus a key role in cultural and political debates, only set up a provincial department in Aarhus in 1973, and even after that its coverage of Aarhus music was limited. Until the establishment of a semi-professional recording studio in 1975 (*Feedback*, refurbished in 1981 as a fully equipped recording studio), Aarhus musicians were only able to record their music out of town.

The new music scene emerging in Aarhus during the long 1970s was developed by a large number of young individuals, sometimes university students, and was linked to a number of specific places and a few formal institutions. Individuals included, for example, audiences, amateurs, semi-professional and professional musicians, venue employees, volunteers and owners, record and instrument dealers, and journalists from local daily newspapers. The

places could be informal, such as rehearsal rooms and communes, or they could be actual venues, most of which laid within walking distance of each other. The music would be contemporary rock, folk, and jazz. The boundaries between these were not always clear as they saw themselves as non-commercial and artistic genres.

The music scene emerging in the 1970s was held together by the rather loose term: *rhythmic music*. In Danish parlance this notion came into circulation around 1968, alongside a new emphasis on rock music as an artistically valid form of expression, yet typically also covering jazz and various sorts of folk music, uniting all of these musical styles and opposing them to both pre-established senses of 'serious' (primarily 'art') music on the one hand, and commercial pop music on the other. As audiences and musicians "built" the Aarhus scene, the national media contributed to its consolidation by writing still more about it and giving it national exposure, thus producing an external gaze on the scene.

In the 1970s' Aarhus we can study an example of how external media discourses interacted to produce a music scene in which the concrete relations among members of the local music environment were supplemented by discourses and narratives adding up to a distinct type of *imaginary community*. In this context, we approach the 1970s not as a fixed decennial but as a period of cultural significance. In this context, this implies a longer duration, approximately the 20 years from 1965 until 1985 – that is, *the long 1970s*.

1960s: Barbed-wire music

In the mid-to-late 1960s the emerging Aarhus scene for the new musical styles of the youth began to be reflected in the national music press. This was centered around amateur bands inspired by British idols such as The Shadows during the early years of the 1960s, then The Beatles and other well-known bands. In Danish, this style of music was initially termed either just *pop music* or *pigtrådsmusik* – literally: *barbed-wire music* – reflecting how its piercing lead guitars, drums and electric bass sounded to representatives of the parent generation. A bit later the term of choice became the English term *beat*.

The vanguard position of Copenhagen in the youth music culture of the 1960s was bolstered by prominent Copenhagen-based bands, music, entrepreneurs, music venues dedicated to this music, recording studios, national radio and television as well as the previously mentioned and youth magazines focusing more and more on music as the nodal point of youth culture. Fostered by the Copenhagen-based press (regular newspapers as well as youth magazines), a new roster of young pop and beat music journalists emerged from 1965 onwards, interpreting and guiding the music taste of youth towards distinctive styles and an increasing collective self-awareness as independent youths along with a more and more outspokenly critical attitude towards established society. This vanguard were all men, with one significant exception (Helle Hellmann).

In parallel with the Copenhagen hirings in 1965 the two local Aarhus newspapers, the previously mentioned, dominant conservative *Aarhus Stiftstidende* and the Social-Democratic

Demokraten, each appointed a young journalist to write about the new music (Poul Blak and Erik Meier Carlsen, respectively). Neither of the two assumed the role of spokesmen for a progressive youth generation in the manner of the self-confident young beat journalists of Copenhagen. With the gradual emergence of a more ambitious local beat environment in Aarhus, the staff writer at *Aarhus Stiftstidende* in particular, was often the target of complaints that he was unqualified for the task and did not take it seriously enough. The local music journalists, being company men, did not really contribute to supporting local self-esteem.

The perception of Aarhus as nothing in particular during the mid-1960s is easily verified if we glance through the successful, though short-lived Copenhagen pop magazine *Beat*. It reported diligently on Anglo-American stars as well as events and bands in Copenhagen, and gradually it also began to acknowledge provincial youth, reporting on local bands and venues in the smaller Danish cities. A reporter visiting a youth dance event in the harbour city of Esbjerg in Western Jutland named this city the “Liverpool of Denmark” (No. 13, 1965), but *Beat* never featured a similar report from Aarhus, and only on a few occasions did it even mention Aarhus bands alongside other provincial bands. At this point, Aarhus was, at best, conceived as one provincial city among many in terms of pop music. The Copenhagen press tended to reaffirm traditional prejudices about provincial cities defined from a position of transnational metropolitan youth culture in which Copenhagen was conceived as the key point of reference within Denmark.

However, among the rather rare appearances of the Aarhus music scene in mid-to-late 1960s national media we find a small but jubilant note in the February 1966 issue of *Vi Unge* (*We, the Young Ones*, 1958-), the longest-standing Danish pop magazine with an average monthly print-run of almost 50,000 that year in a total population of less than 5 million. It said, simply: “Things are being done for youth in Aarhus. No-one has to be bored.” Of course, this reflected the presumption that the reader would expect Aarhus to be boring to youth. The following month, the same magazine carried a small feature article on Tine Sejersen, a student of musicology at Aarhus University specializing in classical piano who in her spare time played the electric bass as a member of the otherwise male Aarhus-based band the Four Comets. The headline was telling: “Better barbed-wire music than silly dance music”.

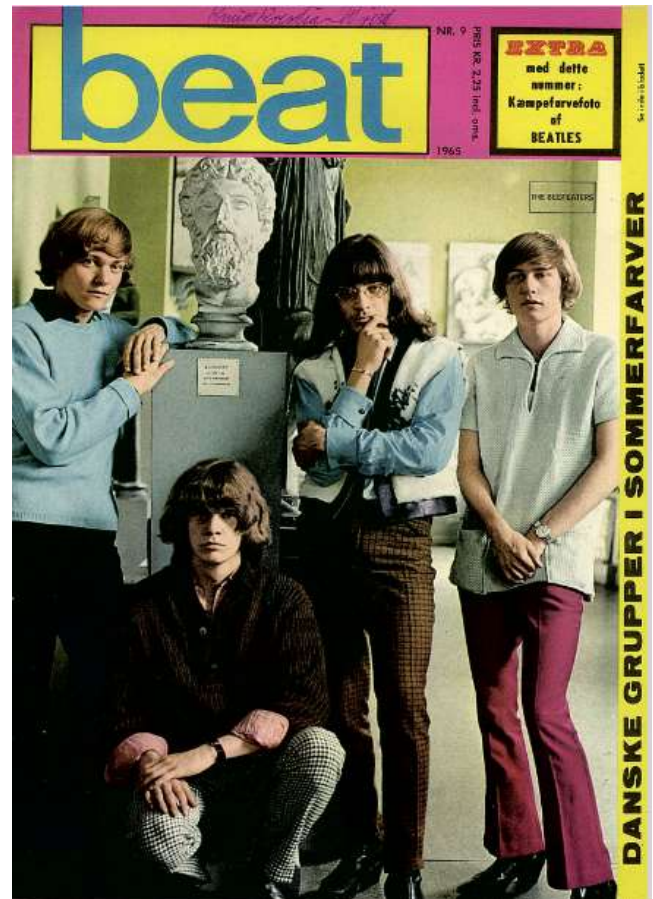


Figure 1: The Cover of *Beat*, vol 9/65 where the Copenhagen band *The Beefeaters* contemplate things. *Beat* was published 1965-66.

The following year, the same magazine sent its regular provincial reporter on a field trip to the dancing center, BOOM. Among more than 500 local youths dancing and partying to a pop band from another provincial city, the reporter noted that Aarhus was taking part in the miniskirt fashion of the time. In other words, Aarhus youth was not as backwards as some readers might expect. In its clothing style, at least, it was contemporary. Also, the reporter noted, competition among bands wanting to play in the BOOM dancing center was so harsh that even bands from Copenhagen met obstacles. "It's a tough struggle getting to play in BOOM, that's for sure. At least as tough as it is for Jutland bands wanting to play in Copenhagen. And then you know." Yet, there were only few such attempts at countering prejudices against provincialism.

The mainstream pop-cultural criteria invoked in this qualified acknowledgment of an Aarhus pop music scene soon proved to be on the retreat due to a distinction emerging within pop music culture between mainstream, commercial, conformist pop music culture on the one hand and *beat*, i.e., *rock music*, signaling nonconformism and strivings for artistic and/or social senses of authenticity on the other. Thus, from within pop music culture two distinct music scenes emerged, implying very different attitudes to life, art and society, even though the distinctions between the scenes remained an object of continued negotiation. While contemporary conceptions that this process implied the demise of pop music culture certainly proved exaggerated, there were tangible setbacks to conformist pop music culture towards 1970, calling for renewal. This setback was reflected in the declining print-runs of the mainstream pop press itself. Several successful Danish pop magazines emerging during the high tide of Beatlemania in the mid-1960s ceased publication in 1967-68. While *Vi Unge* survived this phase, its print-run dropped from its peak point of almost 75,000 during the first six months of 1965 to less than half only four years later.

Meanwhile, socio-structural changes began to have an impact on Aarhus and its youth segment in general. The traditional working class of the city gradually abandoned the old, often ill-equipped or even decaying inner-city apartment buildings in favor of new dwellings at the fringes of the city or the sprawling new suburbs. This left affordable, if primitive accommodation for the thousands of youths moving from other parts of the country to Aarhus in order to study at the growing number of higher educational institutions in Aarhus. In the academic year 1965 the University took in 5,000 students, and ten years later it was 15,000. Among the students were many aspiring musicians as well as a sizable audience eager for more than the usual local entertainment of provincial cities. With thousands of resourceful youths now living in the inner city of Aarhus, a hub of creativity emerged, large enough to produce a broad variety of styles, yet small and spatially confined enough that members of this informal community knew each other and interacted across conventional style distinctions. The city's jazz, folk and beat scenes were certainly distinguishable but the boundaries between them were frequently crossed by individuals as well as venues.

In all of this, traditional perceptions of provincial 'backwardness' were challenged by grassroots forces, gradually acknowledged in the national public sphere with many of its most prominent local members achieving national success at the same time as the grassroots preconditions of their musico-cultural development were widely felt to erode.

1969: Counter-cultural beat against pop provincialism

With the development of counter-cultural trends in a sizable and very visible segment of youth during the late 1960s, the elements of perceived provincial 'backwardness' was initially criticized condescendingly by members of the 'hip' counter-cultural communities considering themselves as a sort of cultural vanguard. In print media terms, the most prominent example of this was the hippie magazine *Superlove*, published in Copenhagen from 1967 to 1970. From the vantage point of its cosmopolitan cultural politics of authenticity, critical social consciousness and a perception that smoking marijuana was an act of liberation, Aarhus appeared backwards. Thus, the few portrayals of the Aarhus music scene in the pages of *Superlove* were much more straightforwardly condescending than the reports previously published in *Vi Unge*.

In early November 1969, *Superlove* published a report from the Aarhus music scene, written by the visiting Copenhagen-based hippie Jørgen Aurvig, a regular staff member. In this article, Aurvig positioned himself as a Copenhagen visitor visiting the smaller second city in Denmark, adopting the superior position of a person who is in-the-know, a partisan of what was then termed 'progressive beat', that is, rock music conceived as "serious" music, as distinct from not only art music and jazz, but also pop. As a consequence, his article resembles an old-fashioned explorer reporting on the conditions in a backward place.

The visitor from Copenhagen did note that the city's rapidly growing university provided the critical mass necessary for beat events of an acceptable size. Yet, he pointed out, there were few organizers of such events and few venues suitable for hosting them. However, the writer mentioned the recently established jazz club Tagskægget, which did host beat concerts occasionally but was not large enough for what he termed real beat events. And he mentioned the pop club Box 72 which was significantly bigger and used to host beat concerts but had stopped doing so, and whose owner, a former dance teacher, appeared uninterested in music and disrespectful towards the teenage crowd visiting his club. Only the independent, university-based Students' Jazz Club (Århus Studenter Jazz) regularly organized beat events in the largest canteen at the local university, with an audience capacity of 850. Among the visiting performers, the writer emphasizes the San Francisco group Country Joe and the Fish. This, at least, would imply some connection between Aarhus and contemporary music culture of the counter-cultural youth.

To Aurvig, all this signified a city of little worth in terms of music or youth culture. And not only did the city hardly contain any local beat groups of any worth, according to the writer, it was also practically devoid of marijuana, making Aarhus a beer-drinking city, a clear sign of cultural backwardness in the eyes of the Copenhagen hippie. The only feasible solution, as Aurvig saw it, was for Copenhagen beat groups to come to the aid of music-loving Aarhus youth by performing there at reduced rates. A sort of musical foreign aid from the metropolitan capital to the culturally impoverished second city, in other words.

This bleak image of the Aarhus music scene around 1970 was echoed in an opinion piece appearing a few months later in the same magazine. It was written by an Aarhus musician named Claus Pedersen who soon became a full time hippie under his artist name *Tømrerclaus*, i.e. Claus the Carpenter. In the spring of 1970, he described his hometown as dominated by a “square mentality”, whether caused by prejudiced traditionalism or a lack of self-confidence. He added that there was no space for small cohort of true musical capacities living in Aarhus, among whom Claus Pedersen saw himself. How, Pedersen asked, was “free music” supposed to thrive in Aarhus? “Where is the place where thoughts, environment and music take each other by the hand and walk out on a trip of perceptions and experience?” Pedersen’s colleague, the experimental jazz musician Tony Kovacs, had expressed a similar desire a few years earlier (in *Vi Unge*, May 1966). Yet, in his letter to *Superlove*, Claus Pedersen also despaired of the opportunities for Aarhus musicians to perform in Copenhagen. Copenhagen audiences greeted Aarhus musicians unkindly, calling the visitors “provincial peasants” and similar slurs.

Both of these reports on the Aarhus music scene were highly biased and selective, of course. Yet, through the particular lens and prejudices of the Copenhagen journalist we may get an impression of a local beat scene in the making, characterized by at least a small group of enthusiastic organizers within the university environment as well as a crowd open to new music. However, it was similarly clear that the burgeoning beat scene in the Danish second city was up against not only local obstacles but also prejudice on the part of hip Copenhageners identifying as progressive and metropolitan.

1975: A vibrant music scene

The perception of Aarhus as backwards in terms of progressive beat was challenged by a series of larger-scale concerts organized by the previously mentioned Students’ Jazz Club in a sports venue on the outskirts of town (*Vejlby-Risskov Hallen*), with an audience capacity of around 3000. Within a few weeks during the autumn of 1970, such top rock performers as Jimi Hendrix, The Who and Rolling Stones performed there, and during the first half of the 1970s they were followed by other rock performers of comparable stature such as Pink Floyd, Deep Purple, T-Rex, Slade and Sweet as well as prominent jazz musicians such as Duke Ellington, Oscar Peterson and Miles Davis.

Such remarkable music events were characterized by local musicians at the time as singular occurrences making no difference to the everyday lack of local venues suitable for beat (see, e.g. the journal *MM* no. 2, 1973). Nonetheless, these events did gain national media attention and thus contributed to challenging what we might, for lack of a better term, call the typical inferiority complex of the second city. Around 1970, the Students’ Jazz Club was supplemented by a new organization of local beat enthusiasts and musicians, *Musik og Lys*, and from these collaborations emerged new music venues as well as cooperative booking agencies. Apart from the dedicated Copenhagen-based music journal *MM*, these developments were only noted briefly, if at all, in national media.

In the 1970s, *MM* (Music and More, 1968-89) became the chronicler and discussion forum of the alternative music scene, primarily in its Copenhagen variant, but to some extent also the Aarhus scene. With its roots in jazz criticism, it was very opinionated, but the views expressed by the staff towards Aarhus was quite positive. Actually, the most negative sentiments relating to the Aarhus scene were expressed by local musicians from Jackie Boo Flight and Shit & Chanel in interviews. They missed the solidarity and the communal spirit that they knew from the hippie camp Thy-lejren, or they referred to the good old days at the very beginning of the 1970s when ideals were more pronounced. Apart from this, many others lauded the scene for its solidarity and openminded attitude. For a couple of years, *MM* had an Aarhus correspondent reporting on things great and small, and most record reviews were either somewhat or very positive. At one point in 1977, the editor even suggested that there was a specifically Aarhusian sound: mellow melodies, rich harmonies, and less aggressive rhythms (compared to Copenhagen). In general, the *MM* articles on Aarhus paint a picture of a scene to a certain extent closed around itself, not hellbent on becoming successful, and not really using the by the mid-1970s extensive number of visits from international artists for inspiration. The main point, though, is that several Aarhus musicians actually got a voice through the interviews, even though the print-run was only between 5.000 and 10.000 copies.

The more generalized, positive revalorization of the Aarhus music scene in the mid-1970s emerged in other parts of the national press as well. In 1975, *Vi Unge* referred increasingly to Aarhus-based bands, including the progressive rock band Taurus and Shit & Chanel, the first all-female rock band to gain nationwide success. In December that year, the same magazine published an article on the music environments of provincial cities, proclaiming that they were now rivalling the leading position of Copenhagen. In particular, the article emphasized the now thriving Aarhus music scene, quoting Ole Kühl, a musician from Copenhagen recently resettling in Aarhus:

“The music environment in Aarhus is healthier, more fertile and more humane than in Copenhagen”, says Ole Kühl (...). He was a member of Blue Sun, a Copenhagen band, and a good Copenhagen band at that, leaving the capital three years ago because too little happened there, and the environment had become a bit too suffocating. Now he has just released his first solo album, *Natdamperen*, with help from his friends. His friends in Aarhus. “There aren’t as many concerts in Aarhus as in Copenhagen”, he says – but much more is happening at the club level, people jam with each other and help each other.

In other words, Aarhus could now be perceived as the key place for music development, at least in terms of its live music venues.

This was still a rather early stage of recognition, however. Tellingly, the Copenhagen-based author of the article, rock journalist Jørgen Kristiansen, misplaced one of the most commercially successful Aarhus bands (*Bamses Venner*) as based in the smaller provincial city of Vejle. This simple mistake was symptomatic of how the Aarhus music appeared in the

Copenhagen-based national media during the mid-1970s. However vibrant, Aarhus was still mainly regarded as a part of a series of provincial urban music scenes.

C. 1980: From grassroots to mainstream pop success

Through the stylistic changes of the later 1970s and early 1980s, from progressive rock through punk and new wave, *Vi Unge's* Jørgen Kristiansen repeatedly acknowledged the Aarhus scene and its vitality. When the newly-formed Aarhus new wave band Warm Guns released their debut album in 1979, he ascribed the qualities of the band to its local music environment:

What a tightness, what an energy, what dynamics! In general, Aarhus is increasingly asserting itself as the new number one Rock City of Denmark. This is where new groups have ideas, body and spirit; this is where small, alert record shops can present the future rock top-sellers before they are noted elsewhere.

And when in 1980 Anne Linnet, the most prominent female member of the Aarhus scene since the early 1970s, released an album of songs in English, the same journalist not only enquired about her ambitions for entering the US market. He also pointed out her roots in the Aarhus scene. "Aarhus has always been appreciated as 'a good music city,'" he remarked in the June 1980 issue, with some exaggeration, adding that despite her success at the national level she was planning to stay in Aarhus.

Soon, the same magazine began using the Aarhus scene as the basis for comparisons. In April 1981, the journal presented a band from Denmark's fourth biggest city, Aalborg, with the words: "Just as Aarhus has played a nice role in the life of Danish rock music, Aalborg has now started doing the same." In August 1982, the magazine introduced a new rock band from Copenhagen, named V6, remarking that it was now unusual to see a promising, upcoming band which was *not* from Aarhus. From such examples of acknowledgment from the Copenhagen music press it would be tempting to conclude that the relationship had now been reversed, with Denmark's second city now emerging as the capital city in terms of its pop-rock scene.

Yet, these examples of acknowledgment of the Aarhus scene were still implicitly counterbalanced in surveys of the Danish music scene at large. One such survey, published in January 1983 in *Vi Unge*, emphasized six significant new bands emerging during 1981, among which only one (Anne Linnet Band) consisted partly of prominent figures from the Aarhus scene. All the others (Rugsted & Kreutzfeld, Tøsedrengene, Sneakers, Malurt, Delta Cross Band) were from Copenhagen. Among the bands emerging in 1982, the magazine did not mention a single example from Aarhus.

Conclusions

The above comments on articles related to Aarhus from *Beat*, *Superlove*, *Vi Unge*, and *MM* demonstrate how the scene very slowly became something to be reckoned with in a national perspective – even by the Copenhagen trend setters. That reckoning also mirrored the national acceptance and eventual celebration of music made by musicians coming from that scene. The articles were few and far between, but they still demonstrate a change, both by their frequency and by their tone.

The contemporary media sources studied here cannot be said to falsify the established narrative of Aarhus as the site of a vibrant, increasingly acknowledged music scene, but the study of them do call for de-mythologization of this scene as “miraculous” in some way. One argument being that the Aarhusian artists’ career trajectory is quite common: the move towards the metropolis in search of success. In this process they tended no longer to be associated strongly with their place of origin. Rather, they became associated with a general, nation-wide pop scene. In that respect, they tended to outshine the real, much more numerous, yet also much less glamorous Aarhus music scene. In this case, the concrete, multifarious community of the Aarhus scene contradicted the increasingly dominant narratives of the Aarhus scene as an imaginary community.

As interviews rather than reports became sources for articles, the narrative began to change. The unusually friendly atmosphere became an important nodal point in the Aarhus scene narrative. Our observations also demonstrate that the national media’s contribution to inferiority complexes seems to become still less manifest, and that the act of not mentioning the scene has been in fact the largest factor in what locals even today perceive to be a problem.

As mentioned at the beginning, Scene studies have mainly focussed on the present as it unfolds among ordinary people in everyday circumstances, often with an agenda of empowerment. We have ignored this perspective in order to analyse and understand a specific, historical scene – albeit still in a power perspective. A consequence of this change is that archival studies and the interpretation of written texts is more central than ethnographic methods as developed in anthropology, oral history, sociology have become widespread. We do not consider this to be radical in any way, but the approach lets other voices come forwards, not least some relatively powerful voices like the press and public institutions. This does not mean that the media has formed the scene in question, but that it has contributed to a scene’s self-understanding. In this way, national media are to some extent a part of local scenes – as a few voices taking part in the scene’s developments.