

Rush, Rock Music, and the Middle Class: Dreaming in Middletown. By Chris McDonald. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009. 255 pp. ISBN 978-0-253-22149-0. \$22.95.

Chris McDonald's *Rush, Rock Music, and the Middle Class* situates itself in the context of other recent critical studies of single artists or groups, such as *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* and *Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy* as well as ethnomusicological studies such as *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture*.¹ Like those works, McDonald's book identifies specific aspects of Rush's history, performance practice, and reception, and examines them through various theoretical lenses. What sets this work apart, however, is the overarching use of social class as a means to unite the theoretical strands. *Rush, Rock Music, and the Middle Class* is "not intended as a biography" (7). Rather, the concept of social class is used as a tool to weld together various elements including biographical details of Rush's members (Geddy Lee, Alex Lifeson, and Neil Peart), the band's audience, and the sociological aspects of rock music.

Individual chapters in the book take different approaches to this position, such as the study of subjectivity, professionalism and virtuosity, and representation and criticism. In chapter 1, McDonald looks at the "suburban desire for escape" (27). He examines the difference between previous rock formulations of lifestyle as engaged and engaging, even if tough and working class, and this new formulation of suburban middle-class life as something from which to escape. Chapter 2 expands on the theme of escape and looks at the construction of middle-class individualism in Rush as an extension of lyricist Neil Peart's interest in Ayn Rand's philosophy as well as the value placed by the middle class on self realization, self expression, and individual freedom. This identification of the band with middle-class subjectivity allowed Rush to "[use] individualism as a wellspring for optimistic, inspiring messages, as well as a framework for making social and political critiques" (63). Following this discussion of lyrical style and content, chapter 3 examines professionalism and virtuosity in Rush's musicianship. Given that one of the most readily identifiable aspects of Rush's performance style is its extreme levels of professionalism—associated with middle-class rather than working-class values—the rejection of professionalism by the working-class orientation of much rock music and criticism becomes an important element in McDonald's study. Chapter 4 discusses the question of discipline in performance, while chapters 5 and 6 explore the questions of reception by audiences and critics respectively.

1. Susan Fast, *In the Houses of the Holy: Led Zeppelin and the Power of Rock Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001); William Echard, *Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); and Deena Weinstein, *Heavy Metal: The Music and Its Culture* (New York: Da Capo Press, 2000).

The question of the extent to which Rush can be usefully associated with Rand's objectivism, or libertarianism more broadly, is an interesting one. Rand's work was explicitly referenced by the band from 1974, and in 1978 it was the subject of an extended piece in the *New Musical Express* which ascribed fascist tendencies to the band members (especially Peart). McDonald sees Rush's focus on individualism as a sign that rock music was making a transition from the more collectivist ethic of the working class to the suburban privileging of the individual, which he argues formed the basis of middle-class values and experience. Rush's youthful enthusiasm for unregulated individualism and laissez-faire capitalism, and its rejection of the collectivist ethos of the rock and folk of the 1960s, has moderated since the 1970s. Nevertheless, it remains characteristic of the band's outlook.

Despite eschewing biography, McDonald considers the middle-class origins of Rush and its audience to be of primary importance. In his view, Rush originally delivered a hard-rock sound generally associated with the working class, signified by an intentional lack of virtuosity and straightforward lyrics which exemplified stereotypical working-class concerns and occupations. The adoption of a blue-collar viewpoint was ironic, McDonald suggests, because of the middle-class, white-collar backgrounds of all three band members. In the transition from working-class characterizations to more poetic, intellectual, aesthetic, and even existentialist concerns, Rush began to appeal to a new audience. The band's adoption of specifically middle-class imagery and performance style also signaled a new attitude.

This attitude, in McDonald's view, involved a broadening of the parameters of escapism as one of the genre's primary functions. In the 1970s, rock music began to provide the middle class with a new aesthetic of escape from class and social constraint based on that which had defined working-class rock. "The potential of hard rock's working class defiance and machismo for use in reclaiming—if only vicariously and temporarily—a sense of masculine and rebellious vitality for middle-class, suburban boys is certainly part of the genre's appeal" (33). The significance of this change was that performer and audience now shared and belonged to the same social class, rather than being from different class backgrounds, which until then had been a significant feature of popular music culture.²

Rock music's capacity to provide a narrative escape from socially determined norms of behaviour, sexuality, aesthetics and affective response also makes it more than capable of supporting the perspectives that McDonald brings to the Rush phenomenon. However, social class—especially middle class—is a difficult notion to pin down. McDonald notes that his "emphasis on the North American middle class as the primary contextual frame for Rush was the most challenging theoretical hurdle I faced when writing this book" (19). While noting the difficulty of defining the middle class, given its

2. An interesting example of this from the world of jazz is the fact that the audiences for Miles Davis's albums were predominantly white, leading Davis to actively court black audiences. See: Ian Carr, *Miles Davis: The Definitive Biography* (New York: HarperCollins, 1998): 226.

size and wide distribution both in terms of geography and other factors, like income, McDonald does a good job analyzing the dominant theoretical conceptions. Despite the fact that his “class-focused approach challenges some of the prevailing thinking on the creation and reception of popular music” (21), McDonald ends up combining several schools of thought to arrive at his own pragmatic formulation. The principal characteristic of the middle class throughout the book is geographical. Following Rush’s own lead in songs such as “Subdivisions,” McDonald identifies the suburbs as the salient feature of the North American middle class.

On the whole, *Rush, Rock Music, and the Middle Class* is an important contribution not only to the scholarship of one of the most successful and long-lived Canadian rock acts, but to the application of social class to rock culture. The tone is lively and the arguments well-structured, coherent, and engaging. While there are no transcribed musical examples, discussion is not restricted to Rush’s lyrics, and the originality and complexity of Rush’s musical contribution is fully explored.

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