

Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate. Edited by Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno. New York: Routledge, 2004. 379 pages. \$33.50 ISBN 0-415-94366-3

Bad music—it’s something we all know when we hear it and, at times, seems to be everywhere. Bad music knows no bounds. It exists in all styles and genres and can elicit vigorous reaction from those that identify it as such. It has existed for ages. The divide between “high” art and “low” art established value systems that have endured and influenced the significance of most music composed before the twentieth century. Many of the “greats” in the canon of classical music were once considered composers of bad music; and entire genres, like country music and disco, can be and many times are tagged as “bad.” But of course one person’s bad music is another person’s favourite, and the designation is more about personal aesthetics and social constructs than anything else.

Christopher Washburne and Maiken Derno deal with this subject in their book *Bad Music: The Music We Love to Hate*. Washburne and Derno have collected a series of essays that address questions concerning so-called bad music. The impetus for the book arose from a discussion regarding the discrepancy between the music addressed in the scholarly literature and what most people in this world actually listen to (ix). The editors point out that “[W]ith only a few exceptions, scholars tend to focus on music that has special value in terms of influence, competence, and historical genealogy all the while avoiding the mundane music of the everyday” (ix). This results in the construction of canons that exclude a vast number of music and musicians

considered mediocre, non-influential, and unexceptional, leaving them out of the scope of analytic inquiry. To that end, *Bad Music* faces the “mundane music of the everyday” with compelling essays that run the gamut between classical, jazz, world music, and popular music.

The opening chapter by Simon Frith, “What is Bad Music?,” sets the stage for the rest of the book. Frith contends that bad music is a matter of taste and involves a judgment dependent on the social and psychological circumstances of the person making it. Frith argues that value judgments are essential because they provide identity constructs that establish our place in musical worlds. Frith’s prolonged chapter effectively opens the bad-music discussion with the rest of the book arranged into four sections that address different perspectives of the subject.

The first section, “Value and Identity Politics,” looks at music and value systems and includes diverse topics such as Jason Lee Oakes’ essay on lounge music, Elizabeth Tolbert’s Kristevan-focused “Theorizing the Musically Abject,” and Aaron Fox’s discussion of country music in “White Trash Alchemies of the Abject Sublime: Country as ‘Bad’ Music.” Fox navigates cultural theory to uncover what makes country music “bad.” In Fox’s view, many cosmopolitan Americans find country to be “bad” music because it signifies a claim to whiteness—a claim of cultural identity (44). Fox alludes that, “[T]he taint of whiteness in country

aligns with the taint of rural idiocy and working-class psychopathology” (44). Fox’s aim is not to qualify country music as “good” music, but rather to understand the music as “bad.” As Fox notes, “badness is a cultural logic, determined by social relations structured in hegemonic dominance and resistance, ease and abjection.” But he notes that discriminating judgments miss the rhetorical point of the music itself and the cultural essence of its practice. He concludes, “It’s all good *because* it’s all bad” (59).

Section Two, “Canonizing the Popular, Discovering the Mundane,” brings together essays that discuss dual issues of canonization in the writing of historical narratives within the realm of popular music along with the urgency of economic factors when high art institutions try to please the masses. Christopher Washburne’s essay, “Does Kenny G Play Bad Jazz: A Case Study,” addresses questions pertaining to the policing of generic boundaries and the attribution of stylistic labels. The recent phenomenon of reality television programs receives scrutiny in Matthew Stahl’s “A Moment Like This: *American Idol* and Narratives of Meritocracy.” Stahl theorizes that humiliation rather than redemption is the key and sets out to investigate what he describes as musically-themed discourses of opportunity and upward social mobility. The overt “badness” of *American Idol*, especially during the early weeks of the show, is not a detractor to the show’s popularity; instead it is viewed as a necessary component in a marketing campaign that will culminate in CD sales (217). Stahl points out, “According to this logic, no such obviously ‘inauthentic’ musical product, con-

ceived, manufactured and marketed in an openly rational and instrumental way, can carry other than commodity value” (217).

The third section, “Noise, Malfunction, and Discourses of (In)Authenticity,” is concerned with perceptions of musical badness. “Extreme Noise Terror: Punk Rock and the Aesthetics of Badness” looks at punk music’s use of a self-contained ethos of “bad aesthetics” to set itself off from the mainstream and challenge the status quo. Another example of intentional badness is explored in separate essays by Torben Sangild and Eliot Bates that each discusses the emerging sub-genre of glitch, a style of electroacoustic music that uses sounds of technological malfunction and damage as constituent elements in compositions. Rock musicals are explored in Elizabeth Wollman’s essay, “Much Too Loud and Not Loud Enough: Issues Involving the Reception of Staged Rock Musical.” Wollman spans the gulf between authenticity and rock musicals, which has grown out of divergent aesthetics, performance styles, and ideologies.

The final section, “Historical Afterthought,” is from Carl Dahlhaus’s 1967 tome *Trivial Music (Trivialmusik)*. “Preface” and “Trivial Music and Aesthetic Judgment” provide an historical grounding and theoretical broadening of the larger topic of bad music. Dahlhaus discusses a type of nineteenth-century bad music known as “trivial music,” and stresses the importance of developing an analytical approach that is more genre-specific and, most importantly, different from that used for art music. For Dahlhaus, this entails aesthetics playing a role in

understanding the trivial. He notes, “Dealing with trivial music, we need to get involved in the aesthetics of content. An abstract formal analysis would be inadequate” (352). Further, Dahlhaus illuminates the parallel between nineteenth-century trivial music and today’s bad music in his observation that “Trivial music is a mass product. In order not to disturb comfortable pleasure, it must not transcend the limits of the familiar. Trivial music achieves its ideal when it makes the worn look charming” (355). Dahlhaus’s essay provides a fitting conclusion to the bad-music topic by presenting persuasive arguments that are relevant today.

Editors Washburne and Derno have effectively gathered together a collection of essays that address musics usually relegated to disdain and dismissal. The book is well organized, with footnotes and references included at the conclusion of each essay along with a comprehensive index. The authors all make their arguments convincingly, which leaves a sense of uniformity that runs throughout. Tackling a subject like bad music is in itself intriguing, and the editors negotiate the topic with aplomb and courage. They assert that “[B]y addressing this large segment of music which has a real impact in the daily lives of millions...we hope to lay bare the

complex dynamics and dialogical interaction which underpin and perpetually redefine the relationship between the ‘good’ and the ‘bad’” (7).

Bad Music succeeds in its efforts to broach a difficult topic and it is a welcome addition to the pantheon of scholarly books on popular music and culture. It is not a book for the casual reader, unless that reader is versed in Derrida, Kristeva, Frith, and Dalhaus; rather it is an excellent companion to other books that critically examine music such as heavy metal, country, and progressive rock. The diversity of essays contributes to the enormous scope of the book, but does not slow the progress with impenetrable theories; rather it provides a multi-faceted view of a subject that is hard to define yet ubiquitously existing. At first glance, *Bad Music* might appear like its topic, but the psychological reaction, the aversion to things “bad,” vanishes with the opening sentence of the introduction: “Bad music is everywhere!” Indeed it is; and we all participate in some kind of “bad music” ritual. The guilty pleasures of Britney Spears, Mitch Miller, or the Monkees overwhelm us and, when no one else is listening, the dancing begins.

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