

Timothy D. Taylor. 2012. *The Sounds of Capitalism: Advertising, Music, and the Conquest of Culture*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Reviewed by Ralph Whyte

If some associate Christmas with “Hark! The Herald Angels Sing” or “Jingle Bells,” it takes only a mention of the word “holidays” to set off the chugging rhythmic ostinato of an old earworm in my mind: “Holidays are coming, holidays are coming.” Whether or not this song has convinced me to buy more Coca-Cola at Christmas, it has made an indelible impression on my imagining of the festive season. Music’s power to impart impressions and to make the forgettable maddeningly memorable was recognized by advertisers long before Coca-Cola released its ads of branded trucks traversing winter landscapes. It is the task of Timothy Taylor’s *The Sounds of Capitalism* to detail the history of this field in which musicians, record companies, and advertisers have all interacted.¹ The narrative is largely chronological, although some chapters are organized thematically. The historical account is infused with copious examples, which can be experienced on the companion website, soundsofcapitalism.com. Despite these profuse examples, Taylor steers clear of close readings, preferring to engage with the words of those involved in the world of advertising music. Taylor wears his two hats as historian and ethnographer, drawing on large quantities of trade discourse and numerous interviews: 37 in total, 24 of which he carried out personally. Such a study looks beyond the facts of the history of the business and seeks to understand how participants have understood what they do, not merely as individuals, but en masse. The volume of information Taylor includes towards this end is impressive. It is unsurprising that the book was a decade in the making (xvii).

The first two chapters (1, “Music and Advertising in Early Radio” and 2, “The Classes and the Masses in the 1920s and 1930s”) chart the “pre-jingle” era of radio advertising. During this time advertisers and sponsors would produce entire radio programs; more programs were produced this way than by the networks. Music was a relatively cheap resource for filling broadcast time, but advertisers knew relatively little about the profile of radio audiences and were therefore anxious about picking music audiences would like. One method of selection was to choose music that would give a brand a “personality” or that would “animate” a product (6); for example, the bright timbre of the banjo of the band *Clicquot Club Eskimos* was thought to capture some of the effervescence of Clicquot Club ginger ale.

Faced with uncertainty about who was listening and what music to play, advertisers engaged in market research by asking listeners to write in, even luring them with free photographs of stars. These letters provided researchers with critical data: “types of paper, grammar, spelling, punctuation, and sentence structure” revealed the social profile of a program’s listening public (47).

The third chapter, “The Great Depression and the Rise of the Radio Jingle,” describes the advent of the jingle. Taylor sees early jingles as the first instance of music that was composed specifically for advertising crossing over into the wider popular–music market, as the most popular jingles were sold widely on record and in print. Thus begins an important thread for Taylor: the thesis that since the 1920s the distinction between advertising and creative industries has become increasingly fuzzy. Taylor considers the jingle as a way to sugarcoat the hard–sell tactics that were effected by the Depression. Networks were initially reluctant to sell jingle–length timeslots, but they succumbed and thereby generated the ad–break format as we know it today (87). This is fascinating history, but when Taylor writes that “because of the Depression, advertisers demanded more effective ads for less money” (67), “the Depression” represents a *zeitgeist* or “context” that is assumed to be all–affecting rather than established to be germane. A phenomenon as broad as “the Depression” surely had variegated effects on different industries, different parts of society, and the relationship between retailers and advertisers.

Taylor interrupts his chronology when he reaches the 1950s (4, “Music, Mood, and Television”) in order to focus more intently on the emergence of the rhetoric of emotion and affect in advertising discourse. This marks an important shift around midcentury in ad tactics from emphasizing the attributes of a product to “invad[ing] the subconscious” (110). While the idea of using music to set a mood or emotional tone is present in early film trade discourse, Taylor discovers that those in music and television advertising were slower on the uptake: the first pioneers only began thinking of music in these terms in the late ’50s and early ’60s. Here Taylor references the fashionable Freudianism of the ’50s. Similar to his discussion of the Depression as a context for the hard sell, this connection is roughly rendered: the connection between the new emphasis on “mood” in the advertising world and Freud, Freudianism, or psychoanalysis is suggested but not explored in any detail. Despite this, the larger point is clear: the language of emotion became the primary means of communicating about and classifying music—for clients of music production companies describing what they wanted as well as for record labels trying to make their offerings easily searchable (121–23).

Chapter 5, “The Standardization of Jingle Production in the 1950s and After,” continues the chronology of the jingle. Reaching its happy heyday between the ’50s and the ’70s, the jingle became increasingly professionalized and sonically standardized—or, to use Taylor’s term, “rationalized.” The unique jingle style during this period drew from popular music yet remained distinct from it: consisting of choir with or without soloist, it became known as the “Madison Avenue Choir” sound (138). Taylor follows the jingle’s story until its death knell sounded in the ’80s and ’90s; he describes how the jingle’s decline came about largely because of its inability “to sound like anything other than something that was industrially produced”: the cheerfulness sounded formulaic, canned, and inauthentic to the younger generation (142). The irony of this distinction between “inauthentic” industrially produced jingle music and the “real” music of industrially produced pop is not lost on Taylor, who makes reference to Jean Baudrillard’s writings on the untenability of distinctions between reality and fabrication in the postmodern world (145); nevertheless, the distinction is crucial to a trend that dominates the final four chapters—the advertising industry’s adoption of the “cool and hip” as a governing aesthetic framework.

The first two of these four chapters (6, “The Discovery of Youth in the 1960s” and 7, “Consumption, Corporatization, and Youth in the 1980s”) deal with the advertising industry’s “discovery of youth” and the symbiotic relationships between advertising, youth, and counterculture from the ’60s to the ’80s. On the one hand, youth and counterculture shaped the advertising industry as baby boomers took up positions in advertising agencies; on the other, the industry was able to co-opt youth and counterculture, even if that counterculture had originally been intended to serve as an arena for critique of and resistance to the very forces that engulfed it (176). In musical terms this was manifested in the displacement of the traditional jingle by the licensing of pre-existing songs. Subsequently, the sound of rock-and-roll gradually infiltrated into advertisements despite initial resistance from advertising executives who feared the possibly deleterious effects of “low-class” music (151). Part of this shift Taylor attributes to the arrival in 1981 of MTV, whose significance “can’t be overstated,” although his eschewing of close reading leaves more to be said about this confluence of styles (185).² The precedence of music in MTV’s audiovisual nexus certainly furthered the favor of pre-existing pop. By the neoliberal years of the mid to late ’80s, enormous sponsorship deals were being made between advertisers and pop stars: Pepsi paid Michael Jackson \$5 million to appear in TV commercials in 1984 and paid him \$15 million more for further appearances three years later (187). This leads Taylor to the conclu-

sion that “the advertising and music industries were becoming more like businesses in this era, more exclusively concerned with profits” (193). In contrast, Taylor provides the case of Nike’s appropriation of the Beatles’ “Revolution” for an ad campaign in 1987–88: the resultant uproar and litigation demonstrates the dissent sometimes provoked by this new direction in advertising (199–202).

The embrace between Taylor’s protagonists—the music and advertising industries—tightens further in the penultimate chapter (8, “Conquering [the] Culture”). Taylor argues that these changes amount not just to the “conquest of cool,” as Thomas Frank (1997) has argued, but the “conquest of culture” (Taylor, 206). Taylor provocatively proclaims “there is no popular music that is not, to varying degrees, advertising music” (8). What this means is that the advertising industry has infiltrated the world of popular music production and dissemination. No longer does advertising music mimic or lag behind popular music styles; advertising professionals are at the forefront not only of trendspotting but also increasingly of trendsetting. At the same time, Taylor notes, similarly to Bethany Klein (2009) in her *As Heard on TV: Popular Music in Advertising*, that popular musicians fear less than ever that they might be considered “sell outs” for commercial tie-ins (229). A risk-averse music industry—affected by the decline of the influence of MTV, the loss of local radio, and declining sales—has left a void for upcoming musicians that advertisers have partly filled.

The conclusion that a “conquest of culture” (the book’s subtitle) has taken place, which Taylor recognizes as reminiscent of Theodor Adorno, may seem inevitable and pessimistic (5). If there is no popular music, not already embedded in commerce, does it really constitute a “conquest”? And while Bethany Klein has suggested that musicians themselves have shouldered disproportionate blame for the increased influence of ad men in the creation and dissemination of their work, does “conquest” too much portray musicians as passive when the reconfiguration of cultural production may in fact provide them with new professional and creative opportunities (Klein 2009, 126–127)? Nevertheless, it raises stimulating questions: for example, if selling out to advertisers no longer carries the same stigma for musicians, what does it now mean for a popular musician to be authentic? Which musicians and audiences remain hostile to advertising arrangements? And do advertising professionals maintain their influence in a world where broadcast media is decreasingly prominent?

The conclusion is a theoretical consideration of advertisers as a social group who populate the “field of cultural production” that is advertising music (231). Taylor equates this group with Bourdieu’s “new petite bourgeoisie” and discusses their new position as arbiters of taste in an environ-

ment where commercial and aesthetic considerations have intersected and the music and advertising industries have become so intermingled as to be inseparable (232). Of particular interest in this chapter is Taylor's discussion of the rhetoric of "creativity" in the advertising world, which proves to be an excellent example of the type of insight discourse analysis can offer. While the rest of his narrative deals primarily with the commercialization of music, this chapter presents the flipside: the aestheticization of advertising. As with Bourdieu's "new petite bourgeoisie," the advertising professionals of Taylor's study do not equate legitimacy with highbrow culture but rather with the "hip" and the "cool" (237). Even though those who work in advertising seldom consider what they do as art, they understand it as a "creative" endeavor (240). The word "creative" therefore operates within the advertising industry as a justification for doing the otherwise unpalatable job of selling "needless commodities"; it provides a positive self-image for advertising practitioners who self-identify in opposition to those who "merely" work in the humdrum business/financial/commercial worlds (245).

The theoretical ambition of this conclusion is welcome. Although Taylor's prose is laudably jargon-free, sometimes the book starts to feel like a series of examples and interviews, a feeling that could have been mitigated by the inclusion of a few more of the aperçus that litter this final chapter. It is possible that Taylor is aiming his book beyond a small academic market, and the book is certainly clearly written and highly readable, while many of his anecdotes add all the pep and sparkle of Clicquot Club ginger ale.

Notes

1. Taylor compliments and considerably expands upon the historical purview of Bethany Klein's (2009) *As Heard on TV: Popular Music in Advertising*. Research on earlier instances of music-advertising interaction includes work on the business practices of Tin Pan Alley (Suisman 2009) and, even more relevantly since it implicates music in the sale of non-musical goods, the practice of musical performance in late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century department stores (Tyler 1992).

2. In *Unruly Media: YouTube, Music Video, and the New Digital Cinema* Carol Vernallis (2013) asserts that the influence of music video has transformed the aesthetic of YouTube and contemporary cinema, but Taylor's history points to a much earlier convergence with advertising. In her early study of MTV, *Rocking Around the Clock: Music Television, Post-modernism, and Consumer Culture* (1987), E. Ann Kaplan considers the videos of MTV to be in essence a form of advertising but without examining any specific connections with the forms or personnel of advertising.

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References

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