



***Music and the Road: Essays on the Interplay of Music and the Popular Culture of the American Road.* Edited by Gordon E. Slethaug. London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 280 pp. ISBN 9781501335273.**

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Gordon E. Slethaug's *Music and the Road: Essays on the Interplay of Music and the Popular Culture of the American Road* is a critical love letter to the music of American motion. Despite itself, *Music and the Road* reads quasi-chronologically, in three implicit acts. After the introduction, chapters 2–6 form the first arc, demonstrating how to “read the road” by tracing the construction of “road music” in different and sometimes overlapping archetypal American contexts. Chapter 2, “Semiotics of the Road” (Slethaug) gives the reader a survey of the shifting nature of both the historical and imagined American road, from Whitman to Turner<sup>1</sup> to

Kerouac. Indeed, it is Kerouac's that *becomes* the quintessential American road across this volume. Chapter 3, “Easy Riders and Hard Roads in the Early Recorded Blues” (Steve Knepper and James Tuten), traces emblematic biographies and the blues' real and imagined movements down roads and rails in the early 20th century. Chapter 4, “Easy Street on Mud Tires: The ‘Heartland’ and the Frontier of the Road in Country Music” (Virginia Shay), traces evolutionary tropes in country music's road dealings from the pre-depression South to present day global country stars. Chapter 5, “The Tour Bus and the Road” (Ania Shaw), discusses both real and fictional tour buses and their place in the popular imagination and in the construction of the bus as liminality icon. Chapter 6, “Band on the Ruins: Meditations on Music and Motion” (Warren Leming) is a reinvigorating companion to the semiotic abstracting thus far: an anecdotal meditation about life on the road for a working band touring America in the early 1970s.

Chapters 7–10 elect four gold-star American rock stars' relationships to the road in their work and life for case study. “‘All That Road Going’: Brian Wilson, Van Dyke Parks, and The Beach Boys' *Smile*” (Dale Carter) deconstructs the *Smile* album project from the perspective of a post-colonial reckoning with and critical reconstruction of Turner's thesis of the American Frontier along with the modes of transportation that built and enforced it. “‘Happiness is the Road’: Bob Dylan” (Susan Kuyper) takes a long-view of Dylan's life as the “Endless Tour,” examining Dylan's effulgent status as American minstrel



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1. See Fredrick Jackson Turner, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” In *The Early Writings of Frederick Jackson Turner*, edited by Fulmer Mood, 185-233 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1938).

against his peripatetic forebears (particularly Woody Guthrie) and his adherence to road archetypes. “Apology and Forgiveness Got No Place Here at All’: On the Road to Washington D.C. with Bruce Springsteen” (Chad Wriglesworth) centres around The Boss’s controversial performance at the 2014 Veteran’s Day Concert for Valor, linking the persistence of a nation’s past to the ambivalence of the promise of the road. “But People are Strangers’: Lyric Narratives and Ethics on Paul Simon’s Roads” (Alexander Hollenberg) deconstructs Paul Simon’s road songs as aesthetic-ethical interrogations of both his lyric subjects and their historical information *and* the assumptions of narrative teleology underpinning the trope of “the journey” inherent to road song itself.

The final implicit grouping of chapters is short but brings us to full contemporaneity. Chapter 11, “Gender is Over: Transgender Narrative Homecomings, Punk Music, and the Road” (Evelyn Deshane), presents Laura Jane Grace’s transition from her identity as Tom Gabel to coming out as an open trans woman as road narrative, played out in the touring and music of her band, Against Me!, questioning national myth, gender and trans mythic narratives, and aesthetic identity narratives. Chapter 12, “Knowing the Score: Road Movie Soundtracks and Cinematic Verities” (Kurt Jacobsen), is the cleanest example of “music and the popular culture of the American Road” interfacing directly. Its more “postmodern” take subverts the book’s structural tendency to reinforce an illusively diachronic narrative of progress; of linear (if complicated) progress down present, historical, and narrative roads, presenting instead a synchronistic vantage of music and road pop culture interacting across time. It is at such temporal nodes that many of *Music and the Road*’s more penetrating moments arrive.

The focus on “the interplay of music and the popular culture of the American road” highlighted by the subtitle is an important ground for the reader to maintain. *Music and the Road*’s true subject is not the broad and over-vague construction of what The Road means to/in America through song; it is rather the discourse of music with and within the *mediator* of the road’s relationship to American cultural consciousness at large: the popular culture of the road itself.

Slethaug admits there are more voices from the road to be heard and argues reasonably that one book can only present so many—the romantic attachment to Kerouac’s American road feels problematic and symbolically hegemonic. There is little challenge to who controls the road in popular discourse—though this may be less the authors’ fault than it is an honest meta-reflection of the interplay of music to *popular* (i.e. mainstream) American culture. Despite being something of an example of this hegemony, “act two” is a fascinating and propelling read with questions that nonetheless suggests a need to examine the “undemocratic” outcomes one finds on the road (especially Carter’s “All That Road Going”).

Adhering to a practical, fluid, yet situated definition of road music as music that “one, invokes the road as explicit theme, or two, is encountered while passing through strange regions, or three, heightens the road experience, whatever the origin of the song or subject of its lyrics” (p. 204), *Music and the Road* lands with sure steps as a study in American popular culture and paves a guide-track for how to approach its subject in other national and international contexts. Though Slethaug and company take the idea that there *is* “road music” as axiom, once the music of the road has been better mapped, what will be especially interesting is what emerges when the fundamental concept of road music is questioned.