

Review

Andy Bennett and Jon Stratton, eds. 2010. *Britpop and the English Music Tradition*. Farnham: Ashgate. ISBN 978-0-7546-6805-3 (hbk). 225pp. £55.00.

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There's a 1990s revival in this new edited collection from Ashgate. It tackles the Britpop history and context, the phenomenon itself, and the consequences for music in the following decades. With contributions from musicologists, sociologists, and media and cultural studies scholars, the editors present a book that positions Britpop as part of processes that (re)shaped national and cultural identities and public opinion. Bennett and Stratton do not assume that the genre was merely a reaction to the influence of USA grunge, but place Britpop in a time in which Britishness, with its English hegemonic core, was being challenged and dismantled.

The book is divided into three sections which cover subjects related to the roots of Britpop within British popular music history; the concept of Britpop; and the music landscape post-Britpop. In the first chapter of section 1, Dave Laing conducts a historical analysis of music hall, and finds that parallels can be drawn with Britpop's expression of Englishness. In chapter 2, Jon Stratton considers how American music traditions such as skiffle were indigenized and included in the sound of music hall and its later incarnation, variety. Chapter 3, again by Stratton, extends this argument and finds that Britpop draws upon elements of music hall. The following chapter by Shelia Whitely places the punk feminism of mid-1990s female bands in contrast with the male-dominated guitar rock of Britpop, which was typified by a loutish masculinity. Andy Bennett's chapter 5 concludes this section by tracing the historical development of Britpop characteristics, such as its quintessential Englishness.

Section 2 begins with Rupa Huq's chapter: an analysis of the connections between Britpop and New Labour's Cool Britannia, suggesting the party aligned itself with the otherwise a-political musical movement in order to win the youth vote. Chapter 7 by Derek B. Scott gauges the musical essence of the Britpop sound through an analysis of motifs and harmony. In chapter 8, J. Mark Percival presents an historical analysis of identity construction and expressions of authenticity

among Britpop artists, which he compares to Scottish and Welsh popular music of the time. Chapter 9 by Stan Hawkins conceptualizes Britpop as a mode of affirming masculinity and celebrating working-class ideals.

The third and final section considers music genres and artists that emerged after Britpop and compares them with the 1990s genre. Chapter 10 by Ian Collinson, for example, is a close examination of three guitar groups from the early 2000s. He concludes that they have a new and different kind of engagement with Englishness. Chapter 11 by Nabeel Zuberi closes the book with a thoughtful consideration of dance music in the 2000s, which he sees as having roots in the 1990s.

A large body of work exists on the Britpop topic, from a variety of sources. Bennett and Stratton's contribution is a coherent and well-researched book that allows us to view the music tradition in a different light. Welsh, Scottish and English artists who were part of the emergence of new popular music weren't all reliant upon essentialist characteristics to express authenticity (Percival: 142), nor were they willing to take on working-class ideals that ill-fitted the contemporary cultural narrative (Hawkins: 158). The book continues to draw parallels such as these throughout the chapters, demonstrating the ways in which nostalgia for a 1960s heritage pervaded Britpop, situating the phenomenon within an identification process taking place within a context of changing cultural and social values. What is unique is the idea that the explicit Englishness of Britpop can be exposed as an ideological concoction in the light of the absence of a core 'homogenous English' culture (Scott: 105). Highlighting such idiosyncrasies, the book once again opens up the debate on the nature of Britpop and its singular English character. This leads to a number of issues about the character and the contingency of Britpop, which makes things far more complex than a critique of style and image may imply.

I would recommend the book for both undergraduate and graduate courses on subjects related to music, British popular history, and national identity. Academics, in turn, will find it useful as a critical source that opens up unexpected avenues of thinking about Britpop and its cultural context. This collection goes beyond rounding up the usual suspects. It daringly suggests new ways of understanding the era, its cultural undercurrents, and musical history.