

Pop Avatars: A Fragmented History of Popular Music

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Abstract:

The volume *One-Track Mind: Capitalism, Technology, and the Art of the Pop Song*, edited by historian Asif Siddiqi, brings together 16 essays by scholars of history, media studies, musicology and music journalists, each of which tell the (fragmented) history of popular music from the 1960s to the 2010s. Using the song as a lens, the essays illuminate both the political agency of songs and the contexts that shape them.

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German Abstract:

Der Band *One-Track Mind: Capitalism, Technology, and the Art of the Pop Song*, herausgegeben von Asif Siddiqi, versammelt 16 Essays von Wissenschaftler_innen aus den Bereichen Geschichte, Medienwissenschaft und Musikwissenschaft sowie Musikjournalist_innen, und erzählt eine fragmentarische Geschichte der Popmusik der 1960er bis 2010er. Jeder Text widmet sich einem Song und situiert seine politische und künstlerische Aussagekraft in seinen historischen Kontext.

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Pop songs are complex signs. They communicate on multiple levels and accumulate meaning over time, as they are referenced and become part of an entangled web of meaning-making, agency and power. What appears simple at first glance might turn out to be better equipped to represent the intersecting complexity of culture and politics in our medialized present than any other form of art – at least that is the impression given by *One-Track Mind: Capitalism, Technology, and the Art of the Pop Song*.

Edited by historian Asif Siddiqi, the volume sets out to tell a fragmented history of popular music by focusing on individual songs. It seeks to show how a “three-minute aural experience” can become a “new political avatar” (p. 1) that speaks to the political and cultural imagination, and can embody, subvert, reinforce and disrupt the status quo at the intersection of culture, politics, and capitalism. Stretching chronologically from the 1960s to the 2000s, the sixteen essays tell the stories of the songs’ makers, audiences, and the political, medial, technological, and economic structures through which they emerged. The volume brings together scholars from history, musicology and media studies, as well as musicians and journalists from the USA and UK, which results not only in various disciplinary but also at times deeply personal perspectives. The song selection was made by the contributing authors and is not meant to be comprehensive or representative; rather, each essay offers a window into the history of popular music.

While all the authors provide a close reading of the song itself, some essays stay closer to the material, crediting musicians and sound engineers, telling the story of the song within the artist’s oeuvre, biography, and the network of labels and distribution. Particularly impactful is the story behind Neil Young’s song “Transformer Man” (1982), as told by media scholar George Plasketes. He shows how the decisively inhuman and futuristic sound of the ‘80s was subverted

by Young's desperation for technological aid for communicating with his disabled child and how personal relations and production and marketing choices can fail both artists and labels – albeit for different reasons. The interests and at times misinformed strategies of the record labels are also in focus in Glenn Hendler's discussion of how David Bowie's lesser-known 'Latinized' USA single-version of "Rebel Rebel" (1974) fell between the racialized cracks of US radio in the 1970s of 'good old rock'n'roll' stations and a diversifying Top 40 format.

In his contribution, Asif Siddiqi discusses MIA's work with field recordings and samples in "Paper Planes" (2007) and theorizes the political possibilities of the digital sampler as a tool for re-appropriation. With a similar postcolonial perspective, music scholar Simon Zagorski-Thomas tells the story of Le Grand Kallé and African Jazz's song "Indépendance Cha Cha" (1960) as a nuanced story of power in the wake of the independence of the Republic of Congo. Here, Zagorski-Thomas pulls apart the multiple networks of power intertwined with the song – the tensions between the rural and urban music scenes in the Republic of Congo, the recording industry and radio in the hands of Europeans, the new rising cosmopolitan spirit of Cuban Music in Africa during the 1950s, but also the exclusion of female* actors in the independence narrative of the song.

The intersection of gender, race, and sexuality is at the center of attention in three essays, although from varying perspectives and in different contexts. Scott Poulson-Bryant gives a personal account of Prince's "When You Were Mine" (1980), as his queer coming-of-age song. Amy Coddington traces how Salt-N-Pepa's hit single "Shoot" (1993) articulated a new type of 'hip hop feminism' that centered on the experience of Black women and contributed to the changing conversation about gender roles in the United States in the early 1990s. On the other side of the Atlantic fifteen years prior, Polly of X-Ray Spex was making waves in the London music scene with a song that later reached feminist-punk icon status: "Oh Bondage! Up Yours" (1977). Based on archival research, Helen Reddington tells the misogynistic "ritual sacrifice of Poly" (p. 113) by the media at a time when male rockism reigned in music criticism. While Polly is today celebrated as the not-white and not-male poster child for feminist subculturalists, Reddington also sheds light on the artistic pop-finesse of the song and its lyrics.

By contrast, two essays seem to subscribe to the subcultural narrative and rockism the other essays so eagerly try to shake off. Historian Susan Schmidt Horning remembers the forgotten

genius of Moby Grape – one of the “hippest new bands” (p. 50) in 1960s San Francisco – and their song “Omaha” (1967). Gina Arnold, member of the US college radio networks in the 1980s, frames the Replacements’ song “Unsatisfied” (1984) as “the real anthem of the Reagan era” (p. 162) and recalls the influence college radio had on disseminating ‘real’ music across the nation. She ends, quite tellingly, by asking the reader if there is “a band that’s doing that for the young people of this era?” (p. 170). One possible answer comes from musicologist Gabrielle Cornish, who anchors her essay on LCD Soundsystem’s “All My Friends” (2007) in the cultural zeitgeist of the post-9/11 New York music scene.

Particularly insightful are those essays that show how songs accumulate meaning over time, as they are re-contextualized, covered, or coopted by media or social movements. It is here that the complexities of pop songs and the entwinement of gender and race with capitalism and cultural politics become especially apparent. Music writer Oliver Wang traces how, through various cover versions and samples, Gerald Wilson’s “Viva Tirado” (1962) became a quintessential song about Los Angeles and its people, growing into a symbol of intercultural exchange between the city’s African American and Latinx communities. Historian Austin McCoy situates the song “F- the Police” (1988) by Niggaz Wit’ Attitudes within the broader historical context of the militarization of the US police that enabled the systematic and racist criminalization of African Americans. McCoy shows how the FBI’s censorship boosted the group’s popularity and catapulted the song into a symbol of mass resistance – “a song that found a movement” (p. 184). In her essay on Led Zeppelin’s “Immigrant Song” (1970) Esther Liberman Cuenca illustrates how a song can be appropriated and recontextualized to combine both voices of domination as well as of struggle and empowerment. She illustrates how the fetishization of age-old Britannia and martial Viking invaders in Led Zeppelin’s music, which has been linked to ideas of white nationalism and colonialism, is both told and undermined through a feminist and decolonial approach in the song adaptations for the soundtrack of *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2005) and the Marvel blockbuster *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017).

Last but not least, Louie Dean Valencia’s story of Hanson and their song “Mmmbop” (1997) with its focus on the agency of the music fans, is a welcome change of perspective. Valencia shows how the song catapulted the teenage band to short-lived fame. Based on this fame, however, the band and their young fans were able to create an independent sustainable system in the

early days of the internet, heralding close fan-artist relationships in the current age of social media.

Overall, with such a flexible framework, this volume shines as bright as its individual contributions. The 'simple' task of starting out from a single song allows the authors to find individual ways of peeling back the multiple layers, from (auto-) biographical anecdotes to larger cultural developments and their embeddedness within political and economic systems. However, while the title and the introduction by Siddiqi allude to the idea of overarching themes within the volume, these red strings hold rather loosely and are not framed conceptually. Often the essayistic writing style leaves methodological and material questions unanswered, which might make for an inspiring read, yet leaves the question of usefulness for further research. Still, this volume conceptually presents a rare opportunity for authors and readers alike: honing in on particular songs, provides not only room to explore their multiple layers of meaning-making in greater length than usual but also offers a comparative perspective on how scholars and music critics approach the ongoing process of writing a fragmented history of popular music.