

Review

Kotarba, Joe, Bryce Merrill, J. Patrick Williams and Phillip Vannini. 2013. *Understanding Society through Popular Music*. 2nd ed. New York: Routledge. ISBN 978-0415-64194-4 (hbk), ISBN 978-0415-64195-1 (pbk). 206 pp.

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This stimulating and engaging book aims to provide insight into how popular music affects social institutions, exploring these through key sociological theories and concepts for the benefit of student readers. The likeable and relatable narration of Joe Kortarba engages the reader immediately, as he personably and elegantly introduces the concept of the book and the work within it. Topics covered are well contextualized by succinct summative introductions and conclusions, and are clearly laid out in relation to the key sociological theories and concepts.

The ethnographic examples of contemporary music scenes used within the book are varied and interesting, in particular the section on hip-hop and authenticity. The summaries of such examples are clear and concise, facilitating the exploration of key sociological concepts. However, other key terms, such as 'scenes' and 'subcultures', are at times used interchangeably, giving the impression that the differences between them are negligible, rather than the product of decades of (ongoing) academic debate. Furthermore, while studies and examples are carefully selected with the average student in mind, seminal theories are left unreferenced at many points throughout the text. As a book avowedly aimed at students, one of the main objectives for such a publication should be the provision of an extensive and thorough bibliography for further reading. While the work of Giddens is succinctly discussed in the chapter on globalization, the pivotal contributions of Appadurai are confined to a last-minute reference. Any discussion of movement of musical forms would be very well framed through Appadurai's 'flows' (1996). Other key texts, such as Anderson's (1991) *Imagined Communities*, are paraphrased yet are uncited. Similarly, the exploration of several ideas within the book happens in a seeming theoretical vacuum. The thought-provoking exploration of *American Idol* could have led to further discussion by reference to Katherine Meizel's (2011) book on the subject, and an equally interesting discussion

of gender performance in popular music would have benefited from links to the field of gender studies, particularly the work of Butler (1990), and a more diverse exploration of media audience expectations of celebrity masculinity (for example, see Spicer 2001).

Some of the chapters initiate noteworthy and thoughtful discussions, such as that concerning the continuation of musical identity and participation into later life. Sadly such topics are not always fully explored and this is not owing to lack of research within the field, with Andy Bennett (2006) and others (for example, Taylor 2010; Smith 2009) providing insight into how ageing rockers find continued meaning through music scene participation. The selection of theoretical contributions also seems to be based upon their fit with the approach of the authors themselves, as the publication includes few critical reviews. The localization/globalization debate is summarized by the authors' belief that 'East' and 'West' distinctions are 'evaporating' (183), passing over the many ethnographic examples of continued culturally-specific, symbolic interaction with the material flows of globalization (for example see Munshi 2001).

In terms of comparison with other student-focused texts, such as *Popular Music and Society* by Longhurst and Bogdanovic (2014), the organizational scheme of this book means that examples are easy to find and helpfully contextualized within key sociological approaches and topics. The tone is accessible and personable but at times didactic, with some of the friendly dialogue adding little to content. This most recent edition brings certain aspects of popular music study up-to-date, but leaves central debates in the field undiscussed, such as the impact of digital media on musical practices and associated concepts of authenticity (as examined in Longhurst and Bogdanovic 2014).

Students will find this a thought-provoking read, and the personal narratives provided by the authors easy to follow and relatable. However, key theorists, and in some parts key fields of debate, are not referenced or even discussed and the lack of critique does not provide the student reader with a model of this central skill of the academic summary. While this is an enjoyable and well-structured introduction to the field, it cannot be completely relied upon to provide comprehensive links to key texts and central issues of contemporary academic debate.

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