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- Yankee Twang: Country and Western Music in New England.** Clifford R. Murphy. 2014. Urbana, Chicago, and Springfield: University of Illinois Press. 232 pages.
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- Reading the vast majority of scholarly and popular literature on country music, it would be easy to get the impression that the music is firmly rooted in the culture and geography of the US South. In a recent essay in the *Journal of American Folklore*, country music historian Bill C. Malone responded to recent challenges to what has been described as his “southern thesis,” arguing that, while “people made music all over rural North America, . . . southerners are the ones who in the 1920s made the seminal and crucial recordings and radio broadcasts that lent the music its public, and lasting, identity. The presumed southernness of country music arose from factors that were both accidental and purposeful, and from postures that were grounded in both romance and realism” (Malone 2014: 227). As a consequence of this decidedly southern bias in the literature, country music cultures that have developed outside of—and sometimes independently from—the region have been marginalized in media representations and in scholarship on the genre. For instance, although such scholars as Neil V. Rosenberg (1974), Peter Narváez (1978), Robert Klymasz (1972), Gillian Turnbull (2009) and Byron Dueck (2013a, 2013b) have written provocatively and sensitively about country music in Canada, much of the scholarly and popular discourse around Canadian country music contin-

ues to focus only on those artists who have had success in Nashville, including Hank Snow and Shania Twain.

Folklorist Clifford R. Murphy's *Yankee Twang: Country and Western Music in New England* is one of several recent efforts to document the ways that country music communities outside of the US South have used country music as a tool to address significant economic, political and cultural changes in their respective regions. Arguing forcefully that "New England country and western music has been buried under a mountain of corporate propaganda that wants you to believe that country music is an exclusively southern cultural export" (1), Murphy presents a meticulously documented history of a thriving New England country music culture that flourished until the advent of format country radio programming and the Nashville-based Country Music Association in the 1950s and 1960s. As one might expect from such a provocative opening volley, Murphy places much of the blame for the marginalization of New England country artists and practices at Nashville's feet, demonstrating the logical consequences of the country music industry's centralization.¹ At the same time, Murphy offers a well-documented and ethnographically grounded study of New England country music culture—described throughout *Yankee Twang* as "country and western" on account of the community's uncommonly strong attachment to western imagery and themes—that demonstrates the important role that local musical and cultural practices played in helping navigate the dynamic cultural and economic forces at work in the region throughout the 20th century.

Yankee Twang would be a noteworthy

contribution to the country music studies literature simply on the basis of the book's second chapter, which traces the history of country music in New England from the first recordings of Norway, Maine fiddler Mellie Dunham in the mid-1920s through the middle of the 1970s. Drawing upon extensive interviews with radio, recording, and stage stars, as well as careful archival research, Murphy depicts a vibrant musical community of native New Englanders as well as southern interlopers who came to New England to capitalize on live performance opportunities, many of which opened up thanks to the powerful signal of Wheeling, West Virginia radio station WWVA. He brings life to many artists whose work is virtually unknown outside of the region and adds much-needed depth to the biographies of such stars as Louis Marshall "Grandpa" Jones and Doc and Chickie Williams. Moreover, Murphy persistently reminds readers that most of New England's most influential country artists had relatively little success as recording artists. Instead, they relied heavily upon radio broadcasts and live performances for the vast majority of their exposure and income. Consequently, many of the artists discussed in *Yankee Twang* have been unfairly overlooked in the country music literature because of the field's early reliance on discography as a primary means of engagement with the genre. The inclusion of more than two dozen images at the conclusion of the second chapter provides much-needed visual context for this rich community of country musicians and audiences.

The second half of *Yankee Twang*—comprising chapters three through six—explores the significance of country music to the New Englanders who make and

consume it. Chapter 3, titled “Finding Community in the Country and Western Event,” explores the complex negotiations that occur between musicians and their audiences through the “show and dance” model of live country music performance that continues to dominate in some parts of New England today. Murphy notes that “show and dance” performances often begin with a concert for a seated and paying audience before the band plays a free dance event catering to local tastes. Murphy argues that the New England “country and western event” is characterized by a musical diversity that is a direct consequence of varied European immigrants who have made lives in the region’s working-class communities; it would not be uncommon, therefore, to hear a band play dances of Italian, Polish or Greek origin depending upon the community for whom they are playing. Also significant is Murphy’s characterization of the “show and dance” as being representative of New England country music’s broader economic culture—one that constantly and freely combines “commercial exchange and gift cycle [to create] ... a cycle of reciprocity that shifts the focus of the event back and forth between the performers and the audience and embodies the felt need by the participants to assuage the tension between individual expression and community expression” (117).

Focusing on the “working life of country and western musicians in the barnstorming era” (which Murphy identifies as stretching from 1935 until 1955) (145), the book’s fifth chapter explores the economic and labour implications that this “cycle of reciprocity” (111) had for the predominantly immigrant musicians who serviced New England during the height

of the region’s country music scene. Murphy documents the arduous road trips, low- or non-paying early morning radio broadcast performances and road hazards (including alcohol abuse and philandering) that characterized life for the barnstormer. Murphy astutely notes that, while community “show and dance” events might have helped to build a sense of community, “the very nature of itinerant barnstorming work removed working musicians from the home and their ‘home’ community nearly all the time” (157), making it difficult for musicians to maintain marriages or to integrate themselves into the fabric of their own families and communities.

The book’s fourth and sixth chapters examine the symbolic importance of place in the New England country music scene. Chapter 4, “Home on the Grange: The Frontier Between ‘American’ and ‘Immigrant’ Worldviews in New England Country and Western,” explores the ways that European immigrants in New England embraced western iconography in band names, attire and stage names. Murphy observes that many New England country musicians crafted origin stories that placed them squarely in western North America, particularly the United States Midwest (including Iowa, Missouri and Kansas), the Rocky Mountain region of the United States, and the Canadian Prairie Provinces (130). Moreover, many immigrant musicians traded their ethnically marked surnames for Anglo-American and place-oriented stage names. Yet, Murphy notes musicians were not simply attempting to assimilate into a presumed “mainstream” culture through their adoption of western names and origin stories. Rather, as the examples of Connecticut’s Georgia Mae

and Maine native Rusty Rogers indicate, western “persona[s] provided an imaginary center for country and western performance within New England, and ... allowed New England performers’ background sites of authenticity to be more in keeping with the expectations of audiences outside of New England” (131). Rather than serving as “an Americanizing leveler,” Murphy argues, western mythologies and Anglo-American stage names may have helped to erase or obscure obvious ethnic differences that Italian, Polish or French surnames might have highlighted. As a consequence of their new surnames and their western North American autobiographies, New England country musicians could perform their “ethnic musics in performances for the general public” to build a sense of community among their own community while not drawing attention to their individual ethnic difference (143). The book’s final chapter extends the discussion of place by exploring the significance of Maine as a locus for “alternative country,” a term that he uses to highlight the widespread belief that “to use and make country and western music in the manner that Mainers do can be read as an act of regional resistance to national culture” (182).

Yankee Twang is a much-needed study that provides a valuable model for further study of those local, regional and international country music communities that flourish in constant tension with the mainstream country music culture emanating from Nashville. Murphy’s ethnographic engagement as a “show and dance” attendee and country musician, and his extensive archival research and collection of oral histories have positioned him as a valuable voice for the New England “country

and western” community. In its clarity and concision, Murphy offers a nuanced rationale for an approach to country music studies that embraces locality and challenges the hegemony of the national recording industry. Moreover, Murphy’s work encourages a continued re-evaluation of Malone’s “southern thesis” by drawing attention not only to the thriving country music cultures that have existed outside of the southern United States, but also to the remarkable power that these musical practices have exerted on the culturally diverse communities that support them. Moreover, *Yankee Twang*’s framing of country music within ethnically diverse communities also calls for a nuanced exploration of country music’s changing role in an increasingly diverse US South. *Yankee Twang* is essential reading for anyone interested in the country music cultures, the culture of working-class communities or immigrant life in the United States. 🌻

NOTES

1. For a more detailed discussion of this phenomenon, consult Pecknold 2007.

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Musiques au monde. La tradition au prisme de la création. Emmanuelle Olivier, dir. 2012. Paris : Éditions Delatour. 320 p., photographies et illustrations en noir et blanc.

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Cet ouvrage collectif dirigé par Emmanuelle Olivier s'inscrit dans le projet ANR Globalmus (www.globalmus.net), qui a rassemblé pendant quatre ans des jeunes chercheurs et des spécialis-

tes qui se situent dans un courant récent des études sur la musique. S'appuyant notamment sur les études postcoloniales et poststructuralistes, et sur les débats anthropologiques concernant la notion de « globalisation culturelle », ce courant ne réduit plus les musiques dites « des autres » à des patrimoines oraux supposés être essentiellement « traditionnels » et « collectifs », ni à des formes de subordination par rapport aux « arts savants » occidentaux. Le nouveau portrait accentue en revanche les aspects de création, de médiation, de mutation esthétique et sociale, d'interaction avec les codes et les chemins d'un monde interconnecté. Le jeu de mots du titre du livre, qui rappelle les « musiques du monde », ne doit toutefois pas nous trahir. Ce syntagme, label commercial et catégorie culturelle bien connue dans le monde francophone depuis les années 1980, n'est pas l'objet central de la réflexion que mènent les auteurs. Au contraire, dans l'introduction, Emmanuelle Olivier critique la vision quelque peu simpliste qui se limite à dénoncer les effets hégémoniques et la violence symbolique exercée par le « Nord » sur le « Sud » du monde (11). De la même manière, les positions d'une certaine « ethnomusicologie d'urgence » sur des musiques qui seraient inexorablement condamnées à l'extinction sont délaissées au profit d'un regard axé sur des formes aptes « à s'inscrire résolument dans la modernité, [...] à agir musicalement sur le monde » (11). Dans le cadre de cette ethnomusicologie contemporaine, l'ouvrage propose une réflexion concernant la notion de « création » en contexte de globalisation, avec une approche qui peut se dire multi-située de par la pluralité des terrains présentés au fil des