
**Reviewed by Gregory Erickson**  
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In *Listening to Popular Music: Or, How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Love Led Zeppelin*, Theodore Gracyk continues the philosophical exploration of aesthetics, value, and identity begun in his previous two books on popular music, *Rhythm and Noise: An Aesthetics of Rock* and *I Wanna Be Me: Rock Music and the Politics of Identity*. The subtitle of his new book is revealing of his purpose. Although it might suggest the tale of a middle-aged professor learning not to be ashamed of enjoying the popular culture of his youth, this narrative is actually only a very small portion of the book. Instead, the keywords of the title each takes on a much deeper meaning, unpacking what it means to learn, love, and worry in the context of the aesthetics of popular music. The central points of Gracyk’s arguments are that aesthetic value is just as important in popular music as in “serious” music; that different musical styles require different listening skills to appreciate their aesthetic value; and that we do not need to treat popular music as “art” in order to consider its aesthetic value. Although his earlier works, in attempting to defend rock and popular music from closed-minded critics, claimed them as art, *Listening to Popular Music* stakes out a more nuanced position, denying popular music the status of “art,” while defending and defining its aesthetic value. Like his earlier books, *Listening to Popular Music* questions the traditional distinctions between “serious” and popular music, yet it insists on seeing them as different entities.

Gracyk’s main thrust is that popular music has an aesthetic dimension and that our engagement with popular music always participates in the perception of aesthetic value. He establishes his position as a corrective to cultural studies scholars who, while taking popular music seriously, have tended to slight aesthetics. The book is in three sections. Part One, while not denying that music is a social practice, argues that it should also be studied through aesthetical analysis. Part Two argues for the importance of popular culture in theories of aesthetic value; and Part Three, while not abandoning aesthetic discussion, turns to issues of communication and identity. Gracyk’s challenge, as he acknowledges in the introduction, is to clarify what
“aesthetic value” means. This is his project throughout the first third of the book and is where the book is the most difficult, not so much for the ideas or vocabulary (no German words), but for the method: The book follows a traditional philosophical form, painstakingly breaking down definitions and concepts, laying out numbered taxonomies and schemas, and progressing dialectically through questions and hypothetical answers.

Working through all the steps of Gracyk’s arguments takes patience, but the book offers rewards if read slowly and carefully. Although his methodology can at times feel laborious, or overly literal in its step-by-step process, readers who have been continually disappointed by the rapidly proliferating philosophy and popular culture publishing industry will be much more richly rewarded here. *Listening to Popular Music* is a work that truly engages with both popular culture and philosophy without short-changing either one.

Equally rooted in the literature and language of cultural studies, popular music studies, and philosophy, Gracyk constructs balanced and informed arguments. His first step, to separate aesthetics from art, makes the claim that “calling popular music ‘art’ praises it for the wrong reason” (12), a sentiment familiar from the works of popular music scholars like Rob Walser, who have pointed to the fallacy of elevating rock for its resemblance to aspects of classical music. Gracyk’s reservation about calling popular music “art” is that doing so misleadingly suggests that we should then apply the same criteria for aesthetic value. In making this criticism, Gracyk looks at the historical construction of the descriptive and evaluative terminology surrounding music and art. After examining Kant’s and Schiller’s theories of art and genius as they may or may not apply to the Beach Boys album *Pet Sounds*, Gracyk concludes that “if we want to praise popular music for providing a valuable aesthetic experience, we should set aside the issue of its art status and address its aesthetic values” (24). Part One finishes its task of defining aesthetic principles and aesthetic properties by rethinking Simon Frith’s previous work on the value of popular music that claims common evaluative principles across all types of music. By beginning with Captain Beefheart’s “Dachau Blues” and then discussing early blues, as well as Van Morrison and Bob Dylan, Gracyk makes a complex and detailed argument for the role of listening skills in the development of aesthetic values and principles.

Part of Gracyk’s argument for the aesthetic importance of popular music focuses on its relationship to what he calls “ordinary” activities—joke telling or taking a walk—that separate listening to popular music from the experience of a concert hall. While he convincingly locates aesthetic value
apart from the autonomous experience traditionally associated with “art”
music, Gracyk does not deny popular music’s power to create such moments
of transcendence, comparing at one point the experience of listening to Lou
Reed’s “Heroin” to listening to a Mozart piano sonata. His point though is that
this kind of aesthetic transcendence is not the primary experience of popular
music, and that there are more nontraditional and more important ways of
thinking about aesthetics in popular music—of seeing it as a “particular
experience within a broader framework” (194).

Gracyk’s book is in constant dialogue not only with major texts of
popular music studies, but also with the work of musicologists associated
with European art music. Despite his separation of popular music from
Western art music, his interaction with conservative musicologists such as
Eduard Hanslick (the prophet of absolute music from the nineteenth century)
or Roger Scruton (musicology’s answer to Allan Bloom), shows him to be
both conservative and progressive, seeing certain music, interpretations, and
listeners as inherently better than others, while at the same time rejecting
many traditional theories of how we arrive at these evaluations. While this
is a useful way of entering into contradictory tensions within popular music
studies, Gracyk’s engagement with the right-wing branch of musicology
perhaps leads him to misrepresent certain trends of thought. For example, he
seems to think that musicologists working in Western art music still insist on
the concept of absolute music, when actually this is an ideal that has almost
completely vanished from contemporary musicological discourse.

Gracyk is nothing if not provocative, and many of his statements left
me scribbling arguments in the margins. While many of my complaints are
better suited to a seminar than a book review, there are a few I feel worth
mentioning. In supporting a distinction between aesthetic and nonaesthetic
listening, he nonetheless suggests the two modes “frequently and fruitfully
interact” (47), a position that he sees as opposing many of the tenets and
figures of cultural studies. Gracyk insists on the limitations of what he calls
their “social relevance thesis,” which he maintains should be combined with
an awareness of the aesthetic. Here, some of his assertions seem to both
simplify the work of theorists he criticizes and dismiss recent developments
in cultural studies that take a more serious look at aesthetics. His insistence,
reiterated in almost every chapter, that cultural studies is not interested in
aesthetic value is a less valid criticism than it was ten years ago when an
article in the Chronicle of Higher Education was titled “Wearying of Cultural
although Gracyk presents his book as offering an alternate path, it can also be
seen as participating in the much discussed turn to aesthetics in contemporary cultural studies.

I also question Gracyk’s claim of an “obvious” difference between popular and serious music. How is it clear just where to separate “popular music” from other forms that Gracyk sees as part of the elite art world? Where do we put various sub-genres of jazz? Or the “symphonic” (if mostly panned) recordings of Emerson, Lake, and Palmer or Metallica? How about “classical” composers like Eric Ewazen or Christopher Rouse whose works have clearly been influenced by rock music?

Although the first half of the book is foundational, nonphilosophers may prefer to read the later sections first. While some of Gracyk’s assertions in the later chapters are perhaps less original, the tone is more accessible to readers without some philosophical training. Perhaps, at least on the initial reading, the most interesting and memorable sections of the book are the set pieces where Gracyk pauses his philosophical progression for a few pages to give a close reading of a piece of popular music to demonstrate a point. His musical examples are, as he admits, limited, but also wide-ranging enough to appeal to a variety of readers: The Beach Boys, The Beatles, Bruce Springsteen, Nirvana, Queen, Elvis Costello, Lou Reed, and, of course, Led Zeppelin. His use of Nirvana’s “Smells Like Teen Spirit,” for example, presents the conflict between the “aching, sweet” melody and the “noise” of the metal/punk-influenced accompaniment as a demonstration of how Nirvana “refuses to ‘normalize’ its activity in conformity to the demand that tonality must govern music.” Sounding a bit like some of the socially minded theorists that he has criticized (Walser, Susan McClary, Richard Middleton), Gracyk concludes that this song is a “species of political organization” and can be seen as a “stand against the degree of repression that we often assume everyone must accept as the price of modern life” (173–75).

When Gracyk finally arrives at Led Zeppelin near the end of the book, it is to examine how a lifetime of listening to music allowed him to hear the sophistication and humor in “D’ Yer Mak ‘Eh,” and to finally learn how to love Led Zeppelin. This experience, for him, epitomizes the complex process of learning to experience and perceive aesthetic value: “One cannot grasp the meanings of this music if one is deaf to the voices of the past,” he concludes, finding aesthetic value and richness in Led Zeppelin’s “cross-reference and allusion” and not in its “harmonic organization and complexity” (167).

There is perhaps irony in Gracyk’s usage of what is essentially the elite language of philosophy to claim a separation between elite and popular music. Chuck Klosterman, who labeled Gracyk’s earlier book *Rhythm and
“an incredibly well researched and painfully dull book” (29), probably will not enjoy this book either. On the other hand, most readers of Gracyk are perhaps not that fond of Klosterman’s pop-culture memoir *Fargo Rock City: A Heavy Metal Odyssey in Rural Nörth Dakötä*. Yet ironically this split between elite art and popular art is what Gracyk is attempting to negotiate in his book. In appreciating the arguments of his book, readers traverse the gray areas between feeling the need to claim texts of popular culture as worthy of study, yet wanting to avoid robbing them of their experiential power or enforcing the domestication that can come with artistic acceptance. Readers of Gracyk, like listeners of Led Zeppelin, must develop the literacy to fully appreciate the accomplishment. The resistances that may arise within readers of *Listening to Popular Music* are the very issues that Gracyk is theorizing, and are the tensions that make the study of popular music endlessly fascinating.


**Reviewed by Maria V. Johnson**  
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Originally conceived as a doctoral dissertation at the University of California, Berkeley, Buzzy Jackson’s *A Bad Woman Feeling Good: Blues and the Women Who Sing Them* purports to chronicle the influence of “a powerful tradition of American women singers” who have challenged the society’s limits and expectations for women, and “helped women everywhere find their own voices” (xi). Jackson begins by addressing the work and success of the first blueswomen—specifically Mamie Desdounes and Gertrude “Ma” Rainey (Chapter 1) and Bessie Smith (Chapter 2)—who “[used] the blues as a medium for deep truth-telling about what it meant to be a woman” (xii). “The early blueswomen were strong, sexy, aggressive, emotional, spiritual, and absolutely unashamed of their desires and demands, and so were the singers who followed them,” she writes (xii). Chapter 3 explores Billie Holiday’s music, visual representation, and audience reception, and conjures the “air of dark mystery” and “sense of danger” she brought to jazz (xii). In Chapter 4, Jackson examines the early life, music, and self-presentation of Etta James who she suggests “consciously cultivated a ‘bad girl’ persona,” and Aretha Franklin who she describes as “a ‘good girl’ among bad women” (xii). Chapter 5 illuminates the journeys of Tina Turner and Janis Joplin.
whose distinctive voices and stage personas, personal struggles, and debt to the blues brought a new depth to rock in the 1960s. In the final chapter, Jackson considers the survival and propagation of the blueswomen’s legacy since 1970, focusing neither on contemporary blueswomen nor on the continuance of the women’s blues tradition itself, but rather on select female performers from almost every other genre of American vernacular music—folk, punk, rap/hip hop, neo-soul, pop, country, riot grrl, alternative, and indie rock—in whom, Jackson says, “the blues attitude abides” (241). “They all [seem] far from the blues music of Bessie Smith and Billie Holiday, but certain artists [carry] some blues flavor inside them, just as a drop of Mississippi River water dissolves into the Gulf of Mexico” (ibid). In her “one-drop” buffet, Jackson includes Joni Mitchell, Patti Smith, Madonna, Courtney Love, Kat Bjelland, Salt’n Pepa, Queen Latifah, Erykah Badu, Lauryn Hill, Mary J. Blige, Whitney Houston, and two longer sections on “roots” musician Lucinda Williams and her eclectic mix of folk, blues, and alternative country.

Jackson’s basic thesis is cogent; her descriptions of early blueswomen and the function of their music are culturally grounded; and her pursuit of blueswomen’s legacies beyond the blues genre is a worthy undertaking. More problematic, however, is Jackson’s selection of musicians—especially her glaring omissions—and the conspicuous lack of reference to some of the most important scholarship on her subjects. Although Jackson devotes a chapter each to Ma Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday, she includes no mention in text or footnote of Angela Davis’s Blues Legacies & Black Feminism: Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, and Billie Holiday (1998) or Hazel Carby’s It Jus Be’s Dat Way Sometimes: The Sexual Politics of Women’s Blues (1986), two of the most significant scholarly works concerning the sexual power and politics of early women’s blues. She also seems unaware of several important books on Billie Holiday, including the much acclaimed If You Can’t Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday by Farah Jasmine Griffin (2001). While Jackson appears to have spent considerable time combing the popular press, especially for the sections on Billie Holiday and Janis Joplin, she has not interviewed any of the living artists (except for Lucinda Williams) but instead relies on the popular, sometimes sensationalized, (auto)biographies of these figures.

Beyond Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith, Jackson says very little about other early blueswomen such as Alberta Hunter, Ida Cox, Sippie Wallace, and Victoria Spivey, who made significant contributions performing and recording bold original songs that challenged gender conventions. Lucille Bogan (aka Bessie Jackson), author of “Struttin’ My Stuff,” “Sloppy Drunk,” “BD
Woman’s Blues,” “Tricks Ain’t Walkin’,” and many other popular records, is not even listed in the index; nor is the gender-bending risqué Gladys Bentley, who performed regularly in a popular nightspot she owned (as a one-woman “band” on piano, voice, vocal “trumpet,” and foot-stomping “drums,” dressed in a man’s suit) and publicly married a woman in Harlem. Nor does the author discuss many of the most important links in the chain of norm-defying influential blueswomen after Ma Rainey & Bessie Smith—Memphis Minnie (1930s and 1940s), Dinah Washington (1940s to 1950s), Big Mama Thornton (1950s to 1970s), Big Maybelle (1950s to 1960s), Ruth Brown (1950s to 2006), Nina Simone (1960s to 2003), Koko Taylor (1960s to present), and Katie Webster (1960s to 1990s). In fact, Memphis Minnie, one of the most prolific, enduring, and cutting-edge blues singer-guitarist-songwriters of all time, is only mentioned because Lucinda Williams and The Rolling Stones covered two of her songs. Koko Taylor, described by Jackson as “one of the late 20th century’s most renowned blueswomen” (12), is quoted (from the film Wild Women Don’t Have The Blues) in the first chapter testifying to the importance of the early blueswomen—and then is never mentioned again. Even Bonnie Raitt, who began recording in 1970 and has achieved crossover fame and nine Grammies, receives only a few sentences (240).

Incredibly, in her final chapter on the legacies of the blues since 1970, Jackson does not bother even to mention any of the women working in the blues today; She justifies this by arguing that the blues had infiltrated American society at a fundamental level, and the blues aesthetic had become a part of mainstream American Culture. In fact, however, she seems completely unaware that there are blueswomen today who are carrying on the tradition/legacy. No mention of Denise LaSalle (the prolific and popular soul-blues diva who has been recording bold original songs steadily since the 1970s), or Saffire—The Uppity Blueswomen (who have toured internationally and recorded seven albums on Alligator Records since 1990), or Candye Kane (the big outspoken bisexual former sex worker from southern California who uses her songs and stories in performance to challenge her audiences to rethink their assumptions and explore new ways of communicating), or EC Scott, Lady Bianca, Deborah Coleman, Shemekia Copeland, Sharrie Williams, Nora Jean Bruso, Diunna Greenleaf, Marcia Ball, Deanna Bogart, Kelley Hunt, EG Kight, Rory Block—and the list goes on and on.

Contrary to what Jackson’s subtitle suggests, A Bad Woman Feeling Good is not about the “blues and the women who sing them.” While the
first five chapters are concerned with a few select women and the blues they sang, the last chapter touches upon most everything but the “blues [today] and the women who sing them.” The first part of her title also seems contrived. In reversing the phrase found in many women’s blues songs—“a good woman feeling bad”—Jackson presumably intends to signify blueswomen’s subversion of gender conventions. However, “I’m a good woman” is the phrase commonly used by blueswomen themselves to subvert these same conventions. In other words, the blues singers affirm themselves by asserting themselves as “good women,” not by embracing the term “bad women.” In “Young Women’s Blues,” for example, Bessie Smith proclaims with pride her chosen lifestyle and the desirability of her dark skin in the face of stereotypes that value lighter skin colors, and a community that disapproves of women who drink, swear, gamble, sleep around, and refuse to marry. “Some people call me a hobo, some call me a bum / Nobody knows my name, nobody knows what I’ve done / I’m as good as any woman in your town / I ain’t no high yella, I’m a deep killa brown.”

There are several places in A Bad Woman Feeling Good where Jackson’s structure seems contrived, and relationships are oversimplified and sometimes distorted in order to give the book a more seamless and pleasing flow. In Chapter 4, for example, Jackson’s opposition of Etta James (and her “consciously cultivated ‘bad girl’ persona”) to Aretha Franklin (“a ‘good girl’ among bad women”) disguises their individual complexities and glosses over what the two have in common. “Imagine all the things lacking in the young Jamesetta Hawkins’s [aka Etta James’s] life—strong parenting, a stable home life, musical education, emotional support—and [Aretha] Franklin enjoyed them” (162). Jackson’s desire for dramatic contrast leads her to romanticize Aretha’s upbringing when she goes so far as to suggest that “Aretha was one of the few blueswomen to enjoy a happy childhood” (164). Meanwhile, in the same breath we are told that Aretha’s father was a “ladies man,” her parents separated when she was six, her mother died when she was ten, and she had her first child at age fourteen and a second at sixteen (164). Somehow the notion of a happy childhood rings false!

Perhaps the strongest part of A Bad Woman Feeling Good comes in the section on Janis Joplin where Jackson compellingly documents Joplin’s transgression of conventional gender roles and challenge to the prevailing standards of female beauty and definitions of femininity, along with the price she paid for it (214–18). The book’s greatest weaknesses, however, come from the fact that Jackson has not adequately researched the blues and the tradition of women’s blues. She has a generalist’s understanding
of African-American culture and American history, but she does not have a deep grasp of the blues—as music, as poetry, as history, as culture. Moreover, the disingenuous claims she makes to justify her lack of attention to and research on contemporary women’s blues in the introduction and later in the final chapter do serious damage. In her introduction, Jackson argues: “From Joplin’s day to the present the blueswomen’s legacy has survived in musical form but, more important, as an attitude toward life” (xii). Given that she has not researched the blueswomen’s legacy, either in its survival in musical form or as an attitude among contemporary blueswomen, it is irresponsible to make such a claim.

The survival of the blueswomen’s legacy in musical form is dramatically demonstrated in the energetic, interactive, ad-libbed performances of many contemporary blueswomen. In her *Live at IMA* (1994) concert recording, for example, Gwen Avery powerfully demonstrates the expressive use of traditional blues/gospel performance techniques such as call and response, personalization, total involvement, repetition, embellishment, and contrast to empower herself and her audience, and affirm her identity as a Black lesbian healing from abuse and addiction. In her final chapter, Jackson summarily dismisses women’s blues since 1970 with the statement that “the legacy of the early blueswomen became less clear from the 1970s on” (241). Using a passive construction, Jackson attempts to disguise another specious claim. *Less clear to whom?* In interviews, contemporary blueswomen talk about the inspiration they have gotten from those who came before and the ways they are consciously carrying on this tradition in their own work. The legacy can also be plainly heard in their songs. In “Queen of the Blues,” for example, EG Kight pays homage to blues foremother Koko Taylor, her mentor and model. In “Silver Beaver,” Saffire talks back to the boasting sexual animal imagery of men’s blues (“I don’t want a little red rooster,” “Don’t want no great big king snake,” “Don’t want no funky monkey”), while introducing a bold new image that celebrates older women’s sexuality (“it’s an eager beaver, it don’t beat around the bush”). The tradition of “uppity” (e.g., boundary-pushing, in-your-face) women’s blues is as old as the blues itself, and today’s practitioners, like their foremothers, consciously honor and continue that tradition in the music they make. If it is less clear to Jackson, it is because she hasn’t bothered to look. In the end, the real disservice of *A Bad Woman Feeling Good* comes in the fact that a presumed expert on women’s blues perpetuates an ignorance and invisibility already prevalent in the society, thereby undermining the legitimacy of the vibrant and ongoing tradition of women’s blues.
Reviews

Notes


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Rock and roll isn’t easy to define. Drawing on rhythm and blues and country and western styles, rock and roll got its name in the 1950s as good-time music. Singers shouted, howled, or falsettoed over guitars, pianos, honking saxophones, and bass drums with an insistent 2–4 beat. Appealing to the body more than the head or heart, rock and rollers danced, on stage and in the aisles. Without a consistent or coherent critique of American culture, rock and roll was never entirely free of traditional 1950s values. Nevertheless the music was a sharp and sassy celebration of leisure, romance, and sex, which derided inhibitions and deferred gratifications.

As it evolved, rock and roll became a generic term encompassing a range of styles. More or less what DJs and record producers and performers said it was, it was far more important as a social construction than a musical conception. In the 1950s, suggests media commentator Jeff Greenfield, a bit hyperbolically, rock and roll set off seismic eruptions along generational fault lines. The music was written and performed by teenagers—for teenagers. “Brewed in the hidden corners of black American cities, its rhythms infected white Americans. … Rock ‘n’ roll was elemental, savage, dripping with sex; it was just as our parents feared” (29). A meeting place, a breeding ground, and a staging area during “the Ike Age,” rock and roll was present at the creation in the 1960s. The music was a backdrop—and sometimes an inspiration—for young people who sought to come together, “right now.”

In *A Brief History of Rock, Off the Record*, Wayne Robins, an editor at *Billboard Magazine* and the former pop music critic for *Newsday*, provides an introductory text aimed at students who want to understand the phenomenon that dominated the last half of the twentieth century “and the events that left
the world ‘all shook up’ ever since.” A synthesis, which draws heavily on Web sites, encyclopedia articles, liner notes, DVD documentaries, and interviews, the book endorses the conventional wisdom about rock and roll. The music, Robins writes, drew a generational line in the sand. Brash—with attitude—it spread contagiously “and stirred a fierce backlash.” In igniting hopes, fears, and obsessions about race, rock and roll made its “most compelling, original, and unforeseeable” contribution to American culture. In the 1960s, Robins points out, political and social movements “rolled on the wheels of music.” And by the 1970s and 1980s, “with the meat heads in charge,” rock no longer served as a unifying cultural force.

In his zeal to cover the ground, Robins conducts a forced march through legions of rock and roll luminaries. At times his trips down memory lane become a veritable book of lists of songs, writers, and performers. Enamored with Jerry Leiber and Mike Stoller, Robins claims the songwriting team built the “foundation for rock’s explosion” (7) and “kept rock alive” at the end of the 1950s (54). Aside from these idiosyncratic assertions, he provides few surprises for rock and roll aficionados, baby boomers, and many of their progeny. Robins agrees that Pat Boone “squeezed the sensuality” out of rock and roll rhythms and lyrics, putting “piety and purity” at the core of his persona (28). He concurs that the Beach Boys exuded sunny optimism, recommending “fun, fun, fun,” as “a kind of innocent response” to the “yeah, yeah, yeah” of the Beatles (68). He believes that David Bowie’s character, Ziggy Stardust, clad in a tight metallic costume, with high-top hunting boots, and orange-tinted hair, made gay life—and protean self-definitions—chic. And he asserts that Madonna also reinvented herself again and again, with her “boy-toy” fetishes, “truth or dare” sexual fantasies, fascination with the Kabbalah, and “Crucifixion” production numbers.

More important, Robins provides few fresh insights into the impact of rock and roll on American culture. Again and again, he places a brief historical narrative next to an account of the popular music of the era. Running on parallel tracks, the two rarely touch, and almost never intersect. The result is inevitable: Robins assumes what he ought to prove. Consider his analysis of the 1950s. Robins devotes three pages to a summary of the Supreme Court’s 1954 decision in Brown v. Board of Education, which outlawed segregation in public schools. Six weeks after Chief Justice Earl Warren read his opinion, Robins indicates, Elvis Presley sang his “sensually charged” version of Arthur Crudup’s “That’s All Right, Mama” on the radio: “Between the Supreme Court and rock ‘n’ roll,” he writes, “the old ways were being forced to change” (20). A few pages later, amidst a discussion of
the Montgomery Bus Boycott in Alabama and the decision of the governor of Georgia to cancel a football game between Georgia Tech and the University of Pittsburgh because Pitt had a black player, Robins maintains that Elvis “revolutionized race relations in the South” by sharing his appreciation for black rhythm & blues with tens of thousands of working-class whites.

Robins’ eddies of analysis do not capture the complex and contradictory relationship between race and rock and roll. To be sure, the music did challenge racial stereotypes. White kids idolized black performers. Elvis reportedly subverted segregation laws in Memphis, Tennessee in 1956 when he appeared at an amusement park on “colored night.” At concerts in the North, whites and blacks chatted and danced with one another. And white supremacists used rock and roll to warn against “total mongrelization.” But the music did not always raise racial consciousness. Nineteen-year-old Virginia Lemon of Little Rock, Arkansas, for example, shook and shrieked when Elvis gyrated, but her heart belonged to Dixie. Photographed for Look magazine, she wore a Confederate cap and waved a Confederate flag. In the North, many high school and college students listened to rock and roll, supported the desegregation of southern schools, and joined fraternities and sororities that were segregated by race and religion.

Robins’ analysis of the 1960s and 1970s is equally facile. He lists the troubling events of 1963: the use of police dogs against civil rights marches in Birmingham, Alabama; the murder of Medger Evers in Jackson, Mississippi; the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham; and the assassination of President John F. Kennedy in Dallas. “It was impossible to imagine,” Robins then asserts, without evidence or elaboration, that the Beatles “would lift young America out of mourning and accelerate the transformation of every facet of society” (70–71). A few pages later, Robins provides details of the confrontation on the Edmund Pettus Bridge in Selma, Alabama between civil rights marchers and state troopers with bull whips, tear gas, and attack dogs. His point: “everyone and everything were in transition in 1965” (86).

In the 1970s, Robins writes, pop music began to turn inward, as young people became “exhausted by protest, by death, by the relentless war” (154). Perhaps, though activists scarcely seemed exhausted between 1970 and 1975. And Robins needs only one sentence to connect politics and popular culture at mid-decade. Following the Watergate scandal, the resignation of President Nixon, and the ignominious end of the war in Vietnam, he claims, “It was time to dance”—and cut loose in the disco world of Studio 54 (195).
In the 1980s, Robins reminds us, Ronald Reagan and Bruce Springsteen appealed to “hard hats.” Perhaps deliberately, the Gipper misread Springsteen’s hugely popular song, “Born in the USA,” as “a message of hope.” Implying that the president had exploited a sincere desire to feel good about the country, Springsteen told an audience in Pittsburgh that the country was being split in two. The promise of equal opportunity and respect inherent in the American Dream, he claimed, had been broken: “Things are gettin’ taken away from people that need ’em and given to people that don’t need ’em... So I know you gotta be feeling the pinch down here where the rivers meet” (219). Recognizing that Springsteen was, in many ways, an anomaly among rock stars, Robins catches his sensitivity to dignified men and women dislocated by the “Reagan Revolution.” With economy and elegance, he has illuminated a moment in which politics and pop culture converged. It is a shame he didn’t use this approach, in all its grounded specificity, when he introduced his readers to Berry, the Bee Gees, and Bon Jovi.

Notes