

## Review

Homan, Shane, and Tony Mitchell, eds. 2008. *Sounds of Then, Sounds of Now: Popular Music in Australia*. Hobart: ACYS. ISBN 978-1-875236-60-2 (hbk). 295 pp.

The editors of this volume state their aim as being 'to survey different genres of popular music as they have been practised in Australia both historically and in contemporary contexts' (5). Thus the 15 chapters present various aspects of popular music in Australia and form a welcome addition to the literature. The book adopts a genre-based approach with chapters ranging from experimental music to punk and from jazz to folk, with a number of stop-offs on the way and an acknowledgement that some genres (such as country and reggae) have been omitted (15). Overall the chapters effectively act as tasters for work which many of the contributors have explored in greater depth elsewhere. Nevertheless the volume raises a number of interesting points of which two struck me as being particularly pertinent.

The first of these concerns the nature of popular music itself. Implicitly the editors here have taken a broad definition. Hence the inclusion of chapters on folk (which sometimes has sometimes been defined in *opposition* to the popular), experimental music (which, as Caleb Kelly acknowledges in his chapter, 'does not generally follow the rules and conventions of mainstream musical styles such as rock or pop' [64]) and jazz (another genre whose status as popular music has been questioned but is given two chapters here—John Whiteoak's on improvisation and Bruce Johnson's authoritative overview). My point here is not to question the inclusion of such musics, but to illustrate how this volume serves to further problematize notions of popular music—something which will be familiar to readers of this journal and which the editors acknowledge in their introduction.

The second point concerns the uniqueness or otherwise of the Australian experience. In other words, what does this book show those of us who live elsewhere that we didn't already know? How does this 'local' illuminate global issues? Perhaps inevitably the strongest answers to questions of uniqueness come in chapters on Australia's indigenous people—Chris Gibson and Peter Dunbar-Hall's chapter on contemporary Aboriginal music and Karl Neuenfeldt's on that of the Torres Strait Islanders.

Outside of this many of the experiences here are shared by others in the western world. Indeed the editors acknowledge that much here 'will be familiar to musicians, fans and scholars in other regions and nations' (7). Furthermore

we are told that 'it is unclear whether there is anything particularly "Australian" about Australian metal' (Michelle Philipov: 215) and that problems of promoting experimental music are 'not specific to Australia' (Kelly: 63). But while acknowledging global phenomena, the editors are clear that 'we must also acknowledge the cultural specificity of practices and the nature of popular music's role within local cultural politics' (7).

I share this sentiment and thus found some enjoyment in finding John Encarnacao's attempt to theorize forms of 'Australianess' in his chapter on punk which talks of 'a peculiarly Australian impulse' (201) based on notions of the outsider. Similarly Susan Luckman shows how the dance music term 'doof' has a particular relevance in Australia. There is more 'cultural specificity' in Tony Mitchell's chapter on rap which draws on experiences in various Australian locales and includes an interesting discussion about whether 'authentic' Australian rappers should rap in their own accents and use Australian slang. Similarly Bruce Johnson argues that in jazz Australian culture 'produced a distinctive repertoire of attitudes and practices' (115) and suggests a unique contribution to the genre.

Australia also has a unique history of immigration and currently a quarter of its population was born overseas (81). This inevitably has a major impact on its popular music as Aline Scott-Maxwell illustrates in a chapter showing how most 'world music' in Australia is domestically produced. Importantly popular music is shown throughout as having the capacity to both further entrench conventional views of national identity (as in Oz rock and folk) but also to challenge them (for example in experimental music and practices around raves).

While the chapters are based on genres a number of themes recur in the book including race, gender, nationality, youth and concepts of the mainstream—again all familiar fare within Popular Music Studies. Thus once again global issues are given a 'local' twist, although this is also a somewhat problematic idea in a country as vast as Australia.

My own (admittedly limited) experience in Australia suggests that some of the most interesting aspects of popular music has come in attempts to use state and federal government to support its production and dissemination. But music policy is ignored here and the impact of, for example, radio quotas goes unexplored even in Alison Huber's chapter on the Top 40. Indeed while the introduction nods to questions of government policy and issues such as the funding of experimental music and the censorship of metal are raised elsewhere, a broader political perspective is often lacking. Having gone through eleven years of John Howard's federal government, this seems a little surprising.

The chapters include questions at the end which is obviously useful as a teaching aid. However, I was not always convinced that some of the questions could

have been answered simply by drawing upon the material contained in the chapters. So perhaps further directed reading could be included in any future edition. I would also welcome a few more photographs which would have particularly helped non-Australian audiences who might lack familiarity with some of the acts discussed here.

Inevitably my enjoyment of certain chapters reflects my own research interests and musical tastes. So I particularly enjoyed Shane Homan on Oz Rock, as well as the aforementioned chapters on punk and metal. More broadly I was impressed by the simple authority of a number of the chapters and the admirable gravitas which contributors displayed.

Finally I am aware that reviewers are probably amongst the minority of people who read the whole of edited collections such as these. Others will dip in and out, selecting chapters which reflect their own interests. Here the book is commendably solid and few readers looking for more on their own interests will come away disappointed. The genre-based approach may detract from any search for a genuine *Australian* contribution to popular music history and here it is a pity that the volume lacks a concluding chapter which could have brought together some of the strands. Nevertheless overall this book contributes to an understanding of both popular music *and* Australia. It also suggests that further research into the nature of the relationship between these two areas will continue to bear further fruit in the future.

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