Reviews


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As I write this, Elvis Costello’s The Delivery Man has just been critically acclaimed as his best album of new songs for fifteen or twenty years and he is being feted in the pages of The Gramophone for his ability to cross the popular/classical divide as exemplified in his ballet score Il Sogno. A few weeks prior to the release of these recordings, Costello’s fiftieth birthday celebrations included a three-day showcase of the range of his musical interests in a series of performances at New York City’s Lincoln Center. It is surely time for an assessment of the music and creative career of one of the most prolific, idiosyncratic, versatile and awkward of contemporary pop musicians. Costello brings out the snob (and inverted snob) in listeners and the responses he provokes from critics are part of his intrigue. Is he a pretentious postmodern dilettante barely concealing his limitations behind mannered over-wrought wordplay and the needless over-ornamentation of derivative rock songs and genre pastiches? Or is he a renaissance man, forging a unique path and highly original aesthetic whilst resisting the demands of industry, the barbs of blinkered rock critics, and the conservative expectations of fans alike? It certainly requires a broad-minded, musically knowledgeable and aesthetically reflexive analyst to get to grips with these composite creations (the artistic persona and his works).

Considering their subject, his strong opinions, provocative pronouncements and the musical moves that he’s taken over the years, both writers are strangely cautious and unwilling to offer substantive critical analysis of either music or public performing persona. Smith’s is the more critical, but both assume Costello to be one of the greats of recent rock history and both continually compare aspects of his persona and song-writing to Bob Dylan, a comparison that many (including me) might feel is historically unwarranted and musically misleading. Both books are heavily dependent on the interviews that Costello has given over the years and the essays that have accompanied the re-issues of his back catalogue, along with extensive citations from reviews that have greeted each Costello album. In each book the story is largely told through Costello’s interviews and the responses of journalists. The fans and public, and the perspectives of Costello’s artistic contemporaries rarely feature.

For someone who once said ‘writing about music is like dancing about architecture’, Costello has spent a considerable amount of his artistic career pontificating about music when speaking and writing. The fact that Costello once said this to a journalist is itself an indication of one of the lessons we should surely have learnt from pop music history: a sceptical attitude is required when assessing and making use of
the words spoken by musicians during press interviews. There is not too much of that here, as quote after quote is uncritically used to explain the motives of the maestro and his music. Well, not so much the music, as the lyrics. Thomson continually attempts to give a sense of the sound of the music, often with some highly idiosyncratic analogies – referring to the songs on *Mighty Like a Rose* as ‘over-stuffed sofas, uncomfortable, misshapen, the springs poking out all over the place’ (p. 222). By contrast, Smith focuses solely on lyrics, barely mentioning the music. Much of the material in both books is familiar to me and I have only partially followed the intricate twists of Costello’s career over the years. Dedicated followers are unlikely to find anything particularly new, with the possible exception of Thomson’s material about Elvis’s, or should I say Declan’s early years. Strangely, neither book contains a discography.

Thomson has some interesting material about Costello’s early days accompanying his musician father Ross MacManus to concerts and recording sessions (father and son collaborated on an advert for White’s Lemonade – ‘I’m a Secret Lemonade Drinker’, for example). Thomson also sheds light on Elvis’s time with the band Flip City and as the solo performer D.P. Costello. He’s consulted old friends who have given him lyric sheets (reproduced in the book) and allowed him to hear demos that give an indication of the folk, R&B, rock, Americana and popular song traditions that Costello has continually drawn from. There are no real surprises here, as Costello has extensively exposed the public to his musical influences over the years (and released many old demo recordings). Nevertheless, there are some fascinating details of the changes undergone by songs. For example, a song called ‘Radio Soul’ that in 1974 had a gentle ‘Spanish-style sway’ and was ‘an affectionate nod to the wireless’ was transformed into ‘a snarling riot of guitars and organ’. By 1978, as ‘Radio, Radio’, it still had the same melody and much of the original lyrical content, but the thematic argument had been inverted. The phrase ‘sound salvation’ had shifted from the redemptive to the caustically ironic.

In narrating the tale, Thomson uses a particular literary device for marking the invention of the Elvis persona and the transformation from Declan MacManus. Whenever the musician speaks of the period prior to this moment in 1977, he is referred to as ‘Declan’. Numerous public media interviews given by Elvis Costello much later in his career are cited as if ‘Declan’ were speaking. After the name change it is ‘Elvis’ speaking. If the book truly presented the opinions of Declan prior to the name change, during this particular period, then it might shed some light on any psychological shift that accompanied the musical changes as he struggled for the important deal, got his foot in the door and then grappled with the consequences. As it is, this trick muddies the waters, even if it does highlight the impact of selecting the name ‘Elvis’ just prior to Presley’s death in 1977 (Costello being the maiden name of his great grandmother).

Thomson’s book follows Elvis’s career, in a pedestrian detailed manner from some brief family history prior to his birth up to his marriage to Diana Krall. It’s noticeable that the periods when Costello is promoting his work and giving interviews are well covered. When he disappears for months, the narrative simply jumps to the next public event, particularly in the latter part of the book. Everything is neatly placed in chronological sequence, with copious attention to the dates when tours began and finished. Yet, there are some odd imbalances. Less than three impressionistic pages are devoted to the music on the 1978 album *This Year’s Model* – a classic of post-punk posturing and postmodern plundering. This is surely an album
that provides many insights into Costello’s skill as a songwriter, one responding to contemporary musical and social changes. In contrast, Elvis’s curation of the genre crossing and occasionally art farty Meltdown Festival in 1995 is ponderously detailed over ten pages. There are few new interviews conducted for the book, and of The Attractions it is only Bruce Thomas who has spoken with the author. Thomas’s voice tends to predominate in accounts of escapades during the 1970s and early 1980s. Considering Thomas wrote a book about touring with the band (The Big Wheel) and that this contributed to his departure and inspired one of Costello’s most vitriolic songs (‘How to be Dumb’) the ex-bassist’s observations are surprisingly coy and muted.

Whether the historically unfolding biography is a useful way of understanding any creative artist, it’s clear that Costello’s music and performing identity do not ‘develop’ in the way that it might be possible and fairly plausible to narrate the history of the Beatles, or Miles Davis or Mozart (even if such an approach to these would have its problems). Over thirty years Costello has cyclically returned to certain themes, styles, and threads and gone off on many tangents that are interesting even if not judged to be aesthetically or commercially successful (which may not be their goal in the first place). In fact, it’s symptomatic of the categories and discourses of both rock critics and music industry that many of his experiments are deemed to have ‘failed’. And, Thomson provides ample evidence to support Costello’s complaint that the music industry has been unsupportive, obstructive and unwilling to promote his recordings.

Smith attempts to avoid the linear biographical approach by taking a more thematic perspective. His study of Costello appears in a book that is half devoted to Joni Mitchell, the two artists linked due to their apparent relationship to a ‘torch song tradition’. Does singing about the trials and tribulations of love inevitably make one a torch singer? And, is this an apt label to apply to either Costello or Mitchell? It’s a pretty tenuous link, and one that is only really argued for in a brief passing introduction and conclusion to the book. Again, there is much in this book that will be familiar to the fans of Elvis and Joni, and Smith’s approach will be familiar to readers of Popular Music. The author uses ‘auteur theory and narrative techniques’ as a means of assessing the words of songs and interviews and to examine the ‘stylistic tendencies that organise those expressions’. He detects ‘narrative superstructures’, identifying these as Joni Mitchell’s ‘Earth Mother manifesto’ and Elvis Costello’s ‘Citizen Elvis editorials’. Both ‘writers cast tales of love, war, peace, politics, fashion, fascism and house pets in a manner consistent with their stated artistic philosophies and creative goals’ (p. xvii) – which doesn’t suggest the rather narrow torch song tradition to me.

This is certainly a more analytical and structured study than Thomson’s rambling tale, and there is much more to argue with as Smith seeks to explicate the patterns of each singer’s ‘narrative superstructure’ via chapters on ‘The Artist’ (life story), ‘The Impulse’ (‘artistic philosophy’), ‘The Oeuvre’ (organised thematically) and ‘The Exemplars’ (key songs analysed almost solely in terms of their lyrics). As a way of making sense of a huge body of work there is a value in such an approach, even though it is inevitably reductive, schematic and perhaps finds too much coherence – he’s unwilling to allow for paradoxes, contradictions and loose ends. Mitchell’s ‘Earth Mother manifesto’, the apparently unifying theme that connects the diverse strands in her musical trajectory, is split into periods: the participant commentator phase; the sonic explorer period; the seasoned commentator period. Costello’s ‘Citizen Elvis editorials’ are also broken down into distinct periods: the making of citizen Elvis; the
punk tunesmith; the punk composer. Whilst Mitchell’s works and influences are elucidated with a degree of subtlety, Costello’s development is more crudely sketched as a ‘punk’ – that word recurring with tedious regularity. In contrast, Thomson, possibly due to his British perspective on punk, is clearly aware of how Declan used the prevailing zeitgeist opportunistically. Like many, Elvis never wholeheartedly embraced punk and he wore the (strait)jacket more awkwardly and ambivalently than many of his contemporaries who rode their bands in on the same wagon.

Finally, Smith attempts to bring Costello and Mitchell together by comparing their third albums, assuming a model whereby the third album of any band/singer-songwriter is always the most significant test of their ability to continue producing new material. Ultimately he interprets the work of both artists as constituting a type of diary through which truths are communicated to fans; ‘They sang from their hearts, playing their roles to their fullest. It is most likely that everybody in each audience took the songs as personal messages from Mitchell and Costello’ (p. 286). So the popular song works its magic directly as personal message from singer to fan. But, notice the ‘most likely’ in that sentence. Of course, he’s guessing. He doesn’t know. He hasn’t even mentioned an audience member that he’s observed, let alone questioned. From talking and listening in bars after a few Costello performances, I’d say that fans judge their relationship to the artist and his songs in a much more sophisticated, reflexive and ambivalent manner than this. Elvis is too knowing, too aware of many musical traditions, of the media, of his own experiences as a fan, of his own construction as a beloved entertainer – and we know it too. Not only is Elvis Costello a pop ‘act’, he is quite self-consciously a writer of character songs and an observer of difficult relationships and perplexing situations. The trick of the great character songwriters is to sing convincingly from the first person, to have us believe. But, you just know that Costello’s verbal ploys, puns and put-ons don’t in any simple way come straight from the heart (and why should they?).

Although acknowledging the quite calculated way that Costello has lifted musical, lyrical and thematic influences, both authors seem to agree that Costello is singing about events in his life. Just as Smith casually compares the work of Mitchell and Costello to a type of musical diary, so Thomson writes of the song ‘Alison’ and confidently asserts: ‘Despite several contradictory theories over the years regarding the inspiration for the song, many fuelled by its author, ‘‘Alison’’ is for and about Mary, plain and simple’ (p. 59) (Mary being Declan’s first wife). We are indeed in the black and white world. As if any song could be so unambiguously about one person/relationship – the most simplistic model of the link between life and work. The certainty and inevitability of such a claim adds little to our understanding of Costello’s creativity. Surely it’s the composite way that songs are created from multiple experiences and influences combined with large doses of imagination that makes song-writing such a fascinating art. These books certainly tell us a lot about his public life and persona, but far greater insight into Costello’s music can be found in David Brackett’s chapter on ‘Pills and Soap’ in Interpreting Popular Music (University of California Press, 1995).

As I was finishing these books, I kept wondering why Costello was so angry, and why the way he expressed that anger had such an appeal for many of us back in the late 1970s. It was a stance that was so far removed from the bland pop poses that would follow in the 1980s and the Brit pop pastiches that looked back in anger during the 1990s. One answer would surely lie in the experience of becoming a certain type of teenager in Britain during the 1970s, and inhabiting that peculiar wasteland of
suburban and provincial secondary schooling, with its strange warping impact upon aspirations, outlooks and the perception of possibilities. That anger and fatalism would very soon be appropriated by the spirit of Thatcherism and transformed into enterprise, entrepreneurialism and self-invention. But, for a fleeting moment, Costello channelled it and gave that confused rage a sound (more than a voice). This is what makes This Year’s Model an album worthy of serious sociologically informed music criticism.

Although Thomson astutely notes that many of the songs on Costello’s first album My aim is true were ‘driven by the motor of suburban paranoia’ (p. 48), he doesn’t really pursue this issue or explore its context and background. For me there’s a neglected connection lurking in each book. Thomson notes that when Costello released King of America, he changed his publishing credits to D.P.A. MacManus, adding the ‘A’ for Aloysius as a tribute to comedian Tony Hancock who also used the name. Thomson says no more. Meanwhile, Smith quotes an interview with Costello from 2002 in which he said the following: ‘There’s a favourite film of mine that has a character who’s a clerk in an office, and he gives it all up to go and be a modern artist. It’s like a satire of England’s middle-class modern art in the ’50s. He becomes a very celebrated artist, and at the end of it he’s asked how he creates his paints, and he says, ‘In a bucket with a big stick’. It’s such a brilliant line, because it’s the way I feel about what I do. How do I write these songs? In a bucket with a big stick’ (p. 164). Smith runs with the bucket as a ‘telling metaphor’. But he doesn’t ask who the comedian was or say anything about the film. Costello is clearly referring to The Rebel starring Tony Hancock.

There was Hancock; angry, dissatisfied and frustrated, peering out through the net curtains at the drab consensual conformity of the 1950s. There was Costello; angry, dissatisfied and frustrated, peering out through the factory windows at the social conflicts of the crisis-riven 1970s. With the 1960s sandwiched between them, both felt trapped by a claustrophobic form of resigned Englishness that oppressively clouded lower-middle-class suburban life. Both aspired to artistic and intellectual ambitions that seemed beyond their identifiable fictional ‘characters’. The more they attempted to resist their inventions the more they become exasperated at the constraints of such identities. As Hancock and Costello attempted their rebellion, both were patronisingly scolded by the English commercial and critical art world establishment for having ideas and ambitions above their station. Both characters were earnest, ethical, and slid from irony to cynicism when dealing with the absurdities of existence. The torments of Hancock’s identity ended in drunken tragedy in an apartment in Australia. The torments of Costello’s identity ended in drunken farce in a hotel bar in Ohio. Perhaps ‘the rebel’ in Elvis Costello’s early music had more to do with Tony Hancock than Albert Camus, Bob Dylan or punk rock.

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Michael Urban is a Professor of Politics in California, whose previous book was *The Rebirth of Politics in Russia* (1997). One of the fascinating features of his new book is the way his professional interest in the politics of Russia informs his understanding of the place of the blues in that country. For although *Russia Gets the Blues* is ostensibly a study of a musical scene, it is one that is driven by the thought that the music, the musicians and the fans have to be understood against the backdrop of a post-communist world. As he writes in the opening pages of his book: ‘the collapse of an entire social order in Russia has been coextensive with the advent of blues music and the formation of the country’s blues community’ (p. ix).

The blues in Russia does not represent a majority choice; it is the taste of a small minority. Urban estimates that 20,000 people are involved in some way with the blues scene. The songs are sung in English, despite the fact that neither performers nor audiences understand the words. But as one Russian blues guitarist is quoted as saying, ‘The words are just vehicles to carry [the] emotion and it is the emotion that I can hear’ (p. 12). The musicians regard themselves as evangelists for an authentic and special culture, one which is both distant from the discredited Soviet regime and from Western materialism.

Urban explores the question of whether the context that produced the blues in the US has parallels with its Russian variant. The answer is that, while there are connections, they are not neat and simple. The social conditions are different in each case, and intriguingly the Russians acquired the blues via Britain and the music of Cream, the Animals and the Stones, and performers like Peter Green and Eric Clapton. Russia was, in short, subject to another so-called ‘British invasion’. In the 1960s, the first blues group was formed by the sons of senior Soviet politicians. With their parents they lived in a building commissioned by Stalin, the House of the Embankment. It was here that they learned to play guitar like Keith Richards. Russia’s second blues band enjoyed the patronage of the Komosomol, the Communist Party’s youth wing, in the 1970s.

In time, these establishment bands were joined by an alternative scene, named ‘hippie blues’, and out of this the blues acquired a sense of subversion and rebellion, helped by police raids of black market record sellers. Jimi Hendrix became an icon of the movement, pored over in student bedrooms. (Much later, a Jimi Hendrix Blues Club was founded in St Petersburg.) With Perestroika in the 1980s, access to US blues became easier; the first blues radio show, hosted by Urban’s co-author, Andrei Evdokimov, was broadcast. These elements were to form the basis of the post-communist blues scene.

Urban maps the Moscow blues scene along two axes, one representing economic capital, the other cultural capital. The first marks the relative cost of entry to the scene, the latter the distribution of knowledge about the blues within it. The scene is composed of the location created by the intersection of economic and cultural capital. This is revealing in itself, but it also provides a mechanism for charting the ways in which larger social and political changes are translated into the constitution of the blues scene. As one of Urban’s interviews says: ‘when you play music, it’s like..."
[enacting] the social order’ (p. 106). Subcultures, including those around the blues, became ways of forging communities within the chaotic aftermath of the collapse of communism. Urban traces out the ways in which the style and language of the blues are used to construct a sense of collective identity, drawing upon rhetorics of authenticity. These are, in part, defined against mass-consumed music (popsa), but they are also defined against the wider social order.

While the music is used to create a distance from the communist past, the musicians also borrow from that past in their sense of the blues band as a collective (kollectiv). Their sense of their rights as cultural workers is expressed in a musicians’ strike staged at the Jimi Hendrix Blues Club. The strikers subsequently organise themselves into the Association of Blues Musicians. At the same time, the blues assumes another political significance for its performers. As one of them says: ‘blues is about freedom . . . it’s the feeling of freedom. It’s the feeling you are free’ (p. 146). And Urban himself concludes, ‘the sound of the blues is itself subversive’ (p. 148).

It is important to voice one qualification of this intriguing book. For all its talk of subcultures and cultural capital, this is not a work of detailed empirical sociology. It is, therefore, necessary to be a little cautious of the general claims being made. Nonetheless, whether or not you are persuaded by the broader statements about the blues in Russia, the story that Michael Urban tells and the voices he records are revealing of the ways in which music can assume meaning and significance in a particular context and setting. It joins that now impressive library of studies of the role of music in communist and post-communist society, and the part it plays in the transition between the two.

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This study focuses on what Quinn defines as the ‘classic years’ of gangsta rap, 1988 to 1996, from the release of NWA’s *Straight Outta Compton* to the death of Tupac Shakur. The author begins with a ‘Parable of St Ides’: the St Ides malt liquor brand enjoyed high sales in ghettos, and had been name checked in numerous gangsta songs before the company began recruiting rappers to advertise its product in 1990. Quinn argues that unlike the east-coast hip hop artists to whom such ‘selling out’ was anathema, this new group of west- and south-western gangsta rappers, producers and businessmen was eager to seize upon such a commercial opportunity. In so doing, demarcations of sponsorship and patronage were confused: from the beginning, the author suggests, ‘gangsta was at pains to expose and critically engage its own commercial impetus and commodified status’ (p. 5). While the musical and linguistic forms of gangsta rap shifted from place to place and over time, those involved in its production made sure the music’s relationship to commerce was always sharply defined, whether in brand endorsements, image sensationalism, or the lyrical invocation of crack deals. ‘I took my street knowledge, whether it was from dealin’ or hustlin’ or whatever’, says Eazy
E here, formulating what has since become a rap commonplace: ‘I took it and brung it to the record business’ (p. 58).

Whatever commentary and criticism exists on gangsta rap tends to be concerned with the moral-ethical issues raised by the genre’s ubiquitous representations of violence and the pursuit of money. But Quinn is keen to avoid judgementalism, preferring instead to chart the cultural and political significance of what she calls gangsta’s ‘double vision’ (p. 15). The author argues that gangsta’s often grim and individualist lyrical themes rebutted the vision of corporate ‘progress’ hoped for by previous generations of Black Americans. Only a select few had made real gains by the time the civil rights movement ground to a halt in the early-1970s; the ‘post-soul’ working- and lower-middle-class African Americans who were gangsta’s producers and consumers disavowed ideas of a grand black arrival as naïve, even delusional (p. 142, *passim*). This loss of faith led to new representations of individualist entrepreneurialism, embodied by figures like Eazy E, Dr. Dre, and the label mogul Suge Knight. Here, Quinn writes, were people refusing to take up the mantle of ‘race delegates’ once happily occupied by Black musicians and entrepreneurs (a role which was being coveted at the time of gangsta’s inception by east coast Afrocentric and quasi-nationalist rappers like X-Clan and Public Enemy). Such was illustrated by NWA’s *Niggaz 4 Life*, on which were interjected vox-pop samples of African-American voices criticising the group’s members for their misogynist lyrics, use of the word ‘nigga’, and so on (p. 33). Quinn argues that this post-civil rights generation of artists and businessmen – the two roles were often conflated – was ‘[a]cknowledging the limits of political position-taking in the current climate’, and ‘self-consciously reflected the inertia and self-interest of the times’ (p. 169).

This was still a political position of sorts, even if it was one too subtle to be understood as such by those whose lived experience was very different from the gangsta rappers’ own. Quinn points out that by the early-1990s, surveys showed well over half the purchasers of gangsta rap records to be white, and, inevitably, mainstream media and pressure-group attention (and pathologising instinct) became focused on rap (p. 82). Ghetto crime had become a mainstay of sensational tabloid TV programmes, too; the author suggests that gangsta’s self-representations functioned as alternative (if not always mitigating) perspectives on Black urban life, and she imagines that ‘alienated and aspiring rappers must have thought: why not capitalise on our own negative press, since the damage is already being done?’ (p. 91). This is well argued, but a broader narrative scope might have enabled a consideration of how Black American performers historically have mugged their way along the thin divide between exploitation and agency. (The narrow musical-historical focus causes Quinn to miss other resonances, too: a battle-of-the-sexes duet between Yo-Yo and Ice Cube, for example, is discussed with reference to textualised folklore, but not to direct musical precedents, like recordings made by Billie Holiday and Louis Armstrong, or by Otis Redding and Carla Thomas).

Gangsta rap may not have offered conventionally ‘positive’ representations of its own constituency, but at least now those constituents had some control over that representation. And in celebrating certain stereotypes, in its way gangsta confronted those images constructed from outside (p. 24). Still, Quinn argues at length, the types to which gangsta rappers were beholden owed their shapes not only to those found on the nightly news, but also to the cast of characters present in African-American lore, figures celebrated in centuries’ worth of folk ballads and toasts. Much work has been done in this area, and Quinn follows in the footsteps of several generations of
folklorists who have discussed the badman, ‘stylishly violent’, and the ‘socially mobile and verbally dextrous’ pimp/trickster (p. 93). For Quinn, these characters ‘encapsulated non-legitimacy and working-class identification of badman lore’, an outsidership claimed by gangsta rappers (p. 113). This was a movement that subverted a Black bourgeoisie’s politics of respectability, and cut out the ‘Black cultural gatekeepers’ who were ‘often the most direct antagonists’ of Black working-class expression (p. 114). Quinn’s nuanced reading of folklore history also leads her to identify the ‘motivated badman’ type, one whose outlaw activities are specifically focused on those who oppress him, and to recognise the trickster’s love of style, play and skilful talk as partly explaining why rap ‘commented so assiduously on the terms and conditions of its own pop-cultural status’ (p. 117).

Quinn’s authorial style is sometimes problematic. Some chapters lapse into the rhetoric, the syntax and occasionally the hyperbole of popular American journalism (Quinn is British, and these borrowings read uneasily). Other parts are loaded with unnecessary academic verbiage; if ‘these combinations of iambic and trochaic feet work to achieve a laid-back yet tight tonal inflection’ (p. 127) sounds like knowledge worn heavily, other theoretical points are rather too glib. Constant appeals to conceptual glosses such as the never-critiqued ‘post-Fordism’ read like tokens of learning rather than features of discursive meaning.

Yet cultural ‘discussions’ shape Quinn’s central model of conceptual and historical understanding. The New Yorker Tim Dog’s ‘Fuck Compton’, the author writes, was a dis record aimed at the burgeoning west coast gangsta scene, but even as it ridiculed gangsta’s ‘wack lyrics and bullshit tracks’, it tacitly acknowledged the new market’s importance (p. 81). Similarly, the 1995 Million Man March – designed in part as a repudiation of the ‘values’ of masculinist individualism celebrated by gangsta – is for Quinn yoked to that which it criticised: ‘figures like Snoop [Doggy Dog] marked a dramatic point of reference for the march, while the social impetus of the march underpinned and energised gangsta’ (p. 169). This is convincing enough, but when she writes that ‘in misogynist rap there lies the tacit acknowledgement of women’s power and importance’ (p. 102), she is hardly departing from the contention of folklorist Bruce Jackson, that badman supervirility may mask masculine insecurity, which she has already rejected as ‘exoticising’ (p. 98). The African-American scholar Imani Perry describes a similar gender dynamic in her (admittedly seriously flawed) Prophets in the Hood (2004). But unlike Perry’s inquiry, Quinn’s includes a sophisticated consideration of social context, and after examining increases in African-American women’s economic and social mobility, she concludes that ‘the anachronistic pimp figure resurged precisely because women were making gains, so that the pleasures and problems of mastering and gaming on them were only stronger’ (p. 138).

The author is in fact rather ginger in broaching the topic of gender relations in gangsta rap; when the issue is discussed, Quinn remains true to her non-judgemental credo, and the form’s normative treatment of gender is less criticised for its dehumanising traits, more applauded for its ‘draw[ing] attention to the bartering system in male-female relationships that usually remains concealed in conventional pop-cultural stories about romantic love and the marriage plot’ (p. 133). So Quinn’s laudable effort to situate gangsta in its economic, cultural and historic context, rather than merely to contribute another two-penneth voice of opinion, means that her sympathies sometimes seem misdeployed; the artist-label relationship, for instance, is considered in terms of a new black control and entrepreneurialism (p. 165), but never
according to the same old patterns of exploitation – rapper The DOC has recounted how he naively sold lucrative publishing rights to Eazy E in return for a few items of jewellery.

Quinn closes her work with what might as well be another parable, this one a consideration of the life and death of Tupac Shakur. Volumes of criticism have already been written around this complex culture hero; the success of Quinn’s own reading is that it identifies ways in which the rapper’s lifecourse embodies the idea of ‘post-soul malaise’ she has been discussing throughout, concentrating on the rapper’s ‘vacillations between individual and spokesperson, between representative of self and group’, and issues Tupac’s life raises ‘about politics and identity within a historical context of declining political consciousness and increasing inequality’ (p. 179). These, after all, are the central themes of the volume: Quinn’s narrative skilfully interweaves cultural trends and economic contextualisation with a thoroughness rarely encountered in studies of popular music.

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Musical Identities is a fascinating book that differentiates the roles and identities we derive from music. Music is an artistic manifestation of human expression, and as such is as inherent to our nature as speech or face-recognition; I suspect that much that is said in this book applies to all other forms of artistic expression, and for many other human social processes, for example, politics or sport. The book makes a distinction between musical identities (a means by which a person develops their identity as a musician) and identities in music (where a cultural role is socially defined via a musical category). Clearly, it is quite possible for persons to have both processes going on simultaneously, so the distinction turns on the creative and expressive nature of a person choosing to acquire a skill enabling them to make music individually and socially, as compared to the communal expression and appreciation of a particular musical form, which does not require the acquisition of a skill so much as a set of values and norms. These identities often form boundaries against other identities that can seem hugely arbitrary to the outsider insensitive to the contrasting values such identities evoke, which can be individualistic or collectively oriented, or conservative, apolitical or (less commonly) radical.

The volume itself reviews the literature to support this broad proposition and derives initially from the broad academic literature on psychology, in which Colwyn Trevarthen discusses the origins of musical identity in infancy as a form of developing social awareness. The book then elaborates on the distinction between musical identity and identity in music. Bringing it full-circle to the inherent social musicality of humanity, the last two chapters address music therapy as a way of developing communication and expression in persons with special needs or other disabilities. Much generic social psychology is provided and linked to the concept of musical
identity, and the book raises many interesting hypotheses – always a good thing, as books of facts date quickly, but books of ideas inspire.

Readers of Popular Music will be more drawn to the chapters on identity in music; ‘gender identity in music’ says precisely what you might expect from the title, and could have further challenged normative right-on nostrums about women’s taste in music. Women who like punk or rock music may be more independent and empowered than those who conform to marketing pressures that place ‘female-friendly’ music in boutiques and supermarket checkouts; furthermore, plenty of women listen to virtuoso performers, they just eschew the macho status competitions males often have about the fastest, loudest, most poly-rhythmic, challenging, ‘authentic’ or versatile artist. The chapter on youth identity covers the expected biases of class and latent prejudice projected by an in-group to an out-group (although who is in or out depends on where you are), although the categorical teenage tribes of the past (punks, hippies, soul-boys, etc.) are surely more fuzzy in these days of rapping rockers, rocking rappers, progressive dance, dancing progressives, etc. One interesting (and unanswered) question is whether identities in music become broader or narrower with age. The ‘£50 man’ (the middle-aged British man who spends an average of £50 a month on a mixture of CDs, DVDs and popular cultural media) has been the saviour of a music industry otherwise deeply wounded by a youth market committed to downloading single tracks as cheaply as they can. And ‘£50 man’ cannot be simply purchasing more King Crimson box-sets, having replaced the originals on CD fifteen years ago. The chapter on national and musical identity is interesting, especially in these days of converging multi-national record companies forcing homogeneity on the mass market. In many nations it is perhaps persons with a musical identity who keep alive unique and local forms of musical expression despite the might of multinational musical brands that saturate commercial wavelengths.

In summary, this book provides a useful review of the psychological bases to musical identities as a developed creative skill building on our inherent ability to communicate and express. It covers the main social processes that lead to the creation of social identities congruent with particular musical forms appreciating types of expression and outlook in music. There is some discussion on how these processes can be used therapeutically. It would have been nice to see Zillman’s work on how individual differences in personality contribute to the person’s choice of musical entertainment, as he claims that certain individuals seek out particular musical stimuli congruent with their basic dispositions to increase or reduce their personal level of arousal – but that can go into the second edition, along with more on longitudinal aspects of identity in music as compared to musical identities.

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This book is a compendium of essays that divides into three sections. Each section shows, in a particular way, how certain types of musical and cultural practices
connect, and in so doing help to define spatial environments. As the sociological nature of popular music studies dictates, the authors draw on a wide range of disciplines and use a variety of approaches touching on and amalgamating anthropology, sociology and (ethno)musicology. Within these fields, and for specific locations, they raise issues, inter alia, of political struggle, notions of class, and power and gender relations.

The three essays in Section 1 are each animated by ethnographic descriptions of the musical and cultural practices they define. Each one beckons the reader on a journey through a specific territory to observe the connections made by the musical and cultural practices of the people who occupy these diverse geographical spaces.

The first essay provides accounts of the musical activities of the African Diaspora, outlining specifically how the musical genres of reggae and Rastafari link people who are far-removed, helping them construct the idea of another far-off place and thereby provide them with a shared identity. The next essay concentrates on musical cultures in the Balkans and takes ‘chalga’ music as its example. It demonstrates how we, as listeners, can easily accept music that emanates from the exotic ‘other’ while we are often prone to reject music of the local ‘other’. Moving next to the musical traditions of Crete, we learn how the lyra as a musical instrument contributes to the inhabitants’ definition of that place. We are treated here to a colourful account of how the lyra (which was traditionally played by shepherds in the mountain regions) is employed in local rituals such as wedding processions. For the indigenous people, the instrument has assimilated the rugged aspect of the Cretan mountains and has become a symbol of masculinity. The lyra is therefore pivotal in how local customs are delineated in terms of gender. The final essay details both a historical and up-to-date account of the musical practices in the UK city of Bristol and how these have rippled outwards to contribute to music heard all over the world while retaining their sense of origin and originality.

The essays in the middle section of the book discuss the deployment of music as a political tool by outlining the practices and purposes of rap and hip hop in places as diverse as Cuba and South Africa. Each essay provides an exquisitely detailed account of how the aspect of resistant language in rap and hip hop is used in these communities to establish and assert their members’ social and political perspectives.

The essays in the final section narrow the musically defined area of space down to that of the recording studio. Within this space, the authors focus on how the role of the female artist reconciles itself with the role of the record producer. One essay focuses on Cher’s song ‘Believe’ and another on Madonna’s song ‘Music’. We learn from both these songs how the two female artists have colluded with modern technology in production techniques to forge new cyber-identities for themselves. The analysis of each song shows how these women have exerted this power of production and purposely mediated the construction of their images, for example, by artificially enhancing the timbre of their voices through vocoders. The final essay by Jacqueline Warwick provides a thought-provoking argument that prompts the reader to reconsider some former opinions which to an extent are still held, that 1960s girl groups were merely untrained singers who responded to the male producers’ musical creations. She astutely points out that girls are adept at translating the male-dominated world around them into female terms because they have always had to do so. Her point is that the girl groups could then transfer these skills to the music studio thereby empowering both themselves and at the same time putting them in the
vanguard of cultural change. This essay’s insightful view of girl-power would certainly be a subject worth pursuing in more depth.

Rather than a general overview, the introduction provides much detail and a discussion on the subject of each essay. Without reading the essays first, this makes the introduction a little difficult to follow. Perhaps a short preamble before each section or a discussion at the end of each essay would have been more helpful.

The book is written and edited by members of IASPM and slightly different versions of three of its essays have been published previously elsewhere. Nevertheless, its strength lies in its format of juxtaposing insightful accounts of the making, the meaning and the use of music in clearly identified spaces to further political, cultural and even sexual interests. This is especially true in Section 3 where the essays outline different accounts of the power of women within the recording studio. Therefore, within the wide variety of disciplines the essays cover, the book adds to the literature in some discerning ways and would be of interest not only to scholars of popular music but to anyone interested in cultural studies, socio-linguistics, and issues of power and gender relations who wish to extend their reference material into the field of musicology.

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