

BOOK REVIEWS / COMPTES RENDUS DE LIVRES

Singer-Songwriters and Musical Open Mics. 2013. Marcus Aldredge. Burlington, VT: Ashgate. 236pp.

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The “open mic” has long been a crucial venue for amateur or aspiring guitar- or piano-playing songwriters who want to get experience performing and trying out material in a fairly safe and supportive environment. As a part of the urban cultural sphere, it is a ripe topic for ethnographic investigation. The singer-songwriter is a topic that has received some attention in critical and scholarly writing (Brackett 2008, Kutulas 2010, Whiteley 2000), but is still in need of a thorough-going history and analysis. Marcus Aldredge’s book provides substantial scholarly work in both these areas, though his emphasis is placed mainly on ethnographic analysis. Aldredge is a sociologist, but his method and approach will be familiar to ethnomusicologists, and the book is a fine example of an urban ethnography shedding light on a musical practice.

The book is based on an extensive ethnography of 18 open mic events in New York City, with particular emphasis on Manhattan and Brooklyn, the boroughs that hosted the most open mics during Aldredge’s research. He selected four open mics to give particularly thick ethnographic analysis.

But before Aldredge gets into such thick description, he lays out the theor-

etical basis for his analyses. Open mics are described as spaces that allow musicians to “practice performing” and to make performing part of their practicing. To some participants, playing open mics is a leisure practice for amateurs, but others view them as gigs and networking opportunities. Aldredge makes a case for the open mic as a “fourth place,” adding to the “three-place” theory of sociologist Ray Oldenburg (the first place is home; the second work; the third includes libraries, taverns, and other “neutral” public spaces). For Aldredge, the open mic is a hybrid of public and private space, theoretically open to the public, but catering primarily to a group sharing a limited, insider’s interest.

Aldredge also frames the open mic through Erving Goffman’s work on how people “perform” when they present themselves in everyday life. For Aldredge, the open mic is an opportunity to perform on several “laminated” levels (personal, artistic, musical). Bourdieu’s theories about the conditions under which cultural labour occurs also provide a lens on the role open mics play in the singer-songwriter’s process of cultural production.

Chapter 2, “Mike to Mic,” profiles the history of the open mic from the “open” radio shows of the 1920s, to the hootenanny (folk jam session) of the 1960s, to the “anti-folk” scene that had developed in New York by the 1980s. The open mic is compared to other types of user-driven performing media, such as karaoke, *Guitar Hero/Rock Band* video games, indie rock scenes,

and *Idol*-type television series. For Aldredge, open mics play a crucial role in sustaining a city's "creative class," as they become part of the character of select neighbourhoods that emerge as "bohemian enclaves." Moreover, they are part of the symbolic economy of such urban neighbourhoods alongside food, clothes, architecture, literature, and other activities upon which cultural capital can be built.

Chapter 3, "Open Mics in New York City," provides a detailed description of the open mic ritual, including times, places, sign-up sheets, protocols for hosts and patrons, stage banter, and the hierarchies that emerge from varying levels of experience, popularity, and regularity of attendance. The roles inhabited by various participants—travelers (touring musicians stopping in), semi-regulars, and homebodies (who only play at local open mics)—are described.

Four particular open mics are described in great detail in Chapter 4, "On Stage and Behind the Microphone," which describes the settings, the organization and order of the event, and the symbolic and social boundaries established at each venue. The open mics each varied in terms of their demographics, range of musical styles played, and the sense of "openness" to newcomers (some more hostile or cliquey than others). Some were more inclusive and supportive; others more competitive. Aldredge describes the open mic at the Cornerspot, for example, where a competitive ethos prevails in the predominance of solo acts, and the artists' displays of CDs, pamphlets, and other promotional material give the venue an

impersonal, professionalized feeling. In contrast, the open mic at Namu's features a more fluid, casual, and relaxed vibe: collaborative combos are more common as performers, and a wider range of ages, ethnic backgrounds and abilities are heard here.

Aldredge returns to the concept of the open mic as a third and fourth place in the fifth chapter, "Practicing and Performing." Aldredge notes that the open mic blurs the performer/audience relationship, since the listeners are mostly fellow performers. But the different venues and hosts do much to change how "performative" or "participatory" an open mic feels. "Stage work" is discussed in detail, with descriptions of the verbal and non-verbal interactions that are performed as people work out their personas or position themselves within the symbolic and social boundaries of a particular open mic.

Chapter 6, "Biographical Intersections," discusses the demographics, character, and performative approaches of the singer-songwriters who play these open mics. Though pianists and guitarists dominate, many performers are multi-instrumentalists, and ukuleles, dulcimers, mandolins, and sometimes full band accompaniment are heard. The reasons Aldredge's informants play these open mics—ranging from conquering stage fright to promoting new CDs, or comparing oneself to other performers—are described.

In the final chapter, "Scenes," Aldredge argues that open mics extend the "indie" idea of DIY (do-it-yourself) to DIT (do-it-together), where the loose collective of the open mic provides an

otherwise inaccessible performing and practicing space. He further theorizes the open mic as a “fourth place,” on the margins of music industry institutions, which allows opportunities for participants to experience “a range of creative production and consumption, along with the negotiations of performance and practice” (Aldredge 2013: 184). Aldredge compares open mics (as “pre-scenes”) to “closed mics” (which book a selected roster of known artists, and occur when a musical scene has been established). Aldredge concludes that the open mic is participatory and producer-centred, but still contains a consumer ethos (the performers, with their CDs and merchandise, literally try to *sell* to each other at open mics, instead of creating a more collective, jam-based vibe). This reflects, perhaps, the open mic’s ambivalent boundaries between practice and performance, as well as amateurism and professionalism.

I found the book to be an ethnographically rich read. To some degree, the title seems to promise a more general scope than the book provides. Past work on singer-songwriters (such as the Brackett, Kutulas, and Whiteley texts cited above) have focused on commercially successful singer-songwriters and their political activism, reflections on changing gender roles, and the social significance of their storytelling. But in Aldredge’s book, the history, context and aesthetics of singer-songwriters and open mics across the US or the Anglo-American world are only cursorily provided, because the specific ethnographic context of New York City in the 2000s, and the theoretical issues

raised by the ethnography, are the primary concerns of this text. As such, Aldredge gives us a substantial accounting for the underground and amateur side of the singer-songwriter phenomenon, which is inaccessible to most popular music histories. The detail accorded to the four main open mics was admirably nuanced. Some of the theories presented, such as his applications of Erving Goffman’s “self-talk” and “frame analysis,” and its attendant use of the term “laminations,” were a challenge for me to assimilate. But many other theories—Aldredge’s proposed “fourth place,” as well as the concept of “scene capital” that Aldredge builds off of Bourdieu, Thornton, Hesmondhalgh and others—were well-articulated, and sound promising for helping to further theorize urban music-making in amateur, semi-professional, and indie contexts. 🍀

REFERENCES

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