

Book Review

Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett and Jodie Taylor, eds. 2013. *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*. New York and London: Routledge. 222pp. ISBN 978-0-415-80782-1 (pbk)

Reviewed by: Marcus O'Dair, Middlesex University, London, UK
m.odair@mdx.ac.uk

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What does the title of this journal mean? For that matter, what is meant by my own job title: Senior Lecturer in Popular Music? As Cutler (1993: 4) has stated, the ambiguity lies in the word “popular”:

Does it mean numerically and statistically the most listened to, or bought; does it mean “of the people”; or has it come to refer to a whole genus of music—a genus loosely bound by its particular means and relations of production, circulation and consumption; its commitment to electric and electronic technology, radio and the gramophone record, and to what we might call a demotic usage and language?

That popular music has something to do with the musical “mainstream” might seem self-evident. And yet, aside from a few specific exceptions such as Madonna, the mainstream has often been neglected by popular music scholars. Sometimes, indeed, we seem to study everything *but* the mainstream. A foundational text such as Hebdige’s *Subculture: The Meaning of Style* (1979), for instance, is explicitly concerned with the antithesis of the mainstream; though less overt, the same tendency might be identified in the rock journalism that also underpins popular music studies. The mainstream can sometimes be seen as simply something against which to define the counter-cultural or the underground, a point of reference by which other music can be situated as precisely that: “other”.

Of course, this binary opposition between subcultures and a monolithic mainstream can be contested. One key aim of this book is to counter assumptions of homogeneity, instead calling attention to the *plurality* of the mainstream. After all, in a world in which major labels routinely release “indie” music, and in which Virgin Money can issue a *Never Mind The Bollocks* credit card, it is clear that the mainstream is constantly being redefined and repositioned. The mainstream, argue Sarah Baker (former reviews editor of this

journal), Andy Bennett and Jodie Taylor, is “in urgent need of detailed consideration” (ix), and not sneering consideration either: a key thread running through *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music* is that of thinking *with*, not against, the mainstream, a notion first espoused by Toynbee (2002). Another key precedent is the study of UK dance music scenes by Thornton (1995), which problematized perceptions of the mainstream as linked to conformity, artifice and the “feminine”, as opposed to the supposedly more “authentic” clubbers (ix).

Where, in a world with streaming but without *Top of the Pops*, might we situate this musical mainstream? Are we living, as Anderson (2006) claims, in a world of “long tail” niches? Or, as Elberse (2013) has argued, is the blockbuster in fact bigger than ever? The hits penned for Britney Spears, Katy Perry and Miley Cyrus by the likes of Max Martin and Dr Luke are examples of a mainstream. But there are other mainstreams beyond ‘...Baby One More Time’, ‘I Kissed A Girl’ and ‘Wrecking Ball’. Apart from anything else, the mainstream is historically contingent: Nick Drake, for instance, may not be mainstream in the Max Martin sense, but he now struggles to keep his place in the *Rough Guide to the Best Music You’ve Never Heard* (Williamson 2008) or *Unknown Legends of Rock ‘n’ Roll* (Unterberger 1998). Even once ubiquitous tracks such as ‘Barbie Girl’ and ‘Crazy Frog’ disappear into oblivion with time; ‘Gangnam Style’ is fading from our collective consciousness even as I type.

The book is organized in five parts and covers a number of genres including grunge, hip hop, punk and teenybop—even New Zealand “tramping” songs. One key theme is that the categorization of tracks as “mainstream” may be less about the music itself than the gender (Sheila Whiteley, Sarah Baker) or sexuality (Taylor) of musicians and fans. Another theme is that of co-option. What does it mean for hip hop, for instance, that Barack Obama listens to Jay-Z and namechecks Kanye West, Ludacris, Nas and Lil Wayne? A third theme is the notion of the mainstream as something to be rejected. Why do pop culture scholars, asks David Baker, despise Elvis Presley movies? (Answer: they are aggrieved by a sense that Presley allowed himself to be contained and constrained, in this period, by the mainstream force of Hollywood). Taylor is among those to point out that the mainstream is a value-laden category, and that we need to think very carefully before dismissing it as inauthentic or commercialized. Sarah Baker puts forward a similar argument, that the records bought by young girls are often considered the most lightweight and worthless commodities of the “culture industry”—and as Catherine Strong reminds us, citing Bourdieu (1984), hierarchies of culture are socially constructed. There is even a chapter on “ironic listening”, a concept Bennett has developed from the “ironic viewing” that Ang (1982) identified in television viewers. Popular music fandom, he suggests, is not always

“serious and earnest”; audiences may appropriate and understand mainstream popular music from an ironic, or even post-ironic, distance (202–203).

More than anything, the book’s central thrust is that to assume a binary relationship between the mainstream and the underground is simplistic. Strong suggests that grunge fans, for instance, may have a much more pragmatic relationship with the mainstream than is often assumed, recognizing the benefits that popular success can bring to artists and audiences alike. Not all members of a subculture, in other words, will have the same attitude to “selling out”. Adrian Renzo, in the volume, makes a different but related point in terms of mash-ups: despite their unauthorized status, these tracks regularly “quote” top 40 songs and are often judged and created according to “mainstream aesthetic criteria” (139–40).

Alison Huber begins the book by citing Hall (1981), asking if we are “cultural dupes” to like popular music such as ‘Say It Once’ by Ultra (4). In just over 200 pages, Huber and her fellow authors answer a robust and resounding “no”.

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