

Sarah Baker, Andy Bennett and Jodie Taylor (eds). 2013. *Redefining Mainstream Popular Music*. New York and London: Routledge. 222pp. ISBN 978-0-415-80782-1

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Keywords: popular music, mainstream

What does the title of this journal mean? What, for that matter, is meant by my own job title: senior lecturer in popular music? The ambiguity, as Cutler (1993) has argued, lies in the word 'popular'. 'Does it mean numerically and statistically the most listened to, or bought; does it mean "of the people"; or has it come to refer to a whole genus of music – a genus loosely bound by its particular means and relations of production, circulation and consumption; its commitment to electric and electronic technology, radio and the gramophone record, and to what we might call a demotic usage and language?' (Cutler 1993: 4). That popular music has something to do with the musical 'mainstream' might seem self-evident, yet the mainstream has been curiously neglected in popular music studies – both its musicology and cultural studies/sociology factions. Tabloids and gossip magazines aside, the same neglect can also be identified in much popular music journalism. All too often, the mainstream serves simply as something against which to define the 'underground' – and it is the underground, as Sarah Thornton (1995) argued, that is usually considered to have the subcultural capital.

Redefining Mainstream Popular Music challenges this binary opposition between subcultures and a monolithic mainstream. The mainstream, argue Jodie Taylor, Sarah Baker (reviews editor of this journal) and Andy Bennett, is 'in urgent need of detailed consideration' (ix), and not sneering, condescending consideration either: a key thread running through the book is that of thinking *with*, not against, the mainstream, a notion first espoused by Jason Toynbee (2002). Countering accusations of homogeneity that date all the way back to the attack on the culture industries launched by Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer (1979), the effect of these 17 chapters is, above all, to call attention to the mainstream's plurality.

Where, in a world with streaming but without Top of the Pops, might we situate this musical mainstream? Are we living, as Chris Anderson (2006) claims, in a world of 'long tail' niches? Or, as Anita Elberse (2013) has argued, is the blockbuster in fact bigger than ever? The hits penned by the likes of Max Martin and Dr Luke, are one example of a mainstream. But there are other mainstrems beyond ...*Baby One More Time* (released by Britney Spears in 1998), *I Kissed A Girl* (released by Katy Perry in 2008) and Miley Cyrus singing *Wrecking Ball* (2013). Apart from anything else, the mainstream is historically contingent: Nick Drake, for instance, may not be mainstream in the Max Martin sense, but he is now sufficiently well known for his inclusion in the *Rough Guide to the Best Music You've Never Heard* (Williamson 2008) and *Unknown Legends of Rock'n'Roll* (Unterberger, 1998) to feel slightly incongruous. Fame, on the other hand, doesn't last forever, and once ubiquitous tracks such as Aqua's *Barbie Girl* (1997) and Crazy Frog's *Axel F* (2005) have disappeared into oblivion. Even *Gangnam Style*, released by Psy as recently as 2012, already seems a distant memory.

Redefining Mainstream Popular Music does not confine itself to the pop mainstream but instead covers a number of genres including grunge, hip-hop, punk and even New Zealand 'tramping' songs. One key theme is that the categorisation of tracks as

'mainstream' may be less about the music itself than the gender (Sheila Whiteley, Sarah Baker) or sexuality (Taylor) of its musicians and fans. Taylor is among those to point out that the mainstream is a value-laden category – one we should not carelessly dismiss as inauthentic or commercialised. Sarah Baker puts forward a similar argument: that the records bought by young girls are often considered the most 'lightweight' and 'worthless' commodities of the culture industry; as Catherine Strong reminds us, citing Pierre Bourdieu (1984), hierarchies of culture are socially constructed. The mainstream, here, is not depicted as lightweight and worthless, nor as starkly opposed to the underground. Strong suggests that grunge fans, for instance, may have a pragmatic relationship with the mainstream, recognising the benefits that popular success can bring to artists and audiences alike. Not all members of a subculture, in other words, will have the same attitude to 'selling out'. Adrian Renzo makes a related point about mash-ups: despite their unauthorised status, these tracks regularly 'quote' top 40 songs and are often judged and created according to 'mainstream aesthetic criteria' (139-40). David Baker, meanwhile, questions the notion of the mainstream as something to be rejected: why do pop culture scholars, he asks, despise Elvis Presley movies? (Answer: they are aggrieved by a sense that Presley allowed himself to be contained and constrained, in this period, by the mainstream force of Hollywood). There is even a chapter on 'ironic listening', a concept Bennett has developed from the 'ironic viewing' Len Ang (1982) identified in television viewers. Popular music fandom, Bennett suggests, is not always 'serious and earnest' (202); audiences may appropriate and understand mainstream popular music from an ironic, or even post-ironic, distance.

Particularly pertinent to this special issue is the chapter by Murray Forman on 'temporality and change in the hip-hop mainstream'. What does it mean for hip-hop, Forman asks, that Barack Obama (this is pre-Trump, of course) listens to Jay-Z and has namechecked Kanye West, Ludacris, Nas and Lil Wayne? Is this an example of mainstream 'co-option'? Forman's answer is that the authentic or 'real', so fundamental to hip-hop as a genre, is in fact a discursive and symbolic construct. Apart from anything else, he argues, DJs and producers have long appropriated mainstream pop hits; hip-hop, indeed, was unambiguously commercial from the beginning. For Forman, rappers such as KRS-One are mistaken to idolise a past age as somehow more 'pure'; the music, like the mainstream, simply evolves.

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