Reviews


In my view, this is a very welcome addition to the academic literature on contemporary dance music. What sets Malbon’s book apart from existing studies of dance music are the graphic insights into the world of clubbing which Malbon’s ethnographic method offers the reader. Popular music ethnographies have been variously criticised, notably for their lack of engagement with the complex interplay of local and global influences in patterns of musical production and reception. A counter-argument here is that only through adopting the ethnographic method is it possible to begin to comprehend, in anything more than a superficial and anecdotal sense, the everyday-ness of many individuals’ understanding of and involvement with popular music. It is in providing an empirical illustration of young people’s everyday experiences of dance music and clubbing that Malbon’s study arguably proves most effective.

Rather than viewing the clubber as the exotic ‘subcultural other’, or branching off into the type of fanciful postmodern narrative which has become a familiar trope in dance music research, Malbon’s study brings home the very real tensions experienced by young people between the highs and lows of clubbing: the release enjoyed by being at one with the club crowd is achieved only after queuing apprehensively in the rain for an hour outside the club, hoping that the bouncers will look positively on one’s choice of dress and general demeanour; the desire for ‘escape’ in the club is interrupted by feelings of self-consciousness about one’s image and style of dancing. These and many other ‘real’ but overlooked aspects of clubbing are brought to life very convincingly by Malbon. Indeed, in many ways Malbon’s book provides an intriguing ‘behind the scenes’ commentary on the art of clubbing. Whereas Thornton’s (1995) Club Cultures may have mapped theoretically the cultural terrain of the club, noting along the way the significance of demonstrating subcultural capital, in Malbon’s study we are presented with gritty empirical snapshots of young clubbers as they go about achieving and maintaining such status in the club scene.

This graphic, real-life portrayal of the club scene is enhanced considerably by the way in which Malbon allows the young people at the centre of his study to offer their own narratives of clubbing. Indeed, in an area of popular music studies overburdened with authorial interpretations, it is entirely refreshing to hear the accounts of young people themselves. The resulting ‘multi-voiced’ text paints a far richer picture of the dance scene, throwing new light on the collective nature of the clubbing experience and how the importance of status and self-image mesh with mundane social practices such as the pursuit of fun and pleasure. Much of the book’s appeal is achieved through the sheer quality of the data obtained by Malbon. Even a cursory glance at the book will be sufficient to reveal the amount of time
spent by Malbon in the field collecting data. In true ethnographic style, Malbon ‘works’ on his subject, making repeated visits to particular club settings in the company of his research respondents in order to gain acceptance in the club scene and to become one of the crowd. The references along the way to leaving London clubs early in the morning drenched in sweat, catching fast-food vendors as they are about to close up, all adds to the picture of what popular music research on the ground really entails.

*Clubbing* is far more than just an ethnography, however. In addition to offering compelling empirical accounts of the club scene, Malbon also demonstrates his firm grasp of contemporary social theory. Particularly effective is his use of Maffesoli’s (1996) concept of neo-tribes as a means of underscoring the ‘tactile . . . forms of communality’ which characterise the contemporary club crowd (p. 26). At the same time, Malbon is critical of Maffesoli’s failure to situate his work empirically, a failure which, it is argued, renders Maffesoli’s analysis insensitive to hardened discourses of stylistic convention and cultural ‘competence’ which may persist even as collective associations become more multiple, fluid and transitory.

Another useful aspect of Malbon’s book is its revisiting of some of the earlier subcultural literature. While this work has been criticised on a number of counts, Malbon adds significantly to such criticism in noting how much research on youth subcultures placed the emphasis ‘on spectacularity at the expense of the everyday’ (p. 15). Although Malbon is not the first writer to offer such a criticism, his views are enhanced through a more thorough understanding of the ways in which the mundane and spectacular interact in the production of youth cultural sensibilities in contemporary society. Similarly, like many current youth researchers, it is clear that Malbon’s academic treatment of clubbing has come only after a considerable period immersed in dance music as a clubber himself. Indeed, my only criticism of an otherwise excellent book would be that more time could have been spent exploring some of the methodological problems inherent in making the transition from fan to researcher. At one point, Malbon boldly claims that his knowledge of the music aided his acceptance into the dance music scene in that fellow clubbers did not regard him simply as a researcher doing his job. Yet, it is clear from accounts of ethnographers focusing on other areas of contemporary cultural life, an example being Armstrong’s (1993) research on football fandom, that ‘insider knowledge’ of the research field on the part of the researcher is by no means a guarantee of straightforward acceptance by the research respondents. It would thus have been interesting to see Malbon reflect more extensively on his fan/researcher role.

To sum up, then, *Clubbing* is, to my mind, one of the most engaging and worthwhile academic studies of contemporary dance music. Malbon strikes a good balance between his obvious enthusiasm for the subject and a clear understanding of the deeper social significance of clubbing for those involved in the scene. In truth, there are still far too few examples of this type of approach in popular music studies. Given the highly reflexive and participatory processes which underpin the creation of musical meaning, it would be good to see more ethnographic work in the style adopted by Malbon focusing on other contemporary youth musics, such as hip hop, girl/boy bands and guitar pop.

Andy Bennett

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This is a fascinating book. Taking what is essentially a psychoanalytic approach, the author seeks to uncover the interconnection between loss and mourning in Lennon’s life, art and identity. However, the title of the book does not just relate to the way in which Lennon mourned the losses in his life, but also to way in which Lennon has been mourned, culturally and ideologically, over the past twenty years. In the first of these aims, the author is considerably more successful than in the second. This is not to say that the book fails in its attempt to deal with the way in which we have mourned Lennon and the way in which Lennon’s own mourning can be related to this, merely that it is at its best when dealing with Lennon alone. The greater amount of the book is given over to a discussion of Lennon’s mourning, which no doubt contributes to its greater relative success.

Rather than produce another biography of Lennon, Elliott has chosen instead to take certain themes and aspects of his life and look at them through the lens of contemporary critical theory and psychoanalytical theory. However, although using critical theory is an integral part of Elliott’s approach, which stresses the inextricable binding of identity, power and social relations, it is psychoanalytic theory that is really to the fore in Elliott’s analysis. This is perhaps the one weakness of the book, narrowing as it does the range of ideas and topics with which the author engages. While it is undoubtedly correct that the experience of loss is crucially important to identity formation, Elliott focuses almost exclusively on Lennon’s loss of his parents in analysing his attempts at forming a coherent identity in the early years of his life. In other words, no real attention is paid to the fact that Lennon was raised in a North of England port town in the 1940s and 1950s, a town with a strong Irish influence; that he was educated there; and that he was exposed to the youth culture of the time. While the loss of his parents was crucial to his identity, these aspects should not merely be dismissed to the background.

In chapter eleven, ‘A day in the life: the mysterious celebrity’, when Elliott discusses the relationship between celebrity, fandom/fanaticism and identity and follows this with a discussion of the ways in which Lennon was mourned in the immediate aftermath of his death, he again does so from an essentially psychoanalytical point of view. But these issues cry out for a broader sociological analysis – particularly, say, looking at these things as essentially religious from a Durkheimian perspective. This approach regards religion as functioning to bind a society together through rituals focused on totems. These totems, though nominally symbolic of the supernatural and its relationship with the natural and social, are in fact symbolic of the community itself and the shared identity of its members. Lennon could be seen as taking this role of a totem which represents the common identity of the fans, and the somewhat ritualistic mourning seen as a religious exercise.

Given the strongly psychoanalytic approach being taken, the discussions of Albert Goldman and Mark Chapman are perhaps the most interesting sections of
the book. Although Elliott points out the similarities between Goldman and Ray Coleman – perhaps the most respected Lennon biographer – the similarities between Elliott’s analysis of Goldman and his analysis of Chapman are perhaps even more striking. (For any Lennon fan, Elliott’s psychoanalysing Goldman’s attempt to psychoanalyse Lennon is an unalloyed joy.) The destruction of the same individual – in the one case physically, in the other symbolically – would seem to have been intimately bound up with both individuals’ self-identities.

Again, the term identity appears. It is this concept that is truly at the heart of the book and quite properly so. Lennon’s life may be read as a search for a consistent stable identity, while always being caught in shifting, changing sets of contradictory social relationships. That Lennon was acutely aware of the contradictions did not seem to make the search any easier. Lennon’s final five years, as househusband looking after baby Sean in the Dakota building, appear to be the time when he came closest to completing his search. For the first time in his life, Lennon seemed to be more concerned with who he thought he was, rather than who others thought he was. Of course identity is not formed outside of social relationships, but the focus has shifted.

It is this penultimate section of the book that is perhaps a little flawed. Elliott appears to be doing what he earlier chastises Ray Coleman for: being somewhat less than rigorously critical. As a result he ends up contradicting himself. Lennon, according to Elliott ‘had thrown off the trappings of image’ and was ‘able to give the slip to the illusions of image making’ (p. 140) in those final five years of his life. He says this on the basis of comments made by Lennon. However, just a few pages prior to this (pp. 134–5) he had said that Lennon’s representation of his years away from the recording industry was not entirely accurate. In other words, Lennon was still creating an image – but Elliott does not seem to take up on this. This may seem a small point, but it is actually central to the chapter.

All in all, Elliott is quite successful in meeting the aims he sets out at the beginning of the book. This is not a straightforward biography, focusing instead on particular themes and episodes. Indeed, his use of Lennon’s life seems to be more a heuristic device for the examination and discussion of themes the author considers central to contemporary Western culture. That the approach is strongly psychoanalytic should not deter any prospective readers (indeed, it will attract some), as it is written in a highly accessible manner. Elliott has produced one of the most insightful pieces of work on the life of John Lennon. Of the plethora of books on his life, relatively few rank as key texts. These ranks have now been swollen by one.

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The development of ‘karaoke’, which means ‘orchestra without a vocal part’ in Japanese, has shown its polysemous character over the last three decades: karaoke has been discussed as technological phenomenon, as locus for singing, and as musical practice. This interdisciplinary anthology of academic papers on the subject is therefore most welcome. Some of the material originated from a karaoke sym-
posium at the IASPM (International Association for the Study of Popular Music) Conference in Stockton, California, in 1993, and from another conference on karaoke organised by the JAL (Japanese Air Lines) Asia Forum at Kanazawa, Japan, in 1996.

The book consists of an Introduction, and three sections that discuss karaoke in its Japanese birth place, in European countries, and in other Asian countries and Asian-diasporic communities. The editors’ introduction provides a clear picture of the development of karaoke studies, and warns against the tendency to focus exclusively on texts, and the assumption of a sharp distinction between professional and amateur music-making, both of which failings have been characteristic of musicology, the sociology of music and ethnomusicology before the 1980s. The authors claim to deal with karaoke as machine, and as everyday musical practice in the binary contexts of globalisation and localisation. They argue that it is helpful to understand the nature of karaoke in terms of ‘technology, place and musical behaviour’ (p. 3). A literature review shows us how previous studies have addressed karaoke, and then various articles on karaoke in Japan are analysed through five discrete discourses: technical, fitness, socialisation, culturalist and religious (pp. 16–20).

In the first chapter of Part I, Mitsui discusses the technological development of karaoke in Japan and gives us a detailed karaoke history, which has not been available hitherto. Next, Hiroshi Ogawa locates karaoke in the context of Japanese popular music culture, and considers how it has changed popular music charts and musical behaviour in general in Japan. In Chapter 3, Shinobu Oku deals with the issue of karaoke and women, which is helpful on the relation between school music education and women’s musical behaviour after graduation. In contrast to highly educated women’s affinity for choral singing, her study of a karaoke coffee shop shows that women karaoke singers tend to sympathise with the world of enka (a Japanese genre focused on tragic love and separation, popular with older women and men), which represents the values of the Japanese working class. However, rather than developing this useful association further, or locating her study within the broader literature on women and popular music, she drifts into an analysis of enka, which does not entirely relate to her main topic.

Part II begins with an account by William H. Kelly of the relation between karaoke and pre-existent singing cultures in the United Kingdom (Chapter 4). Kelly shows that karaoke has been well adapted to traditions of community singing in British pubs and working men’s clubs. His awareness of the differences between karaoke in the United Kingdom and in Japan makes this chapter particularly useful. In Chapter 5, Paolo Prato describes karaoke in Italy, where it has been stimulated by a TV show, and has fitted in with the tradition of public singing for pleasure.

Johan Fornäs’s paper (Chapter 6) begins by situating karaoke, which he understands as a ‘web’ in which various meanings interplay, in the broader development of interactive media forms. Then he divides the text of karaoke video into three elements: ‘written lyrics, musical sounds and pictorial images’ (p. 120). After a thumbnail sketch of karaoke in general, he explains that in Sweden karaoke equates to broad Western approaches to the form, insofar as it ‘is less serious, both in its choice of tunes and in the more spontaneous and informal use of them. Exact imitation of the original is often less important than making one’s own original variant of it, and collective singing . . . is commonplace’ (p. 123). In the latter half of the paper, he analyses a karaoke video of ‘My Way’, one of the most internationally
popular karaoke pieces, and shows how it fills a void ‘between individuality and communality, and between imitation and invention’ (p. 134).

The opening of Part III is a study of karaoke in a Japanese-Brazilian community by Hosokawa (Chapter 7). Based on ethnographic data collected in São Paulo, Hosokawa elucidates how Japanese-Brazilians have identified with Japanese songs through singing in karaoke, which has found some point of contact with the Japanese-Brazilian tradition of amateur singing contests. His discussion culminates in a concept of the ‘way of karaoke’ (karaokedo), the serious mentality of which is equivalent to traditional Japanese practices of judo or kado (flower arrangement). Karaokedo accounts for the disciplined nature of Japanese-Brazilians’ attitudes, which are markedly different from those in Italy, where free karaoke as holiday entertainment ‘lowers the critical judgement’ (p. 111), or in Sweden, where ‘new technologies are denounced as being inauthentic’ (p. 133). Hosokawa finds a ‘compart-mentalisation’ of the Japanese-Brazilian community within the larger Brazilian society: ‘Japanese music is practised and consumed inside ethnic borders and is rather inaudible from the outside’ (p. 161). He thereby provides an insightful comparative perspective on ‘the karaoke scene [rather] than the singing and technology per se’ (p. 140).

In Chapter 8, Casey Man Kong Lum, the author of In Search of a Voice: Karaoke and the Construction of Identity in Chinese America (1996, Lawrence Erlbaum Associates), compares karaoke in Asian countries with that in the United States, on the basis of the opposition between collectivism and individualism. Lum’s ethnographically based paper concludes that Anglo-Americans feel lukewarm about singing collectively oriented karaoke because of their individualistic public behaviour. However, according to Fornärs, we should be wary of such simple oppositions between ‘the West and the rest’, since they can conceal far greater ‘differences within both Eastern and Western karaoke’ (p. 124). This sort of contradiction between the conclusions of various chapters would seem to merit more discussion.

The final chapter by Akiko Otake and Hosokawa is the highlight of the book. The first half is based on a comparative study of East Asian countries, namely, Taiwan, Hong Kong, China, Vietnam, Korea and Okinawa (which belongs to Japan, but is culturally distinct from the main island). Otake and Hosokawa thereby show how karaoke differs in the context of diverse local musical cultures. The second half of the chapter suggests a theoretical framework for studying karaoke from the perspectives of modernisation, Japanisation and Asianisation. Quoting Jody Berland’s ‘cultural technology’ to invoke the mediation between producing texts, spaces and musical practices, they cast a new light on how triple dynamic relationships between the West, Japan and East Asia serve both globalisation and indigenisation. With reference to Sony’s Walkman, another representative ‘made-in-Japan’ musical export, they point out that karaoke creates ‘a new combination and style of use in a certain spatial setting. (…) The two “Japanese-made” cultural technologies create the playful theatricality in music consumption as well as bringing about the instant transformation of private/public spatiality’ (p. 196).

Whilst the book depicts how karaoke practices have been integrated into the discourses of people in and out of Asia, and it fulfils its promise of insights into degrees of continuity between karaoke and its historical precursors in various countries, one cannot clearly understand how the triple existence of karaoke as ‘technology, place and musical behaviour’, that was proposed in the Introduction,
relates to each chapter. Whereas Mitsui concentrates on technological aspects, Ogawa deals with karaoke as a social phenomenon, whilst Oku considers it with respect to place and musical behaviour. This wavering in Part I is enough to show us the theoretical inconsistency of the book, as does the lack of reflection on the diverse findings of the various contributors. The editors could have compared the private form of karaoke singing in the Japanese karaoke box, as discussed in Chapter 2, with the communal form of karaoke in British pubs, as discussed in Chapter 4. Or they could have compared working-class women’s karaoke in Japan (Chapter 3) with British working-class karaoke (Chapter 4), or ‘high-tech’, middle-class karaoke in East Asia (Chapter 9). When we delve into cultural issues, we desperately need new comparative perspectives, and readers might well feel disappointed that this international and interdisciplinary book can do no more than compare the similarities and differences between karaoke in the East and the West.

Despite these theoretical weaknesses, there are some excellent articles that will inform and stimulate even the reader who still has no proper experience of karaoke. Above all, it clearly shows the intriguing travel of this made-in-Japan musical export around the world as a symptom of both globalisation and localisation.

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E. Taylor Atkins’ lucidly written Blue Nippon: Authenticating Jazz in Japan is a welcome contribution to jazz scholarship as well as to Japanese cultural history. The legacy of contested cultural, racial and national ownership of jazz makes the development of this music in Japan an especially intriguing case for historical analysis. Japan’s cultural oscillation between ‘progressive cosmopolitanism’ and ‘regressive nationalism’ since the Meiji Restoration, which is played out in its production and consumption of jazz, is intimately tied to the political and social forces that have shaped the modern nation (see Burt 2001, pp. 7–9, for his discussion of how this oscillation is manifested in Japanese post-war concert music). Atkins situates Japanese jazz within a larger historical framework spanning most of the twentieth century, and delineates the complex and reciprocally contingent relationship of jazz and cultural discourse during times of socio-political upheavals. In the course of exploring the reasons for the Japanese fascination with jazz, Blue Nippon ‘challenges some of our more inveterate myths about Japan, about the evolution and “universality” of jazz, and about the relationship between race, cultural authenticity, and creativity’ (pp. 9–10). Drawing upon interviews with jazz musicians and aficionados, polemical writings in magazines and newspapers, pictorial, cinematic and musical source materials culled from Japan, the United States and Europe, Atkins offers the first comprehensive history of jazz in Japan with insightful discussions of relevant social and historical phenomena. Finally, in demonstrating how jazz was ‘translated’ across cultural and national boundaries, Atkins argues eloquently for a more inclusive and thereby richer arena for the creation and reception of jazz.

Blue Nippon opens with a chapter that examines in depth the ‘authenticity
problem' of Japanese jazz. By recounting the comments made by American musicians Branford Marsalis and Kenny Garrett regarding Japanese audiences and the defensive responses of Japanese jazz fans, Atkins positions the discourses surrounding jazz in the larger context of ‘Japan-bashing’ in the United States and of Japan’s anxiety concerning its identity vis-à-vis the West. The author himself admits to having expected little from Japanese jazz at the outset of this project (p. 3), his own attitude a holdover of the baggage of assumptions and prejudices Americans bring to their experience of Japan. The importance of originality in jazz haunts any non-black, non-American practitioner of this art form and is an especially sensitive issue for the Japanese, burdened by their reputation as skilful imitators. The ‘authenticity complex’ weaves in and out of the bulk of the book, which is given over to a historical narrative of the development of jazz in Japan.

The narrative begins with Kikuchi Shigeya’s serendipitous encounter with a small jazz band in Chicago in 1919 and the introduction of the music in Japan soon thereafter. Jazz provided the backdrop for the dizzying atmosphere of the inter-war years, as emerging mass media technologies expedited the flow of Western cultural imports into Japanese urban centres. Dance halls prospered and jazz kissa (‘jazz coffeehouses’) sprouted up, where a new and growing coterie of jazz fans availed of their record collections. Even in the early years, Japanese jazz moved through national boundaries fluidly, with Nisei Japanese-American musicians achieving stardom in Tokyo, Tokyo-based bands sojourning in Shanghai, and Filipino musicians headlining shows in Osaka dance halls.

As reactionary political movements burgeoned in the 1930s, jazz, by its very cosmopolitan nature, attracted negative attention from the nativist factions and became the site of vociferous debates about modernity, national identity, and morality. These debates were revived in the wake of the war and the Allied occupation when the growing cosmopolitanism of Japanese society induced many to question the viability of Japanese traditions in the face of rapid Americanisation. Immediately after the war, the pressure to catch up with the idioms of modern jazz emanating from the United States stifled, on the one hand, the pursuit of a distinctive Japanese style, but, on the other hand, produced artists such as Akiyoshi Toshiko who attained renown outside Japan by mastering the international, i.e. American, style. The call for a ‘Japanese jazz’, conceived to counter the stereotype that held Japanese artists to be derivative, gained momentum in the 1960s and 1970s at the same time that Japan’s confidence grew apace with its astonishing economic expansion. Akiyoshi, Shiraki Hideo, Hara Nobuo, Yamamoto Hōzan and others, attempting to establish their own unique identity through the construction of a nationally based jazz style, experimented with combining Japanese traditional music with jazz standards, using traditional instruments, and incorporating ‘Asian’ scales and metres into original jazz compositions. Even with the magnitude of talent and enthusiasm brought to such endeavours, however, the results often pandered to the West’s expectations of eastern exoticism and failed to develop a new representative voice.

In the last part of the book, Atkins examines the alternative paths that were pursued by lesser-known artists. The Jazz Academy, later the New Century Music Workshop, founded by Takayanagi Masayuki (‘Jo-Jo’) and Kanai Hideto, provided a forum in which to study contemporary classical music, Cagean aleatoric methods, and minimalism, in addition to avant-garde jazz, and its mem-
bers focused on developing original compositions, poetry and ‘free’ improvisation. Others, like Watanabe Sadao, created new audiences for jazz in Japan by their very ability to imitate and absorb a multitude of musical styles and genres. In the end, the debates concerning the nature of a nationalised jazz style are brought full circle back to the definition of jazz itself, by foregrounding the contentious notions of universality and originality that have been attached to the genre since its inception.

In conclusion, Atkins challenges other jazz historians to embrace the internationality of jazz as the music is transplanted and cultivated in new settings around the world. Atkins cites Michael Kater’s (1992) *Different Drummers: Jazz in the Culture of Nazi Germany* and S. Frederick Starr’s (1994) *Red & Hot: The Fate of Jazz in the Soviet Union* as important precedents. Andrew Jones’ *Yellow Music: Media, Culture, and Colonial Modernity in the Chinese Jazz Age*, also published in 2001 by Duke University Press, is another valuable contribution to this growing field of transnational jazz scholarship, composed of scholars working across various disciplines. These studies contextualise jazz within larger historical frameworks and show how music is implicated in the polemics of race, in nationalistic and ideological discourses, and in the controversies surrounding the introduction of mass media and modernism in various parts of the world.

As much as I enjoyed and learned a great deal from my recent survey of transnational jazz historiography, however, I missed the music in these otherwise laudable cultural historical studies. The pictures of the musicians and other paraphernalia such as posters and advertisements give some sense of the creative milieu described in these books; the actual music is represented only by a few descriptive phrases if at all (most of these writers are not trained in the technical language of music and avoid direct engagement with the music as much as possible). Words unfortunately are sorely inadequate in conveying the dynamic, visceral vitality of music. *Blue Nippon*, in particular, with its lofty goal of resuscitating the reputations of forgotten artists, enumerates a string of unfamiliar names, names of musicians divorced from their creative output by the absence of concrete sonic hooks. Because much of the music that Atkins discusses is unavailable outside Japan, an accompanying CD of musical excerpts would have proved invaluable; such a CD compilation should be seriously considered for any study that deals with music from outside the commercial mainstream. Atkins is presently editing a volume of essays on transnational jazz cultures – *Jazz Planet: Transnational Studies of the ‘Sound of Surprise’* (University of Mississippi Press). I look forward to further expanding my knowledge of jazz from beyond American borders, reading about and, with any luck, listening to sounds from around the world.

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‘Contemporary cultural studies, which has made popular culture a legitimate, even fashionable, area of interpretation, has yet to develop much scholarly interest in country music’ (p. 13), notes Barbara Ching early in Wrong’s What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture. Given country music’s popularity and influence in the twentieth century, she has pinpointed a serious oversight. Moreover, country music criticism tends to focus on mainstream country and is dominated by traditional historical research (e.g. biographies of people and institutions, and song or genre histories) and, to an extent, explorations of sociological trends. Although these are certainly significant areas of research, too little written about country music has a cultural studies ethos. Wrong’s What I Do Best addresses this gap, for here, as Ching explains, the focus is on hard country as an art form, ‘self-consciously low and self-consciously hard, a deliberate display of burlesque abjection’ (p. 4).

Ching, an Associate Professor of English at the University of Memphis with a background in cultural theory, relies heavily on the work of sociologist Richard Peterson to define ‘hard country’, a music in which (white male) singers perform in ‘nasalized, nonstandard English with strong “southern” or “southwestern” accents’ (p. 5). These performers repeatedly share unhappy – even demeaning – personal experiences. For Ching’s purposes, hard country includes artists such as Merle Haggard, George Jones, David Allan Coe, Hank Williams Sr, Hank Williams Jr, Buck Owens, Dwight Yoakam, Waylon Jennings and Willie Nelson. Her study examines hard country through the burlesque, ‘a comic mode that can be used to undermine any cultural ideal’ (p. 27). An exercise in abjection, hard country’s burlesque relies on repetition, imitation, allusion and collusion to undermine cultural ideals (e.g. appropriate male behaviour, lifestyles, appearance and economic status) and artistic ideals (e.g. Nashville-determined musical sounds, performances and themes). Her comparison of Garth Brooks’s ‘The Dance’, a song that suggests accepting loss by always seeing the glass as half full, and George Jones’s ‘He Stopped Loving Her Today’, a study of abjection, provides an insightful illustration of this dialectic.

Ultimately, Ching’s thesis succeeds on some points and struggles with others. Chapter 2 lays out much of the book’s theoretical stance, using Jones, Haggard and Coe as illustrations. While the argument is intriguing, Haggard and Coe never receive the extended discussion each merits, especially Coe, given Ching’s description of him as ‘the “hardest” and thus the most burlesque performer of recent times’ (p. 44). (He also sings the book’s title.) Although the treatment of Jones is very good, it loses much of its coherence by being divided (without any apparent reason) between Chapter 2 and Chapter 5.

In Chapter 3, Ching provides an effective analysis of the hard country careers of Hank Williams Sr and Hank Williams Jr. She first explores the life and music of the ‘King of Hard Country’, who set the hard country standard with his emotive music, substance abuse and early death; Williams then complicated his ‘Saturday Night’ Hank persona by juxtaposing it with the ‘Sunday Morning’ Luke the Drifter character. The King’s heir, Bocephus, has spent his life struggling with his father’s
ideal, creating his own hard country abjection. Ching’s use of biography and songs to illustrate these points is especially helpful.

With the last two chapters, however, Wrong’s What I Do Best begins to lose momentum. Chapter 4, a discussion of Buck Owens and Dwight Yoakam, is less persuasive, in part because fellow Bakersfield-er (and more obviously hard country) Merle Haggard receives so little notice, while Owens merits an entire chapter. For Ching, Owens ‘distinguished himself by drawing and crossing several boundary lines’ (p. 90), such as sound, song content, performance venues and appearance. While this is all true, it pales next to the lines Haggard, who most recently recorded for the ANTI punk label, continues to cross. Owens’s hard-country relationship to Dwight Yoakam is also unconvincing, particularly because Yoakam’s highly parodic performance, both in his dress and videos, remains under-addressed, as well as his relationship to the Los Angeles Cowpunk scene. In Chapter 5, the Outlaws are the subject of only seven pages – this for two major artists, Jennings and Nelson. Then, without transition, Ching returns to the George Jones discussion begun in Chapter 2. Indeed, the last chapter reads as if it were rushed, with an analysis of houses in Jones’s life and music reduced to little more than a list of songs. This material needs the same attention afforded the Williamses.

Unfortunately, too, Ching leaves her study of hard country without examining most of what has happened in the past decade outside Nashville. Although she justifiably criticises the Nashville mainstream and wonders about hard country’s future, she all but ignores alternative country, a music where hard core is alive and well; indeed, alternative country has much the same relationship with contemporary Nashville that hard country always has. It is frustrating, for instance, that Shelton Williams, or ‘Hank III’, is largely overlooked when his appearance, music, and life provide a fascinating extension of the Williams Family saga. Similarly, Steve Earle, a contemporary outlaw both socially and musically who consistently defies Nashville and provides a logical transition to alternative country, is only mentioned, reduced to producing a Highwaymen song session. The possibilities here are much richer.

In fact, Ching really only turns to alternative country in the book’s final paragraph:

In the meantime, the hardest new voices now lurk in what is known as ‘alternative country’. There the unease is still epidemic, and it still springs from a dual conflict with the institutions of country music and American dreaming. (p. 133)

For Ching to make such a statement while not developing it in light of her study is a tremendous oversight, for the genre provides a significant extension of the larger argument.

Ching’s accomplishment with Wrong’s What I Do Best is substantial: she has articulated the subversiveness of hard country against a backdrop of commercial country music that has grown increasingly homogeneous both politically and musically. In the end, Barbara Ching has added an important work to country music criticism, but there remains more to be said.

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In what ways does this edited collection from US scholars studying progressive rock ‘reconsider’ the genre, as its title suggests? The book appears after the brief flurry of texts dealing with progressive rock published in the 1990s (Macan 1997; Martin 1996, 1998; Stump 1997). Are the eleven essays collected here responding to those texts, or do they still seek to engage with the dominant, popular critical writings on the genre that have, at least since the mid-1970s (though in the US well before this) condemned progressive rock as inauthentic, pretentious, even worthless as rock music? The book does both, though many of its writers appear to take as their primary task a critique of (particularly) Macan and Martin. The second task, that of recovering the genre as one worthy for musicological and sociological analysis, seems an inevitable consequence. Yet the success with which the book achieves this is limited by a set of analytical foci that do not address one of the core sociological questions of any exploration of popular music: the relation of music and musician to listeners (fans). I shall return to this key issue later.

First, I want to explore the ways in which the book’s contributors extend the primary work of Macan and Martin. Without wishing to ignore the contributions both writers have made to the study of the genre (these were, after all, the first academic, book-length studies of progressive rock), they have their limits. Macan (1997), in his emphasis on the ‘multimovement suite’ as a defining form of the genre, is profoundly interested in exploring how bands such as Yes, Emerson, Lake and Palmer, and Genesis adapted classical forms and voicings to extend both the stylistic and the intellectual repertoire of rock music (his book’s title, ‘Rocking the Classics’, encapsulates this approach). The strength of the present book is that it challenges this approach, demonstrating that the genre was about far more than a simple mapping on to rock of some selected features of classical or art music. In his introduction, Kevin Holm-Hudson argues that it is ‘a misconception to equate all (or even most) progressive rock with attempts to integrate aspects of art music into the rock medium’ (p. 10). This is shown vividly in John J. Sheinbaum’s study of Yes’s ‘Roundabout’, a piece in which we can hear not so much the stylistic characteristics of classical music being translated (or bowdlerised, or cheapened) into rock music but where the two musical value systems collide, exhibiting the ‘tensions, frictions and incompatibilities’ (p. 29–30) between them. In such a highly eclectic musical structure as ‘Roundabout’, Sheinbaum argues, Yes inhabit no single musical system, but occupy ‘the spaces between these value systems’ (p. 30). This argument does much to nuance the debate between the authentic and the inauthentic in rock, and goes beyond the antagonistic position adopted by Macan. Rather than simply considering the authentic/inauthentic, low/high debate as a ‘value problem’, Sheinbaum encourages us to see progressive rock as ‘about such value problems’ (p. 40).

Similarly, John S. Cotner’s analysis of Pink Floyd’s ‘Careful with That Axe, Eugene’ and Gregory Karl’s analysis of King Crimson’s ‘Larks’ Tongues in Aspic, Parts One and Two’ move away from reifying progressive rock as ‘classical music with electricity’. Whilst ‘Axe’ might be considered superficially as a species of psychedelic rock, Cotner’s examination of its ‘textural rhythm’ finds in it an understate-
ment of progressiveness, presenting ‘more subtle means of variation and develop-
ment’ (p. 87) than the ‘classical rock’ exemplars of, say, Emerson, Lake and Palmer’s
‘Tarkus’ or Genesis’ ‘Firth of Fifth’. Karl goes so far as to argue that in the dense
instrumental structures of King Crimson’s ‘Larks’ Tongues in Aspic’ we may hear
the rock song form, a case not of classical borrowings but of ‘convergent evolution’
coming from within the group’s own oeuvre, where earlier, song-based preoccu-
pations with neoromantic conceptions of the beleaguered hero are transformed into
a large-scale rock instrumental.

These essays do much to extend analytical frameworks within which to
approach progressive rock; they valuably problematise earlier binary ways of thinking
about the music (rock/non-rock, classical/rock, authentic/inauthentic). Other
essays perform a parallel, historical function. Holm-Hudson’s essay on the late-
1960s United States of America (the group, not the country) and Theo Cateforis’
contribution on the ‘math rock’ of the 1990s go beyond thinking of the genre as one
bounded by its early 1970s canon. This is not simply to look for founding figures
or acolytes beyond what Martin (1996) has termed ‘the time of progressive rock’
(for him, 1969–75), it is to show that at an historical level, just as Scheinbaum shows
it at a formal level, what has become fixed as ‘progressive rock’ is more about a
continuing struggle over musical values than about declaring, defining and setting
musical values once and for all.

Thus far, the book offers much that is important not only for those interested
in the genre, but for those seeking to explore certain well-springs and values within
popular music. Its attempts at working with the social and the cultural, in particular
with the listening experience, are more limited. Two essays discuss the music of
Yes as a site for ‘queer listening’. Jennifer Rycenga engages in particular with Jon
Anderson’s lyrics as an example of how Yes’s music offers a route to listening to
rock music that goes beyond the ‘heteronormative’ and eloquently suggests that
the gender-unspecific and ambiguous content of his lyrics presents if not ‘a totally
open field for [queer] identification’, at least ‘a field that was not precluding [the
queer listener] or closing possibilities’ (p. 159). In a beautifully poised essay in
reader response, Dirk von der Horst develops a thesis of ‘queer disidentification’
that addresses the disturbances in his own listening to Yes as a gay man. For him,
Anderson’s high tenor voice, and the absence of ‘heterosexual romantic lyrics’ (p.
167) do not lead unproblematically to an identification with the music and lyrics.
Instead, von der Horst hears in the music of Yes a modelling of masculinity that is
ultimately unsatisfying, at least at an eroto-cultural level. Together these essays
contribute richly to the emerging theme of this collection, one that seeks not to
essentialise progressive rock but that hopes to unpack and recontextualise its forms,
structures, lyrics and ‘intentions’ in more mature and sophisticated ways than we
have previously encountered.

Despite their value, these two essays offer limited attempts at understanding
the socio-cultural aspects of the genre. Given the music’s historical fan-base
amongst middle-class, white males, I would have liked to have seen consideration
given to the reception of the music by this majority audience. Whilst an historical
study of fans might not be methodologically straightforward (though by no means
impossible), the continuing appreciation of the genre in both its ‘classic’ forms and
as neo-progressive rock (through the support of such labels as Cyclops in the UK)
is evident in the large number of fanzines that are currently available (Atton 2001).
Work that focused on the writers and readers of such publications, as primary
constituents of the fan-base for progressive rock, would have greatly enriched what is already a significant and provocative collection of explorations into this marginalised genre.

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References