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Book review: Popular Music Genres: An Introduction By Stuart Borthwick and Ron Moy, 2004

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Popular Music Genres: An Introduction. By Stuart Borthwick and Ron Moy.
Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press Ltd, 2004. 246z pp. ISBN 0-74861745-0
(paperback)

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How often, when browsing in a library or bookstore, do we pass books over, purely because their titles may seem somewhat less than enticing, preferring instead, to pick out a more catchy or colourful offering to read? How many hidden gems do we miss, if selection is influenced in this way? To be honest this was my initial thought when

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encountering the seemingly ordinary book title *Popular Music Genres*. Such preconceptions proved to be completely unjustified – this is a book that really does deserve to be picked up, to be read, and to be recommended!

Given that there are competing publications that also survey the various influences, developments and socio-musicological aspects of popular music genres, a specific purpose of this book, the authors explain, is to combine the examination of musical texts and characteristics of each genre with their social, cultural, political and economic contexts. They reject a 'unidisciplinary' approach to examining popular music, for example by using a purely musicological or purely historical account. Exploring genres through this combination of approaches in *Popular Music Genres* works well, resulting in a balanced, concise and very readable publication. The writers achieve a synthesis in their multi-disciplinary approach through using a template of subheadings for each genre. These subheadings are: 'Overview of the Genre'; 'Historical Roots and Antecedents'; 'Social and Political Context'; 'The Musical Texts'; 'Visual Aesthetic' (performers/audiences); 'Subsequent Generic Development'; 'Recommended Reading'; 'Recommended Listening'. And of the genres themselves? Borthwick and Moy devote a chapter (around twenty pages) to each of the following: soul music, funk, psychedelia, progressive rock, punk rock, reggae, synthpop, heavy metal, indie, rap and jungle. The authors' conciseness and range of information in their descriptions of each genre is excellent; every chapter is packed with the key texts and concepts of each genre that, although dense in places, always remains digestible.

Deciding upon a list of genre labels in order to present a chapter-by-chapter introduction to popular music genres is by no means straightforward. Although their selection is a perfectly sensible one, it would have been interesting, nevertheless, to have known the basis upon which the authors concluded that a particular genre or sub-genre was unworthy of receiving its own distinctive chapter. Music critics will have their own personal tick lists, the 'average person in the street' will have another, whilst a visit to HMV, for example, would reveal how a music business chooses to categorise CD recordings using genre and sub-genre labels in order to guide their customers. I wonder why, for example, a separate chapter is not provided for grunge, rather than it being incorporated within punk rock? Yet psychedelia, on the other hand, rather than being regarded a relatively brief phase that began the development of prog rock, is awarded its own separate chapter. Given that this book is particularly aimed towards students on popular music courses, for many current undergraduates, grunge remains a formative musical influence. Could a case be made for the distinctive genre of grunge as embodied by Nirvana, Mudhoney, Pearl Jam and Soundgarden, I wonder? The Seattle Sound forms a quite distinctive *musical oeuvre*, that could be considered as 'tightly categorised' (p. 3) and with a *Zeitgeist* very different from 1970s punk rock. Had this book been written, say five or more years ago, grunge would surely have claimed its own chapter!

This publication contains much that impresses: it is a highly readable and clearly written book, with a uniformity of writing styles between the co-writers from chapter to chapter. As well as the range of genres that are discussed, there is also plenty of detail, for example when examining reggae, where reggae's historical roots and the developing socio-political context of Jamaica is necessarily explored in more depth

(pp. 99–106) than in the equivalent sections elsewhere in the book. There is also some interesting and fresh information within the examination of indie as a genre and its politics of production and distribution. This chapter is excellent in both grasping and

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distilling the very diverse range of music that might be loosely categorised under the 'indie' umbrella. Here, Borthwick and Moy offer a considered account of the many various strands and sub-genres of indie, including a useful summary of the musical characteristics of the 'shambling bands' of the 1980s (p. 185), a concise retrospective of the indie-dance/baggy period, as exemplified by the Stone Roses, Happy Mondays and Inspiral Carpets, etc., plus interesting developments in the post-Britpop scene as illustrated by the Liverpool act Ladytron (p. 191).

Each chapter contains a 'Musical Texts' section in which key songs representative of the genre are described. Although this book is remarkable in its breadth, in this section perhaps, further space could have been given to performance characteristics. For example, by expanding the discussion of groove development or, by dissecting and putting back together the usual rhythm section – kit, bass and rhythm guitar – in order to explain how they typically fit together in each genre as appropriate. This is not a criticism but rather a suggestion, however, for a future reprint! In addition to the recommended reading and listening provided at the end of each chapter, there is also an explanatory glossary of key theoretical terms and extensive bibliography.

In conclusion, *Popular Music Genres* admirably fulfils its primary objective of providing a key text for students of popular music/popular music studies. This very readable book ought to become an essential addition for libraries and on student recommended-reading lists.

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