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*Top 40 Democracy: The Rival Mainstreams of American Music*. By Eric Weisbard. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014.

There's a certain type of radio listener who tunes in to a given hits station for reasons beyond mere guilty (or non-guilty) pleasure. This listener takes it in, with sincerity, as a cultural news report, observing the latest production trends pulsating from the speakers, processing the lyrical content as illustrative glimpses into fashionable modes of expression, and ruminating on how the vocals perhaps demonstrate current timbres of persuasion. The listener keeps tuning in, notwithstanding recurring grievances. I'm one of those listeners—I tune in regularly for both pleasure and curiosity, and I've also got my grievances, especially the persistence of the I–V–vi–IV chord progression, often reshuffled as vi–IV–I–V. Anyone who's had to ride in the car with me knows I've categorized the numerous tracks that use it as "wowy" (an acronym for U2's "With or Without You"). Every era has its wowys, though. The 1950s, when Top 40 materialized as a U.S. national principle, had its I–vi–IV–V, which now happens to thrive on contemporary norteño stations.

You likely have a few of your own radio annoyances, but complaining about them is like protesting the weather. "When a bunch of songs sound alike, for a time," says Eric Weisbard, in his groundbreaking new book, *Top 40 Democracy*, "that is not a problem, it's a history lesson" (265). So, too, is Weisbard's book, which "reclaims the musical center" of pop music in the United States as a subject worth studying and tangles with its multiplicity of mainstreams that have become, as he puts it, pop's "more lasting story" (24). Commercial radio's pop music is a subject most scholars have made a point of tuning out, but Weisbard's book will likely inspire more breakdowns in resistance. Foremost among his achievements in *Top 40 Democracy* is a convincing showcase of how radio formats—the programming strategies, values, or philosophies of a station—act as crucial components in our understanding of how popular music works.

Radio formats are systems that "deploy genres," as opposed to being genres themselves, and because they zero in on an array of specific demographics, they demand a diversity of interpretive approaches that go beyond such simplistic concepts as "rockism" or "poptimism." Throughout the book, Weisbard even uses "format" as an adjective in describing specific songs, such as Dolly Parton's "format anthem" from 1974, "I Will Always Love You" (89). The word "crossover" might have done the trick before *Top 40 Democracy* in designating the song as separate from the more standard "country" of her previous hit output, but in the pop music analysis of the future, which will take a closer accounting of radio, "format" is the more precise word.

The book's five central chapters provide case studies corresponding to each of the five major strands of "pop multiplicity" spawned by commercial music radio. In the chapter called "It's *Whose* Thing?" the Isley Brothers figure in as decades-long journeymen across the complicated terrain of "race, rock and radio" (30). They

applied "format thinking" to "stretch categories and unite music with publics," ultimately symbolizing R&B's racial unity in the midst of fragmenting African American identities (49). The next chapter ("Duets with Modernity") focuses on Dolly Parton, who is shown to be ever media-savvy and able to diversify her image, but never at the expense of her traditional appeal. She appears as a model player in the evolution of the centrist country format—separate from the country genre—into a profitable pop outpost. Chapter 3 ("Contemporary Adults"), which is devoted to middle of the road (MOR) and adult contemporary (AC), relies on Herb Alpert's A&M Records. It looks at Alpert's own emergence as a top-selling, non-rock faux-mariachi and then combs through the rising-falling trajectories of such A&M AC poster children as the Carpenters within a format that acted as a "counterweight" to the "ideological tendencies" of rock, R&B, and country (154).

Chapter 4 ("Madman Across the Water"), on Elton John, is central, like the jewel on the bridge of one of the British singer–songwriter's opulent pairs of sunglasses. It traces his reliance on the "novel inclusiveness" of the American Top 40 format, with its "coded messages," as the ideal means for him to develop his trademark flamboyant, good-time stage persona (190–93). Always more successful in the United States than at home, he progressed from rock to glam to Top 40's "rhetoric of classlessness and democratizing consumerism," symbolically aligning at the height of his seventies fame with "gay, feminist and black freedom movements" (171). The final extended case study, in chapter 5 ("The Wrath of the Buzzard"), finds Weisbard sorting through the files of the longtime WMMS program manager John Gorman, whose legendary Cleveland station demonstrated a keener understanding of rock's potential for mass appeal than most. This work launches Weisbard's larger investigation of how album-oriented rock outlets strove to turn the authenticity-conscious format into a lucrative enterprise that could cut across class lines. Refuting familiar rockist arguments concerning the music's apparent dilution as airwave product, Weisbard reminds us that "rock radio was commercial from the beginning, only shifting in tone as the audience expanded from a version of class to a version of mass" (199). This WMMS chapter especially serves as a model for researching an industry with notoriously ephemeral archives that are nonetheless rich with cultural information when they surface.

In addition to its reliance on primary sources such as Gorman's personal archives, *Top 40 Democracy* also serves as a practical synthesis of existing scholarship. That being so, readers who dip in with the expectation of the quick buzz Top 40 formats actually peddle may find themselves grappling with more than they thought was possible. But the rewards of the grapple are many, and scholars who are accustomed to denser reading will likely enjoy the journalistic undertone in the voice of Weisbard, the erstwhile pop music critic. (Before taking an American Studies professorship at the University of Alabama and serving as the organizer of the annual EMP Pop Conference, he worked as a senior editor at *Spin* and music editor at the *Village Voice*.) A recurring take-home message this Voice of Weisbard delivers both outright and implicitly concerns the "trap that a manufactured Top 40 Democracy sets for all critics: our antipathy to packaged sound, to format callousness, always seems to spring from self-congratulatory entitlement" (265). Are these words an endorsement for unreserved celebration of all hit radio output? No. Rather they are

a call for a moratorium on using the "why isn't it the way *I* want it?" stance as a starting point.

A stronger consideration of formatting in conversations and scholarship about popular music is precisely what can help us steer around downward-slope conceptions that usually lead to unproductive cul-de-sacs labeled "payola," "commercialism," or "growing older." Closer analysis of formats, as Weisbard has shown, can shine an ultraviolet light, revealing hidden complexities in the pop we care enough about to bemoan. We'd also do well, as he recommends, to note the extent to which formats have participated in the creation of alliances, in spite of what the term "market segmentation" suggests. In the final chapter of *Top 40 Democracy,* Weisbard addresses the question of traditional radio's continued availability, pointing out how changes in music delivery, including internet radio, have actually resulted in a resurgence of formatting and crossover pop. Their staying power—and Weisbard's book—point to untold future studies of how formats interact with humanity on a global, multimedia scale. Here's hoping, at the very least, for a resulting bump in historical radio research.

Kim Simpson

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