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BOOK REVIEWS

Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate. Edited by Christopher J. Washburne and Maiken Derno. New York: Routledge, 2004.

"Bad taste is real taste, of course," writes Dave Hickey in his wonderful book of essays *Air Guitar*, "and good taste is the residue of someone else's privilege."[1] His immediate topic is Liberace, about whom he wouldn't have bothered writing if he hadn't seen in his subject something worth explicating: specifically, how a deniable discourse of theatrical transgression helped alter sexual and musical history, how rhinestones and foppery were "the tools with which Liberace took the 'rhetoric of the closet' public, demonstrated the power of its generous duplicity, and changed the world."[2] There is no implication that Hickey sits down every evening to replay Liberace's records, or that he cares whether anyone else does so. But as he guides us through a world of knowing winks and sexual panic, critical attacks and popular adulations, what cuts through like a familiar theme swathed in arpeggios is Hickey's enormous admiration for the complexities and creativity of Liberace and the culture that produced him, needed him, and sometimes needed not to seem to need him. The artifice—the badness, if you will—was real because of the complex fantasies, desires, and fears with which it engaged. Not to like Liberace is everyone's right, but not to take him seriously is to exercise "someone else's privilege," to choose distance from and disinterest in who we all are and what we do, under cover of good taste.

The editors of *Bad Music* deny at the outset that any music is bad as a result of its inherent features (except in the sense of technical incompetence, which is not what they mean to address), claiming rather to be interested in how musics are positioned discursively, how they are used coercively (paradigmatically, in the elevator), and how we might be simultaneously attracted and repelled by the same music. But at the same time they disrupt this framing with their references to "the constant regurgitating drone of the same formulaic pop song" (1); "the bad, the spoiled, and the vapid musics of our everyday lives" (5); and, most peculiarly, to musics that "invite disdain and disapprobation" (5), a formulation that strangely personifies music and obscures critical agency, in effect, blaming the victim.

The elevation of judgment over understanding excuses many of the contributors from having to deal with the sorts of cultural complexities that fascinate writers like Dave Hickey. Simon Frith cites Pat Boone as obviously bad, just as Aaron Fox does Kenny G, and so neither takes seriously the question of what millions of people have valued about those artists. The underlying message is not critical but casually misanthropic: people who like such bad music are stupid. Frith has been arguing for years, and does so again here, that writing about music is a matter of judgment, and that "judgment is, by its nature, an attempt to persuade other

[1] Dave Hickey, *Air Guitar: Essays on Art & Democracy* (Los Angeles: Art Issues Press, 1997), 54.
[2] Ibid., 59.

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listeners of the rightness of one's own responses" (33). Probably Frith, as a critic and sociologist, doesn't realize it, but this is awfully close to what we musicologists used to call "music appreciation," which was premised on the expertise of the scholar, the ignorance of the unwashed masses, and the presumably ennobling effects of being touched by the German Masters. When Frith does ask what people want from music, what qualities they are *not* getting when they dub music "bad," he comes up with "truth, taste, and intelligence," which cannot help but suggest that anyone who actually likes such music is attracted to lies, garbage, and idiocy. A critic can go ahead and say that, but I'd like to think that a scholar, and even more an intellectual, can be expected to attend more scrupulously to cultural complexities.

Aaron Fox's analysis of country music's badness as a "cultural logic" is much more sophisticated and infinitely more sympathetic. I found myself wishing he knew more music history, though, when I read: "All popular music is, to some extent, 'bad' music in the sense that disposability is essential to the commercial cycle that organizes music industries" (52). The implicit comparison would seem to be with music that stands the test of time, yet Bach's cantatas and Armstrong's Hot Five records alike were meant to be ephemeral—that is, powerfully meaningful in a particular time and place, with no expectation that they would or should appear elsewhere—until they were repositioned discursively, through a great deal of effort, as immortal (for now). I get the feeling that Fox may have stuck a bit too closely to what his informants told him and not thought enough about the kinds of explanations that people don't tend to offer, sometimes even to themselves. "Self-loathing," "embracing what you know is bad and bad for you," and "good because it's all bad" seem less illuminating of these attractions than Barbara Ching's less psychological readings in her book *Wrong's What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture*, which puts more emphasis on the contradictions embedded in the culture than those arising from isolated experience, and better integrates gender as a factor in the hurts of history, class, and hierarchy.[3] Still, Fox wrote one of *Bad Music*'s most thoughtful and fair chapters.

Jason Lee Oakes's offering boils down to a disparagement of craft in favor of authentic feelings, all too familiar from previous criticism yet utterly alien to what many musicians and fans value. Taking up the example of ABBA's "unrelentingly cheesy" music, he points to "it's [*sic*] madeness," which is evident from "the blatant fakeness of the synthesized instruments, the fussiness of the production, the intricate harmonies, the clockwork rhythms, the unusual form" (79). Oakes hears as repulsive artifice what many other people have heard as skill, polish, imagination, and utopian plenitude, which suggests only that he shouldn't listen to it and shouldn't presume to explain it. Bad music, he says, "provides a visceral response where we simply *know* that it's bad, even if we enjoy it as a guilty pleasure" (81), telling us in the end that this is not a contradiction but a cultural fact and that it's okay to feel that way. That's not really an explanation, though, and what about all of us who listen to ABBA with pleasure and don't care who knows it? Perhaps ABBA, which has after all, brought a lot of joy into the world, is not the problem at all; perhaps it's

[3] Barbara Ching, *Wrong's What I Do Best: Hard Country Music and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

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the expectation that we should be ashamed of being moved by such music that deserves critique. Whence comes the suspicion of sentiment, the devaluing of skill, the mistrust of effective invocation of longing and fulfillment? The ubiquity of manipulative advertising, probably. But what sounds like sellout to some people sounds like success to others.

Timothy Taylor's contribution strangely dismisses the specifics of musical sound. World music, if marketed right, he says, is interchangeable: "Aesthetic judgments do not matter" as long as we know that it's "hybrid, political, by people of color" (89). But if that were true we would have Korean world music (we don't), and a Martian could enjoy world music in just the same way as I do, since past experience and cultural competence would have no bearing on our reception—because, if he is right, genre "trumps music aesthetics, no matter what the music sounds like" (98). Taylor writes of "musical quality," of music that is "just as good" as other music, and doesn't say what he means by that until finally defining aesthetic quality as "musical inventiveness and professionalism" (87, 90). That's a startlingly parochial definition, one that not only doesn't fit a good deal of music but also makes *all* music seem interchangeably trivial. "Put on something inventive and professional, please; it doesn't matter what." Who on earth would say such a thing? Elizabeth Tolbert's references to "unmediated sonic power," in her opaque chapter on musical abjection, are just as puzzling.

Christopher Washburne's centerpiece chapter on Kenny G provides sophisticated discourse analysis and a fine summary history of smooth jazz, but he, too, has nothing to say about the specific meanings that are circulating through listeners' experience of musical sound. Would sine tones sell as well if suitably marketed? If not, what is Kenny G's music actually *saying*—not that music is a thing that speaks, but in the sense that musical sound is one of the means by which people interact meaningfully—and what are people hearing and valuing in it?[4]

Not all of the contributors are actually concerned, for the most part, with theorizing musical badness. Richard Carlin gives us an illuminating discussion of oral/literate complexities in folk music. Giorgio Biancorosso offers thoughtful connoisseurship of brief moments in mostly obscure films. Matthew Wheelock Stahl sharply dissects the ideology, narratives, and contradictions of *American Idol*, showing how the show's musical performances "convey finely nuanced stories of subjectivity in late capitalism" (226; I don't know why he thinks music is "non-discursive," though). Angela Rodel celebrates punk's resistance to commodification, taking for granted that producing music that almost no one wants to hear is an essentially good thing to do; she appears also to endorse the hoary punk faith that revolution and disruption always lead to something better, and that we are living in a bourgeois bureaucracy that is in need of a good shaking up rather than in an imperial power perpetually at war. Torben Sangild furnishes an informative introduction to "glitch" music, in which artists damage and manipulate CDs and sound files. Eliot Bates covers much of the same ground in the following

[4] For a brief attempt to answer this question, see the last few pages of my essay "Analyzing Popular Music: Ten Apothegms and Four Instances," in *Analyzing Popular Music*, ed. Allan Moore, 16–38 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003).

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chapter. Deena Weinstein defends heavy metal against snobby rock critics who went to college.

For me, the most interesting chapter is that by James Koehne, who works as a concert programmer and writer, and who analyzes classical music both as a participant in its art world and as a former member of its cult. He observes:

> From my experience, then, I have noted that audiences are highly likely to embrace music which has the following characteristics:
>
> - Emotion and sentimentality
> - Simplicity and directness
> - Conviviality and cheerfulness
>
> And these, of course, are precisely the characteristics which we in the classical music business conspire to deny them. They are characteristics of belonging to the world, precisely the thing which classical music does not do—at least, not within the culture of classical music that we have created (158).

Koehne realizes that it was wrong to grant classical music so much "moral, social or aesthetic authority," that it is, after all, just one kind of music among many, and that it would be better off without the religiosity that has for the past century been the core of its business plan. More generally, he reminds us that musical taste is always about values, whether or not people are able to articulate them, and that musical significance is not simply a function of institutional framing or verbal discourse.

Another fine contribution is Elizabeth L. Wollman's analysis of rock musicals, which must somehow negotiate serious generic contradictions: the musical as a narrative form versus rock's non-narrative immediacy; different ways of rehearsing, sounding, performing; different audience expectations and criteria of success. Wollman pursues the form's tensions to illuminate the values that underlie different styles of musicking, as when one performer's "passion for the spontaneous, the improvisational, and the rebellious ultimately hurt him in a setting where such qualities are viewed as laughably unprofessional" (326). By comparing two different musical discourses, respecting their separate successes and diagnosing their collision, Wollman gains analytical purchase that most of the other contributors lacked.

Bad Music ends sourly, with a new translation of Carl Dahlhaus's 1967 denunciations of music that is trivial, monotonous, banal, vulgar, shallow, conventional, that "makes the worn appear charming" (355), all of which locates badness as inherent in certain musical pieces, a position that the editors had disavowed at the outset. These are earlier versions of the discussion of "Trivial Music" that eventually appeared in Dahlhaus's *Nineteenth-Century Music*, in which the same arguments are more clearly explained.[5] What seems to have justified the inclusion of Dahlhaus in this collection is his affinity for the tension registered by its subtitle, *The Music*

[5] Carl Dahlhaus, *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley: University of California Press, [1980] 1989).

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We Love to Hate. Bad music does not simply deceive us into thinking that it is good, Dahlhaus writes, "the listener may enjoy and contempt [*sic*] simultaneously. He is spared the self-denial required by great art; he feels superior to the music. Cynicism, relying on sentimentality, is answered by a sentimentality that may at any time switch over into cynicism" (338).

In the *Nineteenth-Century Music* version, Dahlhaus is clearer about this. First quoting an 1806 essay on music education to the effect that "a woman should not excel, but touch and gladden the heart," he writes that "it is scarcely possible to define the function of trivial music more accurately than by the words 'touch' and 'gladden'" (314; his caption for a painting reproduced on the previous page underscores his association of trivial music with women). To be pleased, as Adorno had argued, is to accede to the world as it is, to acquiesce in your own subjection. Recall that James Koehne found that what classical music's audiences really want is sentimentality and conviviality, and that industry practice has generally been to deny them such experiences in favor of a distanced, auratic greatness. Besides the attitudes towards gender, sentiment, and sensuousness that are clear here, Dahlhaus's view of trivial music is also grounded in his loyalty to the split between functional and autonomous musics that has been so devastatingly critiqued in the decades since he wrote, to which I would add by rephrasing Dave Hickey: "Functional music is real music, of course, and autonomous music is the residue of someone else's privilege."

My contribution to this volume, had I submitted one and had it been accepted, could have been so brief that I can offer it in this paragraph: There are only two ways in which it is analytically useful to speak of bad music. The first I take from Christopher Small, as it is a central feature of the theory of musicking he has developed over the course of his three books. Any musical performance, he writes, "should be judged finally on its success in bringing into existence for as long as it lasts a set of relationships that those taking part feel to be ideal and in enabling those taking part to explore, affirm, and celebrate those relationships."[6] Bad music, then, would be music that fails, for whatever reason—bad acoustics, missed notes, lack of rehearsal, poor turnout, rain, drunken lead singer, coughing symphony patrons, plague of frogs—to create a valuable experience for those who are participating. The second way of speaking about bad music I also take from Small, not from his books but from a remark he made in response to the Luddite spin given his work by Charles Keil: "I never said that musicking was a good thing." What he meant was that music can be successful in its means but yield a deplorable result: a white power rally, for example, at which music successfully affirms and celebrates an identity that an outsider might very well call bad.

If the subtitle *The Music We Love to Hate* suggests just such a conflicted reception, *The Music We Hate to Love* would better capture the spirit of this volume. As defined here, Bad Music all too often amounts to music that one can enjoy only as long as one can feel superior to those who produce and support it. This is nothing new, of course; to take pleasure in comic performances of abjection,

[6] Christopher Small, *Musicking: The Meanings of Performing and Listening* (Hanover, N.H.: Wesleyan University Press, 1998), 49.

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pretension, and immorality while insulating oneself by attributing those pleasures to others was, after all, the basic mechanism of minstrelsy, among other successful genres. We don't know bad music when we hear it—to analyze any musicking situation, one does need to take the sounds seriously, but one also needs more information than that. Glib hipness and condescension don't help, since, as Small emphasized, all musicking is, in its own way, serious. But this book isn't; notwithstanding a handful of smart and insightful contributions, *Bad Music* was a bad idea.

Robert Walser

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Yellowface: Creating the Chinese in American Popular Music and Performance, 1850s–1920s. By Krystyn R. Moon. New Brunswick, N.J.: Rutgers University Press, 2005.

A large body of scholarship addresses the interrelationships between American popular music and cultural understandings of racial difference, but the vast majority of this work focuses exclusively on the perceived differences between "white" and "black" peoples. Krystyn R. Moon's *Yellowface* is thus a welcome addition to the literature on American popular music and the production of race, for it explores how Chinese Americans—and, to a lesser extent, Asian Americans in general—have been represented in music and theater, as well as how Asian Americans have used the stage to challenge stereotypes about themselves and their homelands' musical traditions.

Moon is not operating in a scholarly vacuum, for recent research has helped clarify our understandings of Asian American identity and its relation to popular culture. Cultural historians, most notably Robert G. Lee, John Kuo Wei Tchen, and James S. Moy, have explored the various ways Asian Americans have been understood within the context of a popular culture dominated and shaped by whites. Meanwhile, many scholars such as Charles Hiroshi Garrett, Oliver Wang, Mina Yang, Paul Jong-Chul Yoon, and Deborah Wong have helped us to understand how various musical idioms have enabled Asian Americans to forge their own identities through performances of traditional Asian music within American settings.

Yet *Yellowface* is unique because Moon approaches her subject with the sensibilities of a cultural historian and a musicologist, offering the reader a twin narrative that addresses both the shifting attitudes of white Americans towards Asians and the development of musical tokens Westerners used to signify the East. She views these stories within the context of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism and convincingly shows how Westerners' binary definitions of the "Orient" and the "Occident" possessed important musical dimensions. Moon also applies Jacques Attali's theories about the relationships among sound, comparative modes of social organization,

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