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Recent Music Scholarship

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Review Essay

Recent Music Scholarship

The Music of Multicultural America: Performance, Identity, and Community in the United States, 2nd edition. Ed. Kip Lornell and Anne K. Rasmussen. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016. Pp. 425, website and acknowledgments, introduction, notes, references cited, additional sources, audiographies, videographies, index.)

Country Boys and Redneck Women: New Essays in Gender and Country Music. Ed. Diane Pecknold and Kristine M. McCusker. (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2016. Pp. xviii + 280, introduction, notes, index.)

Sing Me Back Home: Southern Roots and Country Music. By Bill C. Malone. (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2017. Pp. x + 355, credits and acknowledgments, introduction, notes, index.)

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These three collections of essays offer different approaches to surveying and interpreting American music. Eminent country music scholar Bill Malone reinforces his focus on the importance of Southern music and “plain white folk,” drawing on personal history in essays that serve as an intellectual memoir. Diane Pecknold and Kristine McCusker, while addressing country music, focus on gender using a critical framework that puts it in a global context. Kip Lornell and Anne Rasmussen weave a critical edge into their collection, continuing their project (begun in the first edition of their book) of highlighting the diversity of community- and identity-based music-making in the United States.

Apart from their content differences, these books also provide examples of strategies for

experiencing, understanding, and teaching American music that will be useful for folklorists. The Malone collection allows readers deeper insight into the motivations and personal history of an influential scholar of a certain field of American culture, informing students and teachers as they use his work in their own efforts. Pecknold and McCusker cover similar terrain in their collection; they aim not only to re-examine previous scholarship but also to re-evaluate it and to prompt new approaches to scholarship of country music. Lornell and Rasmussen reveal a similarly ideological goal, with a similar wide-ranging eye to advocacy, transparency, and reflexivity in research and writing, and so on—but with the added goal of bringing previously marginal communities and practices to the attention of readers.

Lornell and Rasmussen establish a strong vision for their book in their introduction, clearly positioning it for use in the undergraduate- or graduate-level classroom. In expanding this collection from the original form (12 essays) of the 1997 edition of this book, the editors have added chapters but continue to avoid some of the most written-about forms of community-based vernacular music in the United States; there is not a chapter on Southern old-time string band music, for example (and the index doesn’t include “banjo” or “bluegrass,” iconic elements of community music making in some areas of the country). Exceptions to the rule of “marginal only” are perhaps Ron Pen’s essay on shape-note singing and Ann Spinney’s chapter on traditional Irish music in Boston. The inclusion of essays discussing Native American traditions, Arab culture, and Latino musical traditions is a strong move toward including a true diversity of sounds and cultures in a course on American music.

Each chapter begins with a preface from the editors, continuing their commentary on music

making and on the diversity of American cultures. Authors include a variety of elements after their chapters, such as lists of recommended media, a glossary of terms, additional resources, and so on. The glossy photo section between pages 362–3 is a bit of an anachronism; the online website presents more engaging media (<http://www.atmuse.org/>), referenced in-depth by many of the contributing authors. Most of the chapters include musical analysis in ways that are accessible to a general audience. Some include Western notation (as in Rasmussen's explanation of modes and rhythmic patterns), while other authors make use of a simplified system, for instance, Christopher Scales and Gabriel Desrosiers' sketches of song form.

James Leary's chapter on Czech American polka music kicks off the case studies with a brief history of the polka in Europe, then ethnographic and historical glimpses of how Americans have used it. In an optimistic turn characteristic of the essays in this volume, Leary concludes—after stating that funeral band processions, dances, and other venues for Czech polka are defunct—that musicians “have found ways to accommodate the changes in American life through the creative transformation of their cultural heritage” (p. 44). The essays often contain significant historical information, including oral history (as in the case of Hank Sapoznik's recounting of the life story of klezmer clarinetist Dave Tarras), which provides both a general overview of a cultural milieu as well as specifics about lived musical experiences.

The Scales and Desrosiers chapter is notable in that it is the work of an ethnomusicologist (Scales) and a tradition-bearing practitioner (Desrosiers). Susan Asai's chapter on *sansei* (third-generation Japanese American) music is informed by her own identity as a *sansei* musician. Many chapters include a similarly deep engagement with their subjects, such as James Griffith's position as an advocate with the Tohono O'odham people and Brenda Romero's discussion of “applied ethnomusicology” in her chapter on *matachines*, a blend of Native American and Mexican American traditions in New Mexico.

The volume conveys the editors' ethnomusicological stance and focus on community. Many chapters focus on religious music prac-

tices, for instance, and many include a discussion of the importance of family to these practices. There is also a careful curation of theoretical topics among the chapters. Gage Averill's chapter on the steel band movement in Brooklyn highlights diasporic communities and transnational desires and resonances. Through his discussion of Louisiana French dance music in California, Mark DeWitt reflects on the sustainability of musical communities in the face of different kinds of change. Sarah Morelli explores similar issues of insider/outsider roles (and issues of power, race, and gender) in her chapter on North Indian classical dance in the San Francisco Bay area, using her concept of “heritage and affinity practitioners” (p. 341). Morelli's discussion of community organizations that organize and fund Indian dance and music events highlights the issue of patronage. Like some of the other essays, the chapter by Theo Cateforis and Elena Humphreys presents urban music making with a special focus on sexuality and pushes boundaries by considering harder-edged music as community culture.

Pecknold and McCusker's volume is a follow-up to their *A Boy Named Sue: Gender and Country Music* (University of Mississippi Press, 2006), a groundbreaking text that was part of a wave of scholarship that might be called “critical country music studies.” Along with authors like Barbara Ching, Aaron Fox, Pamela Fox, Jocelyn Neal, Richard Peterson, and Travis Stimeling, Pecknold and McCusker have (in their collaborations and in individual work) helped reshape country music studies to fit with current endeavors of the humanities, reflecting concerns with topics such as gender, sexuality, race, and class—all topics that are front and center in both their 2006 volume and this one.

The editors acknowledge that their first collection, while labeled with the term “gender,” was largely focused on femininity; this volume is much more informed by studies of masculinity. Neal's study of the character of the “good ol' boy” in hit country songs after 2008 underlies this point, as well as the fact that this collection (unlike much of country music scholarship) considers *current* country music. Neal connects the vogue of songs that highlight a “good ol'

boy” character (often in counterpoint with a “sophisticated lady” foil) with economic data from the recession of 2008–2012, indicating that the editors seek to show not only the relevance of country music today but also that country music scholarship is an important way of interpreting key current events in the larger world.

Alexander Dent expands the discourse in a different way, stretching the definition of country music to include musical activity in Brazil. In his chapter, he extends his earlier work on *música sertaneja*, a Brazilian country music with roots in the early 1900s, to examine the emergence of *sertaneja universitária*, an even more popular music form that has begun to have global resonance but retains its imaginative and sonic rooting in the “hick” experience of the rural countryside. His focus on the breakout hit by Michel Teló, “Ai Se Eu Te Pego” (Hey If I Should Grab Ya), also allows him to discuss the importance of the homosociality of the *dupla*, or “brother duet,” format to Brazilian country music and how it is now in tension with the solo star singer format of global pop. In a chapter that provides similar insights, Åse Ottosson describes how country music provides a framework for performing masculinity for Australian Aboriginal men, one that transforms a global commodity into local traditions of the creation of music among “desert men.”

Travis Stimeling’s discussion of critiques of Taylor Swift’s vocalicity leads to a compelling interrogation of assumptions about a core audience for country music based on age, race, and gender. Countering critics who show how Swift doesn’t fit into a “rockist,” authenticity-focused frame for country music, Stimeling argues that Swift’s music provides a participatory avenue for girls to experiment with as they undertake identity formation. Focused on songwriting as well, Chris Wilson’s chapter provides insight into the ways that gender concerns and expectations shape Victoria Banks’ writing process and professional and artistic life. The tasks of solo writing, co-writing, and pitching songs, as well as the relationships between songwriters, between writers and artists, and with other industry professionals are different, Wilson states, depending on whether one is a man or a woman.

Caroline Gnagy’s chapter on women’s prison country music bands sheds light on little-known episodes of history (like the *Thirty Minutes behind the Walls* radio program) and people (like the Goree All-Girl String Band), bringing new resonance to the idea of “enclosure” and showing how country music’s gendered narratives could provide prisoners with ways to be heard and to transform their lives. The intertwined stories of Linda Martell and Jenny C. Riley reveal similar struggles by women to shape and project their voices from less concrete but no less real enclosures of gender, class, and race. Pecknold’s chapter recounts their experiences in Nashville working with Plantation Records, showing how Martell’s dignified stance countered white disavowal of racist history and how “the coupling of Riley and Martell highlighted the ways both black and white working-class southerners might be excluded from the nominally egalitarian vision of urbane liberalism” (p. 160). Pecknold states further that Martell “also made manifest the differences in their positions by gesturing to the ways whites had historically used images of black women to construct white identity and maintain the privileges that accompanied it” (p. 160). Matthew D. Sutton deals with many of the same issues in his essay on Charley Pride and his “accidental career.” Sutton highlights the rhetorical autobiographical strategy of using “chance” as a male way to emphasize one’s self as an “approachable everyman” (p. 47). Pride’s presentation of his life includes this conceit, Sutton argues, as a way of allowing him to transgress but also fit within expectations of class, race, and gender.

Kate Heidemann’s chapter considers how Dolly Parton and Loretta Lynn help reshape—but also conform to—gender expectations through their respective songs “Jolene” and “Fist City.” Considering life stories rooted in Appalachia and the rural working class, Heidemann finds that these two singers present “intense vulnerability” and “open hostility” that illustrate diverging ways of expressing “country femininity” (pp. 169–70). Leigh H. Edwards’ re-examination of Parton’s production of gender finds it to be more transgressive than previous accounts. Edwards’ textual analysis finds that Parton strategically takes “camp” stances

to critique rather than to support gender norms, using “the privileged version of femininity to question how the marginalized one has been stigmatized” (p. 190).

Georgia Christgau’s retelling of Kitty Wells’ biography counters understandings of this artist as a reluctant or accidental star, asking readers to consider her as a dedicated professional musician who *also* succeeded in her maternal roles. As Wells herself stated later in life: “I’ve always loved to cook. . . . I still enjoy singing, too. I got to do both. Sure did” (p. 217). Returning to the current country scene, Nadine Hubbs offers a reading of Gretchen Wilson’s “Redneck Woman” persona that finds in it a claim for distinctiveness and legitimacy, arguing that it “stakes serious claims for her resourcefulness, country affiliations and tastes, desirability, and especially, agency” (p. 234). Hubbs sketches a long-term history for Wilson’s song and its success, including discussions of race and class projects that led to the “turn-of-the-millennium redneck craze” (p. 235) in which Wilson’s hardcore assertions could resonate.

The diversity of approaches in this text is one of its strengths; the authors’ use of literary, musicological, ethnographic, and other analyses underscores the editors’ claims for the importance of country music and the insights that come from studying it in both historical and current contexts. Pecknold and McCusker continue both the project they started in their 2006 volume and the larger task of bringing country music scholarship into the modern humanities. They show that country music is a way of seeing American music—and a way of addressing issues of class, race, gender, and sexuality that are central to debates about American culture. This book is a valuable addition to the literature on country music and would work well in a class on gender, popular music, or American music.

The final book under review here is a collection of essays by one author. Bill Malone is known for his *Country Music, U.S.A.* text (University of Texas Press, 1968) that is a key part of the foundation for today’s scholarly interest in vernacular American music. This volume presents a less comprehensive survey of key historical situations and figures connected with country music, shedding light on Malone’s personal engagement with these sounds and char-

acters. The credits for each of these essays show that all the chapters were previously released in a wide variety of publications, from genre- and fan-based magazines like the *Old-Time Herald*, *Bluegrass Unlimited*, and *No Depression* to peer-reviewed journals and academic books from university presses.

Malone identifies “folk” or “hillbilly” music as “our music,” staking a claim for himself as an insider; he states that “I was convinced that I was delving into the culture of my own people . . . lending dignity and worth both to their lives and to their contributions to the American musical legacy” (p. 32). Malone maintains this focus through most of the essays. For example, in his chapter on Elvis, one of his main points is that this artist “contributed to the dissipation of one of America’s most enduring prejudices, that directed against the southern white working class” (p. 281).

In most of the essays, the reader gains insight into Malone’s early life and the formative experiences that led to his influential work on American music. As he says,

the chief perceptions and overall thesis of my work were shaped years earlier by my East Texas experiences. I could not separate the music from the memories of growing up poor on an East Texas cotton farm and finding escape and diversion in the sounds of hillbilly music. . . . Clearly, the questions of identity and authenticity that intrigued me forty years ago . . . continue to inspire and stimulate my scholarship. (p. 34)

Folklorists interested in reflexive examination of how scholarship is created will find this an illuminating volume, as it reveals some of the processes by which the field of country music studies was created. In addition, there are moments, such as in the chapter on songwriter Will S. Hays, that highlight pertinent issues such as the “interrelationship of the popular and folk music traditions in the United States and the ways in which they provided one of the major underpinnings of country music” (p. 86).

The introductory note for Malone’s essay on honky-tonk music (originally published in 1982) provides a retrospective view from Malone. It is interesting to know, as Malone tells

us, “where my thinking was over thirty years ago” (p. 197). However, it would be more useful to know what his current thoughts are on honky-tonk, especially as he states that

of all country music styles it has been the closest organic reflection of southern working-class culture, and the one that most closely marks the evolution of the southern folk from rural to urban-industrial life, . . . It has been ignored by folklorists because it is not pastoral, and because it does not protest . . . scorned by the country music industry because it is too country . . . dismissed by many of us, I am convinced, because it is too real. (p. 206)

In his essay on “Country Music and the Academy,” Malone takes a more self-critical stance, noting the influence of scholars in “shaping public perception of and response to America’s grassroots musical forms” (p. 318). He discusses

his “own personal odyssey as a scholar of country and southern music—the process by which I became involved, the limitations under which I have labored, and also my strengths, intellectual growth, and efforts to transcend these early limitations” (p. 318). These limitations, such as they are, make much more sense in light of the volume’s presentation of Malone’s personal history and the backgrounds in which his work developed.

The books reviewed in this essay are presented in order from that most widely applicable to classroom use to that most focused on a specific author and musical field. Each of these volumes, however, is valuable in its attention to individual voices (and, remembering Lornell and Rasmussen’s reminder, *community* voices) and its contributions to narratives and larger discourses about American music.