

Review

Lipsitz, George. 2007. *Footsteps in the Dark: The Hidden Histories of Popular Music*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press. ISBN 0-8166-5020-9 (pbk). 360pp.

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Over the last twenty or so years, 'locality' has been established as a central concept in contemporary popular music studies, drawing on well-established trends in cultural geography and on approaches and methods from sociology, social anthropology, and historical studies. George Lipsitz was an early contributor to this emerging body of work, most notably with his book *Dangerous Crossroads* (1994). In that volume, he examined the manner in which various genres, lyrics and performance styles can connect to memories and hopes about particular locales, evoking both an attachment to and alienation from these. *Footsteps in the Dark* fruitfully continues this exploration of the relationship between popular music and place.

The majority of Lipsitz's chapters usefully bring together and rework his earlier writing. They are situated around the common goal of exposing the 'hidden histories' of genres, songs and performers in relation to social identities (primarily those of diasporic immigrants and indigenous groups in the United States). This process of 'uncovering' is hinted at in the book's title, which is adopted from a little-known 1977 rhythm and blues recording by the Isley Brothers. Lipsitz considers it as 'an emblematic song for our time' that is 'suffused with sadness and weariness, yet holds out a hope that everything will turn out all right' (ix). While recognizing that the song is characterized by ambivalence, he shows how it fused private and personal concerns with public and political issues. In the process, the song offers an alternative history: 'the shared memories, experiences and aspirations of ordinary people, whose perspectives rarely appear in formal historical archival collections' (xi).

Another aim of this book is to delineate 'the ways in which popular music during the 1990s and early 2000s reflected both continuities and ruptures in history', with Lipsitz contending that 'many of the musical expressions that became popular during this period reflected and shaped important historical realities, even though their creators for the most part never intended them to

be heard in that way' (viii). This raises the question of the impact and influence of such work, and the status of the preferred readings (primarily of song lyrics) that are often the basis for arguments such as Lipsitz's. As he observes, meanings in popular music can be deceptive and are often not meant to be taken literally, but he makes a generally convincing case for songs that on the surface appear to be apolitical, but actually have 'complicated political and social histories' (xxiv). Instructive profiles of performers, often drawing on interviews by Lipsitz, feature throughout the book.

There are ten chapters in all. Chapter 1 explores the links between relatively recent phenomena, such as manufactured pop bands, reality TV shows and global digital capitalism, while drawing on notions of media consolidation and marketing synergy. In Chapter 2, Lipsitz demonstrates how Haitian and Jamaican interaction created important spaces for the development of politically conscious music. This music demonstrated a 'profound attachment to place and powerful experiences of displacement' (52-3). Chapter 3 situates the exploitation of Mexican immigrants as cheap labour within the context of global capitalism. Banda provides an example of how Mexican music in Los Angeles in the early 1990s involved 'a powerful rejection of assimilation' (64). At the same time (and in keeping with Lipsitz's nuanced approach) is his discussion of the perpetuation of traditional gender stereotypes in the displaced culture. Chapter 4 powerfully critiques the documentary series *Jazz* (Ken Burns, 2001) and the manner in which such 'histories' construct dominant narratives, in this case presenting jazz as 'the creation of alienated individuals rather than historical communities' (88). Chapter 5 examines 'The Hidden History of Urban Renewal', and includes an insightful discussion of the career of Julius Hemphel.

Subsequent chapters continue the exploration of the interaction of migration and dislocation, community, musical genres, and identity politics: Meringue and Dominican migration to the United States (chapter 6); the music of diasporic Vietnamese (chapter 8); and Salsa and Puerto Ricans (chapter 9). Chapters 7 and 10 focus on black communities and rap and Detroit techno, relating the emergence and role of these genres to the impact of economic and social developments such as deindustrialization and cutbacks to social services. Lipsitz is politically committed and passionate in his advocacy of the rights of the groups he discusses, and his trenchant critique of government policies and practices which have failed to address the problems, or, indeed, exacerbated them.

The strength of the book is its coverage of a diverse range of genres, and the constantly insightful situating of popular music as social history. The result is a fascinating mosaic, which both educates the reader and encourages the further exploration of these communities, performers and their music.

References

Burns, Ken. 2001. *Jazz: A Film by Ken Burns*. PBS Home Video, USA.

Isley Brothers, The. 1984. *Isley's Greatest Hits*. Epic, USA.

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