Reviews

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Writing this review as the Covid-19 pandemic continues to exercise its icy grip on ‘normal’ life, it is hard to escape feelings of sadness and nostalgia. In the space of a few months live music has effectively ceased to exist in many places across the globe and its future may well be somewhat different from that which the editors envisaged when they put this volume together. The rise in research around live music over the past 20 years had led me to assume that live music would be where Popular Music Studies would increasingly focus, while the once-dominant recording sector would continue to be of only lingering interest. At least temporarily, Covid has changed all that.

Thus a review of this book in the pre-Covid word might have been very different from the one which follows. However, the criteria by which the book is judged should remain the same – does it deliver on its promises? Is the standard of writing acceptable? More importantly, what of the argumentation? Does it make the reader think about the topic in a different way? Does it increase their understanding? In short, is it any good?

As will be shown, my answer to such questions is one of ambivalence. While reading this book I was certainly made to think about new things, but I’m not sure that I gained great insight as to what the future of live music would look like. Thus this review will mix praise with reservations.

However, let’s start with the basics. The book consists of an Introduction by the editors after which follow 13 chapters spread across five parts – approaches, technology, performers, spaces and evaluations. As each part contains only two or three chapters, the approach is one of breadth rather than depth. This is reinforced by the fact that the chapters are generally quite short, something which perhaps reflects their (unacknowledged) origins as conference papers. The majority of them address general themes, although some use case studies to present their arguments. Three of the 19 authors are women and four are located outside Europe, with most coming from the UK and Holland.

The editors’ Introduction begins by noting the complexity of the notion of ‘live’ before going on to outline something of its relationship with ‘recorded’, suggesting that two paradigms developed between live and non-live music – ‘rivalry’ and ‘symbiosis’. It then unfortunately attributes to Simon Frith an argument which is actually a paraphrasing of others’ arguments (p. 3). In addition, the claim that readers are ‘unlikely to find testimonies about listening to a specific record in a specific time and place’ ignores Frith’s discussion of the Pet Shop Boys’ Very in his seminal Performing Rites (Frith 1998).

It also claims that ‘in the UK the number of smaller venues is dwindling’ (p. 4) – but one of the sources cited for this is actually an article about falling numbers of
nightclubs, which presumably predominantly use recorded music. Similarly the claim that ‘there are few famous films about music which is not performed live’ (p. 7) ignores, for example, *High Fidelity* (2000). The chapters are outlined and the editors then predict that:

live music will remain strong and develop, but at the cost of extensive labour of musicians and other music professionals, perhaps resulting in a diminished social status of musicians (exacerbated in the modern era by the need now to compete with holograms etc) … But before it happens, let’s enjoy the present of live music, with its utopian potential. (p. 14)

Here there is recognition of the paradoxes of live music. It can be transcendent, but is often built on exploitation of labour including that of underpaid musicians and ‘volunteers’. It is often imbued with notions of musicians’ authenticity, yet built upon technology which replaces them. It dominates earnings from music, but its smaller venues are often victims of market forces. What it gives with one hand, it seemingly takes with another (or is the victim of being stolen from?).

The chapters which follow illustrate these paradoxes. There are two chapters – on approaches and current challenges – by Arno van der Hoeven, Erik Hitters and colleagues. The first examines methodologies and theories such as art worlds, fields of production, cultural studies, network theory and ecology, with the usual suspects firmly in place. They seem likely to remain there as ‘theoretical concepts rarely leave the stage’ (p. 30). The second outlines a series of contemporary issues – such as regulation, spatial embedding, economic challenges, issues with audiences and the position of musicians. However, these can be seen as being perennial, and a conclusion that ‘strong music ecologies are essential to keep offering musicians and audiences rich opportunities to perform and enjoy music’ (p. 47) may not be the most surprising.

Technology is the focus in Part Two where Steven Kerry outlines the implications for musicians of on-stage silence, Duncan Gallagher examines networked performance and Mark Daman Thomas considers digital performance. Kerry’s chapter includes a survey of engineers’ attitudes but suffers from an opaque methodology, although his conclusion that the industry will need to adapt to changing production values is clear enough. Both Gallagher’s and Thomas’s chapters have taken on greater significance since the pandemic, illustrating both the potential and limits of current technology and the ways in which musicians negotiate this.

Consideration of musicians leads nicely into the next part – on performance. Here Darren Moore and colleagues begin with a chapter on *in vitro* intelligence and the cellF project – the world’s first neural synthesiser which plays autonomously. The authors rightly note the implications of robotic and surrogate performances for notions of liveness. Alan Hughes follows with an overview of developments in hologram performances including a typology of dead, live and never existing performers. The future here may lie in holograms based on computer programmes which can make imitative music by no-longer existing artists which can then be performed as new material by holograms. Whether this is dystopian or utopian might depend on one’s disposition, but Hughes’s suggestion that the current market for hologram gigs suggests a potential market for such music is certainly a persuasive one.

Part Four deals with Spaces and starts with the ever-reliable Rob Kronenburg explaining the effect of festivals on their location. In a world where more and more cities are used as backdrops to large gigs, the cities themselves are both part
of the show and also active agents showcasing themselves. Les Gillon’s chapter on The Puzzle Hall pub/venue in Sowerby Bridge is partly a history, but also a possible pointer to the future as it shows how community buyouts can save long-cherished venues from disappearing. The chapter which follows, by Ewa Mazierska on Polish festivals, contrasts the fate of festivals under the former ‘socialist’ regimes with those which operate in the contemporary, uber-capitalist, Poland. What both apparently have in common is the importance of official politics, which can now enhance or undermine a festival. The claim that ‘the future will be bright’ (p. 181) is another stark reminder of Covid’s impact.

The concluding part is on Evaluations and begins with Beate Peter’s assessment of raves in the 21st century. This also outlines a history of rave as a term and its association with EDM from the mid 1980s on, after which Peter sees a division between commercial and DIY raves. Her designation of illegal raves as ones which do not have a licence seems to be something of a tautology and her use of the term ‘hegemonic cultural memory’ is both frequent (pp. 186, 188, 190, 192, 194) and unexplained. However, more positively the use of a case study of a commercial Skepta gig as an attempt to capture the essence of DIY rave raises a number of important questions.

Michael Tsangaris’ chapter on audiences’ experiences and views is based on an Arctic Monkeys gig as part of Athens Rockware Festival in 2018. However both the methodological approach and writing are often opaque here and the links which are drawn between spectacle and technology offer little that is new. Valerie Soe’s concluding chapter on the K-pop band CNBLUE offers a welcome move beyond the Western, albeit one firmly located within capitalist norms. The importance of notions of authenticity to both musicians (especially if, as in this case, they have been put together by others) and some audience members is illustrated again. The conclusion – that their use of technology and recordings in live shows ‘demonstrate(s) the fluidity of meaning between live and mediated music’ (p. 223) – brings us full circle to the problematic notion of ‘live’ with which the book begins.

Overall, this is a work which, despite itself, betrays its origins in a conference which call for papers covering 10 different aspects of the future of live music (https://www.iaspm.org.uk/the-future-of-live-music/). In addition to breadth substituting for depth, another result is a lack of cohesion. This book is much closer to being a themed edition of a journal than a single-authored text. So while there might be ‘something for everyone’ here, it is likely that few readers will be interested in every chapter: inevitably, some will bring more joy than others.

This feeling is exacerbated by a lack of cross-referencing between chapters so that themes which are examined in depth in one chapter but only referred to in passing in others – such as the use of holograms and notions of authenticity – are left to stand alone. The fact that the book ends with a chapter which lacks even its own concluding section adds to a sense of frustration. I really felt the need for an ‘outro’ which pulled the disparate strands on display here together. As it is, the lack of a dedicated conclusion leaves readers to draw their own.

Another notable characteristic of the chapters is a lack of critical perspective with regards to previous literature. Too often this is drawn on to validate an approach or to bolster evidence rather than to add something new. Previous literature is used to reinforce writers’ arguments, rather than serving as an impetus for interrogation. The result is a certain undermining of any claims by the book to
bring something new to the party. There are certainly new angles here, but also too much deference.

It is also questionable how far the book is actually about the future of live music as few of the chapters provide much indication of what they envisage this to be. More deal with the situation at the time of writing, although often with the realisation that understanding history is vital.

Naturally, omissions stand out. There is little discussion of who live music is for and of disadvantaged audiences. Thus while the frequent references to the exploitation of labour which often accompanies live music are welcome, more could be said about gender, disability, race, sexual orientation and class. Patterns of ownership in what is now a truly global industry are ignored and what was until Covid 19 the world’s most important music company – the concert promoter Live Nation – does not even get a mention. Yet it will surely be involved in live music’s future. I would also have welcomed discussion of regulation of events, something which remains resolutely national and which Brexit will doubtless complicate.

So, there is something of interest for most Popular Music scholars here and some interesting observations are made. New knowledge is on display and new avenues pursued. The editors are hardly to blame if the future of live music is one which none of the contributors could have envisaged and it would be a shame if this book became history even as the print on its pages dried.

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Reference

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Great Songwriting Techniques is a long-awaited follow-up to Jack Perricone’s previous practical songwriting text, Melody in Songwriting (2000). In this new book, the Chair Emeritus of Songwriting at Berklee College of Music retains his characteristically simple, readable pedagogic tone and his focus on practical suggestions and exercises. This time however, he attempts a more comprehensive overview of a fuller range of songwriting techniques. The book contains helpful reference to hundreds of specific examples of songs drawn from a wide variety of genres and eras of songwriting. Songs from the ‘Great American Songbook’ sit alongside more varied modern examples from artists such as Nicki Minaj, Lady Antebellum and Zedd, as well as the expected Beatles or Bob Dylan. These are all notated within the book and some are illustrated on the accompanying website of audio examples.

This book is a welcome addition to the rather limited field of high-quality technically focused songwriting texts. On the whole, it avoids the ‘How to Write a Hit in Three Easy Steps’ approach of many other books on the subject, despite the use of the word ‘great’ in the title and reference to ‘hopes of creating a smash hit’ in the