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***The Art of Songwriting*. By Richard West. New York: Bloomsbury, 2016. 256 pp. ISBN 978-1-4725-2781-3**
***The Cambridge Companion to the Singer Songwriter*. 367 pp. Edited by Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016. ISBN 978-1-107-68091-3**
***The Singer-Songwriter Handbook*. Edited by Katherine Williams and Justin A. Williams. 277 pp. New York: Bloomsbury, 2017. ISBN 978-1-6289-2030-7**
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Making songs, singing songs and thinking about songs is a big part of many people's musical lives. Where once the thoughtful and creative young person might have written poetry, or painted watercolours, now, along with the film script and the soon-to-be Arts Council-funded Instagram account, songs are waiting to be written. And so, in university music courses, the practice and study of songwriting is gradually becoming embedded. It follows that there will be a growth of accompanying literature to help the aspiring songwriter, teacher and thinker to make more sense of the form. Richard West's *The Art of Songwriting* provides a study of songwriting practice, anchored in practical experience along with some academic theory as underpinning; Williams and Williams's *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer Songwriter* is, as the title suggests, more firmly anchored in the academic approach to the subject; Williams and Williams also provide a more teaching-based study in *The Singer-Songwriter Handbook.*

The Art of Songwriting situates itself firmly in the tradition of books like Jimmy Webb's (1998) *Tunesmith* and John Braheny's (2006) *The Craft and Business of Songwriting*. The book is elegantly organised into three sections: 'Songs', 'Songwriters' and 'Songwriting'. The first section provides an overview of the field, introducing West's own songwriting history and practice, wrestling with the definition of what constitutes a song, with the slippery borders between a more traditional, Tin Pan Alley-derived idea of the composed song and the increasingly useful understanding of the song as recording or track. This section goes on to balance the competing viewpoints and perspectives on what it is to look at songs. The section on words is also reassuringly clear-headed, West acknowledging the difficulties 'in evaluating lyric outside of its musical and performative context' (p. 23), but mercifully sidestepping the curious notion in popular music academia that any analysis or attention to song lyrics is misplaced. This seems to be based on a misinterpretation

of Frith's cogent observation that lyrics are 'words in performance' (Frith 1996, p. 166). Indeed, this is very true; and, as we all know, song lyrics are not poems and songwriters are not poets. However, would it not be impossible to imagine the impact of recent releases *Pure Comedy* by Father John Misty (2017) or *To Pimp a Butterfly* by Kendrick Lamar (2015) if the meaning of the songs was entirely understood as based on the tone of the words and not the meanings of the words themselves? So, it is good to see the acknowledgement of the importance of semantics in West's book.

Where *The Art of Songwriting* is most useful is its function as a locale for the aspiring songwriter to be in close proximity to an older, wiser teacher. As is generationally fitting, West's interests and approaches are largely located in the world of post-baby-boomer songwriters. This provides a very valuable insight into the practice of a generation of songwriters for whom the great album and great artist are a defining aesthetic trope. Thus, it is significant that West's epiphany as a budding songwriter was the discovery of a Buddy Holly LP where, unusually for his time, Holly was both songwriter and singer and provided a model for the following musical generation. Notwithstanding illuminating sections on, say, Pharrell Williams and Kanye West, the focus of the analyses is largely a roll call of Buddy Holly's great songwriting descendants – Costello, Springsteen, Weller, Dylan, Waits, Lennon and McCartney, and so on – along with more recent artists like Alex Turner, Lucinda Williams, Amy Winehouse and Jeff Tweedy. The selection is leavened with work on songwriters like George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter and the team of Holland, Dozier, Holland, where the idea of song work and craft was centrally located in their practice and where, in the case of these writers, the 'great artist' label came later. Short meditations on particular songwriters form the central element of West's study, and their often discursive approach provides some of the book's most illuminating insights, for example, inserting a soliloquy from musician Matthew Bourne as a way of understanding the impact that the intimacy of a small live set-up of the music of singer-songwriters can have (pp. 131–5). The obliqueness of this approach is refreshing and illuminating.

While *The Art of Songwriting* manages to engage with academic theory and feed these into practical uses, *The Cambridge Companion to the Singer Songwriter* is located firmly in the academic realm, making for a consistency of tone and intention; the considered and thorough approaches of this volume yield some valuable (and sometimes not so valuable) insights. Rupert Till's chapter, 'Singer-songwriter authenticity, the unconscious and emotions (feat. Adele's "Someone Like You")' is exemplary academic writing: clear, detailed, and consistently underpinned by deep but lightly worn knowledge of the relevant field. Till addresses the key subject of perceived authenticity in the singer-songwriter. The opening section 'Defining the singer-songwriter' briefly and cogently provides answers to one of the central debates that both 'singer-songwriter' volumes wrestle with: what is a singer-songwriter? This section of Till's chapter could usefully have served as an introduction to the whole book; he goes on to describe his subject, Adele's, performances of 'Someone Like You' and shows how the perception of her as authentic is vital to the strong connections her music makes to her fans. It also usefully demonstrates how Adele and her creative team are aware of this and consciously manage the process to achieve the necessary connections.

Mark Finch looks at the politics of authorship, using the example of Bill Monroe's 'Uncle Pen', showing the difficult and contested area of popular music

composition and how the single author is often supported by commercial considerations as much as the actual compositional duties. In ensemble popular music, compositional boundaries are inevitably blurred: the 'chords–melody–words' definition of a composition is difficult to support in many instances. As the publishing income from music is increasingly the largest financial stream, the situation becomes even more significant. This chapter will be of interest to any musician who has been part of a group where the common issue of 'who-actually-wrote-the-song?' is a permanent and underlying tension in the creative process.

As a working musician and singer-songwriter myself, and one who, not unusually, cannot read notation or tab, I find it hard to find useful links between the music worlds and practice I know and those described in Timothy Koozin's 'Musical gesture in the songs of Nick Drake'. The purely musicological approach seems to occlude the essence of what makes Nick Drake's music connect with so many people: the complex musicality and styles of Drake's guitar playing can be heard in many of his contemporaries (Michael Chapman, John Martin, Roy Harper), but the uniqueness of what he did is surely more solidly located in his vocal tone and the way his persona, sound and sensibility embodied the quietly doomed desperation that is quintessentially English and inward looking.

Although in the scheme of academic value, a handbook and its more practical purpose places it lower in the hierarchy of knowledge and value, it is actually in *The Singer Songwriter's Handbook* that some of the most interesting and stimulating material of these three books appears. The section on *Songwriting in the Digital Era* is particularly strong, with Richard James Burgess and Rob Toulson giving a good overview of the relationship between the contested area between songwriting and recording practices and where the two inevitably meet and overlap. Lisa Busby's chapter contains cogent thinking and some very useful hands-on teaching ideas with an engaging prose style and layered approach – a chapter both thoughtful and inspiring.

One half of the team that host the excellent and useful songwriting podcast sodajerker.com, Simon Barber contributes a chapter about songwriting practice that works particularly well because it is sourced from Barber's involvement in a very wide-ranging set of discussions with working songwriters. By Barber's careful work the frustrating disingenuousness of the way most songwriters talk about their practice is avoided, and the chapter parses a wealth of information in the sodajerker interviews to create a valuable resource.

Musician and songwriter Lee Bob Watson's chapter begins:

> There are three things that a songwriter needs, a river, a bible, and a broken heart. A river gives you a sense of time and place. A bible is a keeper of language and history. I will speak briefly about the river and the bible. You will find your way to a broken heart well enough on your own. (p. 71)

The reason that I feel the need to quote at length I think shows something important; it is the same reason that I often read the entire chapter to songwriting students; the simple fact is that this chapter makes me smile – and it begins to unlock some of the attitudes and approaches to what makes songs that can connect with people. I think this shows that Watson's more maverick approach to songwriting is something that there is a real hunger and need for.

Watson's song work is akin to the conceptually sophisticated music of Jim White, whose *Searching for the Wrong-Eyed Jesus* uses mythic tropes of the Deep South and Badlands authentically to construct a persona located in a, by now, imaginary America. Despite the apparent ideological distance, this kind of artistic practice is in step with the Art School approaches to making creative work in the 1960s and 1970s, a good example of this being Roy Ascot's Ground Course which helped form the working methods of Brian Eno. This, it seems to me, is a way forward in the ways of making and thinking about songwriting that could very usefully be developed. This is because, no matter how many different ways there are in which the practice of songwriting can be described, analysed and taught, there is something that works in a successful song that is beyond simple mechanics. Somewhere there needs to be an approach to writing songs that seeks to apprehend the kind of conceptual, pop-art derived practice of music making, as described in Frith and Horne's *Art Into Pop*.

Or, as Tom Waits once memorably said, 'Songs are funny that way. You take off your hat and all these birds fly out of your head' (Flanagan 1990, p. 393). As songwriters and educators, understanding those birds is what we need to do.

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***The Bloomsbury Handbook of Religion and Popular Music*. Edited by Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg. London: Bloomsbury, 2017. 425 pp. ISBN 978-1-4742-3733-8.**

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From an insight into the relationship between religion and emotion to an outlook on the ambiguously religious in Goth music, this volume offers a summary of many areas in which popular music has been influenced by the sacred. It reinforces the growing discourse that refuses a hard distinction between sacred and secular, presenting a wide selection of case studies from complementary but varied areas of expertise.

Editors Christopher Partridge and Marcus Moberg begin by highlighting the role of critical musicology in the study of the sacred, presenting it as an 'emerging, but still neglected, area of study' (p. 7), to which their compilation makes a remarkable addition. The volume marks a step forward in addressing research areas related to the implicitly or explicitly religious, when religion is obviously exposed or strategically camouflaged, in music genres and scenes all around the world.

The contributions of the 32 participants are divided into three parts: 'Theoretical Perspectives, Methodologies and Issues', 'Religious Perspectives' and 'Genres'. In many chapters, the reader will find cross-references that foster consideration of complementary perspectives. For instance, several contributions address the sacred in Rastafarianism, discussed by David Moskowitz and Christopher Partridge,