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David Brackett. *Interpreting Popular Music*. Cambridge, New York, Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1995. xiv, 260 pp. ISBN 0-521-47337-3 (hardcover)

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Current analytic approaches to popular music have been widely criticized for their failure to account for the unique and seemingly unanalyzable features of individual works which give them meaning. To a large degree this criticism has revolved around a debate over the relative importance of the "context" as opposed to "text" and the perceived limitations of traditional formal musical analyses in establishing why some works seem more meaningful and relevant than others. Despite this often lamented condition, few authors have actually advanced new methodologies with which to improve the situation. David Brackett's *Interpreting Popular Music*, however, represents a rare attempt to tackle these issues head on. Combining contemporary critical theory and cultural studies with traditional music theory, Brackett convincingly holds that "different types of popular music use different types of rhetoric, call for different sorts of interpretation, refer to different arguments about words and voices, about musical complexity and familiarity, and draw upon different senses of history and tradition" (p. 31). Rather than attempting overarching meta-theories of analytic interpretation Brackett would have us base interpretations only on the unique features and context of each particular work. As a consequence of this pluralistic approach, Brackett's book crosses a wide variety of styles such as jazz, country, rhythm and blues, and punk and includes analyses of works by artists as diverse as Gary Lewis and the Playboys, Billie Holiday, Bing Crosby, Hank Williams, James Brown, and Elvis Costello. Each artist receives a comprehensive and revealing study of the unique socio-cultural circumstances surrounding their careers, including the context of the reception and creation of their music. Issues of authorship, relationship of text to content and context, musical codes, and audiences and reception are all addressed and this information is then applied as a mirror of the rhetorical devices used in each work. *Interpreting Popular Music* is rich in detail and provides a wealth of background information regarding the particular social history, composition, marketing and reception of each analyzed work.

It is difficult to focus on any single chapter in Brackett's work, for to do so misses the overall strategy of recognizing the individuality of the rhetorical devices of each musical work he interprets. Brackett begins his study by contrasting Bing Crosby's and Billie Holiday's renditions of "I'll Be Seeing You." Here Brackett focuses on the impact of institutional factors (marketing strategies, biographical literature, and industry publications) on the reception of each version and the impact of these institutions on the popularity and status of each performer. His main objective is to highlight the entanglement of the "extramusical" information about performers, the motivations which we attribute to them, and the information conveyed by the actual music and performances.

Crosby's version of "I'll Be Seeing You" was initially far more popular than Holiday's, a situation helped by his image, shaped by critical reviews, bio-

graphical discourse, and film career, of being an All-American “Everyman.” At first, Holiday’s version was far less popular and in keeping with her image—constructed by contemporary critical and biographical discourse—of a romantically tortured and thus “authentic” jazz “artist.” Brackett relates such differences in reception to similar differences in the two performances. The intimacy of Bing Crosby’s closed-miked “crooning” delivery of “I’ll Be Seeing You,” for example, was designed to reassure audiences who were suffering the loss of, or separation from, loved ones following World War II. Thus Crosby was able to be viewed as having empathy with the plight of his audience. In contrast, Billie Holiday’s version employs a distanced and paradoxically sad sounding delivery of the song’s banal lyrical clichés such as “every lovely summer’s day” and “every thing that’s bright and gay.” Holiday also demonstrates a much higher degree of rhythmic flexibility and paints a much bleaker picture by evoking qualities of “sincere” expression.

Brackett also discusses the shifting value of musical codes that current listeners will most likely apply in certain listening situations. He concludes that Crosby’s recording is less popular today due to its being “overcoded” in its use of muted orchestral and expressive rubato vocal techniques which have since been turned into clichés by overuse in advertising and in the “mannerisms of countless lounge singers” (p. 71). Holiday’s recording, however, has increased its cultural cachet and appears “undercoded” due to its “inaccessibility at the time of its initial dissemination and to the way in which her style has not lent itself easily to imitation on a mass scale” (p. 71). Questions of aesthetic value are thus linked both to a work’s individual reception history but also to “historical shifts in the prestige of various codes articulated by a text” (p. 73). This is a simple yet important observation and goes a long way in accounting for the varying popularity of many artists and composers (popular and classical).

In the following chapter, “When you’re lookin’ at Hank (you’re looking at country),” Brackett shifts gears to explore the idea of how the “country music” genre emerged from a confluence of industry and musical forces. Using Hank Williams’s “Hey Good Lookin’” as a representative work, he uncovers the presence of several “metanarratives,” that have been closely associated with country music since its inception. The ascent of Hank Williams’s popularity coincided with the music industry’s legitimization of “country-western music” as it developed from previous incarnations as “folk” or “hillbilly” music. Williams embodied a prototypical or “authentic” country-western music in his use of blues and gospel influences and songs such as “Hey Good Lookin’” presented a version of reality, largely through slang lyrics about “hot rod Fords,” “goin steady,” and “cookin,” which continue to dominate country music to this day.

This chapter provides some fascinating insights into the commercial constructions of country-western music and its surrounding mythos of authenticity. The problem of authenticity vs. commerciality in popular music exists, of course, as part of the common experience of music making in a capitalist society. Indeed the subject of “authenticity” appears to be a common thread

amongst Brackett's case studies. Holiday is held to be more "authentic" than Crosby. Williams is held to have an "authentic" country sound. Likewise, later in the book, Elvis Costello is judged to uphold the "authentic" sounds of his English art school roots. Despite Brackett's claim to study popular music based on the unique features of each work he nonetheless identifies many underlying values which might be applied in analyzing a great variety of popular music.

Undoubtedly the most persuasive, well-considered, and important chapter in Brackett's book analyses James Brown's "Superbad" in order to examine the discursive space in which "African-American music" has been produced. Central to Brackett's discussion are the theories of black vernacular rhetorical devices advanced by Henry Louis Gates Jr. in his *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism*. Of particular importance to Brackett is Gates's term "Signifyin(g)" which functions as a type of black trope of tropes.<sup>1</sup> Brackett demonstrates how the rhetorical language of "Superbad" with its seemingly disassociated phrases (i.e., "I got soul, and I'm superbad" and "Good God! Up and down and all around") embodies aspects of Black English signification which depend on paradigmatic strategies of intertextuality, humour, recombination of stock phrases, hyperbolic self-glorification, and the sound of the language. Standard English, in contrast, typically relies on linear narrative and progressive continuity of thoughts and ideas. The title "Superbad," a black-power slogan in itself, embodies several such strategies of Black English signification, including the self-referential glorification, intertextual reference and recombination and recontextualization of the frequently used slang term "bad." A musical analogue to textual "Signifyin(g)" is also manifest in Brown's performative invocation of songs, gestures, and dances which refer to other musical texts and which, through the process of melodic variation of melodic motives set to fragments of texts, syllables or screams, are recontextualized within the song as it progresses.

Brackett also places Brown in context of his enormous influence on subsequent funk, disco, and rap traditions. Brown's influence on these black musical styles affirms Charles Keil's notion, advanced in his book *Urban Blues*, of "appropriation-revitalization" whereby each form of African-American pop music has borrowed more and more from original black oral traditions and has simultaneously become more and more accepted in the cultural mainstream.<sup>2</sup> The use of sampled fragments of previous records (often those of Brown himself) in rap music is a further instance of the "Signifyin(g)" intertextual reference.

In the final chapter of his work Brackett analyses Elvis Costello's "Pills and Soap" in light of both Costello's own comments about his music and the contemporary criticism of others. In what is perhaps the least successful discussion in the book, Brackett quotes excerpts from several of Costello's interviews, spread over ten years, in which he appears to espouse contradictory

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<sup>1</sup> Henry Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of African-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Keil, *Urban Blues* (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1966).

notions of his work as either the unanalyzable product of artistic inspiration or the product of calculated musicological technique. This mediation is used as a jumping-off point for a discussion of “popular aesthetic” in which Brackett advances the relatively obvious argument that artists such as Costello are under pressure to attract audiences large enough to make a profit while maintaining an aura of authentic artistry. Brackett then places Costello’s work in terms of its place within critical discourses on modernism and postmodernism and as an artifact which results from the conflicts between “legitimate” and “popular” taste and 1960s “countercultural” aesthetics and 1970s “punk” aesthetics. Brackett describes the intellectualization of pop music in the 1960s, manifest in “art rock” or “progressive rock” forms and the considerable influence of British art school pop artists in managing the tension between “authenticity” and “selling out.” Though Brackett is merely trying to account for the negotiation of these pressures in popular music he fails to mention the fact that the same tensions existed in other musical realms, such as country and jazz, which seem less linked to the countercultural ideologies of the 1960s.

According to Brackett, Costello achieves a broad pastiche of styles in “Pills and Soap” including those reminiscent of *musique concrète*, *West Side Story*, Bob Dylan, The Beatles, country western, cool jazz, and early rock and roll. While such diverse influences may indeed have some bearing on the rhetoric of the work, Brackett does not discuss their precise contribution to the work’s meaning and are thus rendered almost meaningless. Nonetheless, evoking the theories of Fredric Jameson, Brackett attributes Costello’s stylistic melange to a postmodern “flattening of history.”<sup>3</sup> Costello is consequently seen as contributing to blurring the distinction between “high” and “low” culture. This is a feature, it would seem, that Costello shares with a great many other artists—almost all progressive rock bands at least—and thus, contrary to Brackett’s objectives stated at the outset of his book, hardly a rhetorical feature unique to Costello’s work. In the end Brackett broadly claims that “Costello provides art music for an audience that looks to popular music for [the] formal sophistication ... that they associate with pop music of the sixties without the sixties naivete and optimism” (p. 198). Such reductive uses of Costello’s quotes and such broad generalizations about his stylistic influences and audience require far more information than Brackett provides us with and are out of place in an otherwise well considered analysis.

In his musical examinations Brackett mostly eschews harmonic and structural analysis and prefers to concentrate only on the most prominent aspects of the musical surface. Consequently his notational analysis is often restricted to aspects of melodic construction and content. His transcriptions are accurate and helpful but sometimes lack harmonic and/or other performative details which might be beneficial in accessing his interpretations. In keeping with his holistic approach Brackett is also careful to devote at least some attention to the relationship of music and text in each case study. In so doing Brackett

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<sup>3</sup> Particularly see Jameson’s “Postmodernism and Consumer Society,” in *The Anti Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend: Bay Press, 1983), 111–25.

primarily relies on the three-category model (“affect”: words as expression; “story”: words as narrative; and “gesture”: words as sound) developed by Richard Middleton.<sup>4</sup> Using this system Brackett opines that the word/music relationship of Holiday’s “I’ll Be Seeing You” is best described as “affect,” Brown’s “Superbad” as primarily “gesture,” and Costello’s “Pills and Soap” as a combination of “story” and “affect.” Though informative for the sake of general comparisons, Brackett, in such instances, appears to abandon his interpretive approach based on the unique context and rhetorical features of each given work in favour of fairly broad and reductive categorizations.

Perhaps the most interesting and progressive feature of Brackett’s analytic approach, however, is the use of spectrum photos: recorded sounds played into a spectrum analyzer which are photographed to provide a pitch-time graph. Based on the work of Robert Cogan’s *New Images of Musical Sound*, such photos provide an accurate and unbiased snapshot of various performance features, such as the correspondence of overtones and various vocal timbral effects to lyrics, which would otherwise be extremely difficult to transcribe accurately if they could even be discerned at all.<sup>5</sup> With them, Brackett attempts to account for some of the inexplicable value we find in the “sound” of much popular music. Though this is an intriguing approach the photos themselves are often cryptic and require some practice at reading. Unlike Cogan, who uses actual spectrum photographs, Brackett merely uses photocopied reproductions which are sometimes blotchy and difficult to discern. It is also not made sufficiently clear as to how vocal timbres are separated from surrounding instruments on the recording. Nonetheless the use of this technology represents a bold attempt to uncover the relationship between the literal “sound” of these works and their appeal as cultural artifacts. Brackett thus makes a genuine attempt to introduce a relatively new analytic tool with which to interpret popular music.

*Interpreting Popular Music* is extremely well written and a model in cross-disciplinary scholarship applied to popular music. Brackett’s ideas are well articulated and expressed in a clear and engaging manner and his interpretations contribute a penetrating look at some of the most influential figures in popular music. The book provides enough contemporary critical and cultural music theory and analysis to keep academic musicians happy while still managing to engage those with less musical training. Brackett eschews overarching methods of interpretation for popular music and his attempt to understand the ways in which individual texts result from and contribute to individual contexts is worthy of application, not just to popular music, but to a broad range of musical genres and styles.

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<sup>4</sup> See Richard Middleton, *Studying Popular Music* (Milton Keynes: Open University Press, 1990).

<sup>5</sup> Robert Cogan, *New Images of Musical Sound* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1984).