

## Review

Marshall, L., and D. Laing, eds. 2015. *Popular Music Matters: Essays in Honour of Simon Frith*. Farnham: Ashgate. ISBN 978-1-4724-2179-1 (hbk). 252 pp.

**Reviewed by:** Martin Lussier, Université du Québec à Montréal, Canada  
lussier.martin@uqam.ca

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This book is less a collection of essays *about* the work of Simon Frith—as a journalist, a teacher and a researcher—than it is a continuation of some of the arguments he took part in. This makes a good introduction not only to Frith's own writing, but to (British) popular music studies (PMS) more generally. In fact, as some of the chapters rightly underline, you have to read Simon Frith's work in order to understand PMS, and some of its core debates and issues. It also gives a diachronic understanding of the evolution of PMS from a nascent set of questions to a multidisciplinary field of research, with branches all over the musical, social and geographical spectrum—even though there still is an important Anglo-American tendency. The structure of the book echoes Frith's own trajectory and wide-ranging interests, from a focus on industries and technologies to issues of values and music per se.

Focusing on industries and technologies, the first part of the book could be understood as a dialogue with Frith's *The Sociology of Rock* (1978). The first chapter, by Bradby, starts where Frith's first articles ended: the relationship of music and class. In her essay, she looks at the discourse of class from the point of view of the media. Baker's chapter offers a glimpse at the question of labour conditions of musicians, in particular the difficulty of making a living out of music in the local context of Iceland. Music industries are said to be in an era of crisis, thanks to digital technologies. Jones's chapter debunks some of the dominant myths about the transformation of the industries and the role of 'technological determinism' in how we understand this. Despite the importance of digital technologies in contemporary popular music, he suggests, 'the paths to market success still lie through music-industrial practices' (58).

From my perspective, the essays about Frith's personal career trajectory are one of the most unexpected parts of this book. The first chapter by Laing recaps

some of the relationships in Frith's biography between professional/industrial labour and academia. For him, this ability of Frith's work—and, more generally, of PMS—to go back and forth between different realms—i.e. professional and academic—has taken the form of an interest in 'low theory': the practice of theorizing by 'musicians, entrepreneurs or fans' (Frith, quoted p. 85) and its incorporation in academic discourse. Martin's chapter suggests that low theory doesn't imply that there is no sociology behind Frith's work, and shows some of the very strong theoretical issues that emerge from this academic writing. His engagement with ordinary musical practice and industries is also reflected in Frith's politics, as much in his academic writing as in his work as a public intellectual. This, in Cloonan's words, could serve as a good reminder that 'popular music studies was always a political project' (114). Along with a few personal accounts of his career, this part is much more *about* Frith than the two others. Nonetheless, it conveys the interesting sense to the reader that many of these arguments could have been made about PMS in general, which in itself testifies to the centrality of Frith's thought in the field.

If Frith is often quoted as an academic who is interested in the context of popular music, he also looks at the musical text seriously. Closer to the argument he made in *Performing Rites* (1996), the third part of this collection deals with this characteristic. For Tagg, there are many reasons why there is still an important gap between musicologists and sociologists inside PMS. One of them, he suggests, is the hegemony of notations to which digital media may offer an alternative that could help bridge the divide between musically trained people and sociologists. These possibilities opened up by digital media are also the starting point of Hennion's chapter about 'performance', an idea he tries to unpack in order to understand how every participant in a musical event participates in making music happens. How value judgments are made is the object of Street's chapter, focusing on a particular context that is important in Frith's career: the Mercury music prize. Since the MMP judgments are 'deliberated' by a jury, the politics of value emerges even more explicitly. The last chapter discusses the supposed weakening of pop, rock and soul 'oppositional politics' in the last 40 years. To understand the decline of popular music into today's 'moribund and self-referential' (209) state, Toynbee suggests one has to look at the ways in which 'relations between the social world and music-making changed historically' (211). Toynbee's reading might not be one that Frith would agree with, but the polemical nature of his argument makes for a good open conclusion for this collection.

The scope of Frith's work necessitated a collection that covered a wide range of topics and the choices made by the editors reflect this range adequately. Even though it could have been more balanced in terms of gender (only 4 out of 23

contributors are women) and geography, this book is a good addition to popular music studies.

## References

- Frith, S. 1978. *The Sociology of Rock*. London: Constable.  
—1996. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.