

Pop Cult: Religion and Popular Music, by Rupert Till. Continuum, 2010. 230pp., Hb. \$120.00, ISBN-13: 9780826445926; Pb. \$34.95, ISBN-13: 9780826432360.

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This study of “popular music cults” (xiii) is timely, as Rupert Till’s contention that religion and the spiritual are increasingly being found in popular culture is irrefutable. Till’s research involved both etic and emic perspectives, as he has been a disc jockey and participant in the club scene as well as an academic in the field. Each chapter is an essay on an aspect of the contemporary music scene. From the outset, Till defends his use of the controversial term “cult.” He argues that music fandom, like membership of a high-demand new religion, involves factors such as devotion to a charismatic person or persons, that it is time-consuming, emotional, experiential, ritualized, and “there is evidence of brainwashing type activities” (8). This statement is justified through reference to “transgressional sexual activities,” “repetitive chanting,” “suicides by cult members,” and “references to new forms of Paganism including Satanism” (8). This list reveals much about this book; Till may no longer be a Christian, but his notions about religion, explicit and implicit (*pace* Edward Bailey), are firmly rooted in the idea that Christianity is normative and that the presentation of sexuality, charisma, participatory rituals and so on in contemporary popular music is ‘cult’, in the sense that the Anti-Cult Movement would employ the term, that is, dark and sinister. The back cover endorsement by Bishop Graham Cray reinforces this perception.

Chapter 2 investigates sex through a brief historical sketch of sexual references in African-American music (blues, jazz and rock) and its appropriation by white artists like Elvis Presley and Jerry Lee Lewis. Particular, highly sexualised music genres (for example, “cock rock”) are discussed in a loose, conversational way, and the chapter concludes with an extended treatment of Madonna, specifically the two hits “Like A Virgin” and “Like A Prayer.” This tone alerts readers to the personalised account Till gives; indeed, it is hard to call Till’s writing scholarship at all. The chapter, 23 pages long, has precisely eleven in-text references, though other sources are noted and even quoted at length without proper citation. There is little in the way of an interpretive framework (though Barthes is mentioned without citation). Chapters

3 and 4 continue these unscholarly ruminations, the first focused on illegal drug-taking and the second on “personality cults” within the star system of the music business. Till draws parallels between stars who are so well-known that they use only one name with Mary (if there is no surname then it must be the mother of Jesus that is referred to), and meditates on the persona and performances of Prince Rogers Nelson, better known as “Prince” (and for a time as “the Love Symbol”). He concludes that Prince is a “hollow icon” (62) who has commodified himself “for his own benefit” (64).

Chapter 5 considers what Till calls “local cults” and Chapter 6 “virtual cults.” Punk is linked to the New York scene, and the Englishness of The Beatles remarked upon, and there is an extended discussion of the Britpop phenomenon. The discussion of “virtual cults” focuses on the appearance of many pop and rock stars in films, and the way in which artificially created bands such as The Monkees were rendered popular through the medium of film and television (another example is the Partridge Family). Real bands, like the Jackson 5, became the subject of a cartoon series, and the cartoon band, The Archies, takes this inauthenticity a step further. The final case study is the band Gorillaz, created by ex-Blur front man, Damon Albarn. This chapter features annoying typographical errors (which are, in fact, found throughout the book, but the persistent misspelling Gorillaz as Gorrilaz particularly draws the reader’s eye).

Chapter 7 considers the “death cults” of those rock and pop artists who have died young and untimely, and Chapter 8 discusses the electronic dance music (EDMC) culture and the so-called “possession trances” of those who participate in this music subculture. The former sketches ideas about Satan and the afterlife in music, followed by coverage of those rock stars who have died aged 27; Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix, Jim Morrison, and Kurt Cobain. There is an amateurish coverage of Jimmy Page’s purchase of noted occultist Aleister Crowley’s Scottish home, and a sensationalist coverage of the murder of Mayhem vocalist Euronymous by Varg Vikernes in 1993. The EDMC chapter is the most obvious insider narrative of the book, with discussion of Portugal’s Boom Festival, but it is also the most academically respectable section. This is unremarkable, as the chapter has already been published in *Exploring Religion and the Sacred in a Media Age*, wrongly attributed to Christopher Deacy (ed.) on page vii, but in fact edited by Deacy and Elisabeth Arweck (Ashgate, 2009).

The last chapter, Chapter 9, “Do You Believe in Rock and Roll? Musical Cults of the Sacred Popular,” synthesizes the approaches of the preceding chapters. Throughout, the referencing is minimal, the evidence of research

is poor, and the discussion of the issues is informal and lacking appropriate argumentation. In conclusion, *Pop Cult* is a lazy book, which takes a promising topic of study and produces a personal, largely unscholarly, meditation upon it. It is pleasant and relatively easy to read, but the field of religion and popular music remains largely uncharted territory, waiting for future scholars to map it.