

Book Review Section

Weird American Music, by Dorothea Gail. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag Winter, 2018. (Book Review)

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Dorothea Gail's *Weird American Music* is a comprehensive and insightful resource tool on popular music, with strong emphasis on the conflicts between authenticity preservation and capitalistic strangulation engendered by market forces within certain music subcultures in the United States of America. These diverse subcultures and musical genres are "representative of the late twentieth-century United States" (12). The writer channels her experience as a long-standing scholar and musician through the monograph tailored for the fields of Musicology and American Studies.

The "weird" in *Weird American Music* emanates from the "in-betweenness" created by tension between authenticity and the market; and between the intrinsic experience of identity and the cognizant mercantilism of identity (3). Gail's argumentation revolves around five case studies, namely, the defiant Detroit techno band, Underground Resistance or UR, the conservative Christian rock music band, BarlowGirl, the seemingly hybridized Native American and Chicano music of Jackalope, the classical music of Charles Ives and the self-made jukebox music of Waffle House.

While artists strive to eke a living through their artistry, they are often encumbered by stringent rules imposed by power blocs within the market circuits, which Gail in her introduction, links to the consumerist culture championed by a neoliberal market economy. Neoliberalism is blamed for the erasure of wholesome ideas, annihilation of the labour force and economic stratification. Consequently, the appreciation of musical works with inherently predominant core values is dependent on their survival within the stipulated environment (4-5).

The writer examines the impact of neoliberalism on artistic identity, the ways in which artists handle co-optation and sustain authenticity. Surveying

a time span of three decades (1980-2010), she investigates the evolution in dimensions of artistic expression, and their significance within the American cultural landscape. Each case study is approached from different roads of enquiry, for instance, while commercialization dominates the discussions on UR and Jackalope; identity politics prevails within the argumentation on BarlowGirl and Charles Ives.

Situated in Detroit which is prominent for its lively music scene, notably Motown, techno, and Jazz, the Underground Resistance, for one, maintains authenticity through its ideological stance which involves a tenacious adoption of alternative measures such as defiance against ethnic categorization, exploitation of the mainstream music industry, collective expectation of normative media indulgences, etc. Gail notes that UR's defiance correlates the struggle against enslavement, exploitation and impoverishment which mark the history of Black and Native Americans, respectively. The weirdness of UR is made palpable in its unorthodox self-portrayal as being visibly invisible. Their promotional materials show images of the band members' faces hidden behind diverse objects like gas masks and bandanas. The aim is to intensify the mysterious personae, as well as to fortify the political assertion of being subversive.

Although the band, as argued in Chapter Two, has astutely navigated and carved a niche in the music market through modesty and the non-licensing of their musical productions to major record labels, its detachment from the mainstream creates a financial instability made evident by the minimal patronage received within the US. But this posture ironically gives it a commercial advantage, and has led to the crystallization of a solid fan base in Europe (33-91). Whereas UR achieves operational autonomy and creates music on its own terms, the opposite

appears to be the narrative of the now defunct 'religio-centric' all-female band, BarlowGirl.

In Chapter Three, Gail scrutinises the multiple nuances embedded within the American Christian belief system which highly influences BarlowGirl. The band's identity is shaped by themes such as spiritual warfare and Christian militancy, portraying Christianity as one under siege. Here, a recurrent theme is chastity. This is a message asymmetrically targeted at young females, and excluding young males. Fundamental Christianity sets high puritanical standards for the female, and Gail reminds us that women are put in charge of the preservation of moral purity and marital sanctity, whereas men are allowed to be fallible and subject to libidinous whims. Gail asserts that parental agency in the imposition of these ideologies derails the BarlowGirl's capacity to achieve artistic autonomy. She remarks on the band's inability to make crucial decisions without a guide, rendering self as subjugated and susceptible to the uncanny pressure of conformity (147). Consequently, the artists are neither able to establish a self-identity nor can they become active agents. Their musical production highlights an identity conflict derived from parental expectations and divine injunctions. Gail argues that the paradigm invariably reflects a repressive dimension of the Christian ideology catalyzed by a neo-liberally induced economic decline and the fear of the loss of white privilege (103-158).

Drawn from several case studies, Gail's conclusions are instructive, especially in light of the evolving cultural dynamics mirrored by the market and societal interplay, enthronement of identity politics, erasure of classism, and neoliberalism's pervasive commodification of societal elements. While artistic and humanistic ventures tend to be undervalued, Gail maintains that gainful dividends for artistic engagements remain the basic signifier of authenticity (347-372).

Weird American Music is characterized by well defined concepts, convincing ideas and most importantly, by accessible language - a testimony that academic works need not be stylistically complex- in order to deal with complex topics. Moreover, the volume points to areas where further research is necessary. Ultimately, the

writer's inclusion of ethnographic field notes grants an alluring edge to the case studies, making the book a pleasant and abundant read. In summary, *Weird American Music* is 'weirdly' engaging, informative, entertaining and comprehensible.

Author's Biography

Kensedeobong Blessed Okosun holds a Master of Arts degree in British and American Studies from the Bielefeld University. Her research interests include Music and Identity Politics, and Slave Narratives.