Record Makers and Breakers
Voices of Independent Rock ‘n’ Roll Pioneers
By John Broven
(Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2009. Pp. xiv, 584. Illustrations, appendices, notes, bibliography, index. $50.00.)

According to Marshall Chess, “a record man did everything. He found the artist, he produced the record, he promoted it, he sold it with the distributors.” Ordering records, pressing and printing labels, collecting money from juke box companies, radio stations, and music stores, “it was all part of the job.” (p. 117).

Through their small, independent companies, many of these men (and a few women) became rhythm & blues and rock ‘n’ roll pioneers in the 1940s and ’50s. In Record Makers and Breakers, John Broven, a freelance writer with a longstanding interest in popular music, tells their stories. Based on one hundred interviews with key players in the industry, the book celebrates its subjects for “giving opportunities for almost every artist of any merit” and becoming “inadvertent social innovators by igniting a lasting cultural reformation” (p. 470).

A narrative history, Record Makers and Breakers is often uncritical and only lightly analytical. Broven does not set the context, for example, to evaluate comments about the exploitation of African American artists by “indies” owners, who often insisted on songwriting credits and underpaid royalties. He does not follow up on the assertion of one record man that performers were not really cheated because distributors worked hard to get the music on the air. And Broven’s chapter-long discussion of payola, which he labels (and seems to excuse as) “an integral part of the fabric of capitalist society, no matter what industry, being especially rife in politics” (p. 459), sheds no new light on the practice.

Although Broven did not “cross-examine” his subjects on controversial issues, he has made a useful contribution to the scholarship of American popular music by conducting – and making available – his interviews with so many industry professionals. Broven talked to the usual suspects: Jerry Wexler and Ahmet Ertegun of Atlantic Records; Art Rupe of Specialty Records; Joe Bihari of Modern Records; and Sam Phillips of Sun Records. His conversations with little or lesser-known owners of “indies,” however, provide new on-the-ground details about the business, which was often operated on a shoe string. Abraham “Pop” Cohen, the owner of Essex distributors in New Jersey, employed his sons Irv and Joe as front men, had a nose for spotting potential bad debts as well as hit records, and relied on a unique form of payola: “Mom” Cohen’s “cakes, knishes, strudels and blintzes” (p. 218). Cosimo Matassa ran the J&M Recording Studio in New Orleans as
part of a family-run operation that included the sale of kitchen and bathroom appliances. Although his facilities, as Matassa put it, were put together with “spit and wire” (p. 181), J&G became the go-to destination of anyone interested in Fats Domino.

In the aftermath of the payola scandals, Broven reminds us, the “record men—disc jockey—distributor network was crumbling” (p. 460). As the British Invasion made it clear that rock ‘n’ roll was here to stay (and pay), the major labels intensified their efforts to gobble up star performers and more than a few of the “indies” themselves. The “merry band of mavericks,” Broven concludes, with the nostalgia that permeates his book, was reined in by “natural economic forces and technological revolution.” Once wide-open record markets had matured, as markets “always do.” And “the energetic excitement” drained, “as it always does” (p. 470).

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Understanding Jonestown and Peoples Temple
By Rebecca Moore

“Are you an activist yourself? Do you believe in the practical approach to resolving human problems?” This advertisement appeared in a May 1976 issue of the newspaper Peoples Forum. As a longtime chronicler and analyst of Jim Jones, Jonestown, and the Peoples Temple, Rebecca Moore has built a career out of interpreting the pragmatic appeal of such promotions. Much of her explanatory narrative agrees with novelist Shiva Naipaul’s assessment that “Jim Jones built his movement on the debris of the Sixties; on its frustrations, failures, and apostasies” (p. 22). At its height, Peoples Temple boasted a membership of 20,000, but it never represented a demographically significant trend in American religion. Rather, due to its tragic conclusion, Peoples Temple—and, colloquially, its poisoned Kool-Aid—has become a metonym for brainwashing and blind obedience. Through Moore’s scholarly stewardship, Peoples Temple and Jonestown become instead quintessentially American. As she writes, “Peoples Temple was a homegrown religion and, at its heart, reflected American institutions” (p. 6). From its beginnings, the church of Jim Jones embodied patterns in U.S. religious sociology. After many shifts of congregational name and location, the Peoples Temple Chris-