Two more books to add to the growing literature on music and violence, a field in which I was an early exponent (Cloonan and Johnson 2002). Both are welcome and help in understanding the myriad ways in which (popular) music is deployed in conflict situations by those in power, by participants and by civilians caught up in the conflict. There is a good deal of ethnographic work in both of these books and a great deal of richness within their pages.

Daughtry concentrates on what he terms ‘belliphonic’ sounds – ‘the spectrum of sounds produced by armed combat’ (p. 3). It should immediately be noted that his work goes well beyond music to consider as many aspects as possible of war’s sonic environment. In fact only two of the chapters deal with music per se. Of these, one concentrates on the use of the I-pod during the war, while the other examines the devastating effect on Iraqi music and its associated industries of not only the Iraq War but also the years of dictatorship and the Iran–Iraq war. As Daughtry writes, ‘music and music listening are treated here as subcategories of the sonorous phenomena and situated auditory practices that are the central study of this book’ (p. 11). In this sense the subtitle is something of a misnomer as music does not feature as much as might be implied.

Much of the literature which is reviewed to set up the study comes from outside Popular Music Studies and this is a pity. It does not, however, mean that readers of this journal will not find much of interest in this book. Anyone interested in the sonic environment and its implications will learn a great deal. Daughtry argues that ‘the belliphonic is a fundamental dimension of the wartime experience, and learning to contend with it is a daunting and ever-present challenge faced by service members and civilians alike’ (pp. 4–5). He shows how the auditory is often more important than the visual in war, where knowing how to distinguish the sounds of different types of weapon can literally be a matter of life or death. War changes the aural environment as well as the physical and Daughtry examines the various ways in which this happens.

A quite lengthy introduction lays out the existing field well and Daughtry makes the important point that ‘armed violence, through its sensory and affective intensity, brings injury to a far larger population than those whose bodies are penetrated by flying metal’ (p. 26). The book then falls into three sections: Sonic Matériel (two chapters); Structure of Listening, Sounding, and Emplacement (three chapters); and Music Mediation, and Survival (two chapters). These are interwoven with seven ‘fragments’ which relate the experiences of various actors in the war and serve to flesh out some of the more theoretical aspects of the book.

In the first section Daughtry argues that ‘To witness war is, in large part, to hear it. And to survive it is, among other things, to have listened to it. Or better: to have listened through it’ (p. 33, emphasis in original). Much of this section outlines various aspects of war’s acoustic environment, including discussing the different military and civilian sounds such as those of different weapons. While reference to academic
literature is largely absent here the importance of the acoustic environment in wartime is clearly established: ‘to listen acutely was a skill that increased … likelihood of survival’ (p. 67). There is also discussion of four different zones of hearing – audible inaudible, narrational, tactical, and trauma – and an explanation that there is a need to recognise others (and their suffering) before deciding how to approach them.

The second section seeks to show the nature of the wartime auditory experience and draws upon notions of soundscape in order to do so. Daughtry explains that he has ‘reconfigured the soundscape as a tripartite system of “auditory regimes,” “sonic campaigns,” and “acoustic territories”’ (p. 123). There is an illuminative discussion of how listening develops with experience, so that wartime listeners learn to know which sounds to be frightened of and which they can afford to ignore. Such auditory competence can only be learned. The section also includes a discussion of how sound is used in multiple ways by various actors. Here sound emerges as not an add-on to extreme violence, but as a key component of it. Its various uses amount to what Daughtry terms a sonic campaign. The battle for land involves a battle for the soundscape and the attempt to silence others. In addition, acts of extreme violence emerge as multidirectional wherein no one can predict their outcomes and exactly who will get hurt. The acoustic territories populated are shown and examples of how Baghdad’s acoustic environment was changed by the war discussed. Daughtry also suggests that we need to understand more about the perpetrators of extreme violence, a brave argument to make in these troubled times.

The third section is perhaps the most important for Popular Music’s readers. A chapter on the I-pod as the emblematic sound icon during the war is more about the device than the music it contains. The various ways in which it was used are interesting but what is added to existing literature is not always clear. The final chapter, on the damage to Iraqi music, is perhaps the saddest in an often very sad tale. Musicians became targets and there were successful attempts to silence them. Unfortunately this is a relatively small chapter (15 pages) and I would have welcomed much more here.

There are some other annoyances. The population of Iraq is said to be 27 million (p. 155) and 16 million (p. 152), but these seem to be on the low side compared with the estimated 39 million in 2018 (http://www.worldometers.info/world-population/iraq-population/). A tendency to return to previous examples can make the book somewhat repetitious at times (albeit that the revisiting is designed to allow the theory to be illustrated). Sections of the book tend to drag a bit and there is almost too much detail at times. Above all, music could have been foregrounded more.

Ultimately Daughtry shows that ‘sound wounds’ (p. 271). However, we already knew that. What we have now is more evidence of how it does so and, as he notes, ‘the implications are profound’ (p. 271). Daughtry knows that in something as inhumane as war the perpetrators are unlikely to take such implications into account when deciding upon their actions. However, his book means that they cannot plead ignorance of what the effects are.

Gilman’s book has a narrower focus than Daughtry’s as it concentrates on the use of music by combatants. Based on a series of interviews with former soldiers and located firmly within the anti-war movement, the book actually serves to humanise men and women who are too easily cast as agents of American imperialism. What such people do with music is what we all do – use it in various ways towards various ends. In this sense the book is located as much in studies of Music in Everyday Life as it is music and violence.
An introductory chapter sets the scene before the second chapter – actually called Setting the Scene – introduces the men and women of the American military. This is very useful in showing the diversity of this group of people. Gilman writes that they ‘comprise a diverse array of the country’s population and include a significant percentage of foreign nationals’ (p. 27). Unfortunately of her sample group of 35 interviewees, 80% were Euro-American and only four women. Most were from the lower ranks of the military.

A chapter on Musicking at Work and Leisure contains more useful material on the working conditions of wartime than it does on the music. The next chapter on music as a soundtrack to war is further grist to the mill, but contains little new. When readers are told that fictionalised accounts of war are ‘outside the scope of this study’ (p. 58) and then on the next page that an analysis of a video is ‘outside the scope of my objectives in this section’ (p. 59) their confidence can begin to wane. Toby Keith’s notorious track, ‘Courtesy of the Red, White, and Blue’ is mentioned in passing and its lyrics quoted (p. 62) but as it is not subjected to detailed analysis little new is added. Instead we find out that some soldiers didn’t like it.

Chapter five, on Music, Gender and the Paradox of Masculinity, again shows a great deal about life in the US military, a world of ‘hyper-masculinity’ (p. 82). It includes a discussion of genre and gender and shows how troops could be criticised for listening to music deemed to be too soft. While the use of music in mourning loss acted as a countercurrent to this, too often it appeared that music was used to reinforce stereotyped behaviour and to denigrate those deemed as not meeting the required standards of hetero-normativity and hyper-masculinity.

Music was also used in the healing process following war. It could help with mental health issues, in an environment where even admitting to such problems was often extremely difficult. One soldier who also played music was convinced that it had saved his life and many attested to its therapeutic qualities. These were often evidenced in Coming Home, the subject of chapter seven. Troops are trained to fight, but rarely trained to cope with the return to ‘normal’ life when they are often psychically still in a warzone. Such problems were exacerbated if personnel were invalided out of the army while still relatively young. However, we learn more about such problems than we do about music per se and what we do learn here is not that surprising – that music can help but also harm returning troops. It can help heal but also provoke traumatic memories.

A chapter on music and political transformation shows most troops to have been apolitical on joining up. Once in the forces and a war zone the necessity to obey orders militated against critical standpoints. Many troops seemingly only found out about the anti-war movement once they had left. Again here there is much on the troops, but little on the music, although it does seem to have helped push some towards anti-war activism.

The concluding, seven-page chapter, As Time Goes By, reiterates that the book is meant to take us away from high politics and to ‘the realm of this in the trenches’ (p. 185). This it certainly does. The plight of many former troops is distressing, although Gilman makes it clear that they are not simply victims and that they retain agency. Much is shown about life in the military in a war zone and Gilman serves her subjects well in illustrating their evident humanity.

There is something of a tendency in the book simply to cite previous work rather than to critically engage with it and the overall feeling is of adding more material to existing debates, rather than trying to move them on. Much of the
book is devoid of academic referencing. It is well written, but works more at the explanatory level than at the critical level. Gilman wants readers to be as interested in the narratives of those who experienced war as they are in their listening habits. Yet while this aim is commendable, it might not be why potential readers pick up the book in the first place. In fact much more is learned about the military than about music, suggesting that the two phrases in the title should have been swapped round.

These two books are recommended to readers who want to find out more about war and the lived experiences of those who participate in it. Readers whose prime concern is the music itself perhaps need to be more wary.

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Reference

Cloonan, M., and Johnson, B. 2002 ‘Killing me softly with his song: An initial investigation into the use of Popular Music as a tool of repression’, Popular Music, 21/1, pp. 27–39

Editors’ note

Opinions aired in the reviews section belong to the reviewers, who are also responsible for the accuracy of their reviews. We regret that we are unable to enter into correspondence about reviews.