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Stan Hawkins, *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality*

Abingdon, Routledge, 2016, 256 p.

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- ¹ *Queerness in Pop Music* is the tenth book in Routledge's new Popular Music series, which explores the discipline at the intersection of gender, race, celebrity, fandom, tourism, fashion and technology. Passionate and vibrant, this book delights in detecting, then revealing the permanent tongue-in-cheek of all things queer in pop music. Stan Hawkins' contribution is gleeful, ambitious, smart and occasionally frustrating, which given the remit of the series, is absolutely as it should be! Hawkins' aim is fairly straightforward: to explore a range of musics and highly stylised performances to build on existing discourse of queer temporality and opacity. Arranged across seven chapters, the book unravels from the initial question: "what makes pop music queer?" (p. 1). Hawkins draws upon a wealth of experience in the field of musicology and actively seeks to investigate the complexities of feminist, gender and queer theories in this context. "...Music," Hawkins enthuses, "validates the expansion of identity politics into Otherness for the duration of a performance. My approach...is to venture forth into less-known territories where queerness is rendered pliable" (p. 6). And so, via Halberstam, Foucault, de Villiers, Muñoz and more, Hawkins intrepidly sets out to identify the sonic and visual signifiers caught up in the technologies, performance practices and representations of queerness in popular music.

- 2 Chapter two takes place on the dance floor. Skipping from a brief history of disco to more contemporary forms of dance music, Hawkins begins with an analysis of Ultra Naté's 'Free' as emblematic of a utopian anthem "representing a stirring enactment of queer time ... an invitation to partake in the not-yet-there" (p. 36). Hawkins' close analysis of the intentionally banal sounds of the Pet Shop Boys is excellent, detailed and critical of the lyrical and sonic tricks deployed in the kinds of "tainted love songs" (p. 41), which serve to aestheticise masculinity in a particularly subversive way. This texture is echoed through his examination of Boy George and Mika's musical output, and while these audiovisual texts ostensibly "provide a gateway from the *here-and-now* into the utopian domain of *that-which-might-be*" (p. 43), Hawkins' concluding example is Lou Reed's "staging of a utopia" (p. 53) when he 'Walks on the Wild Side' to step outside of straight time altogether and into the sparkly queer world of Glam Rock.
- 3 The notion of confession and the policing politics of 'the closet' is the vehicle for exploring the way discourse on opacity resonates with a range of pop music performances. For Hawkins, David Bowie's deliberate genderplay, creation of alter egos and demonstrations of homosocial bonding and performative masculinity resonates with de Villiers' argument on queer opacity as a means of "locating the weak points in the system" (p. 65). Taking up the threads spun by Bowie, Hawkins suggests that Madonna's problematisation of heterosexual relationships is played out through tropes of confession and made manifest through a musical text which functions as (queer) postmodern palimpsest. In many ways, these two musical examples are so extraordinarily rich that the chapter would benefit from more in-depth analysis, rather than skipping through a handful of texts with various nuanced levels of opacity. That said, Hawkins' exploration of the ways Annie Lennox visually, culturally and musically toys with 'the closet', to illuminate the constructedness of gender, is particularly perceptive. However, his analysis of the production style and lyrical content of both Diana Ross and 90s alt-rockers Garbage, are less convincing and feel a little like an afterthought here.
- 4 Moving away from the iconic pop acts of the late 90s, Hawkins kicks off a fourth chapter with its attention turned toward the 21st century pop spectacle, immersing himself in hyperbolic expressions of style, gesture and gender performativity by minority communities. Delving into issues on musical appropriation, the intricacies of pop music production and trends in fashion, this chapter plunges into the kitsch, the postmodern, and the deviant. Beginning with Lady Gaga and Ysan Roche, Hawkins explores performers who maintain a position at the boundary of the "real" and the virtual. He argues that by coding herself within a lineage of iconic and mythical performers and (often other-worldly) creatures, Gaga's (often camp) vocal athletics insist upon the dismantling of (hetero)normative stereotypes. Similarly, Roche's 'Black Yellow Pop' toys with the gothic; spelling out a musical identity which is 'different' and utopian in the way it reaches toward a place of fantasy. A particular highlight of the chapter is Hawkins' treatment of the joyfully excessive high-camp of Scissor Sisters; picking away at the song 'Skin Tight' to reveal and pore over the regulatory mechanisms of institutionalised gender which are embedded in the machinations of the song text. He goes on to examine the unique space Nicki Minaj has created through her cartooning of femininity, often through drag – musically overlaying Pop with Hip-Hop. Hawkins notes the significance of an African-American woman flaunting, taunting and subverting the inherent racism, misogyny and homophobia, which ordinarily maintain

the heteropatriarchal male gaze. While this chapter flows particularly well, the issue of *how* these texts intersect and resonate as/with postfeminist discourse is certainly worth more attention given the range of musical, social and cultural expressions here. The work of Angela McRobbie,¹ Yvonne Tasker and Diane Negra,² and Sadie Wearing³ would certainly be useful points of reference.

- 5 Hawkins' fifth chapter explores modes of musical camp, styles of queerness and non-normative lineages. Hawkins' existing work is well-established in this field and this addition is certainly valuable. His review of Le1f as boastful enchantress shows the queer strategy of an artist bringing the hip-sashaying of New York ball culture into the 21st century. Sontag's notion of "camp as sensibility," as opposed to it being thought of as a specific concept or identity, is identified in Le1f's musical aesthetic, which is characterised by a highly-processed, distorted vocal timbre set against the backdrop of heavily compressed, minimalist drum machine and sound effects. Kitsch and noisy, his style campily parodies and ridicules "normalcy" (p. 135). Rufus Wainwright's "pseudo-operatic", vaudevillian, flamboyant camp is analysed through close vocal performance analysis whereby mediating vocal technologies are argued to contribute to a camp sensibility, while George Michael's wry dramatisation of his cottaging antics is celebrated for the way it queers everyday spaces. Hawkins writes beautifully, noting that "the very notion of turning a sordid urinal into lusty disco setting in 'Outside' became a symbolic transition into something that felt like heaven" (p. 143). However, I remain to be convinced that Jay Kay's (performing in the band Jamiroquai) falsetto, lithe dance moves and appropriation of both Native American culture and funk lineage sits somewhere on the camp spectrum. Indeed, while Kay may be perceived to push the boundaries of normative masculinity through his performance style, it seems a bit of a reach to class this as a specifically *camp* performance and as such, points toward a requirement for Hawkins to better define the texture and character of the eternally slippery idiosyncrasies of camp. The work of Shugart and Waggoner⁴ would be a particularly useful addition here. More successfully argued is Hawkins' detailed intersectional critique when identifying camp in Justin Timberlake's beatboxing, dance and singing performance in the video of 'Rock Your Body'. With references to disco and borrowing from Michael Jackson's vocality and dance, Hawkins suggests that Timberlake's stylised performance "is an attempt to escape from the white male heterosexual body" (p. 153) and in many ways, Timberlake's is a performance that does the same work as Kay's but is more convincing.
- 6 Beyonce's exploration and transgression of normative masculinity in the song 'If I were a boy' provides an interesting starting point to chapter six, exploring the signifiers and structures of gender in musical performance. These ideas unravel in the "wistful yearning" (p. 168) of Antony Hegarty. Identifying as transgender, Hegarty's is a space of in-betweens and this is explored temporally and spatially through Hawkins' close analysis of Hegarty's vocal range, singing technique(s) and timbral idiosyncrasies. Hawkins asserts that it is the corporeality of Hegarty's performance, the way the voice draws attention to a non-normative body, that is interesting here. A duet with Boy George on the song 'You are my sister' provides "a release from the constraints of normative masculinity" and becomes bound up with a sense of vulnerability, which is equally constructed through the song's arrangement and production as the vocal performance and treatment itself. As Hawkins notes, what is extraordinary is the performative emphasis of "the fragility of gender...[as George and Hegarty] refer to each other as 'sisters'" (p. 169). Interestingly, an insistence upon male pronouns

throughout the analysis comes with neither caveat, nor comment. This is pertinent given Hawkins' deft, light touch when considering Hegarty's remarkable musical output and as such, functions as a peculiarly missed opportunity to demonstrate the way in which Hegarty and other Trans* identified people trouble the scaffolding of gender. Janelle Monáe's 'Tightrope' reveals a performance space of, and for, a mode of female masculinity, which stylistically draws on dandyism. The author argues that by setting Monáe's video in an asylum, a subtext that dramatises a history of black oppression becomes apparent. And yet, in unravelling the musical context, history, style, conventions and lineage of her performance, Hawkins concludes that Monáe optimistically points to the hope of the future. He closes the chapter with two excellent queer readings of two of the bastions of "authentic rock", Bruce Springsteen and Kurt Cobain. Drawing on Fanshel's insistence of a bisexual reading of Springsteen, Hawkins leans toward discourse on opacity and the "constriction" of heterosexuality and masculinity, rather than "impos[ing] the closet" (p. 184) on Springsteen. Indeed, if Springsteen performs at the normative boundaries of gender, then Cobain followed him there to deliberately convulse at that border. Hawkins argues that Cobain's sensitivity to the socio-cultural rules of masculinity was exacerbated by the gendered traditions of authenticity in rock, thereby classing Cobain as Anti-hero, as Other and ultimately resulting in his suicide. A close reading of 'In bloom' sonically reveals Cobain's vulnerability through the use of chromaticism which in turn determines the harmony of a song. This, Hawkins argues, demonstrates a resistance to the demands of normative tonality and becomes a hallmark, not just for the song, but for the genre itself and helps to concretise Nirvana's idiolect.

- 7 Hawkins' final chapter is firmly rooted in 21st century queer Pop and Hip-Hop, albeit in the context of the careful teasing out of the queer histories that paved the way. Drawing from the highly influential work of Jodie Taylor on queer subcultures in Australia, Hawkins further explores the Queercore aesthetic - specifically the relationship between body, gender identity and musical/lyrical sexual themes (p. 199). The early part of the chapter is rich with queer happenings and textures. Indeed, the way in which it relates to other musical examples in the book is fascinating and for that reason, the opening ten pages of the chapter are really valuable and are certainly worth the time, even if the reader's interest directly lies with another chapter. A return to ball culture, Hawkins muses on the naturalising of cross-dressing by the way in which Mykki Blanco's transgendered identity simultaneously "destabilise[s] norms and empower[s] her fans" (p. 208). This is further emphasised by Zebra Katz' minimal, beat driven music. Hawkins argues that postmodern parody is at play here, evidenced by the ways in which the song is constructed layer-by-layer, only to be topped by a smattering of comedic non-vocal sounds to defiantly code himself as Other. It would have been interesting for Hawkins to interrogate the vocality at work here, as I would add Katz's delicate enunciation and metrosexual accent as part of the self-styled "Queer Outsider" persona that he has gone to such lengths to construct. He goes some way to exploring this kind of aesthetic as he returns to Le1f's performances of the song 'Soda', but this is perhaps another example of the author moving too quickly from one musical example to another.
- 8 Hawkins' conclusion is short, musing on the ways in which queer performances enable listeners to think beyond straight time and articulate a desire for a different and/or more queer world. In examining the internal and external technologies which frame and mediate the voice in pop songs and videos, Hawkins pulls together an

extraordinary range of pop performers and performances, which reflect on the past and muse on the present, but mostly “point to the future by getting us to look back and reflect on how we went astray” (p. 220). For Hawkins, this amounts to a practice of “stepping into ecstatic time” as a mode of “kinship as a social ideal [and that] music establishes spaces for queer bodies to reorientate themselves” (ibid.). *Queerness in Pop Music* is a valuable and timely addition to the field of popular music studies with the author genuinely revelling in the process of exploring the texture of musical texts which toy with (hetero)normative assumptions on gender and sexuality. His ability to get to the heart of what’s going on, be it historically, culturally and/or musically in a visual/sonic text is admirable and I would be fascinated to see him go into significant depth using fewer musical examples. Hawkins is in his element when examining the relatively new phenomenon of Queer Hip-Hop and I hope this will be an area he looks to develop in the future.

NOTES

1. MCROBBIE, Angela, *The Aftermath of feminism: gender, culture and social change*, Los Angeles, London, New Delhi, Singapore, Washington DC, Sage Publications, 2009.
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  3. WEARING, Sadie, ‘Representing agency and coercion: feminist readings and postfeminist media fictions’, in Sumi, Madhok et al. (eds.), *Gender, Agency, and Coercion*, New York, London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 219-239.
  4. SHUGART, Helene A. and WAGGONER, Catherine Egley, *Making Camp: Rhetorics of Transgression in U.S. Popular Culture*, Tuscaloosa, University of Alabama Press, 2008.
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Emily Baker is a third-year postgraduate researcher at the University of Liverpool working on a thesis that examines the function, properties and impact of the aesthetic of Age in the voice in contemporary popular music. Her research is funded by the AHRC and is supervised by Dr. Freya Jarman and Prof. Sara Cohen. With a grounding in popular music studies and discourse around the voice, Emily’s work is underpinned by cultural studies perspectives on Age and ageing processes as well as phenomenological, feminist and queer perspectives on identity more broadly. In other words, she spends as much of her time reading Barthes, Foucault, Butler and Halberstam as she does listening to, and watching the performances of, Dolly Parton, Aretha Franklin, Joni Mitchell and Grace Jones.