

Martha Bayles. *Hole in Our Soul: The Loss of Beauty & Meaning in American Popular Music.* University of Chicago Press, 1996 [1994]. viii, 453 pp.

Reviewed by Daniel N. Thompson

Hole In Our Soul, an expansion of an article entitled "Hollow Rock & the Lost Blues Connection," published in the summer 1993 issue of *The Wilson Quarterly* (and subsequently excerpted in Bayles 1993b), is essentially a polemic on popular music by a cultural critic.* Like the article, the book takes a highly favorable view of most pre-1960 African-American popular music (particularly the blues) but is very critical of later genres (e.g., funk, rap) as well as most post-1950s "white" popular music.

Bayles's musical aesthetics might best be described as "conservative populism." Unlike both Theodor Adorno (with whom she disagrees because of his leftist political philosophy) and Allan Bloom (with whose general politics she seems to agree), she *likes* popular music—the popular music of 40, 50, and 60 years ago.¹ It might seem tempting to dismiss her taste as simply a penchant for the "oldies but goodies," but what follows instead is a fairly detailed examination—together with generous quotations to better convey the character of the author's writing—of a text that is exemplary of a stance still held by many cultural conservatives in this country. Bayles is not a high-art elitist; nonetheless, she essentially believes that the types of music that appeal to her are inherently better than those that don't, and that the rest of us—regardless of our different personal histories—should share her musical aesthetics.

The book consists of twenty-one chapters grouped together into four parts. Part 1 is called "The Weird Music of the New World," and includes the introduction as well as five more chapters, entitled "Why Music is the Wild Card," "The Three Strains of Modernism," "The Obstacle of Race," "The Taint of Commerce," and "Cubists and Squares: Jazz as Modernism." Part 2 ("From Rock 'n' Roll to Rock") and part 3 ("From Inspiration to Polarization") take a chronological approach to popular music in America and Britain, covering the 1950s through the early 1970s, with representative chapters on the British invasion, the counterculture, hard rock, and soul music. "The Triumph of Perversity" is the final part of the book, and its chapter titles cover the music from the late 1970s up until the early 1990s (e.g., "Punk: The Great Avant-Garde Swindle," "High on High Tech," and the book's short, concluding chapter: "Coda: Escape from Postmodernism").

Bayles holds very strong opinions about popular music—usually colorfully expressed—and she indicates the intended audience for these opinions on the first page:

To the reader who finds nothing offensive in current popular music: Please don't put the book down; you are the person I am most anxious to persuade. To the reader who is repelled by everything out there to the point of giving up: Please bear with me. My intention is not just to rub your nose in the latest swill; any number of critics can do that. Rather it is to explain the situation: to articulate exactly what is wrong, to show where the swill comes from, and to suggest why popular music doesn't have to be this way. Unlike many others who have been knocking popular music lately, I do so from a position of deep and abiding sympathy. (1-2)

The kind of criticism Bayles practices usually needs a scapegoat, and Bayles has found hers. The "swill," the "hole in our soul," and the "loss of beauty and meaning in American popular music" all come from one source: perverse modernism. Her own favorite musics seem to be blues, gospel, R&B, and early jazz, none of which are infected with this strain of modernism. In her refutation of what she refers to as perverse modernism Bayles does make some telling points (see below); however, she ultimately undermines her position by 1) overstepping her argument in her identification of perverse modernism as being solely responsible for almost everything she finds negative about twentieth-century American popular music, and 2) producing a poorly written book.

The author denies that this is a book of literary criticism: "Against those who see the 1960s counterculture in wholly literary-philosophical terms, I stress the animating role of Afro-American music" (243). Her methodology, however, is more like that of a literary critic than a musicologist. It is neither analytic in the conventional Western music-theoretic sense nor in terms of anthropological method. Unlike a conventional musicologist, she presents no musical notation; unlike an ethnomusicologist, she presents no ethnographic data. In addition, although there are well over 1,000 endnotes, a brief examination revealed only two citations of scholars (Eileen Southern and Charlie Keil) who have made popular music a focus of their studies. Finally, she impugns other critics for not addressing "the subject of sound—which is, after all, what music is made of" (4), yet her own book includes neither audio nor, as indicated, notational examples of any kind of music. Instead, the author examines verbal texts: she quotes a few lyrics and she cites many journalists.

Bayles's overall approach is one of blatant advocacy, and although it is, to a degree, refreshing to read a book in which an author expresses her opinions so forthrightly, *Hole in Our Soul* reads not as a well-considered argument, but as a series of snide put-downs in which assertions of taste are made within the framework of a simplistic good-versus-bad dichotomy. If, however, one can read past the unsupported generalizations, illogical argument, mangled use of musical terminology, sarcasm, and generally smug, self-righteous tone, the book does have its strong points.

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Perhaps the most intellectually fertile idea in the book is the tripartite scheme into which Bayles divides modernist art. In a chapter entitled "The Three Strains of Modernism" she delineates what she perceives to be the three major types: perverse, introverted, and extroverted. For Bayles, perverse modernism has had a long and deleterious effect on American popular music. Perverse modernism, represented by the futurists, the surrealists, Rimbaud, Verlaine, and Duchamp, is "neither respectful nor radical—merely contemptuous. . . . For [perverse modernists] art is no longer a matter of making objects, but of pointing to objects in the world and proclaiming, 'This is art because I say so.' Certainly this is what Duchamp did when he placed a urinal in an art gallery" (42).² Precisely the opposite of the introverted modernists (who hold the popular audience in contempt), "perverse modernists have contempt for the educated audience, but they want desperately to reach the common people, the masses who normally take no interest in art" (43).

Bayles cogently argues a continuity between perverse modernism and the downtown performance artists of the 1950s and 60s, particularly Fluxus. She then lists three pairs of places and musicians/groups in the rock world that became associated with what she calls perverse modernism. The first is New York and the Velvet Underground, the second is Los Angeles and Frank Zappa, and the third is London and John Lennon/Yoko Ono (290–94). She also sees "camp" as being a form of perverse modernism, and she exposes what she perceives as the shallowness and hypocrisy of the camp aesthetic, quoting conservative cultural critic Hilton Kramer:

'[B]oth pop art and camp involved a self-conscious rejection of high culture, combined with an equally self-conscious embrace of popular culture—the kitschier the better.' [C]amp offers "forbidden" pleasure in objects that are corny, exaggerated, "stupid," or otherwise acknowledged to have failed by the respectable standards of the day,'

while also excluding 'the "straight" public.' Thus camp skips the challenge of genuine art while keeping the avant-garde 'distinction between "us" and "them."' (173-74)

She offers perceptive statements about the influence of art school musicians on punk, new wave, and other postpunk musics, pointing out in particular the insulting, art school attitude of camp toward both melody and harmony (without, however, thoroughly investigating why new wave, for instance, was so heavily influenced by students involved in the visual arts—who were, in turn, often influenced by David Bowie).

[M]any new wave performers could not bring themselves to dismiss all forms of listenable music as 'pop.' So they resorted to camp: playing, or hiring others to play, their favorite 'pop' style, while sending the message (more or less) that the whole thing was a joke (more or less). (324)

[Elton] John was flamboyant and hilarious about it, Bowie cool and detached. This stylistic difference helps explain why the new wave adored Bowie and despised John, seeing the former's commercial success as a feat of Warholian manipulation, the latter's as crude pandering. It probably mattered that John's popularity was a mass phenomenon, while Bowie's was something of a cult. But even more, it mattered that John did not always sustain the attitude of camp. On the contrary, he ventured into the forbidden territory of love songs. . . . Predictably, the new wave judged this side of John to be pure schlock. (325)

As indicated above, however, Bayles overstates her case. Throughout the book her primary nemeses are academic leftists and practitioners of perverse modernism, and she seems to want very badly to blame the existence of popular musics that do not appeal to her on these two groups. She fails, however, to convincingly make the case that perverse modernism has caused the violent lyrics and, for her, musical degeneracy of those kinds of popular music whose practitioners have historically been otherwise little affected by high-art modernism or academic theorizing. She draws a line from leftist art schools to punk to rap, but never considers the culpability of other cultural influences. Furthermore, her support for her thesis tends to be anecdotal:

Created by a fashion designer named Malcolm McLaren, who had attended six British art colleges but knew nothing about music, the

Sex Pistols became famous for attacking music along with everything else. . . . It is no accident that Rick Rubin, one of the driving forces behind 'gangsta' rap, got his start in a New York punk band called the Pricks. (13)

There may be a very tenuous connection from perverse modernism to rap (i.e., from futurism to dada to constructivism to situationism to Malcolm McLaren to the Sex Pistols to the Pricks to the Beastie Boys to N.W.A.), but after a certain point the relative strength of perverse modernism's influence becomes questionable. In other words, it is one thing to make the case that Andy Warhol had some influence over the Velvet Underground, but it is an entirely different proposition to prove that perverse modernism has a pervasive influence—via Rick Rubin and the Beastie Boys—on hardcore or gangsta rap.

She doesn't devote as much attention to the introverted modernists, perhaps because in her view they have had less influence on popular music than have the perverse modernists. Introverted modernists tend to be academic types, who substitute art for religion. This group would include the Bauhaus artists, Kandinsky, Schoenberg, and Webern, and is the "art-for-art's sake retreat from the world [that] keeps, even intensifies the high seriousness of romanticism" (38), rejecting the shared sense-experience of most of society. The introverted modernist seeks to wield influence, but, "despising the larger public, he demands veneration from a tiny circle of initiates, whom he sees as the vanguard of his artistic revolution" (40).

While she has no use for either perverse or introverted modernism, she sees extroverted modernism—which, within her conceptual framework, includes jazz, cubism, impressionism, and Stravinsky—as vitally important (referencing here M. H. Abrams's concepts of intrinsic and extrinsic artistic values):

The third strain of modernism, which I call extroverted, is descended from cubism, realism, and robust romanticism—that is, it represents the survival, even today, of the venerable Western (and non-Western) conception of art as having 'intrinsic value, but also extrinsic value, as a means to moral and social effects beyond itself.' (51–52)

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As indicated, Bayles's political and economic philosophy is generally far more capitalist than Marxist, and she seems to take particular glee in pointing out some of the foibles of the Frankfurt School; nonetheless, she fair-handedly exposes the contradictions inherent in the arguments both

of media capitalists and Marxist ideologues on the general question of whether music affects behavior:

Ever since the 1950s the question has repeatedly been raised as to whether the violence in popular culture has any impact on actual behavior. Today, when the violence in Hollywood movies is depicted with a vividness unimaginable in the 1950s, the usual defense is that the whole thing is just a cartoon. . . . The most obvious flaw in this defense appears whenever a puffed-up concert promoter or industry honcho insists that popular music has the power to change the world—a claim that underlies every rock-missionary effort of recent history, from George Harrison's 1971 concert for Bangladesh to the colossal Live Aid Concert of 1985. . . . Such claims have been exaggerated ever since the folk movement sought to radicalize the masses with song. But that doesn't make them groundless. (257–58)

The hypocrisy, as she points out, is just as evident in the strategy often employed by media capitalists to market, for instance, gangsta rap. She quotes rap impresario Rick Rubin's assessment of the Geto Boys:

'The images in their lyrics . . . are exaggerations. It's not any more real than a horror movie. The guys are just having fun.' . . . But the logic is no better than heavy metal's. Switching expertly to the other side of his mouth, Rubin also touts gangsta rap as the authentic voice of ghetto rage. . . . The whole 'gangsta' rap strategy is summed up in the Capitol Records press release that promised 'mean-spirited diatribes on violent "gangsta" lifestyles [that] challenge middle-class norms by rubbing their noses in the reality of the contemporary urban jungle—a place most suburbanites don't dare tread.' (356)

Including, presumably, the suits at Capitol Records.

In general, however, Bayles reserves most of her ire for leftists, colorfully pointing out, for instance, the seemingly untenable position of academics who are politically radical but culturally elitist:

[T]he Frankfurt School casts a spell in which the highbrow Marxist can have his cultural cake and eat it, too. By insisting that most art, high and low, exists for the sole purpose of reinforcing bourgeois-capitalist consciousness, the 'critical theorist' gets to be revolutionary. But by dictating the handful of exceptions that achieve true 'negation,' he also gets to be a snob. (78)

She particularly draws attention to the cultural classism (and apparent fear and loathing of all things popular) exhibited by Theodor Adorno:

[Jazz] was 'pseudo-individualistic,' because (to his ear) its improvisation offered only the repetition of simple themes. It was 'pseudo-democratic,' because it substituted 'collective' for 'individual' fantasies (this from the man who blamed radio for breaking up the collective listening experience of the concert hall!). And finally 'pseudo-erotic,' promising only 'illusory' sexual emancipation. (77)

Wearing his highbrow hat, he condemned the exuberance of jazz as 'stylized like the ecstasies savages go into beating the war drums.' In other words, jazz was damned if it did and damned if it didn't. As a false erotic liberation, it was helping to oppress the masses. As a true one, it was being carried out by the wrong folks. (78)

Finally, she is also adept at highlighting the ideological contortions that Soviet communism exhibited in its pronouncements on music:

[T]he Stalinists, like the Nazis, condemned jazz in both highbrow and racist terms. But because the Soviets had no explicit ideology of race, their theorists had to justify this condemnation in terms of the class struggle—a tricky business at best. . . . Like modernism, jazz was tolerated by the Communist Party for a brief period after 1917; like modernism, it was attacked as 'bourgeois' in the mid-1920s; and like modernism, it was eventually crushed, to make room for the uplifting inanities of socialist realism. . . . Unlike modernist painting or music, jazz sprang from an extremely oppressed people in an extremely capitalist country. The dilemma for the Party, therefore, was whether to praise jazz as the rallying cry of the black masses, or to denounce it as a tool of capitalist domination. (74)

The book's weaknesses are less obscure than its strengths, and can be generally classified as exhibiting one or more of the following traits: the author's absolutist, unsupported assertions (exhibited most noticeably by lack of adequate support for her thesis that the loss of "beauty" and "meaning"—neither of which is ever defined—is due to the pernicious influence of perverse modernism, as noted above), her use of illogical argument, her apparent misunderstanding of musical terminology, and her employment of excessive sarcasm. Although unsupported assertions and illogical argument are usually more significant problems than sarcasm or, within limits, the misunderstanding of terms, a few examples of each of these four traits follow.

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Critics who write polemical works are expected to make assertions. Too often, however, Bayles's assertions—which at times are generalizations about all members of a category, and at others are absolutist statements about individual musicians or musical styles—are unsupported with any kind of data or logical argument. This habit is sometimes combined with her penchant for uncritically citing those who agree with her. Near the beginning of the book, for example, she quotes from Leonard Meyer's *Emotion and Meaning in Music* an extraordinary generalization made by English musicologist A. M. Jones:

'All this rhythm crossing is the spice of life to the African. It is his real harmony. He is intoxicated by this rhythmic harmony, or rhythmic polyphony, just as we react to chordal harmony. It is this remarkable interplay of main-beats that causes him irresistibly, when he hears the drums, to start moving his feet, his arms, his whole body. This to him is real music.' (20)

Here we have Martha Bayles quoting Leonard Meyer quoting A.M. Jones who is speaking for "the African." This, to her, is (apparently) real criticism.

The author's penchant for gross generalizations is found throughout the book; eventually she takes it upon herself to speak for both blacks and whites: "Some blacks damned soul as a shameful secularization; others blessed it as a timely put-down of rock 'n' roll. Either way, they knew where soul was coming from: Behind each cry of 'Baby!' they heard the echo of 'Jesus!' Whites, on the other hand, knew only that soul was coming from blacks, and that it gave people a thrill" (181–82). I don't understand how Bayles could possibly know this, but it isn't the only example of her ability to read minds:

[S]oul singers of the 1960s made no effort to dispel the youthful white male perception that their music was an expression of hypersexuality cut loose from any moral context. Yet in . . . these cases, the process of debasement was counteracted by the presence—in the musician's own mind, if nowhere else [!]¹—of Afro-American religion. Even at their most hedonistic, none of these people ever forgot that what they were fooling around with was a means of spiritual transcendence. (196)

On page 223 she claims that art rock's "most celebrated successes consist of decoration added to existing compositions, such as Emerson, Lake, and Palmer's *Pictures at an Exhibition* (music by Mussorgsky)." How does

she measure success? Using what data? The fact is, ELP was not “celebrated” but were, rather, consistently dismissed by many critics. Neither were they art rock’s “most celebrated successes” in terms of record sales. There can be no doubt that with *Dark Side of the Moon* and *The Wall*, that distinction goes to Pink Floyd, a band whose most celebrated successes did *not* “consist of decoration added to existing compositions.”

Another simple assertion surfaces during her discussion of Van Morrison. “Van Morrison does successfully what postpunk art rock only pretends to do. Having mastered the Afro-American idiom, he added melodic and harmonic elements (as well as a lyric sensibility) from his own Irish background” (321). Which “melodic and harmonic elements”? (And what exactly is an “Irish lyric sensibility”?)

And then to the Police: “The Specials had tried to mix ska and punk by speeding up the former and interspersing it with noise, but the Police took a different tack, blending reggae with sophisticated jazz rhythms and harmonies” (374). Which “sophisticated jazz rhythms and harmonies?” the reader might well ask. (Admittedly, it might be too much to ask for examples of these rhythms and harmonies in the form of notation from an author who is a cultural critic; still, a little more explanation in prose of the particular “sophisticated jazz rhythms and harmonies” of which she is speaking would have been extremely helpful.)

Finally, a simplistic dichotomy that does not take into account any of the music between the two extremes she posits:

Since the 1970s popular music has suffered a severe polarization of attitudes toward the proper nature of musical eloquence. At one extreme we have the ‘do-it-yourself’ ethos of punk, which equates true art with impassioned incompetence. At the other we have the cult of bloodless virtuosity that free jazz bequeathed to hard rock, leading to the abandonment of feeling in favor of empty athleticism. (338)

This just isn’t true. “Polarization” generally refers to the concentration of elements (formerly ranged on a continuum) around opposing extremes. Sales of audio recordings and concert tickets reflect the fact that both punk and free jazz are still fringe musics, with most of America’s musical attention (and dollars) being spent on middle-of-the-road pop/rock/R&B.

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Another problem for this reviewer is that I’m not always able to follow her logic. For instance, she makes the point that we shouldn’t take “high” art and “popular” art to be polar opposites. “The situation looks quite

different if we make a logical distinction between popularity (as measured by commercial success) and artistic merit (as measured by critical and audience acclaim)" (386). What is the difference between popularity and audience acclaim (i.e., how is audience acclaim measured, if not by commercial success)?

Her discussion of minimalism, Eastern philosophies, and jazz is no more clear than her confusing statements about audience acclaim and commercial success. For example, she seems to indict minimalist composers for their interests in Eastern musics and philosophies, yet praises John Coltrane for the same trait.

Like the blank canvases of radical, non-objective painters, the monotonous compositions of minimalist composers are routinely praised for inducing the aesthetic equivalent of a religious trance. But, as I asked earlier, to what purpose? (226)

The unavoidable fact is that, without a meaningful connection with the symbols and disciplines of a shared religious tradition, such as Hindus possess when they listen to ragas, most of us (including most music lovers) find it hard to stick with trancelike music for its own sake. We may become mesmerized for a while, but when nothing much happens, we become unmesmerized. (226)

Clearly, however, the relative popularity of minimalist and postminimalist composers would seem to indicate that many of us who are not practitioners of a "shared religious tradition" do, in fact, enjoy the music "for its own sake." It therefore seems likely that whether we become "mesmerized" or "unmesmerized" is more a reflex of what we have been musically conditioned to accept than a result of our religious conditioning. On the other hand, she seems to favor the interest that jazz musicians have shown in Eastern philosophies and musics:

Coltrane in particular was an insatiable reader who ignored ethnic boundaries: Along with the Bible of his Protestant minister grandfathers, he assayed Zen, Hindu, and Muslim texts, as well as Plato, Aristotle, and the Cabala. It's too bad this open-minded eclecticism has been forgotten by those who idolize 'Trane' as a patriarch of black cultural separatism. (230-31)

But, then, she likes Coltrane. Two pages later she is again in "condemnation mode" and disparages the beat poets and hippies for the same thing for which she has just praised Coltrane: "Like the beats who

admired Zen but had no use for its mental and physical discipline, the eclectic pseudospirituality of the hippies was not tied to the behavioral or moral requirements of any faith" (232). Wasn't Coltrane's spirituality not tied to the behavioral or moral requirements of any one faith? But, then again, she seems to dislike hippies and beat poets as much as minimalist composers. Neither does she like John Cage:

Cage's experiments were all the more alluring for being wrapped in the mantle of Zen Buddhism, an approach that greatly impressed the beats, since they, too, justified their artistic methods—or lack thereof—with quotations from the Zen masters. (289)

Just as an interest in Eastern spirituality is a positive attribute when it's exhibited by jazz musicians (and an undesirable one when exhibited by beat poets, minimalist composers, and John Cage), there is also a double standard when considering commercialism. She defends the commercialism of the blues: "[I]t has never ceased to sell itself. For more than a century, the blues performer's motto has not been 'art for art's sake' but 'make way for the paying customers'" (187). However, when rappers, punks, or pop stars exhibit this philosophy and produce music that appeals to *their* paying customers, they are pandering.

In general, Bayles twists herself into the most extraordinary contortions to justify her agenda. About the famous Robert Johnson lyric "You can squeeze my lemon 'til the juice run down my leg," Bayles states, "Like all blues lyrics, 'squeeze my lemon' must be interpreted in context" (191). Why just blues lyrics?

What [Paul] Oliver says about country blues is equally true of the urban styles: 'As with all other subjects the blues, when dealing with matters of love and sex, is forthright and uncompromising. It was this open declaration of subjects that the conventions of polite society decreed should be kept hidden from view which caused so much offense.' (191)

Again, the blues is not the only popular music that is forthright and uncompromising when dealing with matters of love and sex. But when it comes to punk, heavy metal, or rap, Bayles finds the forthrightness and uncompromising stance as offensive as did many whites of an earlier era when confronted with the blues.

She disparages Jon Pareles's reference to heavy metal as "a community ritual" (249), yet the ritualistic aspects of gospel and blues performances are cited as a positive characteristic: "Like gospel, the blues involves both

performer and audience in a communal, ritualized reenactment of extreme emotional states" (189). Don't heavy metal and punk concerts do the same thing? Responding to those who claim that heavy metal is therapeutic and that heavy metal concerts are an important ritual, Bayles writes,

Both group therapy and puberty rites are intended to help people cope with real life. The same cannot be said of heavy metal. On the contrary, the young people most deeply involved with the genre, such as the dropouts, runaways, and 'throwaways' who congregate in places like Hollywood Boulevard in Los Angeles, seem incapable of coping with anything. (261)

Undoubtedly, the "throwaways" on Hollywood Boulevard are often products of very dysfunctional families; furthermore, heavy metal provides an important outlet for many young people who are *not* homeless (or pawns in the music/movie/sex industry). In addition, it is also entirely conceivable that some of these young dropouts might suffer even more acutely without the balm/opiate/outlet of their music, a possibility Bayles arbitrarily eliminates from the discussion with the statement, "The same cannot be said of heavy metal."

Further on logic: she castigates "the British elite, both in the cultural establishment and among folk purists," who "failed to make any distinction between the small, independent companies that had fostered R&B, and the large monopolistic firms that had tried unsuccessfully to resist it. From the elite perspective, rock 'n' roll was no better than the 1950s pop purveyed in the dance halls and on the Light Programme" (166). The trouble, of course, is that Bayles seems just as unable to "make any distinction" (i.e., is unaware of how to discriminate) within the genres that do not appeal to her.

Her argument about Bob Dylan's lyrics is equally hard to follow: "Dylan's more rambling, free-associative lyrics display the typical vices of beat poetry: deliberate obscurity, self-indulgence, pretentiousness, and . . . indifference to the aural texture—the *music*—of words" (215). Even if one were to agree that many of Dylan's early lyrics seem to display obscurity, self-indulgence, and pretentiousness, her claim that they display "indifference to the aural texture" is certainly contestable, since the aural texture (or "music" of the words) often seems to be precisely the quality for which Dylan sacrificed clarity, restraint, and unpretentiousness.³

Again, a large part of her illogical presentation stems from her ambivalent view of market economics in the "cultural" sphere. For example, she is an apologist for commerce to the extent that she defends the practice of payola, but, significantly, only for those music industry professionals who

have promoted the kinds of music she prefers (additionally observing here how unfairly Alan Freed was treated—compared to Dick Clark—during the 1959–60 congressional hearings on the practice of payola in the music industry).⁴

At those hearings, the editor of *Billboard* testified that payola was nothing new, that it was best understood as a continuation of the old (and accepted) practice of ‘song plugging,’ by which Tin Pan Alley publishers had once offered incentives to bandleaders to play certain songs. [Freed] argued that payola was the only way the independent labels who produced it could compete against the majors. . . . Shortly after refusing to sign an affidavit denying that he had ever accepted payola, [Freed] lost his last DJ job in New York (at WABC) and retreated to Los Angeles, where he worked sporadically while sinking into the alcoholic tailspin that caused his death five years later. (144)

Dick Clark, a rich and powerful radio and TV personality, was also summoned to testify before the subcommittee. . . . But the fates, or rather the major record labels, were kinder to Clark than to Freed, because they understood that Clark was more willing than Freed to push their bland cover versions of rock ‘n’ roll over the real thing. Clark’s original radio program in Philadelphia had featured covers, and his TV shows, *American Bandstand* and *The Dick Clark Show*, boosted the careers of such major-label ‘teen idols’ as Frankie Avalon, Fabian, and Bobby Rydell. By sticking with this strategy, Clark soon rebuilt his empire. (144)

As indicated earlier, the problem here is that Bayles is a political and fiscal conservative; however, she’s not really a cultural elitist. She’s a populist, but only a populist for a certain historical period (the early decades of this century) and a certain place (the U.S.). Once the musical genres that appeal to her are no longer popular (i.e., are supplanted by the same market forces that first brought her favorite types of music to prominence), she begins to sound as if she’s shouting at change. “As I have repeatedly stressed, the market is both friend and foe to art, in the sense that its power to amplify, magnify, and accelerate changes in taste is, obviously, good or bad, depending on the nature of those changes” (268). Or on the viewpoint of the author.

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Bayles repeatedly refuses to define her musical terminology, and the commonly accepted musical terms she does use are often used incorrectly.

For example, throughout the book she frequently confuses “beat” and “rhythm,” claiming, for instance—in a statement in which she also refuses to supply any examples of the African-American rhythms to which she refers—that the “monotonous beat of hard rock (and, indeed, of much rap) is a travesty of the rich, tireless, complicated rhythms of Afro-American music at its best” (11).

“Polyrhythm” is a term that makes several appearances throughout the book, although it is never clear what she means by the term. For instance, in a discussion of the 12-bar blues form, Bayles states, “First and foremost, the blues is polyrhythmic, possessing the elusive but essential quality of swing” (188). What does this mean? If by using “polyrhythm” she simply means “more than one rhythm,” then certainly every song on pop radio is polyrhythmic. If she means it in the more restricted sense of two-against-three, or three-against-four, etc., then most blues songs are no more polyrhythmic than most other popular music. If she is simply talking about syncopation—well, the fact is that almost all pop music contains syncopation. Whatever polyrhythm may be, we learn later—in a statement in which she mixes a plausibly valuable insight with an entirely unsupported generalization (where terminology is again not defined)—that country music fears it: “The abiding weaknesses of country music are two: love of sentimental cliché, rooted in its turn-of-the-century link with Tin Pan Alley, and fear of polyrhythm, rooted in white racism” (380).

Bayles’s lack of mastery of musical terminology is again evidenced in this passage about Janis Joplin:

[Joplin] paid constant tribute to Bessie Smith. . . . But vocally Joplin could not have named a less appropriate model. Smith, whose vocal range barely exceeded one octave, was a stunning practitioner of blues ‘mixtery,’ shading every note and beat with rich nuance. (244)

How does one “shade” a beat? And what, exactly, is “shading” a note with nuance? Is Bayles referring to alterations in pitch? Timbre? Dynamics? Duration? What exactly is she talking about?

In discussing Chuck Berry, she says, “His career began in Chicago, where he ventured in 1955 to try his luck with the renowned blues label, Chess, which until then had focused almost exclusively on the Chicago blues—the one type of R&B that was not crossing over to white youth” (148). Were Chicago blues R&B? If so, there were other types of “R&B” also not crossing over (e.g., rural acoustic Mississippi delta blues). The following example illustrates her misuse of even very common musical terms (“singer-songwriter”) as well as a disinclination to define her *own* terminology:

Since Berry's lyrics are the first fully self-conscious ones in rock 'n' roll, it is remarkable how many people in popular music fail to appreciate his role. To cite one salient example, in a recent film documentary about Buddy Holly produced by former Beatle Paul McCartney, the Rolling Stones' lead guitarist Keith Richards praises Holly, not Berry, for being the first 'singer-songwriter' in rock 'n' roll. Given Richards's active participation in the Berry documentary cited earlier, this omission is mind-boggling. (149)

What is a self-conscious lyric (much less a "fully self-conscious" lyric)? And are Berry's indeed the "first" ones in rock 'n' roll? Regarding her boggled mind over Richards's statement: In the Berry documentary Richards clearly credits Berry with being the father of rock 'n' roll. It is also clear that Richards's use of the term "singer-songwriter" in this passage refers to the fact that Holly wrote many "ballads" and love songs, and that these and many of the other light pop songs he wrote can easily be performed by "singer-songwriters" (whereas Berry's music more strongly requires a rock 'n' roll *band* for its performance). She goes on: "[Berry's] music is as galvanizing as Pentecostal rock 'n' roll—in fact, it wears better because of its jazzier texture" (150). How is Berry's musical texture "jazzier" than that of "Pentecostal rock 'n' roll"?

As for "popular music," she contradicts her own use of the term within three pages: "[T]he most important fact about Southern soul is that during the late 1950s and early 1960s, it was the only form of American popular music not tailored exclusively to youth" (159). Again, this just isn't true. There were certainly other forms of popular music during the 1950s (e.g., Appalachian ballads and country blues, among others) that were not "tailored exclusively to youth." On page 162 Bayles seems to reverse her stance.

In the 1950s most middle- and upper-middle-class British fans of Afro-American music preferred older styles. . . . Along with this preference for older styles went a fastidious purism that rejected all subsequent styles, and deplored the forces (especially the commercial ones) that had fostered the change. . . . Ultimately these purist distinctions derived from the Stalinist double-think of the 1930s—as did the purism of those British folk music fans who worshiped Appalachian ballads and country blues to the exclusion of all *other* popular forms. (162, italics added)⁵

In her discussion of hard rock bands, Bayles is clearly out of her depth. Referring to "distortions begun with hard rock," she writes, "Steppenwolf

and Grand Funk Railroad (in the United States) and Led Zeppelin and Black Sabbath (in Britain) . . . basically simplified, and amplified, Cream's 'wall of noise' (246). How did Led Zeppelin "simplify" Cream? Again, no discussion of musical parameters.

She doesn't restrict herself to nondefinition of only musical terms. In a statement about African diaspora religions, for instance, she states that "voodoo" is a "folk religion," and that "very little of it can be traced directly back to Africa" (252), and then follows this with a reference to Rastafarianism as a "religious cult" (374). No explanation of the differences between cults and religions is given, nor is there any definition of "folk religion." (Is there such a thing as a "non-folk" religion?)

After unsuccessfully negotiating the terminological minefields of "polyrhythm," "R&B," vodou, and "folk religion," she shifts her attention to jazz: "[T]he adoption of modal scales in the cool jazz of Miles Davis and Gil Evans was seen as radical at the time, but it was really an attempt to simplify: like the blues scale, archaic modal scales provide a basis for improvisation that the everyday listener can sense, even if he wouldn't know a Doric mode if it were wired into his doorbell" (366).

The above is confusing on two counts: First of all, Miles's cool jazz period started several years before his "modal period." (In fact, "modal jazz" is the term often used to describe much of his work from the 1950s and early 1960s, whereas his cool jazz period is generally considered to have started in the 1940s.) Secondly, "Doric" refers to either 1) an ancient Greek dialect, or 2) the oldest Greek architectural order.⁶ (Some of us, however, might recognize a *Dorian* mode if we heard it.)

* * *

Her sarcastic tone is evident throughout the book. Three of her favorite metaphors for music and musical elements of which she disapproves are "fool's gold," "Dagwood rhythm sandwiches," and "Nintendo games." For instance, disco "glistened with fool's gold" (279); "Blondie's music . . . followed . . . pop art logic by sticking to fool's gold genres: first teen idol rock 'n' roll, then disco" (326); but "[w]hen the circumstances are propitious, the public can and will reject fool's gold in favor of the twenty-four-carat real thing" (159).

In chapter 11, entitled "Blues, Blacks, and Brits," Bayles opens her discussion with an attack on the Merseybeat groups. "Companies signed dozens of mop-topped look-alikes . . . who departed ever further from the Afro-American roots of skiffle. The resulting combination of music-hall melodies (without a touch of blues), archly affected lyrics, and rhythms reduced to a vapid tick-tock certainly fits my definition of fool's gold" (177).⁷

"The weaker songs [of Boyz II Men's *Cooleyhighharmony*] still smack of contemporary R&B, vocal curlicues bouncing around inside a Nintendo game" (365); Miles Davis's *Tutu* is "a lifeless album that merely inserts Davis's trademark sound into a Nintendo game" (369).

Miles also receives the "Dagwood rhythm sandwich" treatment for his collaboration with Eazy Mo Bee on his album *Doo-Bop*, which "does little more than squirt Davis's horn, like mustard, into a state-of-the-art Dagwood rhythm sandwich" (369). Additionally, a "typical Ice Cube or Public Enemy record offered the auditory equivalent of a Dagwood sandwich: a monster rhythm track stuffed with every variety of sampled sound effects" (364).⁸

She justifiably indicts Adorno's derogatory pronouncements when she says, "It was an insult to jazz when Adorno described its rhythms as having 'convulsive aspects reminiscent of St. Vitus' dance or the reflexes of mutilated animals'" (303). Two sentences later, however, her own writing exhibits the same sort of name-calling disparagement:

Thrash fans often brag that what the genre really does is take old rock 'n' roll and speed it up—play it live at 78 rpm, instead of 45. Yet what they are speeding up is not the sound of the real thing . . . [but the] sound of the white-bread cover. . . . Only a fool with a tin ear, or a conformist terrified of not being on the 'cutting edge,' would credit the Ramones [who are *not* a thrash band] with recapturing the old energy. (303–04)

* * *

In addition to the problems of unsupported assertions, illogical argument, undefined terminology, and sarcasm, there are a few minor factual errors.⁹

The Who made their biggest mark in 1968, with . . . *Tommy: A Rock Opera*. Despite the name, *Tommy* does not mix rock with European music. On the contrary, it is dominated by the Who's mature style: ponderous, rhythmically monotonous hard rock, relieved only by a scrap of memorable melody (the haunting, 'feel me, touch me' refrain) and Elton John playing boogie-woogie piano. (224)

Tommy was first released in 1969. Elton John does not appear on this album, nor with the London Symphony Orchestra and Chambre Choir's *Tommy*, released in 1972, but on the soundtrack of the Ken Russell film, which was released in 1975. (A Broadway show, entitled *The Who's Tommy*, arrived in 1993.) In addition, the refrain is not "feel me, touch me," but "see me, feel me, touch me, heal me."

A couple of small errors also crop up in her discussion of punk. For instance, we learn on page 303 that the Ramones are a thrash band (see above), and she states that the speed of thrash is 250–300 beats per minute; however, Ramones songs are generally 160–220 beats per minute; in any case, they are certainly not a thrash band. Furthermore, “[T]he Sex Pistols’ greatest triumph came in the summer of 1977, when their sardonically titled single, ‘God Save the Queen,’ reached the top of the UK pop chart during Queen Elizabeth II’s silver jubilee” (324). In fact, “God Save the Queen” reached only to the #2 spot on the BBC chart, although it was undoubtedly the best-selling single at the time.¹⁰

* * *

Why do people still write books like this? Does any writer seriously believe that his or her aesthetic views will come to be validated as *the* truth (rather than the writer’s own truth)? More to the point of this review, why does anyone bother to universally hierarchize music?

Hole in Our Soul is addressed to people who find “nothing offensive in current popular music” (1). Why, then, would they read the book? Wouldn’t these people rather spend their time listening to grindcore and gangsta rap? For Bayles, there are two uncomfortable facts that she must confront: First of all, the overwhelming majority of people who enjoy spending their time listening to punk, rap, or heavy metal are not going to spend their money and time buying and reading a 400-page diatribe that denigrates them, their favorite music, and their favorite musicians. Secondly, those who might be predisposed to buy and read it are not the ones spending money on the kinds of popular music the author dislikes. So who is the book for?

The sort of criticism practiced by the author of *Hole in Our Soul* seems anachronistic today. We do indeed live in the culturally pluralistic post-modern world, where, regardless of the dictates of high-culture (or even middlebrow) tastemakers, people “vote with their feet” and buy, experience, and create the kinds of music they enjoy. Bayles effectively skewers the Frankfurt school for some of its views, but adopts the same conceptual framework and uses some of the same elitist language. The only difference is that, instead of defending Western art music against Western popular music (as does Adorno), she defends her favorite genres of Western popular music against unpreferable forms of pop *and* art music.

The key, as always, is the audience. . . . I mean the casually discriminating audience, the kind of people who partied and danced to the Duke Ellington Orchestra back in November 1940, when one of that band’s wintry one-nighters was captured on record at the Crystal Ballroom in Fargo, North Dakota. (370)

Martha Bayles is too much a proponent of the free market to want the state to dictate what sort of music people should listen to (since, after all, it was the market that allowed the widespread dissemination of jazz, blues, and gospel); however, like any aristocrat looking to the past as the source of authority, she's too elitist to believe that the popular music of today will ever be as good as it used to be.

Notes

*Although editorial board members are often not acknowledged by authors—perhaps because by offering commentary on a manuscript they are only doing what is expected—in the case of this review explicit thanks are due Mark Burford, Marlon Feld, Rebecca Y. Kim, Jonathan T. King, and Jinho Weng for going above and beyond the call of editorial duty by offering constructive comments on what can only charitably be described as a rough draft at the time it was passed around to them for feedback.

1. The tenth anniversary of the publication of Allan Bloom's *The Closing of the American Mind* provided the occasion for a lecture recently delivered by Bayles at the University of Chicago, in which she again voiced similar criticisms of much contemporary popular music. This lecture formed the basis of an article entitled "The Musical Miseducation of Youth," published shortly thereafter in *The Public Interest*.

2. Duchamp isn't the only one to "point and proclaim." Bayles seems not to realize that throughout her book she makes the same sort of assertions (i.e., she points to certain musicians or musics and proclaims that selected individuals or pieces are artists or art "because I say so").

3. It is perhaps noteworthy that literary critics have leveled the same charges of obscurity and self-indulgence in the service of the "music of the words" at the work of Dylan Thomas, the poet from whom Robert Zimmerman reportedly took the name he assumed when first beginning his career.

4. See Jackson (1997) for a more thorough examination of Clark's involvement in the payola scandal.

5. The British fans aren't the only ones that seem to exhibit a fastidious purism. As with the case of Duchamp (see note 2), Bayles seems to come uncomfortably close to being guilty of what she accuses others—in this case, a "fastidious purism that reject[s] all subsequent styles."

6. Another example of sloppy terminological use combined with a disparaging tone appears in her perspective of the psychedelic scene in San Francisco: "Quick to seize on the sitar, especially after George Harrison strummed one in Norwegian Wood, these San Francisco groups made that instrument's shivery arpeggios into musical code for the drug experience" (226). First of all, in "Norwegian Wood" Harrison plucked the sitar rather than strummed it, but by using the term "strummed" she can more forcefully make the point that Harrison was really an incompetent know-nothing (i.e., a rock musician). Secondly, "arpeggios" seems misleading when describing the sitar's "shivery" music, since the term almost invariably refers to the tones that constitute Western triadic harmony.

7. Besides the insulting terminology, there are no examples offered to support the idiosyncratically formulated assertion that Merseybeat rhythms had been reduced to a "vapid tick-tock." It would have been even more helpful for her to have included an appendix in the back of the book that might at least have included a list of songs and their instrumental parts that exemplify what I imagine Bayles is trying to describe: a steady, unvarying, quarter-note or eighth-note rhythm. Unfortunately, however, this statement fits the pattern of the rest of the book: many provocative assertions with little or no supporting data.

8. At times the author seems to go rather far out of her way in order to disparage whatever it is she doesn't like. For instance, in reference to Eldridge Cleaver's public assertion of support for Malcolm X (instead of the Nation of Islam), she quotes Cleaver: "It was no longer possible to ride two horses at the same time," and then follows with, "Too bad the brothers at Folsom didn't have Public Enemy to show them how to ride two horses, a donkey, an elephant, and a load of bull besides" (360).

9. In addition, notes 47–53 for chapter 19 appear to be numbered incorrectly (probably caused by the fact that reference #53 is missing in the text).

10. For more on the shenanigans of the BBC and the British Market Research Bureau, see, for instance, Savage (1992:364–65) and Gimarc (1994:68).

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