

Perfect Beat v8n1 July 2006

PUBLICATION REVIEWS

Walley, D (2006) *Teenage Nervous Breakdown: Music and Politics in the post-Elvis Age*, New York: Routledge

There's something going on here, but you don't know what it is, do you Mr Walley? This book sees a 1960s survivor lament the way that things have gone since that decade and take a swipe at some of the reasons for the supposed decline – educationalists (they've let their students down), school administrators (corrupted the curriculum), feminists (too doctrinaire), the internet and associated IT (a con), music reviewers (sold out) and so on. The book is actually a series of essays and this has resulted in a lack of any sort of organising thesis or overview. Instead the reader is subjected to a series of rants in which the only common denominator is that the author is pissed off. By the time I'd forced myself to plough through this book, so was I.

The problems begin with the sub-title. It is a misnomer. What I thought I would get from this book was an overview of developments in the relationship between music and politics since 1977. This is instead a collection of separate chapters which give a lot of insight into Walley's state of mind, but offer precious little else. It would be pointless to list the things which are missing from a coherent view of music and politics since 1977, as this is obviously not the point of the book. Rather it is, we're told, "a series of word-jazz rock and roll improvisations" (x) on various themes. Nevertheless it is disappointing that a title that offers so much produces so little.

Walley believes that a continued interest in popular music amongst older fans has had an infantilising effect. For Walley many of his peers remain trapped in the world of the High School, which is "eternal" (xiii), and so they lack maturity – "We never leave" (98); "life is nothing *but* high school" (109, emphasis in original and attributed to Kurt Vonnegut). Meanwhile their children are trapped in a world of vacuous pop and asocial technology. He asks why "although America is a world power we haven't yet managed to graduate from high school?" (10). But he provides no answers.

Walley believes that the dreams of the sixties have been lost, but exactly how and why is never really explained. We get hints such as "the sixties has become a casualty, homogenized out of recognition and Cheesewhizzed by market forces and media" (43), but a thesis is never developed. In fact I learned nothing about the decade Walley cherishes, although its true spirit apparently meant "nonrepresentational living, free of endorsement contracts" (67). Walley feels

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under no obligation to point out a future direction as “there are no *right* answers, only right questions” (xv, emphasis in original) and the essays are meant to be “descriptive rather than prescriptive” (197). So he gives himself carte blanche to rant away without offering solutions.

There is also precious little for the popular music fan to get their teeth into. Apart from a general feeling that things have gone downhill (an unoriginal thesis if ever there was one), not much is presented which could give an idea why people are passionate about music and what a life-changing force it can be. While it may be true that music “seems more and more to be a product conceived to appeal as much to the corporate bottom line as it is to the audience” (16) this tells us nothing about how musicians have reacted to such corporatism, or the various attempts that have been made to counter this. Some of the chapters deal with topics such as education, food, ICT and sex; and not with music at all.

The book is full of the sorts of sweeping generalisations that characterise weaker undergraduate work, and claims are not backed with hard evidence. Walley is telling it as he sees it – but without providing the sorts of evidence that would allow us to see it too. I’m not convinced that Walley recognises the difference between voicing an opinion and constructing an argument. Who could really engage seriously with lines such as “Who stole the Bomp from the Bomp Sha Bomp? We did” (35)? I’m not sure that I want to spend time protesting my innocence.

The irony of this book is that Walley is raging against the state of the world without the sort of self-awareness that might make him realise that books such as these are part of the problem, rather than the solution. It takes a certain amount of intellectual dishonesty and laziness to rage against the modern world without producing a theory of how we came to be here or a considered account of where we should go next. He distances himself from academic approaches, failing to consider how the best academic approaches might help his own work. When Walley has the audacity to say that this book “is a great book for college students” (xiv) it is time to hit back. His intellectually lazy, scatter-gun, incoherent and generalised approach is exactly the sort of thing we should *discourage* amongst our students. It is close to being a disgrace that a respected academic publisher such as Routledge should print such nonsense. So do your students a favour and *don’t* put this book on reading lists. In addition, do yourself a favour and ignore it. Walley believes that “Thinking is a subversive activity” (xvi). On the basis of the evidence gathered here, Walley is no subversive.

MARTIN CLOONAN

Research Fellow, Macquarie University