



Andreas Häger (ed.): *Religion and Popular Music: Artists, Fans, and Cultures*. Bloomsbury Academic, 2018, 263 pp.

Religion and Popular Music: Artists, Fans, and Cultures is one of the latest books to be published in the Bloomsbury Studies in Religion and Popular Music series. As its title suggests, the volume is structured in three parts, exploring artists, fans, and cultures. As such, it succeeds in covering quite a broad range of different contexts and central areas of interest in the study of religion and popular music more generally. Most of the contributors have backgrounds in disciplines other than the study of religions.

The editor's Introduction fulfils its basic function of situating the volume as a whole within a broader interdisciplinary field of research. However, it also attempts to directly relate the study of religion and popular music to several broader sociological debates on contemporary transformations in the (Western) religious field. While this attempt should be commended, the more precise connections of these broader debates with the contemporary relationship between religion and popular music unfortunately remain only imprecisely and vaguely articulated throughout Häger's discussion. The theoretical discussion included in the Introduction therefore seems a little odd, especially since we find few traces of any of the perspectives discussed in any of the volume's individual contributions.

Adrian-Mario Gellel's opening chapter in the 'artists' part explores the prevalence of religious themes and imagery in the music and music videos of Katy Perry through the lens of symbols. As is appropriate for an artist-focused exploration, the chapter devotes a fair amount of attention to Perry's religious/spiritual background. Most of the actual analysis focuses on the music video for the song 'Wide Awake' and the ways in which its bricolage-type use of religious symbolism can be argued to reflect changes in Perry's personal religious/spiritual interests and inclinations. Chapter 2, by Angela M. Nelson, explores black gospel music in light of the life and production of gospel singer CeCe Winans. Notwithstanding some terminological confusion, the chapter convincingly highlights the intricate boundary work required from artists who are faced with constant pressures to reconcile their identities as representatives of a particular form of religious-cultural musical expression with the entrapments of 'secular' celebrity. Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the prevalence of religious themes and symbolism in the music of Judas Priest and Ozzy Osbourne, both major representatives of the heavy metal genre. Brian Froese's exploration of the Christian themes and symbolism in the musical production of Judas Priest simply provides what can only be described as a very general and highly speculative interpretation of the content of some of the band's lyrics. The chapter also completely

fails to engage with the by now quite extensive body of previous scholarship on the relationship between religion and heavy metal music. Michael J. Gilmour's exploration of the religious themes encountered in the solo production of Ozzy Osbourne follows a largely similar path. Almost completely devoid of any real analysis, the chapter reads more like a fragmented collection of personal musings than a scholarly text.

The second part, about 'fans', opens with Eloísa Martín's genuinely original and engaging account and analysis of the highly devoted fan culture surrounding the late Argentinian cumbia singer Gilda. However, while the chapter undoubtedly makes a valuable contribution to music fandom research, it only deals in passing with issues related to religion/spirituality. Chapter 6, by Sabina Hadzibulic, explores Nick Cave fandom in Serbia. The chapter illustrates how Serbian fans often perceive Nick Cave as a religious 'educator', and how his treatment of religion-related issues provides them with a valuable source of inspiration for personal religious reflection. However, while the title of the chapter might suggest that it is based on more extensive ethnographic fieldwork among Serbian Nick Cave fans, it emerges that it is based on Skype interviews with just five informants. Chapter 7, by Carla Schriever, brings us to what is termed the 'para-religiosity' of Prince fandom. In light of the views of a small number of European Prince fans, Schriever sets out to

explain fandom as a 'para-religious and secular practice in a world centered around the fulfillment of individual needs' (p. 108). This results in an account that engages in (sometimes highly) confusing conceptual acrobatics as part of a more general effort to render fandom an essentially religious or 'religion-like' practice. For example, Schriever both unproblematically and uncritically approaches fandom as a type of 'worship' and 'devotion', fans as 'believers' and 'devotees', and Prince as their 'para-religious' or 'spiritual' 'leader', and even 'Messiah' (p. 111). The author's un-reflexive employment of such concepts and categories results in an analysis that is far from convincing from a study of religions perspective.

The opening chapter of the 'cultures' part by David-Emil Wickström provides an interesting and focused discussion of the main ways in which a particular type of Russian rock music has come to intersect with Russian Orthodoxy and the current Russian political establishment. Through his analysis of the production of Russkii rok artist Konstantin Kinchev, Wickström persuasively shows that popular music can develop into a powerful medium for communicating and bolstering a particular brand of religion-infused nationalist sentiment and 'restorative nostalgia'. Chapter 9, by Thomas Bossius, turns to the presence of religious themes in Swedish country music. While this is a truly original and promising choice of genre and context, the

chapter mainly focuses on the ambivalent stance of Swedish country music artists towards the inclusion of religious themes in their lyrics. As such, the chapter arguably provides more of an analysis of artists than it does of 'cultures'. Somewhat strangely, however, the analysis focuses almost exclusively on examples from lyrics, reviews, and artist biographies from the early to mid-1980s. While the chapter contains some interesting observations, one can certainly question their validity for the present.

In Chapter 10 Jim Donaghey offers an excellently and engagingly written analysis of the intersection between the punk scene and religion in Indonesia. The chapter is based on extensive ethnographic fieldwork in several locations throughout the country. Donaghey provides a solid account of the sustained and frequently religiously motivated repression to which the genre of punk has been subjected over a long period. Against this backdrop, he proceeds to account for Indonesian punks' attitudes towards religion, including punks who, in spite of the widespread religiously motivated persecution of the genre, continue to self-identify as Muslim. Chapter 11, by Andreas Häger, explores the use of Bob Dylan's music in the context of Protestant church services in Sweden and the United States. As such, it provides the volume's only exploration of the appropriation of popular music in an established institutional religious setting. The analysis covers both the services in

and of themselves and the broader discourses surrounding them, both justifying and critical. Chapter 12, by Melanie Takahashi, finally brings us to the topic of religion and electronic dance music. The chapter devotes much space to a discussion of the changing character of the DJ following the mainstreaming of EDM and the increasing democratization of access to music production technology. However, apart from a brief discussion of EDM and 'possession trance', the chapter contains few if any references to issues specifically related to religion. The chapter therefore seems a little misplaced and would have been better suited to another kind of volume.

Taken as a whole, the volume can be described as a highly uneven collection of essays that diverge greatly from one another with respect to originality, sufficient grounding in previous literatures in the field, and stringency and sophistication with regards to the employment of key analytical concepts and categories. Where the themes and contexts covered are concerned, the volume contains a few welcome contributions focusing on hitherto largely unexplored artists, genres, and cultural and religious contexts. However, it also contains several contributions that rather dully choose to go down some old and well-trodden paths in terms of both focus and analysis. Readers more solidly acquainted with the field will probably therefore be just as impressed by the volume's stronger contributions as they are disappointed by the weaker ones. A

volume of this kind should ideally strive to both advance the research in the field and provide a useful resource for teaching and instruction purposes. In spite of some strong contributions, the overall verdict must be that this volume falls a little short in both these respects.

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