

Reviews

The Environment—Popular Music and American Studies

Dale Carter. *The Jukebox in the Garden: Ecocriticism and American Popular Music Since 1960* by David Ingram. *Nature, Culture and Literature*, 7. Amsterdam and New York: Editions Rodopi, 2010. 276 pages, bibliography, index. ISBN: 978-90-420-3209-5. €55, \$80.

As a subject, the natural environment has played a significant role in the making of American Studies: think, for example, of canonical works by Henry Nash Smith, Roderick Nash, Annette Kolodny and William Cronon, amongst others. Though it has also played a notable part in the nation's articulation, music—popular music, at least—has been less prominent within the discipline, notwithstanding the contributions of authors like Leroi Jones, Greil Marcus, Robbie Lieberman, and Robert Cantwell. However uneven the distribution of recognition and influence, in its pursuit of environmental tropes in modern American popular music David Ingram's *The Jukebox in the Garden* mines at a juncture rich in cultural and scholarly deposits.

The book's title alludes back, of course, to an American Studies foundation text by another canonical author. Close to fifty years after the publication of Leo Marx's *The Machine in the Garden*, though, Ingram's study might equally have been entitled *The Garden in the Jukebox*: an index not only of the extent to which scholarship in the intervening decades has flipped notions of text and context inside-out, but also of the book's reciprocal critical thrusts. Where Marx dealt with articulations of the land, imaginative and documentary, in a range of expressive forms, Ingram explores not only "how environmental themes have been represented in popular song," but also "the growing link between music and ecophilosophical thought, according to which music ... has a special affinity with ecological ideas" (11).

The Jukebox in the Garden is divided into two parts. The first, dealing with theories of popular music and of eco-criticism, reviews analytical frameworks through the writings of leading critics: some whose ideas have

informed multiple disciplines, like Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari; others best known within specific fields, such as musicologist Susan McClary and environmental theorist Lawrence Buell; and a few more familiar to students of American Studies, including Leo Marx himself. The second, larger, part of *The Jukebox in the Garden* addresses musical genres and examples, to which its critical theories are then applied. Some types of popular music, like blues, country, folk, and world music as well as hybrids like country rock, are more readily associated with the natural world and might therefore appear to invite ecological analyses. Others, notably, rhythm 'n' blues, hip hop, and electronica, at first glance seem less self-evident candidates for such engagement. Yet the conceptual and theoretical armory elaborated in the book's first part enables Ingram to throw light on all these genres and more: not always revealing, either, what one might expect to see.

In theoretical terms, the study explores a variety of relationships and tensions between its chosen eco-critical, Marxist and post-structuralist approaches vis-à-vis popular music. Informed by their respective insights while cognizant of the "partiality and fallibility" (35) of each, it pursues a precise trajectory across and a careful balance between them: finding Theodor Adorno's dismissive treatment of popular music of little use, for example, it draws on some parts of Deleuze and Guattari's aesthetics, yet remains wary of others, opting ultimately for a stance in which ontological realism is mixed with epistemological skepticism (33). Ingram characterizes this "critical realism" as a position from which a "post-modernist embrace of popular music" (46) enables an "aesthetically pluralist approach" to its subject matter (40). Insofar as "aesthetic debates about music" constitute "a unifying theme of the book" which it pursues through "a wide range of ecophilosophical discourses produced by composers, musicians, philosophers, historians, critics and fans" (18-19), therefore, those debates and discourses are handled in contextual as well as formal (though less often strictly musicological) terms. This is not, as its author notes, a study which sets out to grind any one particular interpretive axe.

That Ingram is informed by established traditions and methods within American Studies is perhaps best illustrated by his treatment of environmental themes *within* popular music, wherein an initial discussion of Leo Marx's analysis of pastoral modes allows for later analyses of a variety of generic themes. Thus the chapter devoted to folk music relates lyrics from a number of Malvina Reynolds's and Pete Seeger's pastorally-informed environmentalist songs (in which nature is a domain of political and social

struggle) and the aesthetic premises of so-called “American primitives” such as John Fahey and Joanna Newsom (in which nature is a realm of mystery and enchantment) to their multiple historical, social, cultural, and political circumstances: from the shifting agendas of the left via the impact of pollution to the influence of mysticism and nature religions. Ingram includes here a brief, but illuminating, commentary on Bob Dylan’s mediation between these artists’ trajectories—music as protest, music as magic—from his earliest commercial recordings through his mid-1980s support for and contributions to what became the Farm Aid campaign.

In its treatment of other genres, *The Jukebox in the Garden* highlights different kinds of musical and environmental intersection. Part Two begins, appropriately enough, with the blues: characterized by “father of the blues” W.C. Handy as an “earth-born music” and by musician, songwriter and producer Willie Dixon as the roots from which all other genres grow into fruits. Yet for Ingram the blues offers little sign of latter-day environmental consciousness, from cultural hearth via subsequent geographical dissemination. Its rural origins and subject matter scarcely made it pastoral; drought, dust storm, or boll weevil were self-evidently bad news; and even without such troubles performers, amateur or professional, were too busy struggling to make ends meet: many of the latter had, in any event, ventured on the life of a guitar-picker precisely to avoid that of a cotton-picker. It would take the blues and folk revivals of the early 1960s, with young, urban, northern, and often college-based youth in the forefront, before this most grounded of musics started to be re-inscribed as, and to become a vehicle for, what might be called blues for greens.

Though claiming just as historically-justified an association with agricultural life as the blues, country music owes its semantic association with assumed qualities of rural life—honesty, authenticity, spirituality and the rest—to a sustained exercise in cultural framing: one pushed into higher gear by the commercial threat of rock ‘n’ roll to the country music industry in the late 1950s, but reaching back thirty years earlier to the first recordings by the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers. Building on the work of the genre’s historians, Ingram highlights the resultant contradictions in country music’s self-understanding less as indices of delusion or hypocrisy than for their articulation of what Leo Marx dubbed a “complex pastoral” (85-6): at once radical and conservative in its populist rhetoric; Jeffersonian in its instincts yet anti-pastoral in its recognition of nature’s mercilessness and the farmer’s plight; hostile to the city though reliant on its capital, technol-

ogy, and audiences; mourning a chimerical lost ideal to the tunes of “hat acts” and rhinestone cowboys; and—last but not least—in denial about the environmental costs of agribusiness, because to recognize them would violate the genre’s self-image. For all that, Ingram adds, in country music’s complex pastoral may be located an articulation of aspects of western myth capable of underwriting an environmental sensibility, not least in relation to wilderness preservation.

That popular music may foster ecological sensibilities and behavior regardless of its own practices; that there may be such a thing as “eco-listening”; that, in composer John Cage’s words, “music *is* ecology” are possibilities explored initially via a review of theories emanating from so-called “deep ecology” and New Age thinking. Ingram is more skeptical here, at least in relation to the latter’s pseudo-scientific or Romantic speculations, though he cites music therapy’s use of “entrainment” theory—a kind of physiological and psychological resonance—as potentially beneficial and illuminating beyond its immediate applications, so long as too many claims are not made on its behalf. A number of chapters in *The Jukebox in the Garden* bring these concerns with the ontological status of music, with its effects, and with the nature (literal and metaphorical) of listening to the fore. At first glance paradoxically, whereas those popular music genres whose close associations with the natural world might be assumed to enable, even call forth, an environmentalist aesthetic and expression have done so only to a limited or qualified degree, some genres less readily associated with ecology have seen more sustained engagement with the natural world, both in theory and practice.

Thus electronica has built, in Ingram’s reading, on links between advanced technology and environmental consciousness reaching back to counter-cultural bands such as The Grateful Dead. Anxieties amongst some musical eco-theorists about the synthetic nature and aesthetic incongruence (not to mention the sonic and material pollution) of digital, computerized music-making have been challenged by others for whom new technology enables innovative, promising articulations of mankind and the natural world. To the latter group, ambient music, trance music, even electronic dance music constitute realms in which nature may be heard anew, simulated, assimilated, or surrendered to in ways that their antecedent pioneers in the world of 1950s exotica music could scarcely have imagined. While Ingram retains a degree of skepticism, particularly where he detects updated romantic primitivism in superficially novel, speculative New Age rheto-

ric, he is also willing to give serious and sustained attention to seemingly implausible combinations: to find in trance music, say, a field in which therapeutic notions of entrainment are being thought through and enacted; to consider electronica more broadly as a counter-environment (to borrow Marshall McLuhan's term) capable of illuminating how some, seemingly greener, musical genres may, in the very act of rallying to the environment, tame and thus undermine it.

The academic study of popular music has struggled for some time to legitimate and assert itself intellectually and institutionally against criticism: from a political right distasteful of popular culture's perceived threat to its standards and a political left skeptical about the allegedly predatory nature and soporific impact of the culture industry. Perhaps because American Studies itself has had analogous experiences, at least in institutional terms, popular music has been able to find a place within its environs (think, to give just one example, of David Riesman's early contributions). It is not difficult, of course, to dismiss or even ridicule the application of complex, abstract, heavyweight theory to the study of mere entertainment ("*the eco-rhizomic discursive interventions of free jazz, you say?!*"). Yet while it addresses a subject, the environment, that could scarcely be more pressing, *The Jukebox in the Garden* is never overly somber, and it displays both a knowledge of and enthusiasm for a wide range of music that makes it an engaging work of scholarship.

Many other genres than those identified here—jazz, hip hop, rock, and world music among them—are discussed in relation to eco-criticism, all of them well worth listening to and reading about, not least for those looking to bring new ideas and topics into their teaching of American Studies, Cultural Theory, Popular Culture, or Popular Music courses. Finally, anyone who has found the words and music of, say, Frank Zappa or Captain Beefheart unintelligible or nonsensical could do worse than read Ingram's eco-critical treatments of their work—and then listen, and then listen.

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