

Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy. By William Echard. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2005. \$19.95 US pbk. 260 p. ISBN 0-253-21768-7

There is an early live recording of Neil Young's where the enigmatic and protean rock star bemoans to his assembled throngs of fans his inability, when confronted with their thousands of arms all reaching stageward, to shake all their hands at once. Perhaps something similar could be said of William Echard's intriguing, elegantly written analysis of Young. It also attempts to "shake hands," serially and meaningfully, with an audience composed of cultural studies scholars, musicologists, philosophers of aesthetics, critics, and Neil Young fans. Beginning with an historical and thematic overview of Young's fertile yet turbulent musical career, proceeding through analyses of genre and the semiotics of noise, and ending with detailed investigations of musical style and structure, *Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy* "couples formal analysis to the exploration of lived experience and meaning" (4). Echard's investigations of Young's music cohere around the concept of energy, "understood as a family of metaphors" expressing identity formation, motion, and musical meaning (5). Echard is interested in Young's communication of energy in his sonic textures, lyrics, performance style, as well as the energy with which Young's fans and critics' enjoy, interpret, evaluate, situate, and use his songs.

The author, a self-identified scholar-fan of Young's music, belongs to a breed of fairly recent origin in North American musicology, that is determined to put on speaking terms the discourses of formal musical analysis and cultural studies.

Echard's work, like that of Susan McClary, Robert Walzer, Richard Middleton, and David Brackett, asserts that rarefied investigations of harmony, melody, dynamics, tonality and meter will never by themselves produce a wholly satisfactory explanation of how the Troggs' "Wild Thing" works its lascivious magic on the rock fan's body and soul. While these scholars do not abandon the tools of classification and hermeneutics in which they were trained, they assert that musical texts are received and produce meaning only within specific spatial, temporal and cultural communities, that their pleasures anchor certain identities and problematize others, and that listening to the Troggs (as well as Bach) requires a sophisticated set of cultural competencies. The quest of musicologists like Echard for the sources and patterns of musical meaning-making is to be applauded, even if the results can show some methodological incoherence or interdisciplinary overexuberance.

Given the book's commitment to multiple perspectives and discourses, it comes as little surprise that Echard's sources include the voices of the "rusties," i.e., fans who participate in spirited (and, in recent years, mostly online) debates about the meaning of Young's songs, as well as the testimony of journalists and rock critics who have identified Young's cultural significance and high position in a sort of classic-rock canon. At the same time, this is clearly a work intended for the discourses of academia: "lay" enthusiasts of Young's work may find James McDonough's 2002 biography, *Shakey*,

more accessible and satisfying. Echard, who states early on that his study “is offered as a provocation more than a summation” (7), will likely find his most attentive readers are advanced students of popular culture and musicologists.

Chapter 1, “Words: A Neil Young Reception Primer,” provides a lengthy overview of the several stages of Young’s nearly forty-year career. Eschewing the biographical facts amply documented in other books, Echard discusses the successive “masks” Young has donned, and the ways in which they have been received by critics and fans. Central to these performative identities, Echard argues, is the more general category of gender. The analysis of gender in Young’s work and personae is one of the most novel and salutary elements of Echard’s study. In fact, I couldn’t help feeling that his arguments merited sustained treatment in a separate chapter. Incorporating the voices of fans and Young’s own words in lyrics and interviews, Echard locates Young’s “complex engagement with masculinities in process, at once traditional in its basic terms of reference and its implied ideals and untraditional in its reflexivity” (20).

However, another important category of identity, race, does not get enough ink here, or later. Following an otherwise illuminating account of Young’s brilliantly gloomy 1973 album, *Tonight’s the Night*, Echard notes that in Young’s work “blackness and ethnicity in general are excluded from consideration” (30). Whatever the validity of this finding, Echard reproduces the silence on racial identity. Though this chapter intends to map the discursive history and cultural placement

of Neil Young and his songs, Echard is also making his own claims, and analyses of Young and race seem like an opportune avenue of inquiry. For example, the apparent whiteness of Young’s audience, and Young’s more general transformation of black-encoded musical sounds into a codified sonic whiteness, goes unexamined. Only slightly more satisfying is Echard’s brief account of Young’s engagement with First Nations’ themes. Even in the book’s later chapters, which investigate musical meaning-making through detailed discussions of composition and listening, race is absent. The omission is especially curious given the author’s attempt at “a neo-pragmatic style of interpretation” which asserts “the general idea that art works should be understood with respect to their real effects and uses in practice, emphasizing experiential features over formal ones” (198). As the interpretive community for Neil Young’s music is largely white, some analysis of the sonic significance of whiteness merited inclusion.

Some readers might also wish Echard had developed a larger argument concerning the market of cultural goods. There is little discussion of Young’s relationship to the regime of consumer capitalism, or of the effects of the popular culture industry on ostensibly autonomous artists such as Young, or of the commodification of identity more generally. This criticism also connects to the race issue, since scholars have shown that what we perceive as “black” and “white” music has been an effect of the historical segregation of the market for popular music.

Yet *Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy* accomplishes most of its ambitious agenda. Engaging cultural studies thinkers such as Julia Kristeva, Pierre Bourdieu, and George Lipsitz, the opening sections of the book reflect on Young's "expressive intensity and stylistic diversity" (43) as both the result of the actions of a self-aware artist and as symptoms of larger cultural, aesthetic, and political shifts since the 1960s. Chapter 2, "Unlock the Secrets: Waywardness and the Rock Canon," focuses on "the nature of stylistic and generic boundaries and the manner in which these provide relative stability or instability for Neil Young as an authorial presence" (55). Here Echard picks up on a strand from the previous chapter, namely Young's status as an individualistic *auteur* in the literary sense, and draws on a good deal of literary theory to characterize Young as a "persona simultaneously mobile and stable, and with respect to rock music broadly defined, simultaneously critical and celebratory" (69). This chapter, which also discusses themes of waywardness and structural determination in Young's career, and Chapter 3, "The Liquid Rage: Noise and Improvisation," begin to bridge the more sociological early material and the more musicological second half.

In Chapter 3, Echard takes up Jacques Attali's assertion of the political tension between accepted—that is to say, musical—forms of sound and that which is deemed *noise*. The distinction is ultimately a matter of power, a subject Echard takes up explicitly with his discussion of Young's experimental 1991 album, *Arc*. He concludes his assessment of Young's noisemaking by

stating that "although the noise in Young's work is not entirely revolutionary or prophetic, it is nevertheless truly oppositional and refreshing" (107).

Chapter 4, "Have You Ever Been Singled Out? Popular Music and Musical Signification," attempts to provide a framework for thinking about musical signification as part of the larger institutions and practices of identity formation that govern the everyday life of social subjects. This is the book's most theoretical chapter. In fact, Neil Young disappears, replaced by sophisticated discussions of Peircian semiotics, musical signification, and identity, all connected by the theme of energy. The chapter concludes with a reiteration of the book's interpretive goals, which combine sociological categorization, structural and semiotic analysis, and philosophical meditations on the force of Young's music.

Chapter 5, "You See Your Baby Loves to Dance: Musical Style," guides the reader through the musical landscape inhabited by Young's many musical personae. Echard points to textures and patterns of significance in Young's guitar, piano and harmonica work, his melodic and harmonic tendencies, and his uniquely expressive voice. The book concludes with Echard's skillful extended riff on the 1976 song, "Will to Love," with an eye to metaphors of space and energy. Despite some blind spots, *Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy* exemplifies the fruitful union of musicology and cultural studies.

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