

GERRY SMYTH, *NOISY ISLAND: A SHORT HISTORY OF IRISH POPULAR MUSIC* (Cork: Cork University Press, 2005), ISBN 1-85918-387-5, 190pp, €15/£13.95/\$19.95.

Short introductions are often a good idea. Short histories tend not to be a good idea unless the historiographic approach of the text is explicitly conceptual or thematic instead of chronological. There is, however, no obvious historiographic basis to *Noisy Island*, and the conceptual underpinnings of the text are hastily thrown together. One of the strengths of an analytically-shallow text might be that it provides a reasonably encyclopaedic listing of known and generally unknown worthies, as well as a straightforward chronological history. The listing of names never surprises, however, and appears for the most part to be a reinforcement of a popularly-orthodox canon that many people might be able to list off the top of their heads. The chronology is often confusing, and frequently jumps all over the place, for example: the Pope's visit in 1979 (48) precedes the Miami Showband shooting of 1975 (49); the launch of CDs in 1983 (curiously framed within 'the advent of digitalization during the 1970s') is placed before the launch of MTV in 1981 (50).

The level of scholarship throughout the book is generally sloppy. Names and terminology are haphazardly dealt with: the Live Aid concert is referred to five times as Band Aid; De Danann member Alec Finn becomes Alex Finn; Q (est. 1986) is listed matter-of-factly alongside *Loaded* as a post-feminist magazine of the 1990s. There is also a wealth of casual overstatement. The word 'invariably' is invariably a dangerous one in analytic prose, particularly where histories are concerned, and the author clearly has a fondness for the word as it appears frequently.

It is somewhat worrying that an author can publish with one of the leading academic publishers in Ireland in 2005 and speak openly about 'the shape and character of national culture' (21) without the slightest hint of irony. Smyth's historical *modus operandi* anthropomorphs all too easily. Watch the Personality of the Irish Nation as it matures towards modernity. Despite his protestations to the contrary, the author structures his text with a classic Herderian approach that dare not speak its name. As a consequence, the distinction the author claims for various examples of anointed futurity in Irish popular music often renders his analysis little more than an overly-long justification for a fanciful progress narrative. The history Smyth offers us is thus never really 'peopled'. The many become one, and the history of Ireland becomes the history of people with names but without a history. As the fascinating lives of particular people disappear in the drive to present a broad overview of a 'national history', the dissonances and conflicts of everyday popular musical practice also disappear amidst the discursive scaffolding of Smyth's looping chronology. Without the particularism of people's lives, this book offers a passionless, sexless, drugless, and conflict-free jaunt through the field of study.

The fascinating, lived particularisms that accompany sustained interrogation of the discourses and practices of aesthetics, taste, style, genre, manufacture, consumption and performance (the lifeblood of historical scholarship in popular music studies) are effaced by a frequent deferral to the uncritical clichés of nationalistic discourse. This severely weakens the deployment of Smyth's central conceit—the politics and poetics of 'genre'. Despite inferring that genre-ideals act as the normative forces of popular music, the parameters he uses for the terms 'popular music', 'Rock 'n' roll', 'Rock', 'Beat', 'Punk' or 'New Wave', for example, are never adequately explained. Smyth also seems to assume that genre *distinctions* imply genre *separations* in practice:

Those who inhabit the worlds of art, folk, and rock music clearly do not constitute 'appropriately knowledgeable listeners' when it comes to the music of the showbands. Or to put it another way, each of these different worlds has invested its cultural capital in significantly different stock, and as a consequence is ill-disposed to appreciate the value, or indeed the meaning, of each other's activities. (17)

Sweeping statements like this go a long way towards undermining any arguments the author might otherwise make, as they suggest a simplistic understanding of how aesthetics, taste, affinity, community, or genre work in the interactions of musical practice. To suggest that aesthetic inclinations constitute 'different worlds' that correspond to radical separations between listeners ignores the complexity and nuances of what actually happens. People can and often do belong to many different genre communities and can and often do experience a variety of affinities in their aesthetic inclinations.

There is no sense of the intricacies of the 'production of culture' here, no understanding of how genres develop in a broad nexus of musical discourses and practices. To come even near any adequate explanatory analysis of such issues it helps to encompass the influence of music journalists, broadcasters, and music industry operators, none of whom are deemed to merit inclusion here. This is a history in which the only significant tensions are rhetorically abstracted from the peopled grain of politics—explanation founders amidst purported tensions among the rhetoric of tradition and modernity, the past and the future, local and global, culture and politics.

The fly-leaf blurb reads: 'This book establishes the field of Irish popular music as a legitimate and significant area of cultural debate, and provides both a methodology and an archive which will serve as the basis for future studies in the field.' It doesn't, and it doesn't. There is no clarity of methodology in this work. It purports to be a work of cultural theory, but Smyth does not undertake any serious, substantive engagement with it. The names of Attali, Adorno, and Bourdieu are pulled in to legitimate the work as a piece of serious academic inquiry, but in no case is the work of these theorists ever dealt with adequately enough to justify their inclusion. Perhaps it

suggests an embarrassment about adopting theoretical perspectives in a text that is bound to draw a wide readership but the effect allows the author to draw upon the distinction, legitimation and authority of theoretical knowledge without having to be accountable in any way for its relevance or lack thereof.

There is little evidence of editorial guidance, from theme to structure to writing style to paragraph editing to basic facts to simple proof-reading, and as an academic text or even a text for general readership it fails on so many fronts. I remain bemused as to why Cork UP saw fit to publish both this volume and *Beautiful Day: Forty Years of Irish Rock*, co-written by Gerry Smyth and Sean Campbell, in the same year. The latter volume covers much of the same ground in a much more readable and structured fashion, and, in its single-by-single format, is more helpfully structured, more specific in its analysis, and far more honest in its packaging. Far from being authoritative, *Noisy Island* is seriously flawed in both conception and delivery. If this is the first academic monograph in the field of Irish popular music, then it is something of a false start.

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