



The Production and Consumption of Music in the Digital Age

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BOOK REVIEW

The Production and Consumption of Music in the Digital Age, edited by Brian J. Hracs, Michael Seman, and Tarek Virani, New York and London, Routledge, 2016, 292 pp., \$116.00 (hb), ISBN 978-1-57646-224-8

Space and place have long been important topics of inquiry for scholars of popular music. They are core to understandings of scenes, communities, and identities, on the one hand, economics, policy, and logistics, on the other—and interactions between the two. The essays collected in *The Production and Consumption of Music in the Digital Age* demonstrate that, despite various “disruptive” innovations, these concerns remain current. Appearing in Routledge’s “Studies in Human Geography” series, the book benefits from this discipline’s repeated exchange with communications, popular music studies, and sociology. Twenty-seven scholars are assembled, from across the career spectrum, over 18 chapters. Five sections explore changing conditions and practices associated with, respectively, “Recording,” “Working,” “Playing,” “Distributing,” and “Promoting/Consuming” music. The chapters work as standalone articles, although readers will unfortunately (given we are “in the digital age”) have difficulty accessing them individually. Nonetheless they are complementary and the editors work to present them as a cohesive unit. I endeavor to assess them in this spirit.

The particularly *digital* gambit of the collection’s spatial-cultural-economic approach is to rehearse several interdependent arguments repeatedly throughout. These arguments, predicated on the apparent diminution of music recordings’ economic significance, will be familiar. Nonetheless, they helpfully consolidate findings from diverse fields of scholarship. First, value must be remade. This concerns intellectual property regulation and exploitation, of course, and new methods of rendering behavior calculable as data—but live music especially appears as a key site of scarce authenticity. Second, physical location remains central, despite the apparent immateriality of digital modes of production and circulation, albeit in hybrid form. Third, the democratic promise of digital has a hidden side: where cultural production is liberated from institutional hegemony, creative individuals must now take up the burden of commercial strategy. Fourth, old economic distinctions (between production and consumption, to take the book’s title as example) no longer hold firm.

A risk of overturning orthodoxies is of simple contrarianism: inverting the digital picture to provocatively reassert, in a vogueish term, its “materiality.” As Pratt (Chapter 15) writes, instead we need “an approach that brings the digital age back to earth: specific times, places, and practices,” such that we come to see “the two positions as joined and interwoven” (207–08). That much of the book is given to exploring this interweaving in empirical context is its strength. By way of discussion, I highlight three examples of how these themes receive divergent analyses: in live music venues, musicians’ careers, and affective economics.

In Chapter 9, Johansson *et al.* explore the changing “spatial configuration of live music landscapes” (114) in two US cities. “While venues come and go,” they offer, “the overall provision of live music during the digital era has been robust,” leading them to recommend that “viable” venues “embrace” and “anticipate” change, to continue “providing customers with quality live music experiences” (126–27). This begs questions: which venues, what music, whose quality? Virani’s Chapter 8 suggests a response. He explores how a single East London venue, specializing in constitutionally improvisatory (that is, non-repeatable) forms of music, has experimented with technology and policy mechanisms to build a unique border-crossing identity: performance space and creative hub; immediate experience and recorded archive; local and transnational. It

is, for Virani, “a renegotiation of what the local means” (111) for all enmeshed in the ecology of the scene.

A second example: Hracs (Chapter 4) fruitfully outlines an array of “survival strategies” deployed by “contemporary independent musicians” in Toronto. Acting like small firms, they administrate, outsource tasks, and rationally plan their location. But “independence” appears here purely as a “DIY model” of *institutional* autonomy; we do not learn if questions of *aesthetic* freedom or *political* alternatives come into play for his participants. Although Toronto’s “diverse array of genres”—“jazz, classical, blues, rock, pop, country, hip-hop, electronic and punk”—are referenced (44), it is never quite clear what music is at stake. Speers (Chapter 5) and Haijen (Chapter 6) ostensibly support Hracs’s observations of an increasingly necessary entrepreneurialism. Yet they also detail how (respectively) British and Dutch hip-hop artists must balance this with the rules of their genre. Using a more ethnographic and historical approach, both show how practitioners understand their genre in explicit contrast to close relatives like US hip hop or UK grime, which shapes normative expectations around “underground values” like “keep[ing] it real” (Speers, 58; Haijen, 80); that is, living, working, and creating authentically. Certain career options and marketing decisions are more legitimate than others: Speers relates how an in-show “sales pitch” is relegated to a bitter “This is when I have to sell shit” (64).

Lastly, Leyshon *et al.* offer a remarkable chapter (18) surveying the rising importance of consumption as a means of “leveraging affect” for production purposes, focusing on crowd sourcing. In their diagnosis, “the harnessing of fans to the interests of capitalism” is “not just a business proposition but an integral part of *generating business propositions*” (251, emphasis in original). The insight sheds light on other chapters. Arriagada (Chapter 16) usefully augments our understanding of fan practices by focusing on the administrative and technical labor of running scene-based websites; from the production perspective, Frenette (Chapter 7) performs a similar manoeuvre in a discussion of record label employees’ fading affective commitments. All provide welcome insights into the *non*-creative side of music’s production and consumption, challenging the suggestion (in Hracs, Speers, and Haijen) of this side as *necessarily* corrosive.

To my mind, the most welcome contribution of this collective effort is to delineate how economic abstractions emerge from particular arrangements of cultural practice. Urban contexts are, understandably, over-represented and some chapters resemble policy-led “creative city” approaches (of the likes of Richard Florida or Allen Scott). We travel across Western Europe (Sweden, Germany, the UK) and the Americas (from Canada down to Chile), on a range of scales from the individual to the nation in search of examples—although the editors fail to highlight a substantial lacuna in the shape of any examples from the Global South and East. This journal’s readers may also find the occasional lack of attention to musical specificity odd, where music appears simply as one lens through which generalized “economic” categories (production, consumption, exchange, value generation) are refracted. These criticisms aside, we can nonetheless view the book as a welcome response to Wynn and Dominguez-Villegas’s call (in Chapter 10) for more specific “geographies of genre” (140).

The collection’s multidisciplinary and multi-perspectival approach to a relatively narrow set of questions is a real strength. It does feel more might have been done to bring the chapters into conversation in ways I have attempted to signal. An endless proliferation of “this volume” citations attempts to draw out continuities but, organizationally, the five sections unhelpfully reinforce old categories and divisions of labor that authors repeatedly question (e.g. over half the book is conceivably concerned with the working/playing tension). A concluding chapter, clearly articulating the book’s complementary and contradictory strands, alongside its limits, might have produced a more “definitive statement” on the persistence of place in

digital music economies. If the book is not that, it should nonetheless be viewed as a primary reference on the topic.

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