

Review

Matt Brennan, *Kick It: A Social History of the Drum Kit*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020. 392 pp. ISBN 9780190683870 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Karlyn King, University of Birmingham, UK
KXK628@student.bham.ac.uk

Keywords: drums; drumming; percussion; cultural; social history

Addressing drums as the core subject matter for a research monograph is a significant choice given the proliferation of drummer jokes, often inescapable amongst performers. The disposable nature of the drummer is parodied in the 1984 film *This is Spinal Tap*, the fictional band losing a number of drummers to irreverent deaths—spontaneous combustion and aspiration—only to replace them, almost without note. In addressing these common and disparaging narratives, in the introduction to *Kick It*, Matt Brennan profiles the ways in which the ‘transformative’ (p. 1) power of playing drums has accumulated often misunderstood and/or derogatory sign value; unruly and unskilled within hierarchical band structures. Reflecting upon his own experiences as a young boy and his current roles as an academic and musician, Brennan frames drumming as incredibly valuable and questions the processes through which the drums have become associated with less desirable stereotypes. This issue is addressed through a thorough yet accessible historical analysis of the global diffusion of the drum kit, as it is known in Anglo-American popular music. Challenging many lazy assumptions along the way, this book provides vital insights into the history and practice of drumming, plotting both through a range of examples.

Beginning by documenting the use of drums by the transatlantic slave trade as ‘an oppressive musical ritual’ (p. 12), Chapter 1 considers how the beat kept the enslaved awake and enforced physical activity. Brennan’s key argument here is that, originally ‘an instrument of cultural expression, the drum became an instrument of control and oppression’ (p. 13). Through this example, the author succeeds in demonstrating the interplay of drums and power. He goes on to note the influence of military bands on classical concert composers in the nineteenth century, moving the drum sign value from marginal to official usage, a change in value instigated by the musical choices of ruling classes. Continuing the global and historical scope

of this initial discussion, Brennan considers the popular use of drums in the USA by big bands in New Orleans and argues that this represents a globalized melting pot of influences from Africa, America, France, Spain and Cuba, an insight that is often overlooked. The author also effectively demonstrates that the now ubiquitous standard of bass drum, snare drum and cymbals became widespread by breaking through limitations imposed by hegemonic values.

Chapter 2 handles the negative associations of value-less noise with the drum kit in the early twentieth century. A discussion of ragtime, silent film scores and the emergence of immigrant cultures and their own interpretations of drumming offer an opportunity to reflect upon how a particular musical instrument can be intrinsically linked to popular culture and leisure activities. For example, the arrival of mainstream jazz is discussed through this social history frame: 'the transformation from parade drumming to jazz drumming occurs when these musical conventions fuse with ragtime as musicians travelled out of New Orleans and into cities like New York and Chicago' (p. 83). The dominant defining and associated valuing, used by European cultural intermediaries to create lowbrow connotations within the musical rankings, is argued by Brennan to represent 'a dubious cultural power grab by Eurocentric elites on the wrong side of history' (p. 104). Following the context established in Chapter 1, this chapter proves to be compelling reading.

Disrupting somewhat the emerging rhythm of the book, Chapter 3 begins by addressing the emergent rudimental standards of the 1920s for drummers, and how these can refute the musically illiterate labelling of the drummer. The global influence of jazz becomes the next point of discussion, the popularity of the genre boosting drum manufacturing and retail, consumption and production patterns aided by 'the interaction of numerous immigrant musical cultures over the nineteenth century' (p. 128), a legacy that echoes into the present through the brands which continue to dominate: Zildjian, Paiste and Ludwig. The chapter then jumps to the first big band drum superstar, American jazz drummer and band leader Gene Krupa (1909–1973), and the impact that his music, style and performance had on drum stylistics and youth culture, both at the time and in the decades that followed.

The following chapter returns to a more cohesive form by examining the emergence of respected drum icons, going beyond the male experience which tends to dominate our scholarly understanding of music history and including women and child prodigies, such as Bernard Buddy Rich. Kenny Clarke's accidental innovations which shaped 1940s jazz are rightly credited to him, demonstrating the creativity that is often dismissed in drumming. Equally, Ringo Starr is discussed within this chapter as an underrated, quiet yet focused drummer/artist, and his signature use of tea towels to dampen his sound as early as Beatles circa 1964 is highlighted as a creative innovation. Moving beyond individual drummers to shared practices, the key

role of the backbeat as a structuring element is emphasized, although the rhythm guitar and piano are given their dues. However, Brennan tempers this statement by noting that the 'fundamental shift in time feel was initially driven not by the drum kit, but by the rhythmic playing of rock n roll stars Little Richard and Chuck Berry' (p. 187). What is more insightful, however, is the nod to 'the polyrhythmic, straight (i.e. unswung) percussion driven music of Latin dance culture' (pp. 188–89), demonstrating the benefits of a thorough analysis and an inclusive and respectful scope which looks beyond the dominant Anglo-American canon.

In stark contrast to the innovations and creative practices of the well-known drummers discussed in the previous chapter, Chapter 5 examines the devalued labour of overlooked and invisible drummers, beginning with a consideration of the session drummer. The emergence of signature sounds, for example the Motown and Stax grooves, validate the drummer as creative author, yet the dark side of copyright protection for rhythm arrangement—examined in the case of Clyde Stubblefield—reminds the reader that Stubblefield received nothing for his continuous influence across multiple genres and eras. Addressing a significant gap in the literature, this discussion also highlights lesser-known female participation, despite the entrenched associations of male military bands which Brennan sets up as a powerful discursive legacy. Faced with gendered barriers in addition to the more general devaluing of drummers, Brennan considers the trailblazing female drummers of 1930s orchestras and the primal beats of the Velvet Underground's Moe Tucker. In a reconsideration of her role, Brennan highlights the barriers imposed on Karen Carpenter: encouraged by her bandmate brother, PR team and mother to leave her kit behind and to stick to singing, Carpenter referred to herself in an interview with Ray Coleman (Coleman 1975) as a 'drummer who sang' (p. 240).

We then follow the drummer into the studio as Brennan analyses how advances in recording technology have been used to manipulate the sound of the drums. The role of the beat in Jamaican and Nigerian music leads to the astute observation that, ultimately, 'the sound of the drum kit was also key to the birth of hip hop' (p. 280), innovations that equally structured disco through the advance of the drum machine. Key milestones such as Phil Collins's 'In the Air Tonight' act as excellent examples of how a song can be developed around the drum parts, subsequently influencing pop music for the following decade. As Brennan notes, 'by the end of the 1980s the sonic palette of the recorded drum kit was more expansive than at any other point in history' (p. 298). Today, this is even more prevalent, aided by 'the advent of automated drummer replacement software' (p. 311). It is argued that the ability to create detailed beats using a very different form of creative labour to that discussed in Chapter 5 demonstrates not the disposability of drummers, but rather their inherent importance.

Further interrogation of such absorbing debates could have produced a book twice this size, particularly a more nuanced engagement with the role of the drummer today using both live and electronic drums (considered, for example, by Zagorski-Thomas 2010 and Theberge 2015). Equally, the predominant Anglo-American focus could also have been expanded to include Asian influences. Nonetheless, this book makes a significant contribution, particularly by including a detailed discussion of women and drums. This is a fascinating and insightful book, reflecting upon how society, culture and ideologies play out in popular music and the rhythms that we take for granted.

References

- Coleman, R. 1975. 'Carpenters—Good, Clean, All-American Aggro!' *Melody Maker*, 8 November. (Reprinted in *Yesterday Once More: The Carpenters Reader*, revised edn, ed. R. L. Schmidt, 145–74. Chicago: Chicago Review Press, 2012.)
- Theberge, P. 2015. 'Digitalisation'. In *The Routledge Reader on the Sociology of Music*, ed. J. Shepherd and K. Devine, 329–38. London: Taylor & Francis Group.
- Zagorski-Thomas, S. 2010. 'Real and Unreal Performances: The Interaction of Recording Technology and Rock Drum Kit Performance'. In *Musical Rhythm in the Age of Digital Reproduction*, ed. A. Danielsen, 195–212. Farnham: Ashgate. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315596983-12>