Review


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If I was asked to summarize Kimberly Kattari’s *Psychobilly: Subcultural Survival* in three words, I would probably write ‘Subculture's not dead’. Published in 2020 by Temple University Press and comprising five chapters, one introduction and one afterword, the book draws on no less than a decade of ethnographical research, numerous interviews, and abstracts from song lyrics to provide a detailed account of the psychobilly subculture and its survival strategies in North America and Europe.

In the introduction, Kattari discusses the relevance of the concept of subculture for contemporary research in (underground) musics. She notably highlights the ways in which psychobillies develop an ‘us and them’ worldview, opposing their subcultural activities to the mainstream. However, she doesn’t disregard post-subcultural contributions, but rather searches for common ground. In so doing, Kattari circumvents the main tropes of both subcultural and post-subcultural theory, that is (respectively), the overtly heroization or politicization of subcultures on the one hand, and the individualist hedonism of post-subcultural approaches on the other. In turn, the book aims at analysing the ways in which ‘psychobillies do frame their subcultural activities as an apolitical “escape” ...[from]... the hegemonic culture that has socially and economically abandoned them’ (p. 74).

The first chapter traces the history of psychobilly as a hybrid music genre that stems from rock’n’roll, rockabilly and punk. Beginning her historical account in the early 1970s, years before psychobilly even became a thing, Kattari reveals how psychobillies were often dragged into rock’n’roll music thanks to their parents, thus distinguishing them from traditional subculture participants who rejected the music of previous generations. Later, this interest grew into vintage and retro cultures. Yet it is the development (in the late 1970s and early 1980s) of neo-rockabilly—a music genre that broke the strict rule of revivals by mixing traditional rockabilly sounds
with the contemporary influences of punk and new wave—that mainly paved the way for the emergence of psychobilly. Indeed, the Meteors, often considered the first psychobilly band, performed a ‘punk-ish interpretation of rockabilly, demonstrating their refusal to accurately imitate the music of the past’ (p. 48), and crossed a ‘DIY approach’ (p. 49) with an interest for macabre topics and horror movies. Due to their rejection of both rockabilly and punk clichés, the Meteors and the bands that grew after them fuelled a new subculture.

The following chapter addresses the carnivalesque and transgressive performances of psychobilly concerts. First looking at the historical Klub Foot, a tumbledown venue from psychobilly’s first wave, Kattari highlights that, as members of the working-class in 1980s England, psychobillies ‘appropriated the places that Thatcher had abandoned, using them for their own purposes and pleasure to relieve the anxieties that Thatcher had created’ (p. 70). The rest of the chapter draws on contemporary observation: turning to Bakhtin’s carnivalesque, the author analyses the role of the ‘grotesque body’ in psychobilly performances. The concerts she describes are fuelled by astounding features, from heavy drinking games that foster a community feeling of sameness amongst participants, to ‘real or simulated’ sexual acts (p. 80), to performers throwing food or dead animals at the audience, to the ‘wrecking’, a characteristic dance of the subculture during which participants ‘move in unpredictable directions’ (p. 85). Together with psychobilly fashion—the key element of which is the quiff, a haircut that resembles ‘an exaggerated 1950s flattop crossed with a Mohawk and Pompadour’ (p. 92)—psychobilly concerts embody a rejection from the norms of self-control.

Chapter 3 interrogates the relationships between power and the dark figures summoned by psychobilly’s second wave. Within song lyrics, narratives or visual artifacts, horror and macabre narratives, monsters, zombies, and other murderers abound, often recalling the B movies that psychobillies cherish. In fact, these figures epitomise a variety of purposes: macabre songs may, for instance, provide psychobillies with a symbolic way to ‘express their frustrations with life’, as they identify with the victims of ‘supernaturally powerful monsters’ (p. 110). On the other hand, psychobillies may also identify with non-normative creatures, to emphasize their difference from the norm. Finally, psychobillies also find affinity in zombies, for they consider them as hedonistic beings who ‘embrace an undeath that is better than life’ (p. 121). Identifying with such figures that usually scare ‘normal people’ is not to be taken in an overtly serious manner. Rather, it is something psychobillies joke about, as a response to disempowerment. As Kattari explains, the process of identification with transgressive creatures offers them the possibility to imagine being in control and claiming power.

The fourth chapter addresses gender power relationships within the subculture.
Although this chapter was ‘the most difficult to write’ for the author (p. 163), it was, in my opinion, one of the most engaging to read. Like most subcultures, psychobilly remains male-dominated, so that only a handful of female musicians perform in the scene. There, women are mostly perceived ‘as mere auxiliaries or fashion accessories’ (p. 136), and their contribution to psychobilly is often dismissed as ‘inauthentic’. But despite such a negative perception, women rarely stay passive. Instead, they developed transgressive strategies to gain agency and express their own non-normative subcultural identities, for instance by performing an over-emphasized femininity or by incorporating androgynous elements to their looks. In giving voice to male and female psychobillies alike, Kattari manages to avoid creating a caricature of the subculture. Yet the strength of the chapter lies not only in this very nuanced account of gender and power relationships, but also in the ways in which the author expresses her own struggles as a female ethnographer in a male-dominated subculture.

The final chapter analyses how the subculture is sustained by internal flows of social and economic capital. Kattari looks at the role of the internet as a way for geographically dispersed psychobillies, who meet intermittently face-to-face during international festivals, to maintain constant communication. Moreover, being really ‘niche’, the scene ‘is economically sustained entirely by its own fans’ (p. 172) who buy merchandising, records, concert tickets, but also host bands on tour in their own houses. Such a close relationship between fans and musicians fosters a sense of equality and horizontality between them.

Conclusively, the afterword addresses a crucial choice for subculturalists: stagnation or change. Questioning the value of ‘authenticity’ in a hybrid music scene, and the norms of a nonconformist subculture, the author asks: ‘What happens when a subculture that originally valued nonconformity begins to reject anything that does not conform to one particular set of aesthetic guidelines?’ (p. 205). As an answer she concludes that, despite psychobillies’ attachment to the underground, their subculture ‘may only survive if it comes out of its protected shell a bit’ (p. 205) and calls them to embrace change.

Kimberly Kattari’s book provides us with a very thorough account of psychobilly and its culture. It is a valuable contribution that will not only interest fans of the genre but more broadly the entire field of contemporary cultural and popular music studies. Indeed, Psychobilly: Subcultural Survival proposes an interesting framework that underpins the relevance of classical subcultural studies, without dismissing the contributions made by post-subcultural approaches. Moreover, drawing on both ethnomusicology and cultural studies, the book highlights the constant relevance of ethnographical methods in cultural studies and the ability of ethnomusicological methods to adapt themselves to Western popular musics and their cultures.
My only concern with this book is the ways in which class subordination is sometimes framed by Kattari—as a cause for male psychobillies’ expression of fantasies of domination over ‘an even more subaltern group—working-class women’ (p. 144). Instead, I would stress that the domination of women isn’t specific to working-class subcultures and dispute the claim that male psychobillies’ fantasies of domination over women infer to their own experience of class subalternity. As several systems of domination co-exist and intersect within the social world, female psychobillies experience subalternity in the capitalist and patriarchal system, within and beyond the boundaries of the psychobilly subculture. The analysis of this specific position necessitates stepping aside from the traditional subcultural studies’ class-based analysis. Subsequently, the chapter on gender also left me wondering if psychobillies of colour or queer psychobillies exist. And if so, how do they navigate the psychobilly subculture? Such questions remain open for future research.