

BOOK REVIEW:

Timothy D. Taylor. *Making Value: Music, Capital, and the Social*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2024. 230 pages. ISBN: 978-1-4780-3035-5. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1215/9781478059349>.

Why do music managers strive to get an artist's music on a playlist of a streaming service? How does a rock band in Los Angeles try to break into the music industry? What do "trendspotters" do? Answers to these questions can be found in Timothy D. Taylor's book *Making Value: Music, Capital, and the Social*. A collection of the author's earlier writings, the book provides a multifaceted examination of how the value that people ascribe to music directs its circulation to and from the marketplace. Over an introduction and eight chapters, Taylor presents several useful concepts and demonstrates each concept through case studies, of which several are located in the United States. Taylor is an ethnomusicologist based in the Los Angeles area and the book benefits from his long-term study of the topic, as well as his access to musicians and music professionals who are proximate to or in the American entertainment industry. The book is a compelling read for anyone interested in the ways in which American cultural goods and practices are made appealing to consumers around the world.

Each chapter offers a deep theoretical engagement with established anthropological and sociological lines of thought applied to historical and ethnographic data. Throughout the analysis, Taylor follows theorists including Anna Tsing, Pierre Bourdieu, Arjun Appadurai, David Graeber, Sherry B. Ortner, and Terrence Turner. A major focus is on ethnography, which the book turns to in order to elucidate people's actions

and realities. The book effectively demonstrates that attention to value through the study of social actors' actions provides a refreshing and productive avenue of inquiry in studies of music. Furthermore, the specific focus on value complements Taylor's recent groundbreaking works such as *Music & Capitalism: A History of the Present* (2015) and *The Oxford Handbook of Economic Ethnomusicology*, edited by Anna Morcom and Taylor (2023).

The introduction presents Taylor's view on value "as a variation of the idea of meaning, though broader, in that it includes 'the economic' (where 'meaning' tends to be more idealist)," and establishes its grounding in anthropological writings from two intellectual lineages, one extending to Karl Marx and the other to Marcel Mauss (2). Taylor also provides an extensive discussion on David P. McAllester's early book *Enemy Way Music* (1954) as an important ethnomusicological precursor to studies in value and music. The introduction also explains the book's foundation in practice theory: capitalism is "the structure" in and around which social actors produce varied, transformable values. To that end, Taylor follows theorists who conceptualize capitalism as a social form of uneven global reach that excludes some non-capitalist spheres, which nonetheless can be subsumed into it. The musical goods and practices in the book's case studies are situated in this relationship.

The first chapter presents “supply chain” as a concept adapted from Tsing (2015) that elucidates how cultural goods move between different value regimes by accrual of people’s actions in time and place. The three case studies in this chapter trace the paths of cultural goods and practices from one value regime to another by managers, other agents, and owners whose actions transform how they are valued. This includes early music managers in nineteenth-century Europe who steered the careers of virtuoso musicians, dealers of artworks who market a work’s provenance, the previous ownership, which accrues value, and bureaucratic processes such as the “consecrating” of traditions by UNESCO.

The second chapter introduces the concept “scalability” through an examination of music managers’ work toward bringing musical practices from outside the commercial field into its purview. The commercialization of music, according to this concept, hinges on the potential of producing more sellable commodities with the same amount of labor. To musicians this means making musical practices desirable to an expanding consumerbase, a process Taylor summarizes as follows:

turning musicians into laborers whose products can be distributed to a scalable fan base includes a set of processes that involves different strategies of standardization, broadly understood: creating a recognizable sound for an artist and stabilizing it; deciding on an artist’s look and capturing it with a particular photographer and videographer to stabilize it; assembling a team of professionals who are in agreement with the musicians about their career goals and who can help with the first two tasks; and in general turning artists into brands, sonically and visually recognizable entities to whom fans feel a connection that makes them want to purchase

or stream recordings, or purchase tickets or merchandise repeatedly (46-47).

To show how managers actually help their artists implement these strategies, Taylor provides captivating interviews with music managers. For music industry outsiders, managers may seem to be elusive figures behind the scenes, but here the reader gets an intriguing glimpse of their day-to-day work. For example, managers seek to promote an artist by “amplifying their story” and creating “moments” that connect an artist’s music with listeners. Getting an artist’s music on a playlist on a streaming service is an important vehicle for achieving these goals. To this, Taylor adds an interesting observation: “[n]ote that ‘playlist’ has become a verb” (64). Managers also help ensure that the artist appears successful, for example as measured in social media “likes,” because in a paradoxical way this increases the odds of the artist’s success (66).

The third chapter turns attention to “trendspotters,” consumer research professionals who keep an eye on emerging values and meanings that could be curated from outside capitalist production into commodifiable products. Taylor focuses on their work as part of his broader interest in the ways in which “consumer tastes and preferences can be harvested, codified, and reinforced or reshaped” (73). In practice, “trendspotters” make use of selected people’s practices and values: for example, something that is a sign for “cool” could be brought into the dominant culture. Here again, Taylor’s fascinating interviews with consumer research professionals reveal how they search for emerging values and meanings. In this chapter, the reader learns that consumer research professionals themselves view the study of consumer preferences as a way to improve products, to get qualitative insights beyond large quantitative data, and to segment markets and generational preferences, which include musical tastes. Also this chapter lifts the curtain on the use of ethnographic

methods in consumer research, when, for example, firms study consumer preferences in environments that are more comfortable than basic focus groups by organizing fun social settings for them. This chapter also addresses “influencers”—social actors in different spheres who do things in distinct ways and popularize ideas—and how they play a role in the production of value (84).

The fourth chapter examines how cultural commodities are made appealing to consumers by processes of “consecration and promotion”—in other words, by making a commodity appear as a gift, or something superior to a commodity, whose value can be measured in noneconomic terms (98-99). To accomplish this, professionals in a capitalist realm of value alienate labor and mask social relations. One compelling example here is Western European classical music, which, according to Taylor, was “sacralized” in the early twentieth century, when newly mass-produced classical recordings were marketed by record labels deploying “promotional strategies surrounding music recordings, invoking every conceivable discourse of noneconomic value in attempts to consecrate these commodities” (105). Taylor also discusses branding as “a concerted industrial effort to use the apparatus of advertising and marketing . . . to attempt to create personal connections between consumers and commodities” (110). The eye-opening data here is evidence of huge marketing and promotion budgets that labels use for brand building, along with merchandizing and music licensing. Here Taylor’s sources include trade publications such as *Billboard Magazine* and an interview with a publicist.

The fifth chapter examines the indie rock scene in the Echo Park neighborhood of Los Angeles. There, musicians and small, independent label owners work in ways that produce very little money, but their cultural production is sus-

tained by other forms of exchange and reciprocal relationships. To that end, Taylor theorizes that while the members of this community barely make a living in music, they “serve, in a way, as the reserve army of labor for the music business” (119). This “enclaved community” is located outside the capitalist music business, but is both maintained and simultaneously destroyed by it through the exploitation of community members’ labor. For example, many of the musicians in question are casual about their meager earnings, but others, such as label managers who use their own resources for bands (e.g., in hiring publicists), and musicians who work hard to promote their visibility, especially on social media, do so in the hopes of one day “making it” in the music business. Because of this kind of dependence between noncapitalist and capitalist value regimes, Taylor theorizes that the indie rock scene is eventually drained of talent as the musicians who currently maintain it leave it behind (137).

The sixth chapter assesses values ascribed to music both before it enters a capitalistic value regime and after it departs from it. This chapter examines music called “world music,” a marketing category invented by music industry insiders in the 1980s. The purpose of the category was to bring “many disparate and unrelated musics into the main regime of value of the Western music business, an economic regime” (139). Taylor is well-versed in the topic, having authored pioneering works of scholarship—such as the book *Global Pop: World Music, World Markets* (1997)—which has been helpful for students and instructors like me when I taught the course “An Introduction to Music and Cultures of the World” at the University of Helsinki. In this chapter, Taylor concentrates on Irish traditional music sessions, which bring together amateur musicians to play music. Taylor, who also plays in these sessions, shows his nuanced understanding of interpersonal dynamics between participants. Based on extensive ethnography collected in

Ann Arbor, Michigan, in 1991, and in Southern California in 2013, Taylor convincingly argues that these communities place high value on “sociality.” Additionally, Taylor describes how musicians in Southern California keenly take photographs during sessions. Those photographs serve to store the value of sociality, which then can be amplified by posting on social media.

The seventh chapter examines musical performance as a medium of value. According to Taylor, musical performance carries values accrued by prior actions of musicians and others in rehearsals, instrument preparation, and making costumes, etc. These activities transmit values that are concretized when music is performed for an audience aware of value priorities. Such an audience is necessary for the idea of a performance. According to Taylor, the varied “performer-audience interactions reveal the conceptions of value that are on display and being (potentially) transmitted or realized, or, if expectations are not met, diminished or not realized at all” (157). The case study here is the South African isicathamiya tradition in the context of local competitions. Isicathamiya is a music style based on four-part harmony sung a cappella. It originated in mining communities and it is performed locally in competitions. Taylor posits that the competitions display, along with the Zulu value of competition, the value of excellence. In comparison, isicathamiya as a world music style resides in a different value regime, for example when it is commodified on recordings such as Paul Simon’s *Graceland* album, which features isicathamiya sung by the famous singing group Ladysmith Black Mambazo.

The final chapter elucidates how values play an integral role in the global circulation of cultural goods and practices. Taylor builds on earlier studies that treat the circulation of goods as “flows,” furthering the idea that people’s actions generate value, thus propelling the movement of goods and practices; in turn, people exchange

goods that they value. Here, radio serves as a case study. Drawing on interviews with a manager and an artist, Taylor shows how radio is a valuable channel for advertising and disseminating music to potential music consumers, who then generate demand for music and give attention to musicians. Hence, circulation also creates value. Then Taylor expands this view of circulation to the idea of “public culture” (Appadurai and Breckendridge [1988]). Taylor concludes with a statement that could be seen as one of the book’s principal arguments: “If something is valued, it will be exchanged, and when something is exchanged, it acquires value” (189).

Taylor’s book and its focus on the action-based valuation of cultural goods and practices provides a captivating picture of how the business of music operates. Scholars, lay readers, and aspiring artists can find much to enjoy in this book. Furthermore, the conceptual tools that Taylor presents can be applied to studies in various contexts and disciplines. As such, the book is highly recommended for scholars, as well as anyone interested in the ways in which values are ascribed to cultural practices, whether in arts, sports, fashion, or other cultural fields.

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