

BOOK REVIEWS

Coming To You Wherever You Are: MuchMusic, MTV, and Youth Identities. Kip Pegley. 2008. Middletown: Wesleyan University Press. viii, 159pp, bibliography, index. Paper.

Rush: Rock Music And The Middle Class (Dreaming in Middletown). Chris McDonald. 2009. Bloomington: Indiana University Press. x, 255pp, bibliography, discography, index. Paper.

BY JAY HODGSON

Book-length treatments of the so-called “CanCon” tradition in popular music are typically aimed at trade readerships. Recently, though, unambiguously academic fare has begun to make market, too. In fact, the last few years have been something of a boon time for academic studies of Canadian popular musics and musicians. Monographs devoted to Canadian repertoires, producers, songwriters and performers have lately begun to appear on Canadian bookshelves – library and retail – with unprecedented regularity; and the past eighteen months alone have seen no less than three American surveys of Western popular music history adapted to suit the distinct priorities and needs of the Canadian classroom. A reliable academic literature on Canadian popular music history has emerged. Can we now finally *require* that professors working in university classrooms present their surveys vis-à-vis the Cubist prisms of Canadian history?

Professors open to this challenge will find much to lecture about in Kip Pegley’s *Coming To You Wherever You Are:*

MuchMusic, MTV, and Youth Identities and Chris McDonald’s *Rush: Rock Music And The Middle Class (Dreaming In Middletown)*. These monographs represent the first book-length studies of their respective Canadian subjects (MuchMusic and Rush) to make market, though they come from publishers based in the USA. Pegley and McDonald tread similar methodological terrain in their books – what I would describe as *laissez-faire* interdisciplinarity, braced by varying amounts of ethnographic detail – even as they reach different analytic destinations in so doing. Pegley, for one, studies her subject from a primarily quantitative perspective, though her tabulations inevitably buttress broader observations about mythologies of national identity and the role that cultural institutions like MuchMusic play in shaping them. McDonald, on the other hand, dons a more obviously qualitative analytic lens, which is entirely appropriate given the ultimate goal of his analysis, namely, to adumbrate the cultural mechanisms Rush exploited in positioning themselves as spokespersons for North American suburban *ennui* throughout the middle 1970s and 1980s (“... the suburbs have no charms for the restless dreams of youth,” sings the band’s piccolo-voiced lead-singer, Geddy Lee, in one of the more heavy-handed passages from “Subdivisions” [1982] ... “Growing up it all seemed so one-sided, opinions all provided, the future pre-decided, detached and subdivided in the mass production zone.... nowhere is the dreamer or the misfit so alone ...”).

At first blush, it seems that only Pegley is concerned about untangling the

knotted mess that is modern Canadian identity. Analyzing roughly 336 hours of programming, aired on MuchMusic and MTV during the first week of November in 1995, Pegley spends the vast majority of her time in *Coming To You Wherever You Are* elucidating the numerous ways that national mythologies of Canadian identity shaped, and were shaped by, MuchMusic's broadcasting policy at the time. Broader markers of personal identity, for example, the cultural studies "holy trinity" of race, gender, and class, figure in the analysis, to be sure, as they do in the particular videos which together comprise her sample, but these markers remain significant for Pegley only insofar as they ultimately inflect, and articulate, the national *mythos* that MuchMusic, the self-styled "nation's music station," propagated through its televisual discourse in the middle 1990s. A study of gender and instrumentation (Chapter Three) thus quickly segues into a study of the gendering of Canada *per se* on the world stage, while an examination of race and performance context (Chapter Four) provides fodder for a broader meditation on the efficacy (and accuracy) of "multiculturalism" as official policy in Canada.

McDonald, for his part, remains mostly silent on the matter of national identity. This is not to say that he does not deal with Canadian identity in so doing, however. In fact, McDonald's conspicuous refusal to discuss Rush in a national context cleverly invokes a prevalent, if often neglected, strain of Canadian nationalism which Rush themselves signal in their progressive rock, namely, so-called "continentalism." Canadians and Americans are spiritually linked, the continentalist argument runs,

specifically, by a broader continental culture that transcends national borders. McDonald notes that "Rush's Willowdale was scarcely different from any number of suburban communities throughout Canada and the United States ... It was a grid of small bungalows, townhouses, and medium-size family homes punctuated by new redbrick schools and strip malls, green belts and power lines, commuter lots and freeways" (3). As such, McDonald explains elsewhere that the band's progressive rock comprises "an integral part of *North American* popular culture" rather than just Canadian popular culture; their records articulate, and critique, a continental "middle-class cultural landscape" more than any distinctly Canadian terrain (77). Class trumps nation, in other words, both in Rush's music and in McDonald's analysis of that music.

Because I came of age in Canada during the middle 1990s, when Canada's dissolution seemed likely and impending, I am profoundly sympathetic to McDonald's approach here. Grassroots nationalists like The Tragically Hip defiantly dared Americans to make sense of their oblique lyrical references to often esoteric Canadian historical players and dramas during that decade; the band's general thinking about nation and region were unmistakably clear – Canada, along with Canadian history, is unquestionably important enough to sing about – even if their lyrics were often stubbornly opaque. A band like Rush, on the other hand, rarely had (or, indeed, has) anything explicit to say about Canada, let alone about Canadian identity, though, I think, this is the implicit upshot of McDonald's (silent) approach to the

problem of Canadian identity in Rush's recorded repertoire. The band nonetheless embodied a quintessentially Canadian perspective on national identity in so doing (i.e., the concept of a specifically *Canadian* identity is an illusion and, even if it were not an illusion, it certainly isn't anything important enough to write songs about). Instead of singing about, say, race riots in Toronto (The Tragically Hip, "Bobcaygeon," 1998)) and famous hockey players (The Tragically Hip, "50 Mission Cap," 1992, and "Fireworks" (1998), Rush sang about: traveling by spaceship to black holes deep in outer space ("Cygnus X-1 duology," 1977, 1978); what I earlier called "suburban ennui" ("Subdivisions," 1982); transcendent individualism ("2112," 1976); Tolkienesque realms and the "elfin" creatures who inhabit them ("Rivendell," 1975); and Randian metaphysics ("Anthem," 1975).

Rarely did Rush "break character" to discuss anything so mundane — or, at the very least, anything so terrestrial — as national identity. Ironically, though, it is their best-known song, the perennial fan-favorite "Tom Sawyer" (1981), which arguably provides the most obvious example of this sort of "breach of character." As one of McDonald's informants explains: "It sounds like they're talking about the worst traits of the United States [in "Tom Sawyer" (1981)]. Is Rush praising him or criticizing him?" (p. 100). Most commentators are simply too fixated on the libertarian gestures in "Tom Sawyer" (1981) — i.e., "no, his mind is not for rent to any god or government" — to consider any explicitly nationalist readings. It seems that the band, too, has little patience for such readings: they

usually describe the song as nothing more or less than a celebration of rugged individualism over oppressive governmental authority. Still, it strains credibility to suggest that a Canadian band might openly vaunt a "root icon" of twentieth-century Americana (Tom Sawyer) without even considering the possibility that, in so doing, they were inviting their Canadian peers to interpret the track specifically vis-à-vis national context.

Interestingly, McDonald and Pegley make much of the concept of technical virtuosity in their books. According to McDonald, the virtuosity which Alex Lifeson, Neil Peart and Geddy Lee habitually display on their records models the "competitive collaboration" that remains a core tenet of libertarian-capitalism. "Although performing collectively as a group, there are many musical gestures in.... Rush's songs which point toward heroic individualism," McDonald explains. "Foremost among them is Rush's practice of allowing each instrument to lead" (p. 71). As Pegley sees it, however, the very concept of technical virtuosity is much less about heroic individualism, and much more about excluding women from positions of power in modern rock. Developing work by Sherry Turkle on "female socialization into technology" in the West, which includes a taboo against public displays of technical proficiency, Pegley draws a compelling parallel between computer "hacking" and rock guitar subcultures. Success in both worlds requires "commitment to individual technical mastery and control," Pegley writes, and openness to public "risk-taking" in the form of "improvisation and technological innovation." Perhaps unsurprisingly, then, Pegley ultimately

uncovers an “underrepresentation of women guitarists” in her sample (54).

There is no question that a majority of the videos in Pegley’s sample featured male electric guitarists. There is also little controversy in Pegley’s consequent assertion that such an unbalanced representation probably follows from broad-based cultural proscriptions against female work with technology, including with the electric guitar. However, the conclusion Pegley subsequently reaches about what she describes as a related abundance of female electric bassists in her sample is that “one could read [their] interest in playing the [electric] bass as a strategy to supply the ensemble’s glue without appearing as the primary figure” (55). To my mind, this seriously minimizes the myriad celebrated contributions of female “virtuoso” electric bassists and electric guitarists. This is not to suggest that the broader point Pegley pursues here is therefore moot. There are, indeed, fewer female “shredders” than male “shredders,” for instance, and the number of male virtuoso bassists in the rock pantheon is exponentially higher than the number of female virtuoso bassists. And this imbalance is *undoubtedly* a product of cultural conditioning. But can the argument be reformatted to acknowledge the important, and widely celebrated, contributions of female virtuosos like Me’shell Ndegeocelo, Jennifer Batten and Lita Ford? Perhaps not, but I challenge future researchers to try.

Pegley’s and McDonald’s books provide irrefutable evidence that a strong body of academic research on Canadian popular musics, and musicians, is finally emerging from within Canada. *Coming To You Wherever You Are: MuchMusic, MTV, and*

Youth Identities and *Rush: Rock Music And The Middle Class (Dreaming In Middletown)* demand the attention of Canadian and American scholars and students alike, and not just as an indication of the way that popular music studies are done in Canadian institutions. These two books demand our attention as nothing more or less than deft popular music studies *per se*. Pegley and McDonald have written insightful, engaging, and purposeful books. Their studies clear a number of engaging analytic pathways for future researchers to follow, regardless of where they live and teach. I, for one, look forward to watching them do so. 🌻

Experiencing Ethnomusicology: Teaching and Learning at European Universities. Simone Krüger. 2009. Farnham: Ashgate. x, 244pp, bibliography, index, musical figures. Cloth.

BY MARGARET WALKER

In a recent article, distinguished ethnomusicologist Bruno Nettl suggests that “the practice of critiquing the discipline [of ethnomusicology] ... is part of the identity of this field” (2010:85). This is arguably quite true, yet self-critique is closely linked with self-examination, and reflecting on what we do and why should also be seen as part of the field’s identity. British scholar Simone Krüger’s recent book *Experiencing Ethnomusicology: Teaching and Learning at European Universities* takes this disciplinary inclination for introspection and applies it to an examination of how ethnomusicology is taught in post-secondary education. Building