

Beverly Diamond. On Record: Audio Recording, Mediation, and Citizenship in Newfoundland and Labrador

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BOOK REVIEW

Beverly Diamond. *On Record: Audio Recording, Mediation, and Citizenship in Newfoundland and Labrador*. Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2021. ISBN: 978-0-228-00655-8

Beverly Diamond's latest work is a singular achievement of scholarship that will likely be the standard reference work on the topic of recorded music and song in Newfoundland and Labrador for many years to come. Unlike the popular, commercial, and local material she writes about, the work will not have much of a readership outside of academic audiences given its jargon, theory, and authorial voice — although I expect some in the music industry may have an interest in how they and their work are characterized. The book is ambitious in its scope, covering: historic material; rural and urban parts of the island and key sites in Labrador; disciplinary theory and issues; and a fine and detailed engagement with the vast scale of the province's music/song. The scale of the work leads to one of my few criticisms in that Diamond picks up and puts down so many ideas and topics that its organization and writing need to be nearly flawless to allow the strands of ideas to hold together, and at times this high-wire act fails.

Diamond is an expert in Newfoundland and Labrador ethnomusicology, and the work brings together a career's worth of material and a deep knowledge of the field. The monograph's key strength is its breadth and specificity. Readers will find a critical re-evaluation of early collectors, music/song creators, influential radio stations and shows, and an exhaustive documentation and analysis of recording studios, to name just a few topics. One example of the attention to small details is her investigation into the place of country and western music in NL. Diamond not only

covers the predictable, such as key performers, but also tells the story of how American military bases, a US radio station, sheet music, and an American recording artists' job action combined to produce a distinctly NL audience and sound tradition. In the chapter on recording studios we get a patient and excellent analysis of how commerce, geography, skill, technology, and artistic choices produced the various sonic textures of NL music.

For academic specialists in ethnomusicology, pop culture, history, folklore, and companion disciplines, many of the foundational theories, approaches, and key words that haunt our literature make an appearance in the book. For example, the role of social power and its expressions in taste, class, gender, and ethnicity shaped collections/collectors to produce the NL canon. There is a nuanced use of the dynamic between song and track throughout the work. The classic issues of authenticity and the problem of genres are addressed, and the tension between the local, provincial, and transnational in music production and consumption is considered, as are a host of smaller theoretical models used to analyze specific phenomena. While the topic of the book might appeal to an interested reader, the theory itself takes as its starting point a general familiarity with the literature and will be daunting to the casual reader. For academic readers looking for advances in or the production of novel theory, you will be disappointed. The work is as much a survey of theory as it is a survey of NL recorded music and, as such, Diamond uses theory pragmatically rather than advancing or engaging with the making and breaking of theory.

Indeed, my critique of some writing and organization problems is most acute in regard to theory. The book's chapters are (generally) organized with a brief introduction to an interrelated set of theories followed by the presentation of material. This is standard academic structure, and it works about as well as that structure allows. The problem is that Diamond picks up and puts down several ideas and theories, and then sometimes (as with her use of Latour's actor network theory) does not operationalize them overtly within the preceding section, only to pick them back up much later or in another chapter. An introduction that

situated the reader and more patiently demonstrated the relationship between and within various theories/approaches adopted by the author would have helped; however, what we get in Chapter One is unfocused and at times confusing. Luckily, other chapters like “The Lure of Audio Recordings,” “A Unique Music Industry,” and “Past and Possibilities” are well organized and structured. The latter clearly displays the promise and execution of the book, asking “how do individuals, families, communities, or other groups respond in the creative work of recorded sound to the decisions and events that shape their lives.” The chapter’s subsequent investigation of Indigenous and settler communities, as well as themes of memorialization and parody, is, like the work itself, creative, surprising, and ambitious.

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