

Fabian Holt. 2007. *Genre in Popular Music*. Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press.

Reviewed by Elizabeth K. Keenan

The concept of genre has often presented difficulties for popular music studies. Although discussions of genres and their boundaries frequently emerge from the ethnographic study of popular music, these studies often fail to theorize the category of genre itself, instead focusing on elements of style that demarcate a localized version of a particular genre. In contrast, studies focusing on genre itself often take a top-down, Adorno-inspired, culture-industry perspective, locating the concept within the marketing machinations of the major-label music industry. Both approaches have their limits, leaving open numerous questions about how genres form and change over time; how people employ the concept of genre in their musical practices—whether listening, purchasing, or performing; and how culture shapes our construction of genre categories. In *Genre in Popular Music*, Fabian Holt deftly integrates his theoretical model of genre into a series of ethnographic and historical case studies from both the center and the boundaries of popular music in the United States. These individual case studies, from reactions to Elvis Presley in Nashville to a portrait of the lesser-known Chicago jazz and rock musician Jeff Parker, enable Holt to develop a multifaceted theory of genre that takes into consideration how discourse and practice, local experience and translocal circulation, and industry and individuals all shape popular music genres in the United States. This book is a much needed addition to studies of genre, as well as a welcome invitation to explore more fully the possibilities for doing ethnography in American popular music studies.

Holt outlines his flexible framework for studying genre in the first chapter, after which he embarks on a series of musical tours of the American past and present that demonstrate the construction and maintenance of, interventions into, and divergences from genre conventions. Each chapter blends history and ethnography and offers a different application of Holt's theory of genre. Chapter 2, "Roots and Refigurations," uses ethnographic material to explore the reception of the soundtrack to the film *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000) as a part of a roots-music revival. Chapters 3 and 4 form a "Double Session" and examine reactions to rock 'n' roll. Holt introduces these two chapters with a concise "Model of Genre Transformation," which uses the emergence of Elvis Presley and rock 'n' roll as an example for understanding how genres change in response to one another. Chapter 3,

Current Musicology

“Country Music and the Nashville Sound,” and chapter 4, “Jazz and Jazz-Rock Fusion,” each supports its historical perspective with present-day interviews, tracing the transformations that took place in country and jazz in response to rock ‘n’ roll. After these historically focused chapters, Holt considers genre in present-day, local contexts in “Double Session II: Urban Boundaries,” which contains chapters 5, “Jeff Parker and the Chicago Jazz Scene,” and chapter 6, “A Closer Look at Jeff Parker and His Music.” These two chapters provide complementary views of a musician who straddles the canyon between rock and jazz, and demonstrate the importance of local identity for the articulation of genre. The final chapter, “Music at the American Borders,” looks at three musical examples whose genre blending leaves them outside what is perceived as “American popular music,” despite having been produced in the United States. In general, the book’s layout works well, as the portraits of genre formation and boundary crossing flow nicely into each other to give a sense of past and present experience.

In developing his framework for reconsidering genre, Holt draws on the contributions of Simon Frith (1996) and Keith Negus (1999), among others, to reassert the importance of genre studies in the face of increasing scholarly concern with hybridity. Central to Holt’s approach is the idea of genre culture, “a concept for the overall identity of the cultural formations in which a genre is constituted” (19). The addition of “culture” to the concept facilitates a holistic approach for comprehending genre formations not only as simple markers of musical style, but as totalities informed by local values and traditions, as well as by national audiences, each of which responds to the influence of broad, historical contingencies. As the above outline of the case studies indicates, Holt endeavors to integrate theories of genre into an exploration of its practiced realities.

To develop his model, Holt draws on both structural linguistics and Bourdieu’s ideas of structured practice to create “explanations of fundamental connections and moments in the trajectory of a genre” (20). Holt’s genre cultures develop from social networks with center and peripheral collectives; they operate through conventions—codes, values, and practices—that can be parsed; and they circulate through mass-media representations. These structural elements provide a means for understanding genre along various axes, and they account for both small- and large-scale cultural interpretations of musical styles. Despite the structuralist approaches that inform his model, Holt’s genre cultures are neither static nor determined. Rather, Holt places emphasis not on the genres themselves—the element most characteristic of a structuralist system—but on their interpretations. He writes, “In sum, categories have little value in themselves. What matters is how they are used and embodied in communicative relations to become structuring forces in musical life” (29).

With this sensitive approach to genres in cultural practice, Holt positions his task from the very beginning as “*understanding* rather than *defining* genres” (8), and most of the book is consistent with this goal. However, the introduction contains a list defining nine separate genres (15–16). The list seems all the more puzzling for what Holt leaves out, most notably the category of “pop music.” Holt writes that pop music is

a category I am reluctant to define as a genre in the strict sense. George Michael, Madonna, Céline Dion, Sugababes, Backstreet Boys, Justin Timberlake, Britney Spears, and other contemporary pop stars specialize in similar forms of production, with professional teams of producers and managers, and their music shares certain conventions and forms a component of certain kinds of collectivity. But the culture has a different social structure, with its heavy focus on mass-media texts and the individual celebrity. It also stands out from genre cultures, if sometimes only in an imagined sense, by reason of its high-volume sales and massive public exposure, which is a source of tension in genre cultures and underground scenes . . . Many artists are attracted to mainstream success, but also to smaller musical spheres and categories that embody a different kind of authenticity and prestige. (17)

If pop music is not a genre, then what is it? I find this analysis troublesome for two reasons. First, it seems to be a slide back toward armchair studies of popular music, in which texts, not people, determine musical meaning for the masses. Second, it reifies the imagined categorical divide between the “real” experiences of genre cultures and underground scenes and the “false” world of pop music. If musicians eschew the “pop” category and/or mainstream success, that is just as much a genre consideration as the blurring of boundaries between jazz and rock; if audiences base their listening choices on mass-mediated texts and celebrity culture, they are still making decisions that help shape the musical styles that constitute “pop.” For these reasons, denying “pop music” standing as a genre seems contradictory to the book’s aim of understanding how people create musical meaning through musical categories.

Despite the problem raised by his description of pop, Holt’s framework provides an excellent entrée into the comparative study of genre across musical styles and a compelling means for confronting the music that mass culture produces. The flexibility and usefulness of his theoretical framework first becomes apparent in chapter 2, “Roots and Reconfigurations,” which introduces Holt’s adroit ability to synthesize the products of mass culture with individual experience and interpretation. As others have noted (e.g., Fox 2004), the success of the film soundtrack to *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* contributed to the construction of a “traditional” American identity based on a sense of nostalgia, an appeal to simpler times. Holt connects the filmmakers’

Current Musicology

use of digital visual techniques to their careful selection of music, arguing that the images and soundtrack fabricate an idealized past that softens the consequences of racism in the early twentieth-century American South. As the chapter expands beyond the scope of the film, Holt surveys reactions to the success of the soundtrack, both in local productions of roots-music discourse and in the national marketing of roots music and “Americana,” a related phenomenon. The examples that Holt uses in this section illustrate the ways that both discourses and consumer goods circulate. In the first example, participants at a small, roots-music night at a San Francisco club “exoticized music from their own country,” cultivating a revival culture that absorbed a number of traditions, including Cajun, bluegrass, and swing, into the category of “roots” (42). In the second example, Holt relates that, following the success of the *O Brother* soundtrack, the marketing representative of one Tower Records store in New York City dedicated a room to roots music and Americana, complete with animatronic musicians and an “object representing the Oracle Chicken.” In contrast, the product manager at a Tower Records store in Chicago dismissed the soundtrack as a novelty, the result of successful marketing rather than a sign of roots music’s popularity as a genre. In the same conversation with Holt, the product manager demonstrated his insider knowledge of roots music by dropping Jimmie Rodgers’s name, reinforcing both the insider/outsider dichotomy and the concern for authenticity in roots music’s genre culture that Holt traces throughout the chapter.

The first “Double Session” examines the pivotal moment in the history of US popular music when rock ’n’ roll emerged in the 1950s. Holt opens with a section entitled “A Model of Genre Transformation” that asks, as one of his interlocutors puts it, “So basically you want to talk about what happened to country music when Elvis came along?” (53). Of course, while Holt is interested in talking about what happened to country music, he is even more interested in finding similarities between the ways that different genre cultures confronted rock ’n’ roll. Holt argues that rock ’n’ roll acted as a catalyst for the transformations of both country and jazz, but rock ’n’ roll’s own formation remains somewhat in the shadows in Holt’s discussion. What made rock ’n’ roll so threatening to both jazz and country? Would rock ’n’ roll’s focus on teenage rebellion have, indeed, appealed to the same audience demographic as country music or jazz? And where is the place of rhythm and blues—whose influence made rock ’n’ roll sound “black” to Holt’s interlocutors (54)—in all this? While it influenced rock ’n’ roll as much as country did, rhythm and blues receives little mention here. In fact, Holt writes nothing about its popular 1950s incarnation, instead mentioning blues (via Charles Keil’s work in Chicago) and soul, a genre that did not

come into its own until the 1960s. The success of major black artists such as Chuck Berry, Little Richard, and Fats Domino on the 1950s pop charts disappears in Holt's paraphrase of Keil: "African American artists did not benefit from the rock 'n' roll boom" (58). Such a statement, while certainly true of Chicago blues, neglects the success of rhythm and blues in the 1950s and flattens out the complicated processes of rock 'n' roll's appropriation of rhythm and blues styles. Further, it diminishes the importance that rhythm and blues artists had in shaping popular music, including rock 'n' roll, and, unfortunately, it reinforces the reductive, segregated historical narratives about rock 'n' roll that have evolved over the years, ironically something Holt writes against. "A Model of Genre Transformation" contains an idea worthy of its own chapter, and Holt would perhaps have contributed even more to the fine discussions of country and jazz that follow if he had further developed this introductory section as a framework for understanding genre formation, and not just an example of the distress that the emergence of a new genre can cause for musicians in other genre cultures.

Chapter 3, "Country Music and the Nashville Sound," examines country music's sonic move toward pop music as a response to the rise of rock 'n' roll. Holt observes that early rock 'n' roll often overlapped with country, and the very name "rockabilly" indexes not just a close connection to country roots but a subgenre of "hillbilly" music. Holt argues that early rock 'n' roll took a significant share of country's audience, forcing its producers to regroup, remarket their music, and reestablish the genre. In this process, the sounds of the fiddle and banjo fell away from country music, leaving it sounding less "authentic" to many traditionalists, but appealing to a slightly older, non-rocking, white crowd who desired smoother vocals and lush, string-laden production styles that refused any musical reference to the kinds of "black" music that were emerging at the time. But I question whether the remarketing of country to presumably older, white audiences is the only difference between country's "authentic" pre-rock days and its Nashville Sound incarnation. In particular, Holt's discussion neglects the implications of gender in this sonic shift. Despite mentioning that earlier iterations of country, namely honky tonk, had appealed to a displaced, "newly urban male subject" (65) (as did rock 'n' roll, at least in its rockabilly form), Holt never considers gender in his discussion of the reformation of country music. Certainly an account of the integration of pop production into country music should include mention of the redirection of the genre toward a white, female audience—still the audience of commercial country today.

Unlike country music, jazz had little to do with rock 'n' roll in the 1950s, the bebop generation already having repositioned the genre as artistic rather than popular. Thus, Holt takes a different approach in chapter 4,

Current Musicology

“Jazz and Jazz-Rock Fusion,” first tracing the disconnect between jazz and rock, and then seeking to understand why a major jazz artist, Miles Davis, would attempt to mix the genres. Holt locates Davis’s decision within a conventional jazz community discourse that continually predicts the death and decline of the genre culture. In this chapter, Holt makes good use of jazz criticism and scholarship to tease out this structure of negative feeling, citing illuminating passages from Nat Hentoff, Ralph Gleason, Albert Goldman, and Eric Hobsbawm. Holt explores how Miles Davis’s *Bitches Brew* (1969), which sold over 500,000 copies, demonstrated the commercial possibilities of fusion, and changed jazz’s response to rock from one of siege to one of attack. Holt subsequently charts the ripple effect this record set in motion, both for Miles Davis and for other jazz artists, who began to include fusion tracks on their own albums.

The second “Double Session” focuses on Jeff Parker and the Chicago jazz scene. Not only do chapters 5 and 6 build on Holt’s discussion of the relationship between jazz and rock music, but they also provide a model for integrating studies of local scenes with larger genre formations. This section volleys a much-needed response to the recent work of David Hesmondhalgh (2005), who has advocated jettisoning the term “scene” in favor of “genre.” As the fine work in these two chapters shows, though both concepts can be problematic and deserve attention as such, the two are not equivalent in use for either popular music scholars or their interlocutors. Chapter 5 explores Chicago jazz as an intensely local scene that contains its own ideologies, exists in the space between jazz and other popular musics, and survives without either national or even local radio airplay. Key to this chapter is an understanding of “scene” as a local formation of a genre culture that creates “a close and fairly straightforward connection between the abstract notion of genre and its concrete relation with practices occurring in a particular place” (117). With this specific, succinct, and useful definition of “scene,” pop music scholarship again is indebted to Holt for bringing out the term’s most common usage among musicians while reasserting its importance for understanding local and translocal relationships to genre.

In chapter 6, “A Closer Look at Jeff Parker and His Music,” Holt applies his theories of genre to the experience of the individual, thereby adding a final element to his structural framework. Jeff Parker may at first seem an odd choice for such narrow focus in the second “Double Session”: he is not a major artist in jazz or in indie rock (his two genres of choice), and, further, he takes part in a jazz scene that is somewhat marginal to mainstream US jazz, which, Holt stresses, focuses on New York City. But, in fact, Holt takes Parker’s position as a midlevel success in a local scene as an opportunity to describe how career musicians use genre to define their own work and

their relationships to music on a daily basis. Holt brings keen insight to this matter through extensive use of interviews with Parker, and integrates the themes of these interviews into his thorough examination of Parker's jazz and indie rock music. Although this chapter is very well written and takes musical culture, performance, and practices into its purview, its lack of attention to the ways that race and class have shaped the music of Jeff Parker (not to mention how they shape Parker's perspective on the music he plays) presents a significant stumbling block. Holt acknowledges that he rarely explored the issue of race with Parker, and he does not raise the issue of class at all. Parker is one of few black men in indie rock, where middle-class, white participants comprise the overwhelming majority, and one is left wondering how race and class influence his experience of the genre. The absence of conversations with Parker about race is especially striking in light of Holt's direct confrontation of Miles Davis's antipathy toward white rock culture in chapter 4. Because race and class are social structures that help to define both jazz and indie rock cultures, they deserve more serious consideration here.

The final chapter, on music at the American borders, raises intriguing questions about how some musical categories become "American" genres and how some music retains the identity of an internal "Other." This chapter uses three different songs—Ricky Martin's "The Cup of Life," Jimmy Peters and the Ring Dance Singers' "J'ai fait tout le tours du pays," and Flaco Jimenez's "Indita mia" (representing Latin pop, Creole *jure*, and Mexican *conjunto*)—to examine what happens to music that comes from the United States' geographical and discursive borderlands. Holt's discussion demonstrates that genre formations involve not only identifications but dis-identifications as well. For the sake of space, I focus here on just one song, Martin's "The Cup of Life." Holt points out that, by employing a blend of Latin and Anglo pop rhythmic conventions, the song refused easy generic categorization and allowed Martin to move between audiences. With this useful musical analysis, Holt builds a case for the importance of genre to understanding social realities as he traces the song's circulation from the World Cup to Martin's performance at President George W. Bush's inauguration. The first use of this song as the 1998 World Cup theme is cause enough for Othering in the US: in marked contrast with the American-as-apple-pie clichés of baseball and football, soccer rarely appears outside the context of Spanish-language television networks, and the World Cup is no exception. The song's subsequent circulation moved it more toward an American audience via prestigious events such as the Grammys. Finally, Holt argues, Martin's controversial performance of the song at the presidential inauguration displayed the difference between "privileged Anglo American and the

domestic Other” (166). These performances suggest that genre boundaries are not just marketing ploys, but reflections of social realities. Holt reinforces this last point throughout the chapter, ending the book with a strong call to consider genre across boundaries as part of a changing social fabric.

In concluding this review, I would like to focus more attention on the book's goal of integrating ethnography and historical approaches for studying popular music's broad categories. Within studies of contemporary popular music, and particularly within the United States, the perceived barriers toward conducting ethnographic research have often become excuses for armchair scholarship of the “I watched a Madonna video, and here's what I think” variety. While a researcher's personal cultural analysis has its place, it adds little to the understanding of the meanings that music and, more importantly for this book, musical categories take on as they circulate among different groups of people. The chapters of Holt's book offer varying amounts of ethnographic detail—and at times I definitely wanted more—but each offers a model for moving between the mass-mediated, large-scale structures typically associated with the marketing of genre categories and the audiences who imbue them with meaning. Further, Holt consistently situates this ethnographic material within history, answering any potential criticisms that ethnography, with its present-day focus, provides too limited a scope for studying genre transformation. With his sophisticated, historically grounded application of ethnographic detail to the seemingly faceless concept of genre, Holt has done popular music studies a great service.

References

- Fox, Aaron A. 2004. “Alternative” to What? *O Brother*, September 11, and the Politics of Country Music. In *Country Music Goes to War*, edited by Charles K. Wolfe and James E. Akenson, 164–91. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky.
- Frith, Simon. 1996. *Performing Rites: On the Value of Popular Music*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hesmondhalgh, David. 2005. Subcultures, Scenes, or Tribes? None of the Above. *Journal of Youth Studies* 8 (1): 21–40.
- Negus, Keith. 1999. *Music Genres and Corporate Cultures*. London and New York: Routledge.