BOOK REVIEW

Coggins, Owen. 2018. *Mysticism, Ritual and Religion in Drone Metal*. London: Bloomsbury. vii + 215 pp. ISBN: 968-1-3500-2509-7 £85.00 (hbk); 978-1-3501-2316-8 £28.99 (pbk); 978-1-3500-2510-3 £31.30 (e-book).

Reviewed by: Barbara Pemberton, Ouachita Baptist University, Arkadelphia, AR, USA
pembertonb@obu.edu

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Mysticism, Ritual and Religion by Owen Coggins is the latest addition to the Bloomsbury Studies in Religion and Popular Music series offering the first comprehensive study of a genre often overlooked by the academy. Coggins, Honorary Associate of the Religious Studies Department at the Open University, UK, and researcher at Nordoff Robbins Music Therapy, UK, not only introduces drone music to the academic world but also challenges basic assumptions within the study of mysticism.

For a genre notoriously ambiguous, the author does an excellent job describing it as an “intensely physical experience of very loud, very low frequency sounds” (p. 115) consisting of “extended tracks of layered distorted guitars and very slow riff cycles, involving little else but multitrack, downtuned distortion” (p. 57). Drone, the only genre hailing amplifiers as the primary instrument—displacing even the electric guitar—is a relatively new genre still on the margins of the world of metal. While groups such as Om and SunnO))) have garnered wide acclaim, there is still no established drone scene to investigate, making the author’s five years of extensive ethnographic fieldwork, immersing himself in the total cultural experience, even more impressive. Coggins investigates every component of the drone culture—from music creation and performance, to album and promotional art and merchandise and, vital to this particular study, the experience, reception and response of the audience, including reviews, internet messaging, humour and memes.

Coggins shifts the focus from musical texts (music and lyrics) and musicians as sole creators of meaning to contextualization and audience response and discourse. He also argues that religious studies tend to conflate “mysticism” with a sort of generic “religious experience” without context. In response, the author employs an “empirically grounded theory of mysticism” (p. 4), investigating observable ways religious symbolism, language and imagery are used by listeners with the goal of transcendence without consideration of dogma or even understanding. His solid methodological work, along with excerpts from interviews as well as his own personal experiences, make the study fascinating even to newcomers to drone culture. Coggins’s aim is to “comprehensively analyse and account for the array of references to mysticism, ritual and religion in the discourse, practice and music of drone

metal while addressing issues arising in the theorization of such concepts as mysticism and experience in the study of religion and popular music" (p. 171).

In the first chapter the author describes the scope of his research then outlines the book. I found the second chapter, "To Be Experienced, Not Understood", most valuable as it provides the author's methodological approach as well as pitfalls to avoid in attempting to explore the mystical experience. To demonstrate his approach, he compares drone music to psytrance (psychedelic trance) and dub (Jamaican popular music), both genres older and more studied. In Chapter 3, "Beyond Heaviness: Listener Experience in a Translocal and Marginal Genre", the author lays out the entire genre culture—including jokes and memes. Chapter 4, "Pilgrimage to Elsewhere: Languages of Ineffability, Otherness and Ambiguity", explains how drone metal offers the listener access to spatio-temporal "otherness", often employing literary and artistic references to fantasy worlds. Interestingly, drone offers "elsewhere" while simultaneously heightening awareness of here and now.

In Chapter 5, "Amplifier Worship: Materiality and Mysticism in Heavy Sound", Coggins emphasizes drone's focus on amplification and distortion, rather than on the guitar or the musician's virtuosity as in most genres. He also explores the strong feeling of communality created by the shared physical vibrations of the listeners' bodies and provides an interesting section on visual aesthetics including the production of and ritual listening to vinyl recordings. In "Methods to Cross the Abyss: Ritual, Violence and Noise" the author introduces other effects and dramatic staging described in language of ritual including chanting, robes, incense and wine.

The conclusion in Chapter 7 reiterates Coggins's aim, describing his empirical investigation and establishing the intersection of drone metal and mysticism from the repeated references to religious language, spiritual practices and mystical discourse. He notes the genre is relatively young and more research is needed.

I see a broad audience for this work, including academics from fields such as musicology, religious studies, sociology and psychology as well as any readers with a passion for music of all kinds—those well versed in metal music as well as newcomers. The author provides solid scholarship in both mysticism and drone metal and brings to light a fascinating intersection of the two. This is an excellent volume that lives up to the high standard of the series.