Soundtrack Available: Essays on Film and Popular Music, edited by Pamela Robertson Wojcik and Arthur Knight

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The cover of *Soundtrack Available* depicts a record collection: a rack of spines of vinyl record covers with most of the record titles visible. It is a very eclectic collection. It includes *Porgy and Bess* twice, and this book includes two chapters about *Porgy and Bess*. Perhaps the book was based on this record collection. Apart from privileging *Porgy and Bess* as a "popular music and film" text, the book cover also includes the spines of *2001: A Space Odyssey* and *Ben Hur*—considered by many to be classics of music in film. Yet in *Soundtrack Available*, there is no evidence of any engagement with this form of "soundtrack" made "available," and, I would have thought, a lost opportunity to make an argument for this type of music having some relationship with popular music. Instead, this sort of soundtrack is dismissed as "classically" inspired in a bid by the book to delineate a different "zone" of music in films. I'm not really sure though, how distinct this "popular music and film" actually is, especially seeing as it embraces almost every *other* form of music in film.

Like the record collection on the book's cover, whilst being an interesting collection, *Soundtrack*

Available confounds expectation. Apart from the cover's promise not being manifest in the book, the introduction is called "Overture," which suggests classical or stage music, but the book deals with little of this type of music or its manifestation in films. The book's title (*Soundtrack Available*) suggests that the book will deal with recording sales—yet it doesn't really take this much further either. In the introduction, we encounter some inexplicable categorization and boldly imprecise description. Here, editors Arthur Knight and Pamela Robertson Wojcik note that "*Wayne's World* (1992) . . . includes thirty different songs, ranging from Tchaikovsky's "Romeo and Juliet: Fantasy Overture" to the theme from *Mission Impossible* . . ." (1). This seems a very loose definition of "song," hardly made more clear by the book's tendency to dismiss orchestral film music. They go on to discuss the theme from *Star Trek*. Whether *Star Trek* is "popular music" (let alone Tchaikovsky) is certainly open to debate. Indeed, in most quarters it would inspire the most vigorous of debates. Alas, here it does not. Some people, myself included, think that the term "popular music" has ceased to have much

significant meaning, but I was surprised to find that in this book the term is never offered up for debate, this description of the music under discussion is never questioned, and the overall attitude of the book really should have been much more reflexive about its subject matter.

Academic writing never takes place in a void and it is crucial that writing of this sort should relate to existing knowledge and debates. Only some of the contributors engage with existing scholarship, while others, such as Krin Gabbard and Jeff Smith, engage with their own notable bodies of work. Overall there is far less of a sense of intervention in existing scholarship than a sense of some chapters reinventing the wheel—as if they happen to be the first writing on the subject. One particularly confusing position adopted by the editors in the introduction is to strike an unhelpfully negative posture toward the existing body of writing about orchestral film music:

Since the late 1980s, film theorists and critics have increasingly turned their attention to the film score, thus avoiding some of the pitfalls musicologists face by

emphasizing the nondiegetic score's importance for film narrative. [They cite Gorbman, Flinn, Kalinak, Brown – after "great men musicologists" Evans, Prendergast] . . . This approach, however, still tends to laud the work of a coterie of great composers, like Bernard Herrmann, Max Steiner, and David Raksin, and to have an auteurist bias in its selection of films. (6)

These books do this? This declaration betrays a poor grasp of some of the scholarship under attack. For example, Caryl Flinn's book is about as far removed as you could get from being concerned with "a coterie of great composers." The editors' description does a great disservice to these books and this stance suggests purely a superficial engagement with such writing. The books mentioned all have some degree of historical viewpoint, and also have a divide between concerns with the film musical and musical scores. Why elect to attack considerations of classical Hollywood film music for not being about popular music? Perhaps the book should have asked if classical Hollywood film music could be considered itself to be popular music, or approached in the light of ideas about popular music. That could have proved a fruitful avenue of enquiry for at least a small section of the book, and at times, some of the book's chapters look like they might wish to go some way in this direction.

Having railed against what the editors see as a film music tradition of little more than discussing "great composers," this book rather surprisingly goes on to include chapters that deal with "great composers" like Henry Mancini, Duke

Ellington and (in two chapters!) George Gershwin. Gershwin, of course, has a certain currency in traditional musicology (and so-called "high culture"). This book has a whole section on the work of Gershwin – a composer who even the most conservative music faculty would describe as a "great composer" more readily than they would any Hollywood musician. I was also perplexed about the concentration on *Porgy and Bess*. Film adaptations of it could hardly be seen as central to film's dealing with popular music, although certainly an interesting case in point for interactions between popular and "legit" music, opera, stage and film (also television). But film only seems to be one – small – concern among many. It is equally surprising in this light that there are no sustained considerations of the economic imperatives that characterized the industrial relationship of popular music and film, since before the advent of synchronized sound. Musical films that were based on a repertoire of acquired songs (such as *Singin' in the Rain*) might have provided the sort of historical case study that could have connected with wider debates about commerce, aesthetics, Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley. Indeed, it is strikingly odd that film musicals are given so little consideration, in that the editors cite Rick Altman's work on film musicals as a principal inspiration. It is most surprising indeed to find a paucity of connection in this book to the Hollywood musical, surely one – if not the – key area where popular music has interacted with popular film. Indeed, there is very little here to make connections between musicals and non-musicals – something which needs serious consideration, and overall there is little tangible inspi-

ration from Rick Altman's august body of work in evidence.

The introduction contains some very interesting ideas that are not developed in any way. It starts with some very general (indeed, rather simplistic) statements that merely remain statements, without any discussion or development:

Increasingly, it seems, we think in soundtracks. Popular music, in particular, governs our thoughts. Film makers, whether due to their own inclinations or market demands, conceptualize scenes in relation to popular song and the mixing board becomes the storyboard. As viewers, we recall movies through song. (1)

This is rather sanguine and perhaps a little melodramatic. It is far too general a statement, and simply asserted rather than argued as a point. Sadly, they take this idea no further at all, and for many assertions in the introduction, little evidence and few examples are provided. I would dearly have liked to read a strong argument along these lines but was disappointed to be left with a weak statement such as this, with no explanation or no examples to support it. Some of the ideas are intriguing: "Songs used in films recall us to our past, or they conjure up a past we never experienced and, through the familiar language of popular music, make it ours." (1) Yet these remain simple statements without flesh, interesting but undeveloped, when they really required careful expansion.

The book is structured into seven sections: "Popular vs "Serious," "Singing Stars", "Music as Ethnic Marker," "African American Identities," "Case Study: *Porgy and*

Bess," "Contemporary Compilations" and "Gender and Technology." The assumption underlying the "Popular vs "Serious"" section is that the high art-low culture divide is still intact, which is certainly debatable—although no debate is forthcoming here. The "Music as Ethnic Marker" section was potentially valuable and interesting, as was the "Contemporary Compilations"—surely one of the key points for discussion, particularly when one bears in mind the implications of the book's title. The final section, "Gender and Technology" consisted of a single chapter, and appeared more like a strange lone afterthought to the rest of the book.

Rick Altman's chapter consists of impressive historical erudition about illustrated songs and the Nickelodeons's modes of using popular music which, as he notes, is a badly neglected area of research. His chapter is a most valuable addition to scholarship of both film music and film history. Priscilla Barlow's chapter details the use of classical music in popular context, looking at Bunuel's *L'Age d'or* (1930). She looks at how music is used to break down the distinction between high and low culture, although the question begged by this chapter's inclusion in this volume is this: is classical music in a popular context thus "popular music" (and vice versa)? This is exactly the sort of question the book could have addressed more directly. Particularly seeing as this chapter could have graced the pages of a book called "Sound-track Available: Essays on Film and Classical Music."

Murray Pomerance's chapter analyses how the featured song *Que Sera, Sera*, reflects film development In Hitchcock's *The Man*

Who Knew Too Much (1955 version). It includes compelling close film analysis, and while it focuses on the song, it sadly decides not to relate it significantly to other musical aspects, such as the *Storm Cloud Cantata* or Herrmann's score. Alison McCracken looks at the radio crooner in Hollywood between 1929 and 1933. This chapter describes an interesting moment when media interests were starting to cohere into a format closer to what we now know of the film and music industries since the heyday of Hollywood. She argues that the crooner challenged the traditions of white masculinity, and looks into the potentially problematic masculinity of early '30s film crooners such as Bing Crosby. Paul Ramaeker provides a very informative discussion about the Monkees, including detailed historical minutiae and centering on their intriguing film *Head* (1968), while Kelley Conway looks at the French realist chanteuse and how analysis of them allows a reading of developments in conceptualizing femininity. Neepa Majumdar addresses Indian cinema and the way that stardom can be attained by playback singers—quite the antithesis of Hollywood—and an interesting discussion of the place of songs in Indian cinema more generally. Andrew Killick provides a very engaging discussion of the ethnic "unconscious" of music, which looks at semi-hidden "Jewishness" in songs about money, and anti-Semitic attitudes in "Jewish" songs (noting musical aspects such as the prominent use of the minor second interval and chromatic melodies, etc.) This is tremendously interesting material, about the ethnic "unconscious" of songs—yet there is strikingly little in the way of direct film examples.

There are more touchstones from the stage and from pop music. Actually, this could have (should have?) developed interestingly in relation to films. Nabeel Zuberi also provides an interesting chapter, nominally about Gurinder Chadha's documentary *I'm British but . . .* (1989), which it uses as a springboard into discussing far more about musical culture than about the film in itself. This is engaging, illuminates the film well, but fails to engage with film culture as anything specific (and inexplicably calls the guitar riff from Cornershop's *Brimful of Asha* the same as the Velvet Underground's "*Sweet Jane* riff"). Barbara Ching looks at how filmmakers tend to use country music for its mythological status and "authenticity" (the latter subject being a perennial debate in some areas of popular music, as she notes). Jill Leeper looks in detail at Orson Welles's *Touch of Evil* (1958), pointing to how the music's mix of styles establishes an uncertain, liminal border state for film world and narrative. This chapter is a well-informed and filmically-literate debate, providing a riveting account of the changes wrought by the release of the film's "director's cut" (1998) with its musical changes, notably the removal of Mancini's music from the film's celebrated opening sequence. Adam Knee's chapter investigates the African American cast film *Broken Strings* (1940), and notes the operative opposition between Swing and classical music. Krin Gabbard convincingly argues that Johnny Hartman's voice on the film soundtrack "authenticates" Clint Eastwood on screen, providing him with a certain form of masculinity in *The Bridges of Madison County* (1995). The two chapters about *Porgy and*

Bess include Arthur Knight looking at how some recordings of the songs (such as *Summertime* and *It Ain't Necessarily So*) might be seen as something of a black vernacular "criticism" of the white high art opera, and Jonathan Gill providing an interesting perspective on connections of Jewishness with African American-ness in *Porgy and Bess*. Corey Creekmur's chapter is a very useful cross analysis of contemporary compilation scores (that bring together existing songs) both in Hollywood and Indian cinema, which demonstrates vital awareness of existing debates. Jeff Smith looks at comic musical allusions in films such as *Boogie Nights* (1997), and also includes some useful discussion of the role of musical supervisors in contemporary films. It provides a very valuable discussion of pop songs as bearers of irony in films, and was an article that certainly needed to be written. Pamela Robertson Wojcik's odd lone essay looks at the representation of women tied to the phonograph and concludes that the configuration suggests that screen women are lacking.

As you might see from the broad range of these chapters, the book is certainly inclusive, and there is probably something for everyone here. However, it is lacking what might be expected in a volume of this sort, entering and mapping this (unfeasibly) broad area. What might have been expected for sheer influence might have been something on Elvis, rap films, Frank Sinatra, perhaps something more about the industrial imperatives of popular music and film, among other subjects. I was surprised by the book containing relatively little about rock music and shocked about its lack of interest in the film musical. In its place, we certainly had some

valuable subjects: Hindi popular cinema, country music and compilation scores. Well, some material about compilation scores. The introduction notes that, "The rise of the compilation score is, perhaps, one of the most significant developments in contemporary film . . ." (13) Yet then it proceeds to only touch fitfully upon this matter. The chapters that do, Jeff Smith's and Corey Creekmur's, both have something useful to add to the debate, but the book as a whole seems to have missed a more general engagement with the debate, and missed an important opportunity.

For a book subtitled "popular music and film" it is striking that a number of the chapters are only tangentially interested in film. For example, Arthur Knight's chapter only has 2 pages of the 21 about film. The rest is purely about popular music! Jonathan Gill's chapter (also about *Porgy and Bess*) is also predominantly not about film, but focuses more on Samuel Goldwyn, the Gershwins and the original version of the opera. Often the book seems more "popular music" than "film and popular music." Yet, a glance through the bibliography not only reveals a lack of references in the area of film music studies (and perhaps even film studies), but perhaps more surprisingly, a lack of references from the established area of popular music studies (nothing from musicologists Richard Middleton and David Brackett, for example, with only a little use of the more "sociological" Simon Frith and Keith Negus). In fact, a significant number of the touchstone books in the final bibliography seem more like the usual suspects of a general "cultural studies" bibliography: Fredric Jameson (*The Political Unconscious*), Henry Jenkins, Andreas Huyssen,

Raymond Williams (*Marxism and Literature*).

Some of the chapters here are outstanding, and happily would grace any number of academic anthologies. Yet with a collection this diverse, perhaps it was an impossible undertaking to pull it all together into a coherent whole. The editors, try as they might, could not unify such a diversity of material as is on display in this book, leaving a lack of theoretical and material unity, or unified approach or purpose. The sheer weight of difference pulls the collection apart and underlines the lack of common purpose across the individual chapters. *Soundtrack Available* contains authoritative work about certain areas of popular music, but lacks the sort of synthetic, wider view that could hold the (very) disparate chapters of this book together. This makes for a fragmented, even incoherent patchwork quilt experience of lots of "little pictures" and no big ones or useful maps of a subject that needs direct and purposeful address before it can be "deconstructed."

This problem is compounded through the lack of connection to other areas of research, little connection with scholarship about film musicals, popular music scholarship or the sort of academic studies that have grown up around film music over the last 15 years or so. Portions of the book are blissfully unaware of existing debates in film studies or in music scholarship. Most evident is the book's lack of self-reflexiveness, with no debate about operative terms, most notably "popular music" and "soundtrack." While both constitute the book's title and broad area of study it is disappointing in the extreme that these terms end up without the interrogation they deserve.