FABIAN HOLT, *GENRE IN POPULAR MUSIC* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2007), ISBN 978-0-226-35039-4, xiv + 221 pp, £10.00/€16.99 (paperback)

Genre is a widely ignored aspect of musical studies. As Fabian Holt rightly points out in the introduction of this monograph, writings on generic identities are few and far between, while they share little common methodological ground. Albeit this is slightly less true in popular music studies of the last decades than in historical musicology (and also less in German than in English scholarship), this is still a surprising fact given that 'Genre is a fundamental structuring force in musical life. It has implications for how, where, and with whom people make and experience music' (2). Of course, in historical musicology there are many studies of specific genres such as opera, the symphony or the piano sonata, yet they usually take the definition of their respective subject as a given, expending little thought on the definition of genres, their categorization and the interplay of structural and social aspects in this process (the fact that only the most recent edition of *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* features the first—if still relatively brief—entry on 'Genre' serves as a case in point).

One reason why musicologists may have shied away from the genre category in the past is that it is notoriously difficult to define. While musical taxonomists up to the mid-nineteenth century (such as Michael Praetorius, Johann Mattheson or Adolf Bernhard Marx) could still confidently claim not only to be able to name the structural and cultural criteria determining genres but also to produce a complete list of all genres of their respective time, our postmodern age has realized that these criteria change all the time, while one set of criteria cannot even be applied in the same way to all genres of the same period and geographical area. Consequently, in more recent studies on the subject (such as those by Jeffrey Kallberg or Franco Fabbri)[1] the focus has shifted away from normative definitions towards the rather descriptive study of definitions of the past in an attempt to understand how the way people defined genres can help us in understanding their general view of music, as well as the interplay between composers, performers, audiences, critics, theorists and the music industry.

While the concept of genre may not be at the centre of musicological attention, it certainly plays a major part in musical life, as Holt points out:

> It is…a tool with which culture industries and national governments regulate the circulation of vast fields of music. It is a major force in canons of educational institutions, cultural hierarchies,

[1] See Jeffrey Kallberg, 'The Rhetoric of Genre: Chopin's Nocturne in G Minor', *19th-Century Music*, xi (1987–88), 238–61; and Franco Fabbri, 'A Theory of Musical Genres: Two Applications', in David Horn and Philip Tagg (eds), *Popular Music Perspectives* (Gothenburg and Exeter: Södra Vägen, 1982), 52–81.

> and decisions about censorship and funding. The apparatus of corporate music is thoroughly organized in generic and market categories. (3)

These social and economical aspects have led to a split between what Holt calls 'music-centred' and 'culture-centred' approaches, the latter ones often undertaken by sociologists rather than musicologists. Holt wants to bridge this methodological gap with his study. In fact, he claims that the study of genres is suited better than many other subjects to serve this purpose as both aspects play obvious parts in generic definitions. The gap as such is an undeniable fact and has been employed to celebrate as well as condemn popular music studies in general,[2] so a successful bridging attempt would indeed be most welcome.

Holt's monograph opens with an introductory chapter outlining the state of research as well as his methodological approach. He points out that while there are some theoretical approaches to genres in popular music, usually the theory has not been grounded in fieldwork—an omission he wants to correct in his study. Equipped with the concepts and the terminology of these theoretical studies (such as Simon Frith's 'genre worlds' or Keith Negus's 'genre cultures'), he tries not so much to define but rather to understand and describe the generic development of certain sections of American popular music since the 1950s. However, he cannot do without some classification himself, so before embarking on his fieldwork he lists the genres playing a part in his study, as well as their subgenres (15–6):

- Blues (country blues, urban blues, Chicago West Side blues)
- Jazz (traditional, swing, bebop, cool jazz)
- Country Music (old-time/traditional, bluegrass, honky-tonk, Nashville Sound)
- Rock (rock and roll, classic rock, glam rock, punk)
- Soul/R & B (R & B, Memphis soul, Motown, soul-funk, contemporary R & B)
- Salsa (salsa dura, salsa romántica, souls salsa, dance club salsa)
- Heavy Metal (black metal, death metal, doom metal, speed metal, trash metal)
- Dance (disco, techno, house, trance, ambient)
- Hip-hop (old school, East Coast, West Coast, gangsta rap)

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[2] For a considered discussion of this problem, see for example John Covach, 'Popular Music, Unpopular Musicology', in Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist (eds), *Rethinking Music*, (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 452–70. In a recent German publication on the relevance of musicology in today's society, the gap is referred to by an historical musicologist in order to disqualify the entire area of popular music studies in a half-sentence; see Laurenz Lütteken (ed.), *Musikwissenschaft. Eine Positionsbestimmung* (Kassel et al.: Bärenreiter, 2007), 63.

These are 'historical genres' (based on conventions as well as popular or academic writing) as opposed to what could be called 'abstract genres' of a higher taxonomic order such as vocal or sacred music—a distinction that Holt does not always manage to maintain during his field studies (not to mention the question whether it is indeed hip-hop or rather gangsta rap that should be classified as a historical genre—in many ways an academic distinction in the light of what is said above, of course, but one that we become almost inevitably entangled in once we engage with this kind of definition). However, Holt is at least aware of this problem: 'Much of my genre theory applies to major styles such as conjunto, disco and techno, which some readers may consider small genres' (18).

The separation of 'style' and 'genre' is another thorny issue as these terms are often confused in popular writing. Holt distinguishes them as follows:

> The network of a genre can be understood from the perspective that the genre is a constellation of styles connected by a sense of tradition. These aspects distinguish genres from marketing categories and labels because it has a more stable existence in cultures of musical specializations among musicians, listeners, critics, pedagogues, and others. (18)

For this reason categories like 'race records', 'top 40', or 'chill-out music' are not accepted as genres in Holt's model. It is interesting to note that he also refuses to classify 'mainstream' pop as a genre (be it an historical or an abstract one) as for him it is rather defined *ex negativo* and mainly based on a star culture with its different social context. Here the question arises as to what extent value judgements should play a part in genre studies—mainstream boybands, for example, often share stylistic traits, have been around as a phenomenon for some time and could, in my view, easily be placed in a common generic drawer. I wonder whether this exclusion resembles to some extent the practice of earlier musicological studies on genres, for example by Blume or Dahlhaus who always speak of 'music' in general yet neglect even to mention traditional let alone popular music—particularly given that Holt emerges later in the book as a member of a jazz culture which often displays elitist tendencies similar to those of the classical music scene (and its musicology).

Following this introduction, the book is organized in four main sections—the two middle sections being composed of two chapters each and based on fieldwork undertaken in 2003–4, the shorter outer sections containing more theoretical considerations. In the first of these framing sections, Holt discusses the use of folklore in popular culture as exemplified by the American movie *O Brother, Where Art Thou?* (2000). Set in the American South in the 1930s, this movie presents a lot of music from that time that was re-recorded by contemporary artists during the production process. Consequently, the sound is much more 'polished' than it would be in old recordings, with pop-inflections and a concert-hall sound that does not fit the diegetic situations in

which the music is mainly presented. The mainstream audience took the songs as part of a revival of 'American roots culture' in the old bluegrass style (sorry: genre) while purists rejected it. This reflects similar tendencies in the 1960s when 'Purists…would stop singing a song if it was recorded and became a hit, because they felt that it had been lost to the world of commerce and did not need their preservationist effort anymore' (37). These debates between purist and mainstream audiences (as well as the music industry) are a constant thread running through the book. Holt reaches the conclusion that the American roots culture is not a genre in the strict sense but rather a simplification of history:

> various musics have been lifted out of the cultural and historical contexts in which they were created and appropriated into new contexts through discursive and technological meditations. The move away from the specialized audience has involved a redistribution of power over the representation of the music. … the *O Brother* soundtrack was not designed for the traditional bluegrass fan. (48)

Again, while this is a convincing argument, it could still be asked whether the result of this amalgamation (which Holt himself describes as a new 'national canon') should not be called a new genre—even though it is part of the mainstream culture. Meyerbeer's grand operas simplified history as well and were quite popular at the time while using exotic musical elements whose authenticity was highly dubious, yet few would question their generic identity.

The second section of the book is entitled 'Reactions to Rock' and deals with how both country music and jazz reacted to the emergence of rock and roll from the 1950s onwards. The two chapters are mainly based on the study of journals and newspapers of the time as well as interviews with surviving performers, critics, studio technicians and fans. Both country and jazz had only recently been established as genres in their own right, and fans perceived the new, highly popular 'rockabilly' music (as it was initially called) as a threat to the music they loved. Country music reacted to the challenge by incorporating certain elements of rock and roll, thus creating the 'Nashville Sound' which—like the 'American roots culture'—was attractive to mainstream listeners yet often rejected by purists (who maintained the 'original' country style in certain niches particularly in the American Southwest). By continuously adapting its style country music managed to maintain its popularity to this day. Jazz, on the other hand, was already something of a niche genre in the 1950s, which means that, for instance, the music industry was less influential in its development. It was also stylistically more different from rock and roll (at least according to Holt who describes jazz as a rather instrumental and improvisational genre while rock and roll is sung and features fewer improvisational sections; also more black artists were active in jazz than in rock and roll). Only in the 1960s did some jazz artists such as Miles Davis finally react to this threat by creating what was called initially 'jazz-rock' and

later 'fusion'. However, jazz was more fragmented than country and fusion never achieved the prominence of the Nashville Sound. By and large, the jazz community thus remained less affected by the musical revolution that was rock and roll, yet at the price of becoming even more marginalized than it already had been.

In the case of both country and jazz, Holt is able to demonstrate that the boundaries of genres are regularly defined (at least in writing) through outside threats, or at least through interaction with stylistic neighbours: 'Genre cultures have always defined themselves in relation to dominant genres in their cultural proximity' (57). He also develops a model of genre transformation in three steps, focusing on the mechanisms regulating genre boundaries: disruption (intensification and, simultaneously, destabilization of boundaries), outreach (integration of outside influences as reaction to disruption), and finally resistance (protectionism in the name of tradition and purity).

Holt's next section is dedicated to the genre culture in the Chicago jazz scene in the early 2000s as exemplified by Jeff Parker, a guitarist Holt met during his studies there in 2003. At this point it becomes clear that Holt is positioned in the jazz corner and particularly a fan of Parker as he himself admits: 'It should be no secret that I liked the music I have written about from the first time I heard it' (146). His emotional involvement is clear on every page of this section; he spends much more time than appears necessary (certainly more than in previous chapters) on outlining Parker's curriculum vitae, his studies and his interactions with other musicians in Chicago (based on extensive interviews with Parker himself, other Chicago musicians, critics and representatives of indie labels). From Holt's description emerges the picture of an artist who is not 'genre-centred' even though he positions himself in the jazz 'scene'—although mainly for economic reasons as the jazz audience is the one buying his records. However, Parker and other independent Chicago musicians play music of other genres and styles as well and enjoy the freedom to mix elements of different worlds (of course, this is to some extent also due to economic pressure). It never becomes fully clear which of these two aspects outweighs the other—it probably depends on the person and the occasion. The Chicago jazz community enjoys its freedom (unlike the much more famous and streamlined New York scene) and revels in an eclecticism that its independent and less prominent position allows it to pursue. Genres are important as they provide the starting points of the eclectic fusion process, but it is less clear to what extent the musical results can still be attached to a genre. The author points out that live performances are usually more eclectic than studio recordings as the CDs have to fulfil the audiences' expectations to a higher degree if they are to be sold in significant numbers—so while the producers of music are interested in fusion the recipients appear to be more interested in purism.

Holt's final chapter is dedicated to the music popular among large non-white ethnic groups in today's United States and focuses on the question 'why some musics of the *country* are marginal in discourse of music of the *nation*' (151). This applies, for example, to genres like Latin pop, zydeco, or Mexican American popular music—none of them are accepted as mainstream pop. In order to cope terminologically with these new musics, Holt proposes the term 'in-between genre,' describing this construct as 'a conceptual metaphor in a form of decentered thinking that is structured less by core-boundary models than by models with more chaotic and transformative structures'. These are informed 'by metaphors of transgression and heterogeneity. They are structured by continuums and plural narratives rather than dichotomies, and they embrace polymorphous semantic textures rather than distinct categories' (159). This rather complex description—perhaps a good example of onomatopoetic syntax as the sentence appears at first reading as a polymorphous semantic texture in itself—is backed up by three music examples representing ethnic musical cultures in which elements of different styles are mixed. This 'in-between' category serves as an alternative to the core-boundary model used in the section on country and jazz and could presumably (although Holt does not do this himself) be applied to some of Jeff Parker's music. Finally, Holt reaches six conclusions (156–9) which can be summarized as follows:

- Core-boundary models of genre should be complemented with decentred models.
- Music has cross-generic and processual qualities that defy categorical fixity.
- Spaces between genres are as valid sites of inquiry as are genres themselves.
- In-between spaces have special significance for understanding diversity and transformation.
- The metaphor 'in-between' draws attention to how music is situated.
- The in-between poetics seeks to unfold connections across borders ad infinitum.

The 'in-between' category is Holt's most original contribution to the discourse on musical genres. Do we really need it? It could be argued that what it describes are genres that have not been fully constituted yet—Holt himself points out that a commonly recognized canon is one of the crucial elements of generic identity; as long as such a canon has not yet appeared, music representing an emerging genre (which always utilizes elements of other, pre-existing genres) would find itself positioned 'in between' several existing genres. However, at least in hindsight we would certainly subsume the early pieces into the fully established generic category: it is interesting to note that two of Holt's three examples are recent productions whose genres could still be 'in the making'. On the other hand, the new genre might never emerge and the pieces remain free standing, in which case the in-between category would make more sense—according to Holt, no piece of music is free of generic associations: 'there are

genres of music and music between genres, but not music without genre' (180). This angle certainly allows for a more specific approach to individual pieces and styles, albeit at the expense of being somewhat weaker as a category than the core-boundary genres. I agree with Holt's assessment of genres being a descriptive rather than normative category, yet there might be a danger involved in the in-between approach: virtually everything remotely eclectic could potentially be categorized as belonging to an in-between genre. Different genres certainly have boundaries of different nature and strength, but even in-between genres have to come with a minimal distinctive power as there would otherwise be no point in categorization at all. But this only highlights again the dichotomy of categorization and description that the genre discourse is caught up in: a focusing on one aspect almost inevitably leads to a paradoxical situation in relation to its counterpart.

Most genre theorists agree that in art music no new genre has emerged for quite some time now.[3] Instead, what we can observe is an eclecticism that is perhaps not dissimilar to some of Holt's observations in the jazz scene. Contemporary composers still use generic titles (like symphony, sonata, etc.) but do not honour any more what Heather Dubrow called the 'generic contract':[4] they don't fulfil the structural expectations audiences connect with these genres (such as the use of a large orchestra or sonata form). However, by choosing the generic titles (and thus evoking a set of expectations permanently reinforced by the dominance of nineteenth-century music in our concert halls), they refer to them and enter into a generic dialogue. While many observers would agree that a work such as Henze's orchestral *Requiem* does not belong to the genre indicated by its title, its reception depends on the continued presence of a normative set of expectations—normative not in relation to the composer's aesthetics but instead to the mode of reception. Could Henze's *Requiem* be described as belonging to an in-between genre? The answer is probably yes, particularly given that there is a continuous string of compositions entitled requiem in contemporary music—

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[3] Both Carl Dahlhaus and Theodor W. Adorno have argued that late romanticism witnessed the gradual decline of the role of genres in music until modernism finally made them redundant, while Theo Hirsbrunner called Wagner's 'Musikdrama' the last new genre to have emerged in music history. See 'Die Neue Musik und das Problem der musikalischen Gattungen' in Carl Dahlhaus, *Schönberg und andere. Gesammelte Aufsätze zur Neuen Musik* (Mainz et al.: Schott, 1978), 72–82: 72; Theodor W. Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1973), 296; Theo Hirsbrunner, 'Richard Wagners Musikdramen und ihr Fortwirken bei Debussy, Strauss, Schönberg und Berg', in Hermann Danuser (ed.), *Gattungen der Musik und ihre Klassiker* (Laaber: Laaber, 1988), 271–85: 271.

[4] Heather Dubrow, *Genre* (London and New York: Methuen, 1982).

all different in relation to each other, but all in some way referring back to the established normative definition of a bygone era. The situation is not quite the same in the jazz scene where the gap between the respective aesthetics of performers and audiences is much smaller, but it is there as the stylistic difference between live performances and studio recordings, referred to above, indicates. What is certainly similar is that the eclectic in-between genres can only work in relation to a recognized set of core-boundary genres: without them there cannot be an in-between genre.

Holt states, as one of his goals, the bringing of 'genre scholarship closer to musical practice and experience' (7) as popular music studies on genres have so far focused much more on social than on 'musical' aspects. However, by and large he does not venture very far in that direction; descriptions like the following one remain rather broad and general in nature:

> The Nashville Sound style is known not only for the absence of certain traditional instruments, but also for its smoother character; created by strings, a subdued rhythmic feeling; influences from pop jazz in harmony and arrangement; and finally the overall impression of professional craft and high-quality studio sound. … In comparison with rockabilly, the tempos are generally slower, the emotional style softer, and there is less influence from African American musics. (72–3)

As a non-specialist reader one would like to learn more about the specifics of these harmonic changes, the details of the professional studio sound or the softer emotional style, yet this information is not provided. Only in the last two chapters does Holt present us with a small number of music examples, making his descriptive narrative much clearer here than elsewhere. A CD with a few sound examples would be ideal in this context, yet in its absence more details in the text or more music examples would have been helpful.

The book combines several different methodological approaches: different types of fieldwork (the study of a local scene, interviews about a scene fifty years ago), source studies and the analysis of film and music. Does all this result in a coherent structure? The answer is clearly yes; the structure of the book in a way reflects the descriptive nature of the genre category as defined by the author. 'One might read the entire book as a series of case studies employing different strategies for understanding genre across discursive boundaries' (180). The juxtaposition of core-boundary and in-between genres is a useful and innovative addition to the theory of musical genres that will hopefully not only inform the future discourse on this subject but also stress its overall musicological relevance, for 'if we move away from genre discourse and do not return, if we ignore genre, we also ignore part of the social reality' (180).

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