

Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence

January 29, 2009



In my final year as an undergraduate, I remember discussing with a friend my plan to pursue PhD research in the sociology of metal music. With a contemptuous look on his face, he said "you shouldn't study something you enjoy". Although I rejected then as I reject now the premise that having an affection for one's subject matter necessarily compromises scholarly excellence, I was reminded of his comment on reading the introduction to Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan's extraordinary new book.

The authors claim to be "writing against a predominant pattern in popular music studies ... characterised by a pervasive and often tacit assumption that popular music is inevitably personally and socially therapeutic". The traditionally marginal status of popular music studies as a discipline, it is claimed, has led to a defensiveness that too often results in a celebratory view of the subject. Although this characterisation of popular music studies probably overstates the case somewhat, there is no doubt that a thorough account of the "dark side" of popular music is long overdue.

This book is grounded on an extended discussion of the exceptional nature of sound among the senses in its ability to physically assault and damage the body. Although music, as organised sound, can have calming therapeutic properties, it can be implicated in violence: "we cannot point to any piece of music and say that it must generate violence, but nor can we say that it cannot under any circumstances".

The main organising principle in the book is the distinction between "music accompanying violence", "music and incitement to violence", "music and arousal to violence" and "music as violence". Overshadowing all these distinctions are difficult questions about causality, about the precise nature of the relationship between musical text(s) and violent act(s). The authors dissect controversies about rap, metal and other musics that are implicated in violence, repeatedly showing that the connection is much more complicated than is usually assumed, while never shying away from critique when it is deserved.

Perhaps the most challenging chapter in the book deals with how "music can be delivered by and within a socio-political order in a way that functions to humiliate, disturb and to torture". The use of music in interrogations in the US detention facility in Guantanamo Bay has helped to publicise this issue, and there are a number of other disturbing examples. The potential of music to act as a form of violence lies in "the idea that one no longer has ownership of one's own sounds is a profound and painful violation". This is not just an issue in prisons or on the battlefield, but also in everyday life where the soundscape can be a site of great conflict and pain - as anyone who has had a noisy neighbour can attest.

Johnson and Cloonan are critical of media and political moral panics that simplistically accuse music such as rap and metal of causing violence, contrasting this with the general lack of seriousness with which cases of music as violence are treated. There are real implications in this book for policy debates and it deserves to be widely read. It is a model of clear and sophisticated writing and a pleasure to read despite the often disturbing subject matter. Yet *Dark Side of the Tune's* impact is likely to be limited to academic popular music studies, given its price. Is there not something wrong with an academic publishing system that confines works that can have a real impact on the world to relative obscurity?

Dark Side of the Tune: Popular Music and Violence.

By Bruce Johnson and Martin Cloonan. Ashgate, 254pp, £50.00. ISBN 9780754658726. Published 28 November 2008

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