Book Review


‘There can be no doubt that the cultural study of music is experiencing something of a renaissance’, claims Christopher Chase, one of the contributors of the book *Pop Pagans*, edited by Donna Weston and Andy Bennett (p.162). It would be hard to disagree. Almost ten years have passed since the publication of this edited volume and Chase’s claim is truer than ever. While the connections between cultural studies and music in contemporary societies and, especially, in new and social media represent an important direction of current research on popular culture, this cannot be said as much for the relationships between popular music and Contemporary Paganisms. In this respect, while birthed in a (pre-pandemic) historical moment less-dominated by social media (the only contribution that explicitly focuses on the Internet, in this volume, is Narelle McCoy’s chapter on the Celtic cyber-diaspora), *Pop Pagans* represents an indubitable reference point for those who are interested in exploring the social, cultural, and historical dimensions of the relationships between pop music, religion, and spirituality (in general) and between pop music and Contemporary Paganisms (in particular).

The book opens with a foreword by religious studies scholar Graham Harvey. It is followed by a succinct but elucidative introduction by popular music scholar Donna Weston and sociologist Andy Bennett, both based in Australia, in which the editors briefly discuss the term Paganism and its relationship with popular music. The rest of the volume is conveniently divided in four parts (Histories, Genres, Performance, Communities), which allow for a clear exploration of the topics by readers with different backgrounds, interests, preferences, and research questions. It might be worth mentioning that the bibliography is followed by a very useful discography and filmography.

Throughout the book, the contributors discuss an impressive range of topics: from Paganism’s relations with the 1960s-1970s counterculture (Andy Bennett), to its theological imagination (Christopher Chase). From Pagan relationships with time and place(s) (Rupert Till, Donna Weston, Andy Letcher, Graham St John) to Pagan metal (Deena Weinstein), Goth (Jason Pitzl-Waters), techno-shamanism (Alan Nixon and Adam Possamai), dance (Douglas Ezzy), and the legacy of Genesis P-Orridge (Christopher Partridge). These latter two contributions, in particular, well exemplify a characteristic of the edited volume as a whole: the good balance between theoretical analyses and empirical data. In *Dancing Paganism: Music, Dance and Pagan Identity*, sociologist Douglas Ezzy presents some reflections stemming from personal ethnographic experiences with Australian Pagan communities—of which he offers a thorough and instructive description. Dovetailing ethnographic and autoethnographic observations, interviews, and a
sophisticated engagement with anthropological, philosophical, and literary scholarship, he convincingly argues that ‘dancing to the music of Pagan bands creates both a sense of individual transformation…and a spiritual community’ (p. 110).

In the chapter, ‘Esoterrorism and the Wrecking of Civilization: Genesis P-Orridge and the Rise of Industrial Paganism’, instead, sociologist Christopher Partridge offers a detailed account of the spiritual, personal, and artistic life of Genesis P-Orridge, an eclectic and influential figure in the industrial music panorama in the late twentieth century. Drawing from archival, sonic, and visual data, Partridge reads the artistic endeavors of Genesis P-Orridge as a prime example of ‘occulture’. This term, originally (probably) coined by P-Orridge himself, has gained academic attention precisely through the work of Partridge. Occulture—a key notion to better understand the social, cultural, and political implications of the whole volume—‘refers to the environment within which, and the social processes by which, particular meanings are disseminated and become influential in the lives of individuals and in the societies in which they live. These meanings typically relate to spiritual, esoteric, paranormal and conspiratorial ideas’ (p. 191), and are disseminated in and through popular culture.

Pop Pagans is a well-written, well-researched, and engaging book. Accessible to a public of experts as well as non-experts, it is, in my opinion, an optimal addition to courses in contemporary religions and spiritualities, Paganisms, popular culture, and popular music in both graduate and undergraduate programs. While almost a decade old and, understandably, in dialogue with the theoretical perspectives en vogue at the time, Pop Pagans still represents a rich and important reference point to the study of contemporary Paganisms and its relationship with popular music and culture. After all, as the editors point out in their introduction to the volume, quoting Jenny Blain, Douglas Ezzy, and Graham Harvey and their Researching Paganisms (2004), ‘just as contemporary Paganisms are still evolving, so are the methodologies and approaches of those who choose to study them’ (p.1). In this vein, I hope that this volume can continue to be a source of inspiration for new and similar studies on the relationship between Contemporary Paganisms and pop music.

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