

Book Reviews

The Sounds of Social Change. Edited by R. Serge Denisoff and Richard A. Peterson. Chicago: Rand McNally, 1972.

The history of popular music in America has undergone a number of distinct periods as distinguished not only by the style and lyrics of the music but also by the role of the music industry and the technology it utilizes - both of which are related.

Popular music from the early 18th century to 1890 was characterized by the "broadsheet" and the ballad form which, respectively, were a form of news dealing with topical matters and sentimental ballads often portraying with realism the ills of the time such as slavery, alcoholism, and the pains of industrialization.

Tin Pan Alley (1890-1954) was the second major era of American popular music where tunes were turned out (first on sheet music and later on shellac 78's) according to innocuous formulae by an oligopoly of writers and publishers located largely in New York City.

The third dominant period of American pop music is the present rock era which began with the recording of "Rock around the Clock" by Bill Haley and the Comets in 1955 and which has been charged with having a substantial effect on the values of American youth and consequently their life styles.

Within each of these periods pop music has not been a homogeneous whole but rather it has been marked by the dominant popular style and the presence of other styles such as jazz, folk music of the 1930's and 1940's, rhythm and blues, and rock. These different styles have arisen within certain strata and subgroups of the population and in turn have been used to appeal to these groups. A question of some interest concerns the conditions under which we have seen these music styles become increasingly popular and acceptable with the dominant white, middle-class audience. Folk style music, for example, was little known outside left-wing circles until its popularization by the mass media in the late 1950's.

The foregoing account represents only a brief sketch of the articles included in this volume. In the Introduction the editors describe the book as an anthology focusing attention on the "uses of music as an opiate, weapon, and/or harbinger of social change" in the hope of stimulating further research in the area. The articles selected represent a methodologically and ideologically wide spectrum ranging from historical analysis of protest songs to content analysis of recent pop music lyrics and from radical right-wing harangue of rock to the charge that Dylan's recent music represents a sellout of the left. Specifically the topics dealt with in the five chapters are as follows: 1) the sociopolitical context of music - its meaning and uses for various subgroups such as labor, youth, and Negroes; 2) the deliberate use of music in specific social movements; 3) an assessment of rock music and its role in the counterculture; 4) changing musical tastes; and 5) relationships between musicians and the music industry. The chapters are prefaced by short introductions that neither summarize the articles nor, I feel, adequately discuss theoretical and interpretive problems. Another shortcoming is the absence of any articles on the sociological importance of the generation (the age gap) for the discussion of popular music and the differences in tastes between youth and adults.

There are several points that should be made both in regard to this particular reader and to the sociological study of music in general. 1) Although changes in styles and forms of music occur in connection with social, political, and economic changes (the nature of this connection must be specified), the question arises as to how much change in musical genre is due the effort of the artist to expand, revise, and move beyond the existing musical forms to express his ideas. Musical ideas as ideas in general do not happen in a vacuum. But, the situation from which the artist receives his tools and stimulation is an artistic world as well as a political and economic one. All of this is by way of saying that we must be careful in making statements about why a particular change or innovation occurs. For example, H. F. Mooney in an article indicates that Benny Goodman was able to hire the Negro pianist Teddy Wilson in the late 1930's because Wilson's style was "urbane, light;" and "polished." Ignoring for the moment the problems inherent in making such judgements of any musical style, it is likely that these qualities account in part for Wilson's acceptance by a white audience which is Mooney's point. But, to say that the white audience was somehow responsible for Wilson's proficiency and improvisation is another matter. 2) A more crucial concern is the difficulty in interpreting and making judgements about styles of music and performance of it. On what basis can we say that the music of the Rolling Stones is more emotional than the ballads of Tony Bennett and then use this judgment to account for the popularity of the Rolling Stones? It would appear that the methodology currently employed by labeling theorists in criminology would be of relevance here.

In summary, this reader is interesting and fulfills the editors' intention to raise questions, but it lacks adequate discussion of theoretical and methodological issues and therefore lacks integration. Combined with a good text, The Sounds of Social Change could be used in an upper level course on the sociology of music and the arts.

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Street Arabs and Gutter Snipes: The Pathetic and Humorous Side of Young Vagabond Life in Great Cities, with Records of Work for their Reclamation. By George C. Needham. Boston: D. L. Guersey, 1884.

George C. Needham's Street Arabs and Gutter Snipes¹ is two things: it is, first, a kaleidoscopic portrait of slum life in the American cities of the late 19th century with particular attention to neglected and destitute children; and it is, too, both an evangelical tract for social reform (Satan lays the snare, and children are his victims)² and a valuable chronicle of contemporary efforts in dealing with the problems of the urban poor.

Committed to the view that "child reclamation is a more important consideration than adult reformation," Needham intended his book to be both a plea for neglected and destitute children, and a protest against social conditions:

This book is a plea on behalf of neglected and destitute children, found chiefly in our great cities, and too often educated in crime by unnatural parents or vicious guardians; or who, through the stress