Reviews


As the publication date of this work indicates, this journal has been slow to review Jason Toynbee’s book – for which should be read, I have been slow to review this book. The reasons for my tardiness constitute in themselves a review: put simply, so refreshing and full of ideas is this work that it demands response at every point, almost at every page. I have used the book to inform my teaching in diverse ways under diverse circumstances and, while I find his conclusions excessively optimistic, I am glad that someone has attempted to work from first principles in a new attempt to state why popular music is so damned popular.

There has been a quickening in the pace of the development of studying popular music in the past few years. There are many evidentiary sources for this observation, not least that the 2003 IASPM international conference in Montréal has attracted a record 300 submissions. Yet for all its increasing legitimacy across and between a range of academic institutions and departments, there are few sources of scholarship on how individuals who aspire to make music that becomes popular are simultaneously enabled and constrained by the constitution and practices of the market for popular music products. Understandably, in a still-emergent interdisciplinary (or, more accurately co-disciplinary) field, scholarly works tend to reflect the scholar’s ‘home base’. Consequently, ‘Popular Music Studies’, as that inter-disciplinary field can now safely be referred to, tends, at best, to be discontinuous. For example, we may have a plethora of works on fandom and few on music business; a range on rock and a paucity on country, and so on.

Whether we consider music of a specific style or at a specific moment in its origination, dissemination or reception, there is likely to be a disparity in available published research. While this might be frustrating to us as teachers and researchers, what, arguably, is more frustrating still is a lack of works which attempt to locate and analyse how the actions of musicians and those of popular music institutions unite or, more accurately, are united by and so constitute the commodification process. Further, what is frustrating is a lack of conceptual tools that might allow us to access the experience of music-making under industrial conditions. What makes Toynbee’s book so valuable is that it is exactly this enterprise he has attempted to undertake. Viewed from this perspective, the lateness of this review is particularly unfortunate – as is the hostility of other published reviews. Our field needs to begin to recognise that popular music comes not from individuals working beyond or despite institutions, nor is it or can it be solely the product of those institutions. In explicating the dialectic of popular music, Toynbee is performe required to forge exactly this missing set of conceptual tools. What work, then, requires to be done is to determine the robustness of those tools, their degree of usefulness and the
fullness of the set. What has delayed this review so badly is that every time I came to write it, this is exactly the work I attempted to undertake – in isolation!

Making Popular Music takes music biography as its point of departure for the reason that, as Toynbee puts it, all of the various instances of music biography ‘share an assumption that the meaning of music can be found in the lives of its makers’ (p. ix). This leads him to make the following observation, an observation which the rest of the work is concerned with unpacking:

These lives begin as ordinary lives, or at least they ought to do so. For the popularity of popular music is very much based on an ideal: popular musicians come from the common people but they make extraordinary music. Over the course of this book I want to take this archetypal myth at face value and explore its implications. (p. x)

From the outset, then, in deconstructing a myth, Toynbee is forced to recognise that the myth of the popular musician as an extra-ordinary person is both multi-faceted and a contradictory composite, comprised, as it is, of a number of equally compelling lesser-myths. Consequently, there is a sense that the motive force of his argument derives from his attempt to harness the ‘natural’ energy generated as these huge and contradictory tectonic plates of popular cultural mythology grind constantly against each other (‘musicians make change’, ‘musicians make fads’, ‘musicians make utopias’, ‘musicians make dystopias’, and so on). To sustain the analogy of the T.V. naturalist, Toynbee draws our attention to the several contradictions which underpin, in fact add up to, the popular musician, and he then proceeds, gingerly, to step from plate to plate, from pro to con, examining each separate conflicting conception of the popular musician as he works towards the confirmation of his stated aim – the demonstration, in fact the confirmation and celebration, of the popular musician as an ‘exemplary agent’, as someone ‘who makes a difference, in the shape of different songs, sounds and styles’.

To state that Toynbee ‘works towards’ a ‘stated aim’ is not to accuse him of contrivance, rather it is to recognise that myth-making gets in the way of allowing us access to the actual experience of making popular music for a living. What is notable in his approach is that, despite evidence of primary research in the final chapter, Toynbee’s work is not one of ethnography as might be anticipated from this observation, rather it is a work of theory, a work in which he confronts all of the ‘nay-sayers’ of popular music, and of popular cultural production in general, by unlocking their assumptions and dismantling their arguments. This is notably, but not solely, the case in his treatment of Adorno. Here we have a pro-pop, anti-capitalist theoretician (Toynbee) arguing against the quintessential anti-pop, anti-capitalist theoretician, Adorno, in a new and novel way. Or, perhaps more accurately, in a way that reminds Adorno, and us, that Marxist dialectics proceeds through contradiction, and that what might constrain the actions, and lives, of musicians – the Market – might also enable them – the Market requires goods for exchange and does not care, overmuch, how those goods come to be. In fact, the whole of Toynbee’s argument devolves on this point, but this is no simple devolution, rather, and again because it is a work of theory, he is induced to create a connected skein of concepts that represents the set of conceptual tools referred to previously.

Beginning, and ending, with the ‘exemplary agent’, he draws on the work predominantly, but by no means solely of Bourdieu and Bakhtin, to present a compelling and elaborate study which argues both against and for the position of the
creative musician, in so doing re-specifying the creation of popular music as a work of ‘social authorship’. Social authorship involves composers bringing their distinct musical and personal trajectories, at an angle defined precisely by this uniqueness, to the sphere (or ‘field’) of existing music available to them in their way of life (‘habitus’ qua Bourdieu) where ‘availability’ should be understood culturally as well as materially. At this intersection are made fresh and unrestricted contributions to the body of pop in and through the practice of recognising a series of musical ‘possibles’ and of re-configuring them along what Toynbee identifies and demonstrates symbolically as the individual musician’s ‘radius of creativity’. The practice of originating through a recombination of existing music is what specifies popular music as a creative practice across the decades and between styles and genres. Further, this practice will always begin at a local level under the conditions of what Toynbee refers to as the ‘proto-market’ – wherein a musician can only progress if his or her peers sanction such progress indirectly through market mechanisms (rather than directly through competition or acclaim). This, in turn and simultaneously, is the product of, and evidence for, the ‘institutional autonomy’ of creative popular musicians wherein the specific nature of popular music production as a sub-set of the economically exceptional sector of ‘cultural production’ affords music-makers a degree of freedom from ‘corporate control’ unimaginable in other sectors of capital accumulation.

Taken together, we begin with the assertion of the ‘exemplary agent’ and return to him or her or them by way of the ‘proto-market’, ‘institutional autonomy’, the radius of creativity’ and ‘social authorship’ and by the means of applying newer theories of cultural production to older ones. This is what makes engagement with Toynbee’s text so valuable, it is a circular ride, a roller-coaster, and it served to remind me, at least, that young musicians make new music in good faith and with great joy. Toynbee’s strength is to draw our attention to these facts and to equip us against those who would say that true creativity in popular music is simply and wholly absent. Yet in this celebration we are at our most vulnerable: young musicians are headstrong and carefree (at least to the extent that they do, indeed, care less for the admonitions of their elders). My difficulty with Toynbee’s argument is that, however much I relish its individual ingredients, I fear they do not make the dish he cooks. To adapt his own specification of a ‘radius of creativity’, as theorists of pop we, too, are restricted to our own recognition of ‘possibles’ by the nature of the coincidence of ‘habitus’ and ‘field’ in our individual cases.

To put this more accessibly, if I had spent thirty years ‘knocking it out’ in a series of local scenes (to use Toynbee’s phrase) I might be drawn to identify my own ‘creative agency’ as largely remote and shielded from the ‘regularized discipline of accumulation’; instead I spent ten years signed to major labels and major publishers and registered the constraints of working within the norms and expectations of profit-driven firms all too keenly. Consequently, my own pessimistic conclusions about the fate of musicians in the marketplace exist in stark contrast to Toynbee’s upbeat and optimistic ones. This is not to ‘pull rank’ – to argue that ‘I’ve been there and it’s like this’ – rather it is to suggest that there are issues of institutional power – its sources, its exercise, its processes of renewal – that remain to be identified and analysed where popular music and where popular cultural production are both concerned. I know that I wrote the songs I wanted to write and I also know that I did not make the records I wanted to make. This means, at the very least, that autonomy and creativity are indeed compromised in some ways, but not in ways
that are reducible to some clumsy argument of ‘false consciousness’ on the part of
musicians (that they simply believe in an illusion of autonomy); rather we need to
consider the complex interplay of the praxis (of how belief informs and inflects
practice) of music-making under the unelaborated but powerful terms and conditions of
the marketplace. Further, we need to know far more about the institutions of popular
music and how they work on and with the power-inflected practices and expecta-
tions of musicians before we can establish, identify and evaluate the extent to
which autonomy from them can be argued to exist. Jason Toynbee’s work points
us in these directions and assembles a group of arguments and concepts to help us
prepare for the encounters which a journey into institutionally inscribed practice
will entail. Consequently, Making Popular Music deserves praise – where the most
productive praise would be open engagement with the text.

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What to Listen For in Rock: a Stylistic Analysis. By Ken Stephenson. Yale University

Reading this book made me very angry. At first, I thought that this was simply
because it was a bad book. In retrospect, taken on its own terms, it has much to
recommend it: its clarity; the logic of its exposition; many of the details of its theory;
its constant reference to actual music. But I don’t think one can regard a book as
enclosed by its covers – the feeling is not assuaged. I think it comes more from the
observation that there appears to be a market for what it contains.

It is a textbook, aimed at US undergraduate music majors (and, being Yale, its
circulation at least in the UK is thankfully likely to be small). That such a book is
thought necessary carries certain implications about popular music in the US acad-
emy that I find saddening. However, to fulfil the role (maybe as a matter of neces-
sity, I cannot say), it makes three fundamental, and deeply flawed, assumptions. The
first is demonstrated by the repetition of the old argument about the necessity of
musicologists ignoring the work of other disciplines because we live ‘in an age of
specialization’ (p. xi). One page in the introduction is key here – on p. xiii he takes
refuge in Nattiez’s ‘neutral level’ (highly tendentious, these days, but he ignores
this) in arguing (as I did ten years ago and therefore agree with!) that an under-
standing of normative rock structures is necessary. This is ground for solid debate,
but the old argument is really all we get. The issue needs to be handled much more
sensitively than the author’s simple dismissal of Shuker’s original (1994) dismissal
of musicological reductionism, on the grounds that sociologists are equally culp-
able. Stephenson offers ‘mutual deference’, but doesn’t deliver.

The second is that he implies that rock theory is uncontested. Well, he doesn’t
claim cognisance of the work of Walter Everett, of someone like Guy Capuzzo, nor
myself (though he does claim to have read Philip Tagg – clearly without effect –
and is uncritical of Wilfrid Mellers) – had he, he would realise (and, far more
importantly, he would encourage students to realise) that any theory worth its
name is vigorously debated. There is no sense of that here. References are scarce,
alternative readings are, by their absence, denied. What model of education does
that put forth?

The third is that rock is a monolithic style (encompassing R&B, country rock,
soul, etc., but by the look of it not heavy metal nor, it appears to me, ‘pop’, whatever
that is), whose function seems to be first (there is a list here, on p. xvii) to validate music theory. The book certainly makes the music live up to this latter claim.

So, what sort of theory? We are presented with chapters on individual analytic domains: phrase rhythm; key and mode; cadences; chord type and harmonic palette; harmonic succession; form. All very fine. What are missing? Well, on p. x (apologies for concentrating so much on the introduction, but that’s the only place we get any sense of the philosophy of the text) I sense an interest in exploring expression, both in the counter he raises to Charles Keil, and in his own discovery of ‘truths’ revealed by rock. And yet, we have no chapter on texture, timbre or sound manipulation, no chapter on the voice, no chapter on lyrics, no chapter on performance subtleties. I don’t think that to imply that these are less relevant to any discussion of expression than what he does include, is a sustainable position. Moreover, these lacunae demonstrate how desperately dated in concept the book is. Within the chapters we do get, the layout is logical, following many tonal music theory primers. As such, they contain many local points of interest (and, while for example I find his treatment of mode totally inadequate, there are many other details with which I agree, and there will be others with which others disagree). However, it seems to me most of this theory is already in existence in various articles (and, occasionally, books). That he has cited hardly any of it is, for me, a bad fault which implies both ignorance of the literature and also that theory exists in some way independent of its use. It may be that, in the USA, theory has to be pedagogically separated from debate, to be seen as somehow pure, and unsullied. Then that is a larger issue, but this book will be contributing to the problem.

Within these chapters, then, any musically proficient reader will find material of value, provided such a reader can contextualise it in their own minds in terms of the rest of the literature. But contextualisation, even for this music theory, is an aspect of the book I also find somewhat disappointing. Analysis is surely only as good, as insightful, as the synthesis and interpretation which results from it (and surely a book such as this should be comprehensive enough to do both?) – here, though, such synthesis is relegated to one chapter and therein to half a dozen case studies (the longest and last of which is from Emerson, Lake & Palmer). This is not a book which serves to demonstrate the value, or the workings, of music, but of music theory. In this it is a success and, therefore (in the larger sense), a failure.

The typeface used for chapter headings is crude and ‘hip’. The title says it all – if you need to ask ‘what do I listen for in rock . . .?’? But then, titles are usually down to the publisher. This author clearly knows his music, and is a more-than-adequate music theorist who writes well. It is sad that I cannot recommend his book to anyone with that level of expertise he assumes of his readers, for he has been badly served by the context within which he is writing and there, I think, lies the source of my response.

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Based on the recent personal experience of an unintentional hour of imposed MTV (UK) viewing, one might be forgiven for pining for the early days of music video.
Those predictable rotations of Duran Duran, Van Halen and John Cougar Mellencamp on MTV (US) were, after all, what allowed for the palpable shock of Frankie Goes to Hollywood’s uncensored ‘Relax’. For those whose cultural memory reaches back to the mid-1980s, it is similar moments of transgression which Stan Hawkins revisits in *Settling the Pop Score*.

The artists Hawkins considers in his five case studies – Madonna, Morrissey, Annie Lennox, Pet Shop Boys, and Prince – have all in their own ways challenged certain gender conventions imposed by visual media such as MTV. One might not immediately think of Morrissey or the Pet Shop Boys when one thinks of video, but by approaching a select number of ‘texts’ by each of these artists, Hawkins analyses the ways in which their identities have been negotiated – visually, musically, stylistically – in opposition to contemporary imposed heteronormativity, and a certain commonality emerges as a result. Most of the chapters included here have appeared elsewhere in other guises, but they work well as a collection by virtue of Hawkins’ approach to the analysis of stylistic and musical codes, and the uncovering of the underlying processes of masquerade, irony and mimicry at play in all the works considered.

Hawkins’ definition of ‘text’ should be mentioned here:

> I stress that the pop text is more than just the song. In a sense, it is an entity of motion determined by the variables of sonic structure that link it together. I would suggest then that reading the pop text be based upon a degree of subjectivity and perception of criticism from a variety of standpoints. In other words, the idea of the permutation of texts and their intersections with one another should draw out the full trajectory of musical narratology. (p. 7)

This necessarily involves introducing analytical methodology to the various elements of the pop text, though Hawkins’ approach shifts according to the focus of each successive case study.

Of the five case studies, it is the first, on Madonna, which is the least successful, not for a lack of material, but for an over-abundance of it. It is a problem which extends from the Introduction, in which terminology is occasionally introduced without the benefit of contextualisation. For example, Hawkins states on page 22 that ‘ironic codes have no axis; they are arbitrary and always adhere to the intertexts that connote both playfulness and *jouissance*’. A term such as *jouissance* is rather loaded, and not easily defined, yet there is neither an explanation of the term nor any preparation for its use in this context. Rather, Hawkins moves in the next paragraph to a discussion of Bakhtin’s work; and when *jouissance* returns again on page 28 (‘Any musical interpretation cannot avoid the consideration of these politics of *jouissance* that shape the text’), again it comes at the end of a paragraph and without warning.

In the introduction to the Madonna case study, Hawkins provides a survey of some earlier approaches to her work (Jeremy Beadle, John Fiske, Simon Frith) and suggests that ‘the *jouissance* and erotic value of Madonna’s texts are located primarily in the spectrum of her “produced sound”’ (p. 39). This is not intended as a catalogue of Hawkins’ use of the term *jouissance*; rather, it is to suggest that the unsupported use of an essentially untranslatable term presents certain problems for a book’s readership. Undergraduates may be comfortable with Barthes’ work, but if they were familiar with the tensions raised by the translation of the word *jouissance* they might find Hawkins’ subsequent use of the word ‘bliss’ somewhat confusing. A similar problem is raised mid-way through the Madonna chapter when the
discussion turns to ‘phallic beats’ (p. 47), ‘phallic snare shots’ (p. 56) and ‘phallic upbeats’ (p. 57). It is the latter which references Susan McClary, but the shift in terminology is rather abrupt (or perhaps phallic) and again, not clearly contextualised. Perhaps Hawkins’ assumption is that his readers are conversant with the literature, which is fair enough; but some of the points he raises would be of worth to the younger scholar, and the worry here is that such a person might become somewhat overwhelmed by language.

The other case studies proceed considerably more smoothly. Hawkins’ introductory discussion of irony is central to his chapter on Morrissey, and his discussion of camp sensibilities in Morrissey’s performative self work well in tandem with the chapter on the Pet Shop Boys and banality. Issues of ambiguity are twofold in both chapters and relate to both sexual and national identities. The latter is a point which was of particular interest, as Hawkins seems to imply that ‘alternative’ Englishness and ‘alternative’ sexuality were related constructions in Thatcherite and post-AIDS Britain. A suggestion of ‘hidden Scottishness’ might be inferred in the intervening chapter on Annie Lennox and masquerade, though the focus is on her particular ‘musical androgyny’ (p. 113), especially as it is explored sonically on the *Diva* album and visually in the attendant videos.

It is the final chapter on Prince which works best to summarise Hawkins’ approach to the understanding of pop ‘texts’. One paragraph in particular seems to pose the central question to the whole collection:

[...] Indeed, masquerade can be understood as a form of masking that intends to resolve gendered identification within a presumed context of heteronormativity. One might read Prince’s motives as based around a fear of his own phallicism – the phallic identity he flaunts yet shys [sic] away from. In this sense, Prince’s masquerading highlights his femininity as a reflection of the Phallus in order to expose the bisexual possibilities that commonly disrupt and challenge heteronormativity. Of course, interpreting his queer antics leads to a rethinking of sexual politics beyond the historic dogma of essentialist spectatorship. Yet the question still remains: what then is masked by masquerade and queering, and how might we rethink the very reflexive notions of masculinity that encompass the performing out of sexual difference? (pp. 184–5)

The final chapter leaves us where we started: recalling the occasional shock of music video, questioning the nature of sexuality, and perhaps even challenging our own assumptions about masculine/feminine address, the enjoyment of popular music, and the understanding of identity politics. Despite the terminological hiccup, *Settling the Pop Score* should prove a useful tool for the further study of musicians like Morrissey, Annie Lennox and the Pet Shop Boys. For those whose cultural memory does not reach back to the mid-1980s, this is a good introduction to questions of identity raised in videos by Madonna and Prince, whose sexual masquerades continue both to provoke and to proclaim.

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The pop-cultural effects of rap music on the young constitute a main source of the music’s social relevancy, fuelling critical and popular fascination. Whether acknowled-
edged or not, assumptions about the impact of rap, (e.g. that it kindles political consciousness in dispossessed youth, or, by contrast, that it instigates violence and leads young people astray), inform nearly all appraisals of this charged phenomenon. Understanding what hip-hop actually means to the kids and how they consume it in their daily lives should therefore be a pressing task for researchers. It seems curious, then, that so little careful scholarly work has been done on rap's consumption. Studies that have recently appeared (see, for instance, Watkins 1998; Negus 1999; Forman 2000; Krims 2000) tend to focus on the contexts of production and distribution and on textual analysis (for studies that do, unusually, emphasise contexts of use, see notably Kelley 1997; Hutchinson 1999).

In light of the critical underexposure of audiences and consumption, Greg Dimitriadis's ethnographic study *Performing Identity/Performing Culture* is particularly welcome, useful and important. Drawing on four years of research at a community centre in North American Midwest, Dimitriadis explores how young black people engage ever more intensely with hip-hop culture: how it shapes their view of history; how it informs their day-to-day interactions; how they mobilise its narratives to engage with politics; how it can (nonetheless) work to perpetuate a sense of social exclusion.

The first chapter provides an account of the evolution of hip-hop from ‘Live Performance to Mediated Narrative’: from the early hallowed days of block parties, graffiti and break-dancing to increasingly commodified and mass-mediated rap. The author provides an insightful summary that elaborates less well-known aspects of this familiar story, growing out of his concern with performance and use. For instance, the discussion of how changing contexts of performance have had impact on lyrical priorities (so that the second-person address *you* shifted from indexing ‘the participants necessary to sustain the [live] event’ to interpolating ‘dominant society’ [p. 18]) is revealing. However, this remains the most conventional chapter. Its trajectory from face-to-face participation to privatised consumption generally adheres to classic distinctions in pop music studies. This narrative frame seems anomalous because one of the most innovative and persuasive features of the book is its insistence on the social activities involved in the decoding of hip-hop notwithstanding its commodity status.

Productive performance sites persist in contemporary mass-mediated rap, as Dimitriadis ably goes on to demonstrate in subsequent chapters. It is in chapters 2 to 4 that we find the most revealing accounts of hip-hop as lived practice, in which the author’s claim to ‘take the performance itself as [the] primary unit of analysis’ (p. 12) fully materialises. He explores the everyday uses of a variety of hip-hop texts both in the urban lives of young people, extrapolated from the comments they made in discussion groups and individually. Combining this data with his own textual readings and contextual descriptions, he tells richly intertextual and sympathetic stories. The first of these chapters focuses on constructions of place; the second on history; and the third on identity, using the iconic figure of Tupac Shakur (with whom the young men and women shared an ‘intense affective investment’ [p. 106]). One of the many achievements of the book is that the young people emerge as individuals who respond to rap in various, unexpected ways, giving the lie to the ‘built-in response’ school of rap reception. Their ‘individual biographies, valued friendship networks, and the institutions they traverse’ (p. 36), the book demonstrates, all play determining roles in their responses to pop-culture. Still, collective ‘popular histories’ (p. 68) do emerge. The most intriguing include these young peo-
people’s continuing investment in the black southern past (as the symbolic home of street practices like rhetorical ‘playing’, in the sphere of courting rituals, and of street codes like ‘respect’); their ambivalent posture towards black political protest; and their continuing fear of the Ku Klux Klan.

Pop-cultural studies scholarship has often tended to neglect audience responses in part because they are so difficult to document and measure with much accuracy. This is especially so for music, which can be consumed in more ways and in conjunction with many more other activities than, say, film or TV. Where ethnographers tend to respond to this challenge by conducting methodologically rigorous studies, often leading to fairly tentative or narrow conclusions, Dimitriadis adopts a liberal, interpretive ethnographic approach, which borders on the anecdotal. While this might concern some readers, I found his flexible, selective use of discussion-group materials refreshing. There is surely space for less social-scientific uses of ethnographic data. Dimitriadis, operating in the interstices of cultural studies and ethnography, is able to provide broadly conceived readings that demonstrate how young black people use music to create and rework a sense of themselves as subjects, actors and community members. That said, at times the cultural and communications studies explanations seem a bit unnecessary; without some of them, and without the tendency to repetition in this slim volume, there could have been more space afforded to the intriguing primary materials themselves.

The book’s brief concluding chapter ‘Black Youth, Popular Culture, and Pedagogy’ makes explicit the book’s agenda: the need to understand ‘the young’s investment in pop culture and’ (with the increasing disaffection from schooling in under-funded inner cities) ‘how it might be made more clearly a part of school curricula’ (p. 91). While this difficult but necessary task, that is, the need to align ‘hip-hop pedagogy’ with traditional schooling, of trying to energise learning by tapping into the cultural competencies and dispositions of young people, is recognised here and throughout, it is neither fully developed nor entirely resolved. Instead, for this reader, the book’s central critical achievement is to demonstrate in vivid detail the social dimensions of commercial culture, and the ways in which texts are inhabited, consumed and used, not in isolation but through a dynamic web of intertextual associations, each in itself a site of ‘performance’. In addition, Dimitriadis’ central empirical achievement is to shed light on the attitudes and aspirations of black youth, a group that drives American pop culture, but also, paradoxically, that remains under-represented, under-resourced and little-understood in US society.

With the rap industry now more than a $1-billion-a-year concern, the values and practices of the people who spawned this music, who lend it continuing social vitality, and for whom rappers claim to speak, desperately need to be better understood.

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Kai Fikentscher’s short, yet informative, book is one of the latest additions to a growing corpus of works (both monographs and edited volumes) concerned with dance music and dance music scenes (cf. Thornton, Redhead, Reynolds, Rietveld, inter alia). It is furthermore notable for its geographical focus (New York City), as well as its foregrounding of the contributions of both African-American and homosexual men to the genesis of Underground Dance Music, referred to by the author as ‘UDM’. Reflecting one of Fikentscher’s foci – namely, the importance of the 12’ single in the evolution of this genre – the book is divided into ‘A’ and ‘B’ ‘sides’, these corresponding to the author’s ethnohistorical and ethnographic methodologies, respectively. ‘Side A’, for example, examines the roots of contemporary UDM, rightly situating the genre in relation to and as an outgrowth of the disco phenomenon of the 1970s and 1980s (and, perhaps implicitly, contrasting the ‘subcultural capital’ accruing from connection with the former, with the almost exaggerated opprobrium which greeted the latter). Conversely, ‘Side B’ – based in part upon the author’s fieldwork, undertaken largely in the late 1980s and early 1990s – deals with relatively current manifestations, framing these within broad theoretical concerns.

Those not familiar with UDM (or contemporary dance musics in general) will find a very useful discussion of DJ practices (Chapter 3), including the DJ’s role in rendering ‘mediated’ musics ‘immediate’, this engendered partly through interactive performance with the dancers. This last concept, in turn, leads to a discussion of group cohesion, in which the author posits the role of rhythm as instrumental in synchronising the disparate subjectivites (and bodies) of the dancers into a relatively unified whole (Chapter 5). Additionally, the cultural component of such a dynamic occupies the last major section of the book (Chapter 6), wherein Fikentscher suggests viewing these group practices as a ‘celebration of marginality’, one reflecting the statuses of the core UDM audiences (black and/or gay) in contemporary North American society. Here, the religious practices of African-Americans are related to those of the dance club, both of which are seen as synthesising aspects of the sensual and the sacred.

However, while both approaches yield some helpful, general observations, it is this recourse to generalities which sometimes proves problematic. For example, the specific stylistic attributes of UDM are not examined in detail; rather, the author relies upon somewhat broad definitions for both constituent parts of the appellation, so that ‘underground’ refers to activities taking place in a ‘limited space, inhabited by a limited number of participants’ who foster a sense of ‘insider knowledge’ (p. 10), while ‘dance music’ is ‘an umbrella term . . . [embracing] several categories of music’ (p. 12). While such a definition may certainly be appropriate for those musics played at Paradise Garage or the Sound Factory (two underground locales discussed in the text), it may be applied equally as well to musics played at other locales – such as the Pyramid Club or the Mudd Club – which were both
geographically and temporally related to those discussed by the author, but whose musics (and musical discourses) were more indicative of the (post-) punk / new wave aesthetic, and in stark contrast to the examples listed in the Appendix as exemplifying UDM.

Furthermore, frequent use of such terms as ‘gay sensibilities’, ‘gay culture’, ‘African-American perspective’, or ‘black musical practices’ (this last eloquently and necessarily interpolated by Philip Tagg in his ‘Open Letter’) suggests a view of culture groups or communities as homogenised, monolithic entities, a view more in line with, for example, Evans-Pritchard’s analysis of ‘the Nuer’, than with current anthropological thought. Indeed, such pronouncements as ‘by 1975, the lifestyle of gay men in New York focused on three things: disco, drugs and sex’, seem not only anachronistic in terms of a contemporary, ethnographically based work, but even disturbingly stereotypical. As a result, the complexities of (postmodern) identities – ‘black’ or ‘gay’ – are not fully explored. This is not simply to cavil at a lack of theoretical nuance; rather, reliance on somewhat one-dimensional concepts begets an almost utopian view of dance music practices – for example, the club as (secular/sacred) ground for ‘celebration of marginality’ – without engaging the internal dissonances (e.g. hierarchies of physique, beauty and/or sexual desirability) that are often constituents of such scenes. The author’s arguments may have been bolstered by inclusion of the views (and quotations) of actual participants; however, while these are occasionally incorporated, many are from secondary sources (notably Arlene Yu’s 1988 B.A. thesis).

One might also take issue with the seemingly materialist focus, which is in evidence at various points throughout the book. For example, the aforementioned focus on technology (12’ singles, as well as mixing and playback equipment) – most definitely a component of UDM’s evolution – may be overstated; as Middleton notes, technologies in and of themselves should not be viewed teleologically, but rather as potentials with numerous possible outcomes. Similarly, the view of the body and the ‘unmediated’ effects of rhythm thereon, discounts not only the variable of drug use (a discussion of which is lacking) in heightening or manipulating ‘direct’ experience but, additionally, discourses and narratives of the body which contribute directly to a subject’s perceptions of musical reception.

None of this, however, should eclipse the positive contributions made by the author, for he has assembled – from sources often ignored by academics – a readable and relatively thorough history of a discrete dance music scene, one which recognises the often-obliterated contributions of members of ‘minority’ groups (including specific individuals such as Frankie Knuckles or Larry Levan) as instrumental in the production of popular culture. There is also an extensive bibliography, as well as a useful glossary containing key terms related to the subject, something that should prove quite helpful to the uninitiated. While not the last word on the subject, this volume raises questions that may be productively explored further, either by this author or others in the field.

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References

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