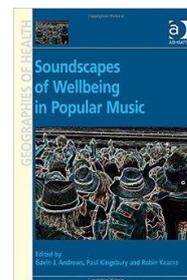


Book review

Soundscapes of Wellbeing in Popular Music (Gavin J. Andrews, Paul Kingsbury & Robin Kearns, Eds.)

Reviewed by Muriel E. Swijghuisen Reigersberg



Title: Soundscapes of Wellbeing in Popular Music | Editors: Gavin J. Andrews, Paul Kingsbury & Robin Kearns | Publication year: 2014 | Publisher: Ashgate | Pages: 320 | ISBN: 978-1937440534

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This co-edited volume is a welcome addition to Ashgate's (now Taylor and Francis) *Geographies of Health* series. It is heartening to see that the series and volume's editors are also responding to the trend that has been evident in anthropology and especially USA-based ethnomusicology¹: the amalgamation of popular music studies, sound studies and cultural musicology with a specific interest in context, place and wellbeing. Within the Society for Ethnomusicology², for example, the sections and special interest groups in medical ethnomusicology, sound studies, music and violence, ecomusicology and cognitive ethnomusicology have paid special attention to the relationship between sound, musicking and location with reference to wellbeing.

¹ British ethnomusicology, with a few notable exceptions, has shown less of an interest in music and its relationship to place and wellbeing, although DeNora's work is well-known and frequently cited, and place forms an intimate part of what ethnomusicologists study generally.

² http://www.ethnomusicology.org/?page=Groups_Home

The American Anthropological Association's Music and Sound Interest Group³ in its turn, has created a bridge between the anthropological and ethnomusicological study of music as sound, championing issues of listening and public soundscapes, studies of aurality and ethnographies of musical experience among others. As such, I think the book is of special interest to people working in the fields of geography, popular music studies, ethnomusicologists, music therapists, sound study specialists, anthropologists and sociologists interested in music as a social phenomenon.

The book asks several questions which are outlined in the excellent and clearly written introduction: a) How are definitions of wellbeing and popular music understood? b) How are popular music and wellbeing related to one another, and are certain relationships in need of further explanation? c) Why does place matter when we study music, and how is the concept of place understood. The editors define popular music as

³ <http://msig.americananthro.org/about-msig/>

“forms of music that are mass-produced, distributed, and consumed and thus familiar to a significant number of people” (p. 2). The definition is broadly inclusive, and does consider various genres of music such as world music, folk, pop, jazz-fusion and others.

The book is divided into three sections, entitled ‘Circulation’, ‘Transformations’ and ‘Gathering’. The first section, ‘Circulation’, “illustrates the ways in which forces of wellbeing move through the lived places of musicians, bands and their listeners.” (p. 12). ‘Transformations’, section two, “focuses on music’s capacities to salubriously change its performers and listeners in private and public places” (p. 13), whilst section three ‘Gathering’, “explores the ways in which musical communities and populations assemble at different scales in the hope of ameliorating themselves and the world around them” (p. 13). In the first section, Foley’s chapter recording the rise in popularity and world tour of the Congolese band Staff Benda Bilili is of particular interest. Foley addresses the varying narratives of disability, equality and public health in Kinshasa. He critically examines how the popular and world music industries provide both an opportunity to promote social and economic wellbeing as well as create environments which encourage exploitation and superficial “feel-good examples of triumph over disadvantage” designed to “make Europeans feel good about themselves” (p. 44). The chapter forms a nice example of how this volume generally refuses to assume that engagement with music will *ipso facto* lead to improved wellbeing.

In some areas for instance, a complete triumph over adversity will never be a possibility. Chapter 10 in section two offers an insight into the uses of music in places of palliative care. Music therapists in particular, will be familiar with this type of ‘place’: a hospice. Authors Bartel and Clements-Cortés between them share an interest in music therapy, psychology and musicology and their article embraces the interdisciplinary field of thanatology: “the study of death, dying, and bereavement” (p. 145). This area of enquiry, they say, has been growing over the past twenty years and embraces the notion of “dying well” and music’s role in aiding a “good death”. Their ethnographic case study explores how music helps facilitate communication between the dying and their loved ones, allowing them to process their reactions to death in a more

positive way. The chapter makes excellent use of interview examples and musical texts and compositions of those involved in the palliative process.

Chapter 13, in section three also explores ethnographic and applied methods, this time in an educational context. It reiterates an earlier call for a more “humanistic sensitivity in methods in order to tease out the interconnectedness of health, culture and place” (p. 191). Despite the cultural turn in health geography, methodologies within this field still remain “stubbornly formal”, decontextualized and with the dichotomy of the “researcher-researched” still firmly in place (p. 191). The authors Skinner and Masuda advocate for the use of culturally and context-appropriate research methodologies. Exploring the uses of critical hip hop pedagogy in Winnipeg in Manitoba, Canada with urban aboriginal youth, they argue that hip hop’s mechanisms of story-telling, music, dance and visual arts are close to Aboriginal history and oral traditions and therefore especially effective at helping youth explore the relationship between place and wellbeing. The authors emphasise that in order to best understand the relationship between music, place and wellbeing researchers should adopt methods that suit the people they work with rather than automatically imposing methods derived from a specifically Western scientific paradigm. This approach is also frequently employed by ethnomusicologists and anthropologists during applied action research projects. The ideas put forward are also in keeping with current thinking in the field of indigenous methodologies in anthropology. This, like many others in this volume, is a very strong chapter. It is well-structured, and provides ample ethnographic and theoretical evidence to support the arguments made.

In all, I only have two minor quibbles with the volume. The first may be due to the specific copy that I was sent. In the hard copy received, the copy editing was not always as consistent in quality as I have come to expect from Ashgate: occasionally spaces between words were omitted as on pages 107 and 108; unusual bolding of letters appeared on page 147 and there was the repetition of exact sentences on pages 216 and 219 and so on. Secondly, as mentioned in the introduction, there is a body of literature and research within ethnomusicology and anthropology that perhaps could have received more attention in this volume.

Even Whittaker, the ethnomusicologist, is not able to fully do it justice. One key figure in this area, as far as I can discern, remains unreferenced: Steven Feld⁴. His performative and scholarly work have been seminal in shaping the field for some time now and he has published in popular music outlets. For example, his recent work in acoustemology (acoustic epistemologies, or 'sound as a way of knowing') looks very carefully at how music as sound can be conceived of as a way of knowing experientially and how this experience is inextricably linked to time-space interactions. His work shows how musical experience, and therefore wellbeing is influenced by surroundings and the cultural, historical, material, mental and mediatised dimensions that music occupies when it is performed in localities. Not drawing the links between the efforts of ethnomusicological, anthropological and popular music studies together more tightly, therefore, seems to me a lost opportunity to elide disciplinary boundaries further. That said, the ethnomusicological and anthropological interest in soundscapes and wellbeing is predominantly in evidence in the USA and relatively new. The editors, therefore, being (health) geographers ought to probably be forgiven for this oversight. As with all interdisciplinary endeavours it is impossible to be an expert in all matters. Therefore, I believe this last quibble of mine to be only minor. The volume's richness otherwise makes up for it more than amply. I would wholeheartedly recommend people read it.

Suggested citation:

Swijghuisen Reigersberg, M. E. (2015). Book review: "Soundscapes of Wellbeing in Popular Music" (Gavin J. Andrews, Paul Kingsbury & Robin Kearns, Eds.). *Approaches: An Interdisciplinary Journal of Music Therapy, First View* (Advance online publication), 1-3.

⁴ <http://www.stevenfeld.net/articles/>