

humor and the humility of self-criticism that shine through the pages of these books, the inconsistencies serve to humanize and so render more approachable what might otherwise be almost too much for a reader to digest: the sheer richness of Stephen Sondheim's art, insight, and legacy. For all of it, hats off.

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I Don't Sound Like Nobody: Remaking Music in 1950s America. By Albin Zak. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2010.

As someone who studies modern popular music of the United States, I am often asked to recommend readings about the early years of rock and roll. Scholars and general readers alike are especially fascinated with the chaos of the music industry and the new sounds that emerged during the 1950s. Although it seems that there should be a mountain of good musicological work on the emergence of rock during the 1950s, unfortunately, there is not. Whereas there are many book-length studies that deal with topics germane to the birth of rock and roll, as a musicologist I have never been comfortable with the available literature in this area. Published work falls into a number of highly populated categories. Peter Wicke, Simon Frith, and many others have written important works engaging cultural aspects of rock's emergence.¹ Philip Ennis's sociological study explains important trends in the music industry against the backdrop of public taste.² Glenn Altschuler's historical treatment and the *Rolling Stone* book *Rock of Ages* from the mid-1980s are centered mostly on artists and age-old stories passed down from fans via the rock press of the late 1960s.³ As interesting as these depictions are within their respective fields, until the publication of Albin Zak's *I Don't Sound Like Nobody* there has not been a study of rock's emergence that at once satisfied my questions surrounding historical context, musical upheaval, and industry change.⁴ Zak's study is a remarkable book that should serve as a model for the musicological community of how to approach popular music history from a perspective that considers culture and music equally.

¹ Peter Wicke, *Rock Music: Culture, Aesthetics, and Sociology* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1990); and Simon Frith, *Sound Effects: Youth, Leisure, and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1981).

² Philip H. Ennis, *The Seventh Stream: The Emergence of Rocknroll in American Popular Music* (Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1992).

³ Glenn C. Altschuler, *All Shook Up: How Rock 'n' Roll Changed America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); and Ed Ward, Geoffrey Stokes, and Ken Tucker, *Rock of Ages: The Rolling Stone History of Rock and Roll* (New York: Rolling Stone Press/Summit Books, 1986).

⁴ Another study worth consideration is Tim J. Anderson, *Making Easy Listening: Material Culture and Postwar American Recording* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006).

Moreover, Zak's consideration of the sounds of popular music are novel, driving the trajectory of his narrative as the book tracks the emergence of rock and roll in the 1950s.

Like Zak's previous work in the field, the thesis of *I Don't Sound Like Nobody* is contingent on the role of recordings, or the emergence of what he persistently calls "records."⁵ In his previous book, *The Poetics of Rock*, Zak spelled out for a musicological audience the process of creating records, and his work on the topic has become foundational in a new subfield concerned with the agency of musical producers and engineers in the electronic age and the ontology of recorded rock as text. The scope of recording's role is much larger in *I Don't Sound Like Nobody*, however, as Zak systematically shows how recordings were the basis for the rock and roll revolution. Over the course of seven chapters, Zak depicts a history in which recordings were central to a host of small sonic, cultural, and industry-wide changes that collectively formed a new rock and roll movement. Debates concerning radio, copyright, union policy, the emergence of sonic novelty unachievable in live performance, and off-the-beaten path artists and producers achieving overnight success against the current of the mainstream are central to Zak's work.

Further, the study considers the emergence of technologists as vital agents responsible for creating new sonic possibilities. According to Zak, this work was at the heart of a challenge to racial and ethnic stereotyping within existing music industry marketing categories during the 1950s. Moreover, a new focus on the recording empowered a generation of performers as songwriters using new sonic-based techniques, and set the stage for vast changes in the creation of popular music after the 1950s. In other words, according to Zak, the emergence of rock and roll in the mid-1950s was directly contingent upon a new method of creating and consuming recordings, and focusing on records is the key to understanding the newfound power of rock and roll.

The story portrayed in this book considers in a serious manner a wider-than-usual pop landscape during the 1950s from which rock and roll materialized. In-depth coverage of novelty songs, mainstream crooners, doo-wop, girl groups, and largely forgotten vocalists like Johnnie Ray and Buddy Knox provides a fascinating depiction of the various styles of music that co-existed on the pop charts during the 1950s. Zak also gives significant attention to notable producers of the era, such as Mitch Miller and Bill Putnam, agents rarely considered in academic histories of popular music. Unlike many studies of popular music of the 1950s, Zak's work allows the reader to contextualize nearly all of the most popular music of the decade, and he doesn't judge music that falls outside the rock and roll canon as inauthentic or unworthy of our scholarly attention. In this manner, and as indicated in its title, Zak's book is really about the popular music of the 1950s, the tenor of which changed so radically mid-decade. Through the course of the book, rock and roll *becomes* the focus of Zak's study, as he depicts how it slowly infiltrated the popular

⁵ See Albin Zak, *The Poetics of Rock: Cutting Tracks, Making Records* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001).

music marketplace in the United States and quickly formed an ironic new tradition. This approach, in which rock and roll is viewed alongside many other vibrant styles of popular music, differs radically from many accounts of the birth of rock and roll. As a result of this balanced portrayal, Zak offers the most compelling depiction in the literature of the radical changes in musical production and reception ushered in by rock and roll.

As any critically minded author is aware, there is no single history of a movement as culturally and artistically dense as the rise of rock and roll. Even though Zak's account is unsurpassed in my estimation, there is certainly room for more work on the topic. In navigating such a detailed web of people and songs, for example, Zak for the most part eschews a critical lens outside of a focus on recording technology. Within the context of the 1950s, there are myriad topics that would add to his account, including further investigation of class and social politics. Zak's source material is almost exclusively recordings, artist biographies, and industry publications. Various aspects of the changes to the popular music landscape during the 1950s may certainly be illuminated in the future through further investigation of both audio and paper primary sources, such as outtake and live recordings, legal documents, and personal papers. In many cases, these materials are only now emerging in scholarly libraries, and greater access will only enhance our understanding of the topic.

There is also no commentary on live performance in *I Don't Sound Like Nobody*, perhaps the most glaring strain of inquiry missing from a book on popular music during the 1950s. To be sure, this absence is a direct result of Zak's focus on the use and effect of recordings. Still, without a proper contextual understanding readers may confuse the nature of Zak's argument, presuming that as recordings increased in vitality throughout the decade, live performance became less important to the history of rock and roll. Zak has certainly not argued that live performance was unimportant, but without discussion of the Chitlin' Circuit, long strings of one-nighters, honky-tonks, barn dances, fraternity parties, and television appearances—all of which helped to “remake” the music of the era in addition to recordings—this study is necessarily limited in its focus.

I Don't Sound Like Nobody is an inspiring study, not only for its content but also for what it represents in the field. As a second generation of popular music scholars matures, Zak has raised the discourse significantly, providing a model for using music and dense historical inquiry as the basis for understanding a complex musical and cultural movement. His thesis—that records were the basis for a musical revolution—is one that forces us to consider music as the center of the rock and roll movement rather than politics, geography, or generational issues, themes so often at the heart of popular music histories. Zak's work ranks with the most important musicological works of the current era and, far more than recommended, it should be required reading for any scholar of popular music.

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