

Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place

By John Connell and Chris Gibson, Routledge, London and New York, 2003, xii + 320pp. \$110.00 cloth (ISBN 0-415-17027-3); \$29.95 paper (ISBN 0-415-17028-1)

As part of an explanation for what he perceives to be the increasing use of aural metaphors in geographical discourse Daniel Sui observes that different sounds have the remarkable capacity to occupy the same time and space without suppressing their component parts. As he says, “we all know that different musical tones can be combined without losing their individuality. What you end up with is a chord, something new, which has its own sound, but in which the individual tones are also distinct and identifiable” (2000, 335). Evidently John Connell and Chris Gibson have been listening. *Sound Tracks: Popular Music, Identity and Place* simultaneously (a) surveys the spectrum of existing literature on music and spatiality, (b) provides many well-researched examples from a global range of popular musics, and (c) situates this material within the theoretical conventions of contemporary cultural geography, without sacrificing either empirical specificity or the coherence of the book as a whole. The result is the most comprehensive and wide-ranging geographical treatment of music to date; both an encyclopedia of individual sounds (and scenes), and a sound of its own.

Like a stimulating piece of music, *Sound Tracks* achieves its overall effect of layering and structured variation through the skillful integration of different themes at multiple scales. The underlying theoretical structure of the book is developed in the early chapters, through a detailed discussion of three overlapping sets of geographically-inflected tensions which the authors think are inherent to how popular music achieves its meaning in the world. The first is “a tension between music as a commodified product of an industry with high levels of corporate interest, and simultaneously as an arena of

cultural meaning” (6). The second tension is between fluidity and fixity, “between music as itinerant and fleeting, and music as something static, fixed and immobile,” rooted in place and rooting identity (9). Implicit in these two tensions is a third; the tension inherent in any self-conscious consideration of authenticity. Music’s popularity is strongly linked to the impression it gives of authenticity. One of the ways performers, fans, musicologists, and recording companies authenticate (and thus attach meaning to) popular music is by associating it with particular places and rooting it in local traditions. The first three chapters – titled “Into the Music”, “Music and Place: Fixing Authenticity” and “Music and Movement: Overcoming Space” – focus on conceptualising the relations among these tensions. This is an effective set-up, not least because it allows the authors to elaborate generously on the varied connections among music, identity and place without overlooking the ways these are continuously manipulated at every scale and in all locations by a music industry whose main stock in trade is the commodification of authenticity.

The book’s remaining eight chapters (excepting a brief summary chapter) lead the reader through music geography’s main research themes: spatial associations in song lyrics, place-based musical sounds and scenes, music as an aspect of communal identity, world music as an instance of globalisation, popular music’s diasporic and transcultural characteristics and implications, sites of musical consumption, popular music and tourism, and the effects of time/space compression and distancing on the spatiality of music. The chapters build nicely on one another and in concert provide a thorough overview of music geography as an area of scholarship with links to related disciplines.

Issues of commodification, culture, fixity, fluidity, and authenticity re-emerge as a unifying conceptual refrain throughout the chapters.

The various chapters also contain literally scores of fascinating empirical examples ranging from passing references to lengthy case studies, as well as 45 carefully researched and referenced text boxes. These introduce a level of micro-variety that provides the volume with much of its interest. They also ensure that beyond describing a plausible conceptual framework for a cultural geography of popular music, and providing a careful overview of the central preoccupations of music geography, *Sound Tracks* will serve as a valuable reference book. Its bibliography includes over 650 references, including most relevant geographical literature up to the year 2000. Unfortunately, the book does not include a discography of selected recordings, which would help readers track down and listen to examples of what they are reading about.

I recommend this excellent book to all social scientists interested in the relationships among music, culture and geography. It is sure to become an invaluable aide in the preparation of music geography courses, and will serve well as a graduate or senior undergraduate course text (perhaps in combination with Leyshon, Matless and Revill 1998, which provides chapter-length case studies). *Sound Tracks* would also make a stimulating secondary text for an undergraduate cultural geography course. The only hesitation I have in recommending it as a core undergraduate text is that occasionally the writing includes such varied empirical detail and so extensive a review of existing literature, that less than fully-committed readers may find their minds wandering. And that would be a shame.

References

- LEYSHON, A, MATLESS, D, and REVILL, G. eds. 1998 *The Place of Music* (London: Guilford)
- SUI, D. 2000 'Visuality, aurality, and shifting metaphors of geographical thought in the late twentieth century' *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 90(2), 322-43

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