

Review

Stahl, Matt. 2013. *Unfree Masters: Recording Artists and the Politics of Work*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press. ISBN 978-0-82235-343-0 (pbk). 296 pp.

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Matt Stahl's monograph *Unfree Masters* explores the politicized domain of labour in the North American music recording industries. Interestingly, Stahl credits the book's title to political theorist Carol Pateman's book *The Sexual Contract*, equating today's professional recording artists to the husbands of past centuries who were 'master(s) in some areas and...servant(s) in others' (3). Indeed the musician is the master of their creative process, but it is the wider economic and legal structures that make them servant to record companies. The book is split into two sections: 'Part I: Representation' and 'Part II: Regulation'. In these sections, Stahl argues that cultural workers in the recording industries have little autonomy due to contracts that favour record labels and publishers. In order to illustrate this, Stahl provides case studies and examples ranging from *American Idol* to Olivia Newton-John to The Dandy Warhols, using these to dissect case law and legislation in a way that illustrates the micro implications on industry personnel.

In 'Part I: Representation', Stahl uses the popular television series *American Idol* and rockumentary film *Dig!* to navigate through the manner in which musicians are professionalized and trained to 'succeed' in a highly competitive industry. Drawing on Jameson's notions of narrative, Stahl argues that the 'aspired to' (44) world of such programmes provides dual servicing of capital (the labels) and audiences (the fans) despite criticism of the shows, by both the public and the music industries, that they provide an at times inauthentic perspective on the reality most musicians face. Stahl's use of a popular music example (*American Idol*), and a contrasting indie rock example (*Dig!*), demonstrates the varied pathways for professional success that give artists the choice between greater autonomy or lower risk.

In 'Part II: Regulation', Stahl 'analyzes struggles between recording artists and record companies over laws that govern their working and contractual relationships' (103). This section looks at North American legislation in detail, starting with California's 'seven-year rule' (1872) (a law which made employment contracts a minimum of seven years). In 1987 the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) successfully changed this law to exclude recording artists. Stahl highlights this as a significant shift in moving musicians into a position of servitude to their labels with longer lock-in contracts. Stahl uses this as a starting point to examine how music industry contracts have evolved, using the lenses of alienation (110), contractual terms (112), industry history (117), changes to law and bills (126), labour mobility (136) and liquidity (138). These key areas exemplify how, despite being situated in a democratic society, the relationship between the employee (musician) and employer (label) is subject to capitalist mechanisms, which form an unequal relationship between these two parties. Stahl reasons that the contract system cannot exist in agreement with democracy due to the increased power of employers who lobby governments to change legislation in their favour. In the following chapter Stahl looks at alternative contract and labour models, with a particular focus on 'work for hire' (188) in which copyright takes a leading role due to the authorship of the work residing with the contractor/employer and not the author themselves (190). This indicates another key shift in the relationship between musician and industry, although it is not an uncommon contract for musicians operating in other areas of the entertainment industries—for instance, film composition. Stahl provides a detailed overview of the lobbying for 'work for hire' by the RIAA and artist appeals, highlighting that music-making is a collaborative medium in which ideas of authorship are not always fixed.

The short concluding chapter offers two answers to the refrain that is present throughout the entire text: 'why should we care about the status of the popular music performer?' (226). The first answer is framed in the context of popular music studies, that popular musicians are of 'great importance to people around the world' (226); the second, more in-depth response, is framed in the context of liberalism and liberal society—tying in with the arguments Stahl raised in Part I of the text.

Unfree Masters makes an important contribution to the field of recording industry studies by providing a detailed overview of the landscape of labour in the North American popular music industries. The research and its implications can be applied beyond music and into other creative industries including film, television and media. By analysing the conditions which creative personnel currently face, the text reveals a worrying hierarchy of control from state and corporate bodies.

The text provides a valuable reminder of the ongoing inequality for musicians and other creative personnel. Reinforcing this problematic inequality, Stahl includes a call to future action (and research), imploring the reader to 'reject the vulnerability that numerous state and corporate actors want to impose on us' (234).