

**book review**

**Writing Pop**

**Contemporary Approaches to Pop(ular) Music Studies**

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Chris Rojek

*Pop Music, Pop Culture*

Polity, Cambridge, 2011

ISBN: 9780745642642

RRP: £16.99

Tara Brabazon

*Popular Music: Topics, Trends & Trajectories*

Sage, London, 2012

ISBN: 9781847874368

RRP: £22.99

The field of pop(ular) music studies continues to attract an ever-growing number of scholarly contributions in history and disciplinary critique. The two books reviewed here offer some similarities and differences in approach, but share a desire to move the field into new critical terrain as the twenty-first century advances rapidly with

continually developing technologies and modes of musical production, distribution and consumption. Both books are about 'writing pop': critiquing how the field might be studied in the present day as a result of changing technologies and changing ways of thinking about music as a product of modern-day culture.

At the heart of Chris Rojek's book, *Pop Music, Pop Culture*, is a calling for an examination of the contemporary 'tectonic changes in the production, exchange and consumption of recorded popular music'. (6) As the title of his book suggests, pop music is not just about music, but also about the broader pop culture within which it is created, consumed and imagined. Indeed, from the outset of his discussion, Rojek defines one of the book's main parameters as an argument for the simultaneous scholarly study of pop music and pop culture.

The author outlines three reasons for using these abbreviated terms rather than the longer forms of popular music and popular culture, which are often used by musicologists who have objected subjectively to the shortened synonyms. First, 'pop' is well liked and it reaches the masses; because of this scholars should attempt to understand the pop phenomenon. As Rojek articulates, it would seem arbitrary 'to separate pop from the rest of the people's music because it is attached to strong commercial objectives'. (1) In fact, the term 'pop' is more popular than some other more 'authentic' forms (genres or styles) of music such as blues, heavy metal and rap. For Rojek, then, the question is 'why?' That is, why do people like pop music when it is well understood and often contested in terms of its associations with 'commercialism, manipulation and low taste'? (2)

Second, Rojek offers the term 'communication highways' (2) to describe the popularisation of any music regardless of its genre, so that all styles of music that have been commercialised might be seen to contribute to commercial values and not just pop. As he states: 'An approach to the people's music that omits to balance the aesthetics and politics of songs with the mechanisms of popular communication is naive and unacceptable'. (2)

The third reason for the focus on 'pop' as opposed to 'popular' is that the abbreviated term is 'better suited as a descriptor ... because it is more direct and informal'. (2) While acknowledging some of the problems with the term and its 'slippery' and 'leaky' boundaries, Rojek emphasises that many of the genres that have emerged in pop music are the result of immense changes in the way that music

is produced that have occurred over the last few decades, and that it would be a mistake to separate pop from some of these other genres.

Rojek draws much from the pop music and cultural theory of Simon Frith. Early on in the book he outlines four of Frith's markers for identifying popular music: general appeal, light entertainment, commercial imperatives and personal identification. While he notes that some scholars from musicology and sociology use these factors as a basis for differentiating pop music from other genres, Rojek insists such other genres that have 'emerged from the people' (3) should be studied in the same way as pop music. After all, it is popular. Here, the author comments that his work 'runs against the grain', (3) and notes the cultural transformation of pop culture over the past few decades where 'sampling, sequencing, the internet and the emergence of various countercultures to capitalism have dislodged old concepts of authorship, accumulation and power'. (3)

As a result of these cultural transformations, Rojek notes four main consequences of concern for pop music studies: spatial distribution, subcultural formation, authorship and co-operative labour, and the power of the record corporation. (4-5) He uses the term 'cultural de-differentiation' to refer to recent 'changes in the production, exchange and consumption of recorded popular music', (6) and reiterates that the term 'pop' has been opposed primarily as a way to defend academic boundaries rather than 'engaging with cultural realities', (7) He stresses the point further when justifying using the term 'pop' for acts such as Eminem, 2Pac and Nirvana, arguing this does not trivialise their music but, rather, privileges associations such as 'ubiquity, speed, flexibility of setting, direct emotional transfer and instant access'. (7) In doing this, Rojek contends the 'abbreviation "pop" conveys this with more force than "popular"'. (7)

Following a short introduction, *Pop Music, Pop Culture* divides into four main parts. Part One, comprising two chapters, is a discussion of the 'field'; in this context, the field is pop music. Rojek acknowledges the influences of musicology and sociology on the historical study of pop music, but argues that 'pop culture, rather than the biography of the artist, the history of the record corporation or the values of the media, is regarded to be the crucible for understanding pop music'. (9) The theoretical impetus is from the mode of production: where pop music is produced, and where it is distributed. The first chapter of Part 1 is 'The Field of Pop Music

Study', the second 'The Urban-Industrial Backbeat'. In the first, Rojek criticises some other types of music research by noting that 'musicology falls short of adequately embracing the industrial, social, political, economic and cultural dimensions of music', (15) even though the work of some ethnomusicologists is acknowledged as contributing to such areas. A thought-provoking part of this chapter is the section entitled 'What is a Pop Song?' Here, the author notes the parameters of harmony and convention; language, syntax and semantics; typification and transcription; and culture and genre. The underlying point is that for a pop song to succeed it must appeal to a wide audience, and therefore it must rely on forms of communication. As he notes, 'pop presupposes linguistic, historical and cultural conventions'. (26) The difficulties of writing about pop music are articulated in the second chapter. As a way of unravelling what exactly constitutes the study of pop music, the author offers several themes for discussion: production, exchange and consumption, the 'popular' and technology.

Part Two is concerned with theoretical approaches to the study of pop music. Two chapters are offered as a way of differentiating ways of viewing theory: 'Structuralist Approaches', and 'Agency Approaches'. The purpose of the first of these is to 'suggest that music has general (or universal) characteristics of production and consumption'. (9) The theories of a number of key thinkers are discussed, including those of Plato, Aristotle, Attali, Lévi-Strauss and Adorno, to back this suggestion. The purpose of the second chapter in this part is to 'draw on a much wider range of resources in the social sciences and cultural and communication studies than is normal in the analysis of pop music'. (10) Representative theoretical ideas discussed are subculturalism, relationism, transcendentalism and textualism; it covers the scholarly thoughts of, for instance, Williams, Bourdieu, Negus and Barthes. With these thinkers and approaches in mind, the chapter aims to 'demonstrate the pertinence of these writings to revitalising the investigation of how pop works and why it has colonized pop culture'. (10)

The third part of the book offers four chapters that explore the mode of production that helps in the creation, exchange and consumption of pop music. Emphasis is given to the postwar period and 'cultural de-differentiation in the form of increasing access to recorded music and widening participation in composition and performance through sampling and sequencing'. (10) The chapters are: 'Roots'.

'Corporations and Independents', 'Artists, Managers and Audiences' and 'Technology and Media'.

The short, final part of the book is the conclusion, which presents a summary of many of the ideas introduced earlier on. Here, Rojek again emphasises the immense change that has taken place in pop music over the past few decades, including changing power relationships, new technologies and cooperative labour. Each has contributed to the destabilisation of pop music, resulting in 'a music industry ... hungry to return to the high-profit days of the 1980s and early 1990s'. (11)

The book is very much focused on the English-speaking world, and while some of the work of ethnomusicologists such as Feld, Keil and Stokes is mentioned in passing, a deeper engagement with the 'popular' music scholarship that has helped define the discipline over the past few decades would have helped extend the discussion into new territory. This might have crossed into spheres of knowledge that would actually help achieve the breakdown of approaches Rojek seems to be seeking. Nevertheless, the work of Ian Condry is mentioned at various places, and this is one example that helps show how ethnomusicological and anthropological approaches to pop music and pop culture offer perspectives that should not be overlooked.

Rojek's book is extremely well researched with strong theoretical underpinnings, and the subjects covered bring the scholarly study of pop music into the twenty-first century in challenging and developing the findings of earlier studies in the area. Lastly, the book has a healthy bibliography, which reinforces the author's theoretical emphasis, and succinct notes and indexes.

Another recently published book on popular music is *Popular Music: Topics, Trends and Trajectories*, by Tara Brabazon. This is a textbook intended for an undergraduate readership. Early in her book Brabazon draws on the ideas of Stuart Hall from the field of cultural studies to define the notion of 'popular' in popular music, to break down the barriers between that which is popular and that which is not. As she comments, 'it is more appropriate and useful for scholars to ignore the loaded labels of genres and explore popular music through its audiences'. (2) By taking such an approach, the author points towards studying popular music as a phenomenon that crosses different genres of music, suggesting more attention should be paid to 'how sounds shape our identity'. (3) Inspired by the theoretical

scholarship of David Toop, who argues for writing about music without categories, Brabazon sets out four main points as a rationale for her book. The first is that writing about popular music is difficult; the second concerns the recent growth of the digital age of music; the third is the author's desire to write a contemporary music history; and the fourth to realign popular music within the creative industries.

The book has five chapters or sections: 'Approaches', 'Music Spaces', 'Instruments of/for Study', 'Genre and Community' and 'Debates'. The first explores different approaches to music, including listening, visualising, dancing to, thinking about, and writing about. This section offers different parameters for studying music, and through them the author creates a much more holistic view of how music exists in society and culture than a focus exclusively on music genre might have. Of particular relevance is the succinct way Brabazon asks provocative questions on how and why popular music is studied and written about. As she notes, 'listening to and writing about popular music is part of a war of position'. (42)

The second section studies the spaces in which music exists, such as sonic architecture or soundscape, city music and urban spaces, recording spaces, clubs and pubs, soundtracks and filmic spaces, radio, podcasting and listening spaces, and mp3 and downloading spaces. Of importance in this section is the exploration of how sounds can help create an environment based on their context of performance. That is, some sounds have a distinct space associated with them, while others are part of a musical imagination. As the author asserts, music 'tells stories about place and identity'. (8)

The next section looks more closely at the musical make-up of popular music, and covers the following key themes: guitar cultures, keyboard cultures, drumming and percussion, voice, turntablism and the iPod. Brabazon uses the term 'cultures' for guitar and keyboard, which reflects Bennett and Dawe's use of the term, but she does not really extend this approach to other 'instruments' typically included in the pop music context.<sup>1</sup> While this third section offers a close-up look at some of the technology of performing popular music, the focus is very clearly on the social and cultural impact of that technology rather than on analyses of the music sound itself.

In the fourth section, Brabazon sensibly moves the study of popular music into the social sphere, but emphasises the grouping of music genres as a part of this. Topics covered are country, folk, blues, rock and roll, soul, reggae and ska, salsa,

metal, punk and indie, hip hop, disco, house and post-house musics, and world music. The author argues that 'genre is an intellectual shorthand that prevents more complex and new ways of thinking and writing about music'.(8)

The final section of the book focuses more on debates about music and includes eight primary topics for discussion: intellectual property, censorship and regulation, race, appropriation and commodification, girl groups and feminism, boy bands and men's studies, gay, lesbian, bisexual and transgenderist musics, digitisation, use generated content and social networking, and politics, resistance and protest. A short conclusion helps summarise some of the key points of the book.

The section on world music helps show the author's sojourn into broader spheres of cultural scholarly engagement in the world of popular musics, but it also reveals a few shortcomings. The author provides a definition of world music as follows: 'It can be seen not only as a generalised description of "non-Western" music, but also as a form of sonic neocolonialism where English-speaking marketing executives label and exoticise the sounds of "the other"'. (188) However, one wonders about world music as a field, discipline and product outside English-speaking cultures. The author doesn't consider this; the further reading suggestions are brief and overlook various significant publications that might have raised the issue, such as Louise Meintjes' 'Paul Simon's *Graceland*' and Martin Stokes' 'Music and the Global Order'.<sup>2</sup>

Reading lists are offered at the end of each section of the book. While these are useful, they might have been longer, and some questions remain about the choice of further reading. Each subsection includes four (sometimes) provocative questions at the end. While these questions are very useful for such a book, especially to help lead discussions with undergraduate students, the limit of four questions doesn't always reflect the complexity of the subject matter. Furthermore, it would have been useful to have further notes on the questions, perhaps offering or hinting towards possible answers, for the provocations to have been unpacked at a deeper level of critical engagement with the subject matter. That said, the book is very well written and, overall, provides a very useful addition to the scholarly study of popular music in the contemporary age.

Both Rojek and Brabazon seem to share a desire to look at pop(ular) music across genre, and each brings pop music studies into the contemporary age. If there

is one thing that both of these books bring to current scholarship in this field, it is the assertion that music exists in an immensely complex media web, something that should be considered an essential topic of study when attempting to understand the phenomenon of mass music production, distribution and consumption.

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<sup>1</sup> A. Bennett and K. Dawe, *Guitar Cultures*, Berg, Oxford, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Louise Meintjes, 'Paul Simon's *Graceland*, South Africa, and the Mediation of Musical Meaning', *Ethnomusicology* vol. 34, no. 1, 1990, pp. 37–74; Martin Stokes, 'Music and the Global Order', *Annual Review of Anthropology* no. 33, 2004, pp. 47–72.