

STEVEN GAMBLE, *HOW MUSIC EMPOWERS: LISTENING TO MODERN RAP AND METAL* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2021). ISBN 9780367339555, 188 pp, £130 (hardback)

There is a moment in the 2002 documentary *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* when singer-songwriter Ben Harper talks about the way soul music ‘gives you power [...] makes you believe [...] as a child, it gave me unconscious hope; it gave my father hope.’<sup>1</sup> Such testimonies of music’s ability to empower can be found throughout the history of popular music. Nonetheless, while the broader consideration of pop’s potential for invoking meaning – and/or making the listener *feel* – has been a central concern of several pivotal treatises concerning popular music aesthetics, the specific issue of empowerment, and in particular, *how* music empowers, has received surprisingly little scrutiny at least in terms of musicological enquiry.

Steven Gamble’s *How Music Empowers* provides a welcome and timely contribution to the topic that sidelines socio-political subjectivity in favour of a more phenomenological perspective to consider what the author terms, ‘the mechanisms of empowerment’ (9). Much of the book’s motivation lies in what the author identifies as the need to shift focus away from specific testimonials of empowerment – as captured and consolidated in music therapy case studies – and, instead, consider the diversity of individual responses to, and understandings of, music (20). Ultimately, this is a book about listening or more specifically, ‘what various listeners can experience – and, crucially, *how* that experience emerges – rather than what they articulate their experience to be’ (9). In choosing to apply his attention to the stereotypically divisive musics of metal and rap – genres for which the author’s enthusiasm is abundantly clear – Gamble selects suitably ripe fields with which to realize his intention to reconcile both the ‘commonalities and idiosyncrasies of how individuals listen’ (29).

At the heart of the theoretical framework established in the early part of the book is the concept of *affordance*,<sup>2</sup> in that empowerment is *afforded* as an emergent force from the interaction between track and listener, as opposed to constituting an inherent property of the musical text: ‘[t]he key definition of affordance is that it does not prescribe or contrast or condition experience with any consistency, but rather describes how ways of being are made possible’ (35). This forms the basis of the analytical model

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<sup>1</sup> Paul Justman (dir.), *Standing in the Shadows of Motown* (Santa Monica: Artisan Home Entertainment, 2003).

<sup>2</sup> Author’s emphasis. Gamble makes frequent use of italics to emphasize concepts/terms central to his discussion. The italicized terms in the remainder of this review reflect this.

that Gamble outlines in Chapter 2, defined as an *ecological-embodied approach*. Here, the author integrates what he regards as two potentially complementary viewpoints that address the way individuals interact with their environments. Theories of perception derived from ecological psychology serve to ground the notion of affordance by way of the establishment of an analytical framework that considers the relationship between the individual and their environment in terms of interactions and learned understanding rather than objective or symbolic criteria. Ideas from embodied cognition theory, specifically, conceptual metaphors and image schemata, are then applied to help define the nature of these interactions in terms of bodily experience. The listener experience is thus outlined as a multimodal process incorporating the individual's *perception* (sensing), *cognition* (understanding) and *behaviour* (interaction) with regard to environment (21).

The chapter that follows establishes the format that Gamble follows for the rest of the book, as he applies his concept to specific lines of enquiry, as evidenced through a series of paired analyses of tracks from contemporary rap and metal (typically one from each). Here, the author develops Allan Moore's concept of the personic environment<sup>3</sup> to consider how manifestations of power connected to the performative persona within each track may affect the behaviours which govern the listener experience. The aforementioned multimodal construct serves as a template for examining rudimentary displays of individual power and performative prowess (perception) and the often-instinctive psychological constructs of power (cognition) before considering how the mentalising and mirroring of the persona experienced may prompt a potential transfer of power to the listener: How do they feel? How would I feel in that situation? (52)

There are other contributing factors at play here which the author acknowledges, not least that of the listener's familiarity with the genre in question or *style competence* (35–6). As Gamble is careful to point out, his approach is ultimately a theory of modelling rather than one that seeks to provide definitive explanations. Nonetheless, it is hard not to be persuaded by what is proposed. Numerous conceptual sources are drawn together with impressive coherence while the analyses themselves achieve a level of rigour that belies the apparent open-endedness of his approach; the opening pair of analytical examples, Little Simz' *Bars Simzson* and Ensiferum's *One Many Army* are demonstrative of the due attention Gamble pays to 'concrete' musical details such as vocal dexterity, arrangement and audio space as well as interpretative meaning, both unambiguous and opaque. On a broader level, Gamble's embodied-ecological approach

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<sup>3</sup> Allan F. Moore, 'The Persona-Environment Relation in Recorded Song', *Music Theory Online*, 11/4 (2005), <https://www.mtosmt.org/issues/mto.05.11.4/mto.05.11.4.moore.html>; Allan F. Moore, 'Addressing the Persona', in D. Helms and T. Phelps (eds), *Black Box Pop: Analysen populärer Musik* (Bielefeld: Verlag, 2012), 125–134.

establishes a valuable continuity to the theories of writers such as Von Appen<sup>4</sup> who have spotlighted the importance of embodied and imagined responses to the listening of popular music in determining its aesthetic value. Indeed, it is easy to see how this approach could be applied not just to a range of popular music genres – particularly those where bodily responses are arguably privileged over or as much as lyrical meaning, such as dance or electronica – but to applications of embodied cognition theory across a range of audio-visual contexts.

For the remainder of the book, Gamble zooms out somewhat from close applications of his model to focus on specific topics related to empowerment. The first of these is individual well-being, or more specifically, the shared theme of resilience found in both rap and metal. Using the metaphor of a pressurized container to describe the human body, Gamble analyses tracks by KoЯn and Drake to illustrate how often negatively perceived aspects of each's musical languages (aggression, confrontation, loudness) may be considered as potentially empowering to the listener by affording them the means with which to '*vent*' or '*fill them with determination*' (70). Further examples from Avenged Sevenfold and Talib Kweli are then used to explore how the presentation of quasi-realistic (rap) or more fantastical (metal) personas afford models of esteem via acts of *feeling* and *doing* that are either reflective of the listener's real-world experiences or prompt a more imaginative form of mentalising and mirroring.

In Chapter 5, the author turns his attention to collective empowerment. While analyses of tracks by Missy Elliot and A Day to Remember effectively demonstrate how spatial mix and lyrical content/performance may evoke an imagined and embodied communal experience for the listener, it is where the notion of community empowerment as a cognitive construct is explored that the discussion gains the most traction. Reconciling several sources from community psychology, empowerment is presented as a process involving incremental changes of state akin to a scale or spectrum rather than in terms of a single definition (102). A notable reference point is Travis and Deepak's Individual and Community Empowerment (ICE) Framework (104) which Gamble uses to situate his previous discussions concerning individual empowerment considering how the relationship between individual and environment impacts a sense of collective empowerment (Community) and, potentially, action (Change). Of the illustrative examples that follow, his analysis of Waka Flocka Flame's *Hard in Da Paint* is worth singling out; the observation of how the track effectively strips out an expected rap sequence to seemingly leave musical space for the listener's own presence and interjections provides a salient example of a track embedding the listener's potential

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<sup>4</sup> Ralf Von Appen, 'On the aesthetics of popular music', *Music Therapy Today*, 8/1 (2007), 5–25.

absorption into an imagined empowered community experience within its musical make-up.

A particular strength of these chapters is the way Gamble foregrounds diversity both with regard to listener experience and, by consequence, to the way empowerment manifests itself. Unlike the sourced psychological studies he cites, the default status of empowerment as a prompt to positive behaviours is not always assumed: ‘what about the metal listener ... who gains self-confidence in their own identity at the cost of discriminating against others?’ (105). Nor is the notion of ‘fixed’ musical meanings: his consideration of repeated listening resonates with what Richard Middleton identifies as pop’s tendency to prompt ‘variable aural readings’.<sup>5</sup> Similarly, when he does turn to specific case studies to show more tangible outcomes, the inclusion of YouTube comments and reference to online fandoms less bound by geographical and more established socio-political factors ensures the same sense of diversity is maintained: Chapter 5 closes by contrasting Metal’s *djent* movement and its increased interest in advancing musical virtuosity with the rap collective, Brockhampton, whose music has served as a rallying point for members of the LGBTQ+ community, amongst others.

In the book’s final chapter, Gamble confronts the cultural politics of empowerment. Much of the discussion is devoted to debunking the often opportunistic and perfunctory rhetoric surrounding the term – of which the author is highly critical. As he notes, it is often those in positions of power who determine how it is defined. The chapter makes for a compelling read and could almost function as a stand-alone paper such is its broader relevance. While possibly tangential, it does provide an important elephant-in-the-room addition to the book which helps frame some of the trickier aspects of assessing Gamble’s model, within the context of what he identifies as the gap between notions of empowerment and the accrual of power in real terms. While he acknowledges that ‘individuals can be powerful without the possession of many resources’ (130), Gamble is equally mindful of the potential pitfalls of his research in affirming some of the problems inherent in the neoliberal ideology of empowerment that he dissects: ‘Even if such listening makes someone feel a little better, the vast majority of people do not have the ability to single-handedly overturn ... society’ (133). Musical examples from both genres advocating or modeling social change are first considered on account of their potential to instill the feeling or belief in the listener that change *is* possible. Referring to concepts from social and community psychology as well as black feminist theory, Gamble then explores how such feelings may prompt change to an individual’s own self-perception which, in turn, may become the first step towards societal change. While, ultimately, he is skeptical of the responsibility that contemporary society places

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<sup>5</sup> Richard Middleton, *Reading Pop* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 4.

on the individual to prompt change, the closing analyses of two tracks presenting celebratory statements of power acquired advocate the significance that 'even small, individual acts motivated by music listening make a difference when considered at scale' (151).

Perhaps inevitably for a book that packs so much in, some areas are left underdeveloped. Given its importance as an analytical parameter, the discussion of audio space could be probed a little more fully although perhaps this is for other writers to consider. Also, while the author is consistently clear in his intention to restrict his enquiry to examples from the contemporary mainstream, there are moments where some acknowledgement of the stylistic heritage of both genres would have given aspects of the discussion enhanced context. Hip hop's long-established propensity for evoking and embedding a sense of a communal, in-the-moment experience – real or imagined – within its musical make-up is one notable area. Similarly, the inclusion of subgenres such as Gangsta and Hardcore in Chapter 4 may have complemented the reference Gamble makes to examples of crossover between the two genres (early and contemporary) to further alleviate the more simplistic delineating to which the discussion occasionally defaults (rap predominantly prompting the listener to *hold on* and metal to *let go*). Ultimately though, this an accomplished and highly relevant book that promotes a much-needed discussion. Those interested in the capacity for music to move or to mobilise and/or the application of conceptual frameworks and embodied cognition theory (this writer included), not to mention the broader debate concerning pop in today's socio-political climate – particularly with regard to the two genres in question – will find it of significant value.

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