

Review

Tyler Bickford, *Tween Pop: Children's Music and Public Culture*. Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press. 2020. 240 pp. ISBN 978-1-4780-0819-4 (pbk). \$25.95.

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Tyler Bickford's second book on children's popular music details the explosion of music-based media aimed primarily at pre-teens that emerged in the first decade of the 2000s. Moving from the ethnographic approach of his previous *Schooling New Media* (Oxford University Press, 2017) which looked at how children use and consume popular music, *Tween Pop* strikes a perfect balance between an examination of the machinations of the global children's music industry and discussions about the often complex and contradictory issues raised. As such it provides an important study of a historical media-driven moment in which corporations moved from merely attempting to sell records and associated merchandise to children (and their purse-holder parents) to 'radically reimagin[ing] childhood as [a] mode of participation in public culture as part of [a] consumer marketing project' (p. 31). The book also provides a model of how to approach the study of oft-overlooked, frequently trivialized and occasionally derided subject matter. By drawing on a wide range of interdisciplinary theoretical sources on issues of race, gender, identity and perhaps most importantly, childhood, *Tween Pop* is an exemplar of how and why music made for children should be taken seriously by academia.

Tween Pop's main case studies are the products of US-based media networks such as Disney and Nickelodeon (*High School Musical*, *Hannah Montana*), the at-the-time independent cover version brand *Kidz Bop*, and YouTube. Through a structuralist production-focused lens, Bickford examines the work of the artists who are most closely associated with tween pop music: Miley Cyrus, Justin Bieber, Taylor Swift and the Jonas Brothers, among others. Fascinatingly, *Tween Pop* also investigates the pre-history of tween, by documenting the stuttering and aborted efforts by Disney and others to create music products that would appeal to a generation of children

who, commentators asserted, were maturing too quickly, getting older younger, and developing a taste for the music of their teenage siblings. While the main focus is on the Disney Channel from 2001 to 2011, the book also includes the work of Walt Disney Records and Radio Disney in the 1990s and their attempts to launch child stars such as Christa Larson and promote older children's music performers such as Norman Foote.

The book expertly explains the challenges faced by the tween pop industry in developing a new marketing category (or a sub-division of existing categories) based on the idea that 'consumerism is itself an essential or intrinsic aspect of childhood' (p. 21). As such, tween pop successfully overcame long-standing notions of a culturally constructed childhood unsoiled by marketing and commerce. It was interesting to read how most of the serious commentary on tween pop came from the areas of marketing and business, rather than media or childhood studies. As Bickford reminds us, children's tastes and preferences make them far from passive consumers.

By the late 1990s, the Disney Channel had honed their mission to provide music that was 'safe' but with enough of an 'edge' to appeal to children. A range of child stars in their early to mid-teens such as The Cheetah Girls (a 'minimally' suggestive version of the Pussycat Dolls), Demi Lovato, Selena Gomez and Hilary Duff were central to 'an entire alternative media ecology' in which the 'most problematic' elements of conventional pop music were removed, most notably, sexuality (p. 37).

Bickford's central arguments concern tween pop's intersection of age, race and gender. While the Disney Channel may have been ahead of the curve in its racial diversity of the casts and presenters of their TV programmes and movies, such a move merely perpetuated a consumerist agenda targeted at a young, largely white and affluent audience (pp. 22–23). In addition, tween pop, Bickford argues, addresses the transitional phase from childhood to adolescence differently for boys and girls. While boys' development is eased by puerility, coprophilic humour, suggestive sexual innuendo and other references that are shared with the older males in their lives, girls must navigate 'a fraught and abrupt dividing line specifically constructed in terms of female sexuality and the body' (p. 24). As Bickford notes, the 'age compression' that characterizes tween pop discourse has a racial bias; Black girls have historically been 'adultified' through an association with adult (sexual) behaviours and responsibilities, and a focus on the body, rather than the 'voice' of the child in all its forms (p. 27).

The chapter on *Hannah Montana* explores how Disney combined ideas of friendship and consumerism (p. 98) in a brand that drew on post-feminist ideals of 'having it all' (p. 91). Miley Cyrus, herself a child at the time, played a professional pop star who struggles to keep her working life and private family life separate.

While raising issues about class, authenticity, and the programme's focus on the nuclear family (constructed white), Bickford explains how *Hannah Montana* presents a vision of childhood in which femininity is a 'struggle to achieve intimacy and affective attachments in a world of public and private contradictions' (p. 38).

Similarly, the chapter on *Kidz Bop* and its extended textual analysis of a video of a child-voiced cover of the Kelly Clarkson song 'Since U Been Gone' explores its mix of 'bedroom culture and fantasies of performance'. In this case, children's domesticity, Bickford argues, was 'complementary, rather than opposed, to their participation in public culture' (p. 37). The amateur (and nameless) child voices that sing en masse in the choruses of *Kidz Bop* songs both anticipate and invite the participation of an already-present child audience (p. 53). By promoting an ethos of anonymity, ordinariness and interchangeability, the message is that you, the child in the bedroom, are the real star of the show.

While *Kidz Bop*, *Hannah Montana* and the wider Disney Channel generally reappropriated texts and tropes from 'older' chart pop and popular culture, the chapter on Justin Bieber discusses how tween pop could also reach down as well as up. As a prodigious YouTube sensation, Bieber's work (the focus here is on the 2011 concert film *Never Say Never*) embraced ideas of naivety, immaturity and childishness, and, like *Hannah Montana* and *Kidz Bop*, incorporated domestic settings while celebrating the participatory and productive consumerism of its young audience.

The chapter on 'The whiteness of tween innocence' compares the peri- and post-child star work of Miley Cyrus and Taylor Swift. While Cyrus's adoption of R&B and other 'sexualized' music styles drew the opprobrium of celebrities and media commentators, Swift's reliance on mostly white music styles (primarily country and folk) chimed with established notions of childhood innocence and its white racial bias.

In his discussions of the racialized and gendered nature of tween pop, Bickford ponders the possibilities of childhood emerging as a separate and political identity akin to gender, race, class and sexuality (p. 33). Western childhood, he argues, is defined in opposition to an identity that is both public and political. He points out that gender took many decades to emerge as political and public (rather than private and domestic). As part of the process, women became a key consumer demographic. Similarly, tween pop was 'an effort to stabilize childhood as a purely consumer demographic separate from politics' that involved 'the simultaneous cultivation of a cultural identity with capitalist accumulation' (p. 34). While children such as Greta Thunberg and Malala Yousafzai and post-tween pop performers such as Miley Cyrus have directly engaged with the politics of climate change, race, gender and sexuality, Bickford is, on the whole, pessimistic about childhood emerging as a separate cultural identity.

The book concludes with a brief examination of the post-tween children's mediascape. By the second decade of the twenty-first century, in tween pop's twilight, *Kidz Bop's* mass of amateur vocalists were replaced by professional child singers sourced from auditions and named stars who toured as *The Kidz Bop Kids*. By 2010, African American child performers such as Coco Jones, Willow Smith, and teen boy band Mindless Behaviour, brought a previously only-hinted-at sexuality to Disney and the wider children's music industry. Although tween pop still exists as a shorthand reference to music that aims to include older children and young teens, *Tween Pop* articulates the complex and problematic issues of creating mass-appeal musical content during tween's golden decade.

Expertly researched, convincingly argued and beautifully written, *Tween Pop* is an important reference source for undergraduates and scholars of children's music, children's media production and consumption, and the history and sociology of childhood.