

**Digitopia Blues: Race, Technology, and the American Voice.** By John Sobol. Banff: Banff Centre Press, 2002. 156 pages. \$26.95. ISBN 0-920159-89-3.

The history of African American music has enjoyed much criticism, study, and debate that has furthered an epistemological database ranging from indigenous to contemporary urban sounds. John Sobol's first book, *Digitopia Blues: Race, Technology, and the American Voice*, traces the African American struggle to find words of liberating power through orality, literacy, and music. Sobol is a jazz musician and performance poet, and he offers a unique perspective regarding music, language, poetry, and the voice. Language, specifically poetry, becomes the unifying thread running through black music history and the primary catalyst for the reconciliation of the body and the word. Because he is a white author dealing with the subject of black music, Sobol preemptively attends in the foreword to the perceived imposition of white authority by problematizing and then addressing the situation. As well, he comments his "idiosyncratic take on this epic history" is a "personal narrative," and not "comprehensive, not definitive, and emphatically not a reference book" (xiii). That being said, an index and end notes are included, a shortcoming being the exclusion of a bibliography; instead, several sources are listed in the acknowledgements.

The book is divided into three parts: "Bluesology," "Printopia," and "Digitopia." Each section uncovers the way language informed genres of blues and jazz, American poetry, and urban music. In "Bluesology," the author

contends the tradition of orality educated black America's collective quest to redeem its heritage which leads through blues, scat singing, jive talk, bebop, free jazz, gospel, and other styles of African American popular music. "Printopia" focuses on white American poets and how their words were drawn to black music long before the birth of rock and roll. Carl Sandburg and William Carlos Williams are likened to jazz musicians or, more specifically, the declamatory nature of their poems alludes to a "swing" musical sense. For rock, language at work is poetry for the masses prompted by the appearance of Bob Dylan, and Sobol argues that rock is the reconciliation of the body and the imagination in song, but only for the white audience. The African American struggle to achieve the same reconciliation would not occur until the mid-1960s because the language of non-violence, present in blues and jazz, was not sufficient to address the continued resistance and subversion of black equity. In light of this, Sobol asserts the reconciliation between the word and music occurs for the African American audience at a time in history when social tensions were at their greatest and the black voice was challenging societal mores and racial distinctions.

The final section, "Digitopia," brings the evolution of contemporary African American music styles like rap and hip-hop in line with the evolution of jazz. The author notes: "Once again, black music has changed America, this time as a vehicle for black words" (117).

Whereas, the black youth culture has embraced the power of words evinced in rap and hip-hop, white youth culture have abandoned words in favour of the body via dance music. This so-called reversal results from the evolution of electronic technology and media targeting, in which both groups are fed confusing and exploitive images that cross cultural and social boundaries (127). A full embracing of technology is readily apparent in rave culture, particularly with the elevation of the DJ as superstar. Now the manipulation of data (or pre-existing sound objects) and the live mix become the essence of creativity. Sobol notes: "The product, like the source of the data, is irrelevant. It's all about process" (130). He concludes with a discussion of Napster and its disregard for intellectual property as the popular response to a new form of communication technology—the Internet. And this has brought about what he calls the "digital divide," which replays the subjugation of black culture during the early twentieth century, only this time in the domain of cyberspace (136).

Generally the book is well-organized and the somewhat informal writing style enables the reader to grasp easily the points Sobol is trying to make. However, it does suffer slightly from discontinuity, sometimes making an abrupt jump into a new thought. In the third section, he speaks of the connection between orality and rapping, suddenly leaping to the topic of graffiti art, which leaves the reader with the sense something was

missed necessitating flipping back a page or two. Furthermore, although the author's assertions regarding the function of orality and literacy are generally not problematic, his claim that jazz evokes the imperceptible, essential qualities of existence in metaphor while other music may not, deserves attention. He notes: "Although one can point to individual works such as Vivaldi's *Four Seasons*, Holst's *The Planets*, and Debussy's *Prélude à l'après-midi d'un faune*, the representation of experience was only rarely the explicit or implicit aim of European composers" (46). Certainly this statement could be called into question given the romantic movement of the nineteenth century. As well, it suggests the relationship between experience and musical meaning is privileged to jazz, which diminishes the extra-musical values placed on European art music by its composers.

This argument aside, *Digitopia Blues* is persuasive regarding the reconciliation of the body and the word vis-à-vis the blues, jazz, poetry, and rap. And Sobol is not overwhelmed by the fact he is dealing with a century's worth of music history. The book does not become mired in cultural theory or impenetrable musicological analyses; instead it is thoughtful and, at the same time, entertaining. The author successfully bridges the gap between scholarly writing and the serious music fan, and the book could be useful as a reference tool, despite his claim to the contrary.

Gordon Ross  
York University