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Interpreting Popular Music



Synopsis

David Brackett demonstrates that there is no one way of interpreting popular music but that different types of popular music use different types of rhetoric, refer to different arguments about musical complexity and familiarity, and draw upon different senses of history and tradition. He crosses the disciplines of cultural studies and music theory to consider how listeners evaluate popular songs and how they come to attribute a rich variety of meanings to them. Issues such as authorship, reception, musical codes, and different modes of representing and describing music are explored in the context of recordings made by Billie Holiday, Bing Crosby, Hank Williams, James Brown, and Elvis Costello. In analysing their music and lyrics, David Brackett shows how interpretations of songs develop in specific cultural and historical contexts.

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Customer Reviews

David Brackett's work is a major contribution to the field of popular music scholarship, as well as to the growing debates about the future of music studies. It's wonderfully readable, thoughtful and wide-ranging, and he challenges some sacred cows in both musicology and popular music studies. There's something for everyone here: chapter topics range from Hank Williams to James Brown to Elvis Costello. And Brackett smoothly uses a stunning array of approaches tailored to each of these widely varied musics. If you're interested in popular culture, popular music, or music studies, DON'T MISS THIS BOOK! --Anahid Kassabia

David Brackett's "Interpreting Popular Music" is a very valuable addition to the field of popular music scholarship. It self-consciously avoids a general theory of popular music scholarship, but rather makes the case that a wide variety of individual approaches, best tailored to 1) the music involved, and 2) the relative, changing stance of the interpreter to the kind of music at hand, provide the most honest and productive hermeneutic. Add this to a forceful defense of paying attention to popular music (take note, musicologists and ethnomusicologists!) and you have a brilliant, rigorous, but open-ended approach to an area of music until recently mostly ignored by musicology. Having said that, Brackett takes several subjects for analysis: Hank Williams "You're Cheating Heart," Billie Holiday and Bing Crosby's "I'll Be Seeing You", James Brown's "Superbad," and Elvis Costello's "Pills and Soap." At each point he critiques and complicates some commonly-held notions, such as biographical relationships between artists and their music (Holiday), notions of immediate 'authenticity' (Williams), and the notions that one can't really write about music, or that musical difference and marketability are at odds (Costello). Drawing on the work of Richard Middleton, Simon Frith and other music scholars, Brackett builds his case at each turn with the help of speech-act theory, African-American literary theory, and "spectrum graphs"-- pitch vs time graphs that help the reader analyze and compare inflection, timbre, style and scope in a more tangible way than simple adjectives. But for the more casual reader, the writing itself is easy and unencumbered. This is a good introduction (without intending to be so) for the beginning scholar of cultural music studies, as the reader really gets a good look at the wide variety of tools available to examine music--not just formal analysis.

The analyses are interesting but I found myself skipping over parts that would have read better if Mr. Brackett had used simpler style that was not so over-worked with academic pedantry (Superbad) "Other utterances that might be considered marginal from and Eurocentric viewpoint, including a variety of grunts and groans, also occur on the latter part of beat four . . . ". The overflowing of original terminology reminds me more of the Saturday Night Live skits that referred to the obtuse and obscure phraseology of self-made Black intellectuals who were prisoners in jail. Ouch. Attempting to work in a reference to the "golden section" in "Superbad" is not legitimate, IMHO. Such proportions do not hold up during a live performance where changes would naturally occur.

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