

## Review

Williams, Andrew. 2007. *Portable Music and its Functions*. New York: Peter Lang. ISBN 978-0-8204-8125-8 (pbk). 127 pp.

For the first time in history, over 50 per cent of consumers in the industrialized world have the ability to play music while on the move, either through their mobile phones or specialized MP3 players. They also access the Internet, send and receive emails or, if stationary, watch and send a variety of visual material. Increasingly, our mobile communication technologies act as a form of digital sherpa aiding us through our mobile day. Ubiquitous mobility has crept upon us very rapidly. The success of the Apple iPod, a mere seven years old, was prefaced upon not just the Sony Walkman but the widespread acceptance of the mobile phone itself. The mobile 'revolution' can be understood as a comment upon the forced physical mobility of many as they commute to and from work, and of the cultural predisposition to be ever-connected to others and the products of the culture industry as we move around, uprooted from our homes. The use of mobile technologies can be understood socially in terms of the way in which we manage the spaces that we move through, or structurally in terms of the way in which global corporations market and sell us dreams of connectivity and mobility. Witness the amount of money Apple spent on marketing the iPod, together with its media strategy of placing the artefact into the hands of the rich and glamorous.

Into this rapidly developing field comes this strangely backward-looking book based upon a small ethnographic study of personal stereo users undertaken in Australia in 2001. The book has two aims: to give an overview of the field as Andrew Williams understands it (which means it is restricted to an ethnographic understanding of 'use'), and to offer a new interpretation of the way in which users 'learn' music through the use of their personal stereos. In the first task, Williams does a reasonable job of giving an overview of the functions of portable music consumption. He divides 'use' up into a series of categories that include aestheticization, environmental control, boundary demarcation, interpersonal mediation, etc.; and in doing so, Williams sticks very closely to existing work in the field which he acknowledges throughout the text. As such, the text works as a good overview without adding significantly to our knowledge of the field.

In chapter 2, Williams attempts to provide his own original take on the use of personal stereos in the actual learning of music. Ten of his interviewees were

music students and they discuss the way in which their personal stereo use aids them in their studies. However, the ethnographic detail of this chapter is rather thin and nothing the respondents say about use adds to how they might learn music through a variety of other recording technologies. Williams also inadvertently appears to fall into the Adorno dichotomy of 'attentive' and 'passive' listening whereby only music students can use their personal stereos to learn music. In my own work, I have found that a wide range of users actively listen whilst not necessarily understanding the 'notes'.

More serious still—and this is why I refer to the text as 'strangely backward-looking'—is the author's conflation of personal stereo and iPod use. Implied in this is that his respondents used both technologies, and yet the interview material comes from 2001. The Apple iPod was introduced into the American market late in 2001, so I can only assume that all the author's interviewees used personal stereos.

Throughout the book, Williams refers to users of 'personal stereos and iPods' as if there was no difference between these two technologies. No mention is made of playlists, shuffles, instantaneity, new forms of downloading music, the implications attached to massive storage capacity, etc. Moreover, there is no analysis of the specifics of MP3 technology and how this might change the traditional experience of personal stereo use. Or, indeed, how users of MP3 mobile phones might manage the often contradictory modes of use, whereby to receive a call permits the contingency of the world to flood through as opposed to listening to continuous sound through the MP3 player which shields the contingent nature of the world from the user. Equally, there is no analysis of the apparent dichotomy between the use of playlists which enable users to program music for virtually every circumstance, or the use of the shuffle which appears to give up the very control engendered by the use of playlists. The book appears to stop in 2001. As such, it might be of use to undergraduates in the field but my advice would be to go to the original texts cited in Williams's book and to more recent work on MP3 technology.

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