

Review Article

Growing Old Together: Pop Studies and Music Sociology Today

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Andy Bennett and Steve Waksman, eds, *The Sage Handbook of Popular Music* (Los Angeles and London: Sage, 2015), ISBN 978-4462-1085-7 (hb).

John Shepherd and Kyle Devine, eds, *The Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music* (New York and London: Routledge, 2015), ISBN 978-0415855464 (hb) 978-1-138-85636-3 (pb).

Popular music and society had been thought inseparable long before the union was made official, at first in the title of pop's original academic journal (1971), later in that of a much-taught textbook (1995).¹ In many minds at late-century, sociologies of music were sociologies of pop: Western art music's true believers could still easily imagine that repertoire existing on another plane – the historical literature was devoted to the minute detailing of its mucky creative contexts, but that didn't have to matter – and critically minded, social-science trained pop scholars usually didn't care enough to argue. Yet music sociology's first, halting steps had actually been taken in approaching the classical canon, and the movement of the 1980s and 90s that was the New Musicology seemed radical precisely because it opened so many doors onto the social. That, then, was the situation 20 years ago, at least in the Anglophone countries: a popular music studies reaching maturity but still largely embedded in

¹ The journal *Popular Music and Society* is published by Routledge. Brian Longhurst, *Popular Music and Society* (Cambridge: Polity, 1995).

sociology and media/communications departments, and a musicology gradually transforming into a discipline in which music was much more openly reconciled with the worlds of its making.

Time passed, and now the academics who pioneered both the new musicology and popular music studies are at retirement. As they go, so does the post-war liberal consensus that afforded their world-view and work; simultaneously arriving in earnest are new forms of social networking that completely rewire the cultures of creativity, knowledge and taste that those scholars knew and described. This is a useful time to take stock of the ways that academic discourses have framed musics in their social dimension, and, in light of those changes, to think about the ways those topics are being positioned for the future.

The volumes under review here aim to do some of that work. As befits the patchy career of its subject, *The Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music* is the first collection of its kind. By contrast, Sage's *Handbook of Popular Music* is only the latest big-book attempt to define its field of study. I'll begin this essay by tackling the *Handbook*, and then turn to the *Reader*; my evaluation of both books is often focused less on the qualities of specific chapters, and more on what editorial shaping says – or doesn't say – about their respective fields at what could turn out to be a critical moment of social, political and disciplinary regeneration.

If popular music studies is a much-defined field, then the *Handbook's* co-editor Andy Bennett is definer-in-chief: he was also part-responsible for the 2005 Routledge *Popular Music Studies Reader*, and his works on youth and subcultures have similarly

aimed to orient what are broad areas of study. It's tempting to compare Bennett's Routledge and Sage volumes in a search for shifts of concern and method, but it turns out that those books, like the intervening *Ashgate Research Companion to Popular Musicology* (2009), explore an almost identical range of topics through very similar theoretical approaches. Perhaps a field's fundamental shape and history can't be expected to mutate that much over 10 years, and in any case, that doesn't mean the new volume is redundant. On the contrary: comprising commissioned essays rather than greatest hits, this is an ambitious collection full of excellent primers on pop music's classic study areas. And there is an effort to move things along by way of a consideration of the digital (non-)economies that characterise the music industry's chaotic present.

Yet that editorial model, where landmarks are dutifully staked out and the field extended in directions within easy methodological reach, can only succeed within limits. So while this volume points towards what it identifies as new frontiers for popular music studies, also visible are some methodological lacunae that make it difficult for pop scholars get beyond these reference-book rituals of consolidation.

To begin with, the title: *The Sage Handbook of Popular Music* is about the field and its scholars more than the music that might seem to be signalled. Here, things do not generally begin at the level of practice or genre and work upwards, and the relationship between the descriptive and the theoretical, between popular music and its study, is often uneasy. Even if a theoretical register is usually privileged, the area's central problems are not always articulated, and that titular ambiguity is only deepened by the editors' lack of interest in defining what 'the popular' might and might not mean. You can't blame them: more-or-less tortured attempts to answer that important but impossible question took up a lot of space in works by first-generation

popular music thinkers. But without explicitly posing or reframing the problem, we are bound to be left with popular music in know-it-when-I-see-it form; almost inevitably, the book betrays a familiar (and very Anglo-American) idea of what pop music's creative contexts, businesses, audiences, communicative properties and analytical methods look like.

The same might be said of the volume's methodological slant. Topic sections, each consisting of three to five mid-length essays and an introduction, include Theory and Method, The Business of Popular Music, Popular Music History, The Global and the Local, The Star System, Body and Identity, Media, Technology, Digital Economies. These groupings, the editors write, describe both foundational and emergent areas of popular music studies. If it's a subject list that says more about sociological or media studies concerns than music, well, those are the bragging rights won way back when few musicologists gave a hoot about pop. But things have changed, and a corollary of popular music's increasing presence in music departments across the global north has been a growth in the study of creative practice, the hands-on stuff that bird's-eye sociologies of 'production' so often miss. Studio work, songwriting, the technical and aesthetic intricacies of any kind of performance: if there is an emergent study area in popular music, surely this is it.

As I've been hinting, it's not so much novelty as purpose that this book can seem to lack, and this is made plain in the volume's somewhat scattershot survey of sociological, musicological and cultural studies methods. As all that would suggest, this field has never been anything other than methodologically heterodox. But this has left it prone to bouts of anguished self-reflection, during which scholars either lament the lack of a more defined theoretical toolkit, or else defend its analytical

improvisation and empiricism.² That history is left largely unacknowledged here, and rather than cutting to the chase, this gives the opening section a rather arbitrary feel. It's not just that we don't fully know what's at stake, or why the broad approaches described here have been singled out above others; without pinpointing popular music's 'problem set', we're not always sure what it is these methods might be trying to accomplish. In this, the book reflects a wider situation. There will never be a shortage of emergent contexts in which favourite concepts can be reapplied – mediation, identity construction – and originality achieved. Yet here is where pop music studies can betray a slide into middle-aged routine: ready answers for everything, but difficulty remembering the question.

So the first essay we read in this guide to popular music studies is Kevin Dawe's piece on ethnomusicological approaches. However surprisingly placed the piece might appear, it says something important about the current direction of studies in popular music, as distinct from 'popular music studies'. It's been noticeable over the last few years that more and more job announcements have invited applications from ethnomusicologists working on global popular musics. As much as that suggests an acknowledgement of pop's ubiquity (and students' desire to study it), the common refusal to advertise for a popular music scholar *per se* likely speaks of other institutional concerns. Whatever those may be, in both research and appointment terms the centre of gravity in academic popular music studies seems to be shifting

² See, for instance, Lawrence Grossberg, 'Reflections of a Disappointed Popular Music Scholar', in *Rock Over the Edge: Transformations in Popular Music Culture*, ed. Roger Beebe, Denise Fulbrook and Ben Saunders (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2002), 25-59, and Simon Frith's response in his review of that volume in *Popular Music* 23/3 (2004), 363-372.

away from the sociology/media focus described above (and this at a time when scholars in media departments are increasingly concerned with non-musical new media).

As both Dawe's headline status and the later 'Global and the Local' section attest, editors Bennett and Waksman clearly recognise this shift. But the changing purview can't be said to receive its due here, especially with that section's chapters all written by white, Anglophone men. The practicalities of commissioning and editing will always get in the way of any ideal project, but still, of the book's 36 contributors, 35 work in the UK, North America or Australia. Given the importance of music's making, industries and scholarship in many areas across Asia and the global south, this can only be an opportunity missed. Here, then, is the first of those lacunae that needs desperately to be filled.

Writing in from the book's self-defined geographical margins – but tasked with describing sociological methods always central to the field – is the Israeli Motti Regev. In the same vein as his work on pop-rock cosmopolitanism and, again, the relation between global and local phenomena, Regev's piece typifies now-current pop and ethnomusicological takes on the workings and values of globalisation: what Regev calls 'expressive isomorphism' (43), that is, activity within multiply-mediated genre shapes shared across continents, is a positive recasting of the old folklorist's 'cultural grey-out'.³ (Elsewhere in the volume, several authors side-eye ageing ideas of McDonaldization and Disneyfication in the same spirit.) In Regev's piece, as in several other orienting chapters of sociological bent, Bourdieu remains the touchstone. But by the end of the book, the venerable Frenchman is being shadowed by Richard

³ See Motti Regev, *Pop-Rock Music: Aesthetic Cosmopolitanism in Late Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013).

Peterson and Roger Kern's much-cited figure of the omnivore – this the ever-flitting fan who has replaced the subcultural exclusionist in popular musical imagination – and problems with fundamentally structural descriptions of taste are beginning to be raised.⁴ Still, given their centrality to early popular music studies, it's quite right that old subcultures should get their due. Gilbert B. Rodman's skilful gloss of pop music in cultural studies describes and contextualises that work as it emerged from Birmingham's Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies from the 1970s; Rodman illustrates the CCCS's monumentally influential analysis of ideology, communication and class via a discussion of Stuart Hall's concepts of articulation, and encoding and decoding, displaying as he does so a systematic and critical approach that is not always to be seen elsewhere.

Serge Lacasse's sort-of-survey of analytical methods is a case in point. Were the aims of the book better defined, this might have been a useful discussion of the problems of and debates around the musicological study of pop. But those techniques themselves are only alluded to here; we end the chapter being almost none the wiser as to what they actually are, and what they might or might not be able to do that others can't. Instead of a systematic description of efforts made across the popular music studies corpus, Lacasse offers a ruminative and introverted institutional history of the position of analysis within professional culture. An article that cites at length a Society for Music Theory subgroup's mission statement, but none of the analytical work it means to support, will win no-one over to what is an often-maligned but, to some of us at least, sorely needed set of approaches to music study. Here is a second project unfulfilled.

⁴ Richard A. Peterson and Roger M. Kern, 'Changing Highbrow Taste: From Snob to Omnivore', *American Sociological Review* 61/5 (1996), 900-907.

The balance of description and theorisation is not always problematic. In the section on the business of pop, Reebee Garofalo provides a typically rich (if US-centred) historical sketch of the business and its power relations. Devon Powers' subsequent piece on intermediaries and intermediation takes a more conceptual approach to related problems: she argues for a shift of attention from the conflicted notion of the cultural intermediary, to mediation more broadly conceived, and a new focus on the active circulation of both music and power across the overlapping fields of production and consumption. The same dynamic shapes the section on stardom, in which David Shumway's authoritative, cross-media history of the icon is followed by Philip Auslander's critical rumination on the performance of star identity.

It may be that the book's uneasy conjunction of narrative and reflection is not a product of editorial decision, but symptomatic of a problem fundamental to popular music studies: it has never really known what to do with pop's history. This is the third, and for me most important gap in popular music scholarship to date. 'For a long time', Catherine Strong writes in her chapter on memory, 'popular music's association with youth and the fact that it was still a relatively new cultural form meant that questions about its past were not of major concern' (418). As I've suggested, that youthful moment has passed. But add to Strong's observation the generally present-minded sociological and cultural studies approaches that have been central to pop studies, and a piecemeal approach to history and historical method is assured: pop's past, as is sometimes the case here, will be selectively mined for background to a contemporary problem rather than treated in its own right. This is not to ignore the fine historical work done by scholars working in those disciplines, or in literary and area studies. But those efforts do not amount to a thoroughgoing address of pop's broader historical domain and problems, nor one that will engage with

creative practices and their representation with the tenacity that music specialists might. A proper address of pop's past is a major challenge for the future.

The editors should be thanked, then, for including a short section on popular music history at all, since earlier summations of the field have not. But their introduction nevertheless describes 'history' in a rather presentist way, with pop music, they write, finally being recognised as 'a cultural form deemed worthy of celebration and preservation as a form of cultural heritage' (6). It's true that writing on pop's history as heritage industry, or its remnants as material culture, accounts for many of the pop studies that engage theoretically with the historical. Yet a competing, growing body of work – much of it appearing in the relatively young journal *Popular Music History* – centres on problems more classically (and perhaps more profoundly) historical: causation, narrative and interpretation, structure and agency. With more confidence, and a more secure theoretical understanding of what problems popular music historians might need to address, this topic section might have done important work in removing the historical project from its cult-studs present. But that's not to fault the component chapters in themselves. An extract from Keir Keightley's project on Tin Pan Alley offers a forensic examination of that place and concept in a shifting creative economy and cultural discourse. David Brackett's outline of the workings of genre in historical context, and Matt Brennan's gloss of the live music industries, are more wide-ranging but equally engaging. Readers can flip forwards to construct other bits of pop narrative for themselves, finding accounts of the Elvis epiphany in David Shumway's article, or a partial history of hip hop in Kembrew McLeod's.

Indeed, while the book's basic 'pop-rock' stylistic focus is what has served popular music studies for decades, hip hop is allocated an amount of space not seen in earlier guides to the field. Tony Mitchell revisits his work on the form outside the US

in the volume's most combative piece: US hip hop scholars and artists are taken to task for what Mitchell suggests is their parochialism and lack of political critique. Mitchell's material on creative and academic production in and on that form globally is interesting, but parts of his strongly stated argument against American hip hop work are misjudged. '[C]urrently prominent artists such as Jay-Z and Kanye West simply perform their own celebrity and have nothing politically conscious to say', he writes; '[t]his task is now left to hip hop artists in the rest of the world' (240). But both those stars have for years been widely understood as doing highly visible and highly contemporary kinds of political work. That hasn't always meant the classic protest politics Mitchell describes and venerates, but sometimes it has; at the time of Trump and the Black Lives Matter movement – and with high-profile statements sounded by Kendrick Lamar, Killer Mike, A Tribe Called Quest and dozens of others – Mitchell's dismissal of American hip hop engagement seems hubristic at best.

Detail of that new politics comes later in the book, with C. Riley Snorton's supple piece on race and stardom. As well as a thoughtful appraisal of Kanye West's conflicted public critique of both those concepts, Snorton provides what is the book's only real consideration of Latin American music. The material he covers, like his analytical approach, has a welcome freshness. Contrasting in method but not in quality, Jon Stratton's survey of critical race theory in pop music studies is a lively, systematic and critical literature review eminently useful for teaching and basic research.

The closing section of the book betrays a desire to bring things up to date, featuring essays on technology, digital and internet economies, and the attendant problems of intellectual property and its exploitation. There is some excellent writing here: Peter Doyle is characteristically, stylishly engaging on the development of

amplification in pop, and Joanna Demers gives a good, legalistic history of musical copying and sampling. But again, the book is somewhat flustered by its own format, and that bid for contemporaneity is doomed by the rapidity of change in this area. Viewed at the distance of a matter of months, some of the final essays already read like reports from another time: by one calculation, in the year of the book's publication streaming use grew by 93% in the US, and yet this enormous change in consumption practice receives little attention here.⁵ Of course, this is not the fault of the editors or contributors. Still, the book might have shown more enduring paths into pop's digital future were it more given to methodological development than reportage.

That's perhaps the luxury, and certainly the strength, of the chapters that close John Shepherd and Kyle Devine's admirable *Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music*. Again centring on digitised mediation, these pieces are part of a project that is evidently less conflicted in its interplay of narrative and theory. That shared contemporary interest is far from the only one common to both these volumes, and the sections here – including Approaches, Sites, and Debates, Politics, Industries, Technology and Mediation, New Directions – read like a recasting of the Sage volume's own. This mixture of abridged reprints and new articles even features some of the same contributors as *The Sage Handbook of Popular Music* (though on the whole the authors here are slightly more geographically dispersed). So what do these similarities signify? Is it that much in contemporary popular music studies is only accidentally about 'popular music', and that its real concerns are not defined by

⁵ Mark Mulligan, 'The Labels Still Don't Get YouTube and It's Costing Them', *Music Industry Blog*, 8 January 2016.

<https://musicindustryblog.wordpress.com/2016/01/08/the-labels-still-dont-get-youtube-and-its-costing-them/> (accessed 20 February 2017).

musical kind at all? Or is it that music studies more generally has been so deeply influenced by work on pop and its disciplinary sources that there is by now little to choose between its various branches?

Whatever the case, this is an important volume: for the first time, it draws together and contextualises what has, in the editors' own description, been a broken tradition of sociological work on music. That some of it is sociology at all might surprise – Schütz's proto-hippy phenomenology of players 'tuning in', McClary's text-based cultural readings – but that's to be expected, Shepherd and Devine argue: 'the sociology of music', they write, 'is not merely the application to music of established sociological theories and empirics', but is instead a range of variegated attempts to read music and the social as mutually infused (xi). That might be an ideal rather than a description of fact, since the editors also identify what has been the project's basic problem, namely, 'the tendency to reify both social structures and musical structures, in the service of ensuring a smooth analytical fit between the two' (7).

So Adorno, the CCCS, Howard Becker, the new musicologists, these and other figures are evoked and often excerpted in setting out what Shepherd and Devine identify as music sociology's central themes: music and (or as) social interaction; the construction of identities of whatever kind; processes of commerce; the material. But the book usefully reaches back to a time before those hallowed names and topics had emerged, its chapters proper beginning with Herbert Spencer's and Georg Simmel's mid-19th-century speculations on the social and bio-cultural origins of music. These are beholden to the ideas of primitivism and progress that mark similar work then being written by music specialists; coming straight after, a 1951 extract by the little-known John H. Mueller is like a coconut shy in which old tenets are knocked down

one by one. This is an exciting piece, one not just marking the start of music's engagement with the sociological project as most now know it, but also ushering in what remain so many contemporary articles of faith. Mueller's radical relativism, his dismissal of high-cultural, ahistorical mythmaking, seems to belie the piece's date of composition; notions of timelessness, *Zeitgeist* and universalism are all packed off. Perhaps most important is Mueller's recasting of the aesthetic as a primarily social category, where beauty is not inherent to music, but something that 'happens' to it (52-3).

Many early music sociologies focused on the Western art tradition, and pop music studies took up the baton in the 1970s. But the editors contend that a contemporary sociology cannot be so stylistically delimited, and a number of writers here continue that argument; Lisa McCormick's enjoyably rugged piece takes Simon Frith to task for positioning pop as exceptional in its bringing together of 'the sensual, the emotional, and the social *as* performance' (118). As is often the case, Adorno got there first – even if ironically – and reprinted here is the introduction to his sociology of music, including the demand for analyses of both 'what is rightly called "corn"' and 'the truth content of authentic works' (70). Without trying to overlook the German's aesthetic hierarchy or read him as the progenitor of everything, it's interesting that he also advocates work on the language people use in talking about music, something central to the now-burgeoning study of listening – even if Adorno wanted his subjects' guiding ideologies unmasked, and those contemporary researchers are at pains to take informants at their word.⁶

⁶ See for instance David Hesmondhalgh, 'Audiences and Everyday Aesthetics: Talking about Good and Bad Music', *European Journal of Cultural Studies* 10/4 (2007), 507-527; Raphaël Nowak and Andy Bennett, 'Analysing Everyday Sound

For musicology's old school, the characteristic sociological refusal to settle on single instances of music making, to really dig into them analytically in terms of their sound workings, betrays the discipline's fundamental inability to cope with such a task. In a sub-section on that old stager, 'the music itself', Peter Martin takes on this charge, providing as he does so a critical primer on points of disciplinary discussion and disagreement between music and sociology. For Martin, sociology wins: it's possible, he says – and writing no farther away than the Sage volume surely bears this out – to have an analysis of music as practice that is meaningful without saying anything about sound or its experience; he is dismissive of a music studies that still wants to focus on the singular work. There is no text without context, Martin writes (102). When this writing was first published in 1995, musicologists might have responded that neither is there any context without a text. But the most contemporary chapters in this collection show that scholars working with the relational methods now coming to prominence routinely imagine those two categories as fictional, impossible to disentangle.

Taken together, the volume's chapters on creation and consumption provide a systematic, critical consideration of key methodological approaches: Becker's art worlds, Bourdieu's fields, Hennion's mediation. Some of the more topic-specific chapters in the middle of the book – Mary Fogarty on dance, Simon Frith on live music, Dave Laing on recording, Paul Théberge on digitalisation – are necessarily more descriptive than theoretical, and here again is a great amount of overlap with the Sage volume.

Environments: The Space, Time and Corporality of Musical Listening', *Cultural Sociology* 8/4 (2014), 426-442.

A final section identifies new directions of research. The editors write that the authors it collects – Tia DeNora, Georgina Born, Nick Prior, Jeremy Gilbert – are looking for ‘resolutely non-reductive accounts of the realities of social processes and the specifics of musical sound’ (339). If their approaches are new, then this quandary has nevertheless been encountered repeatedly throughout the book; after DeNora and Born have outlined various ideas around the mutual enabling and mediation of social and aesthetic phenomena, it is only Gilbert’s piece that attempts in any musical detail to chart that move ‘from signification to affect’, as his title has it. Those wondering what vocabulary sociology will finally use to discuss the experience of sound might be disappointed to find that it is something a lot like broadsheet music criticism. Personally, I like it – so will many musicologists after Kerman still wishing for a scholarly rehabilitation of critical method – but others will worry that, however sure it is with the verbal and the visual, sociology still can’t tell us much about discourses that trade sonically.

Yet there’s a sense by the end of the volume that staging musicology and sociology as distinct enterprises is an outdated way of doing it (this thanks in part to the editors’ canny chapter plotting). The latter pieces show that so many areas of music studies are now imbricated (Born’s word) with concepts of social mediation as to make that disciplinary division seem arbitrary. This leads Shepherd and Devine to wonder whether, despite and because of this new methodological richness, ‘the *need* for a distinctively sociological approach to music is no longer clear’ (15). The same might be said for popular music studies, albeit in reverse. If style is so distant a concern as to warrant nary a consideration in the Sage *Handbook* – and if genre boundaries are so little respected in the age of Spotify as to be meaningless for many listeners – is there a need for a music studies distinguished, confined, by that

‘popular’? The question has been asked before, receiving its most extensive answers in a *Popular Music* symposium in 2005. ‘Rather than designating a particular genre or group of genres’, Alf Björnberg remarked then, pop music could, to an increasing extent, ‘be said to define the general conditions of music in contemporary information society’.⁷ Isn’t it then time to convene a broadly conceived ‘music studies’, one not inflected by these old pop- or socio- qualifiers?

Not really, replied most of those symposium participants, and they were right. If not as a descriptive tool, then the ‘popular’ still served – and today continues to serve – a discursive purpose, articulating a complex set of cultural-political affinities, and making plain the inequitable distribution of power that endures in arts administration, education and research institutions concerned to promote pop’s high other.⁸ Expressly sociological approaches must still be mobilised in the same way, and for the same reasons. But Shepherd and Devine recognise what those pop academics didn’t in 2005, and by the looks of the Sage *Handbook*, still might not: good ideas spread, and get taken up with or without permission from their original guardians. Across the field of music study, scholars and students are engaging with popular music apart from ‘Popular Music Studies’, and sometimes apart from its classic sociological tenets. If that hard-won disciplinary territory is to remain valuable, then pop specialists need more often to move outside their own circles, and to prove what it is that they know better than everyone else. If the methodological address of

⁷ ‘Can We Get Rid of the “Popular” in Popular Music? A Virtual Symposium with Contributions from the International Advisory Editors of *Popular Music*’, *Popular Music* 24/1 (2005), 133-145.

⁸ The ‘descriptive/discursive’ distinction was Richard Middleton’s. ‘Can We Get Rid of the “Popular” in Popular Music?’, 143.

sociality and mediation are now almost common currency, it's not that alone. But pop scholars' ways of listening, their aesthetic literacies, their sympathy for identity and cultural memory, these remain distinctive; at the centre of a rejuvenated popular music studies should lie the close and imaginative study of pop's creative practices and histories, in all their globally interconnected forms.

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