

***Music and Capitalism: A History of the Present.*** By Timothy D. Taylor. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015. 217 pages. ISBN 978-0-226-31197-5.

UCLA ethnomusicologist Timothy Taylor has been writing about music and capitalism for many years, beginning with *Global Pop* (1997), focused on the commodification of world music, and continuing with *The Sounds of Capitalism* (2012), which dealt specifically with music and advertising. *Music and Capitalism* could be seen as an installment in a series, since it develops some of the themes initially broached in his earlier work, but it also presents itself as a summary of the issues at large. Neoliberal capitalism, as an ideology or cultural system, “proffers plenitude, endless goods, now from all over the world, and digital technologies that connect us more readily than ever, even as they come between us,” and lies at the heart of everything that is happening in the music industry today (15). It also lies at the heart of Taylor’s argument in this book.

Taylor begins by outlining a history of music and capitalism, citing Marx and Adorno along the way, but focusing on the shift to music as a commodity and the dominance of finance capital resulting in a skewed “regime of value” (Appadurai) that grossly distorts music’s exchange value. The cultural industries, including the production, distribution, advertising, marketing, branding, and consumption of music, have all been affected by the numerous mergers and acquisitions that shaped a landscape already disrupted by the shift in technologies. Taylor pays special attention to the development of branding as a key force in neoliberalism, citing sociologist Celia Lury’s assessment of the brand as something that goes well beyond the object and becomes a relationship, a “specific market modality or market cultural form...[that] mediates the supply and demand of products” (55). In other words, its role is that of both producing and drawing upon social and cultural relations. Branding with music is especially effective through a “conquest” of the hip or the cool, construed as a kind of “artistic critique” of capitalism, allowing it to “absorb critiques, to adapt and survive, even flourish” (63).

Taylor cites Bourdieu’s warning that the increasing influence of advertising over cultural production is threatening autonomy in cultural fields “by the intrusion of commercial logic at every stage of the production and circulation of cultural goods” (78). Taylor argues that art has never really been autonomous since there have always been systems of recognition, reward, and distribution in place, but that under the regime of neoliberalism this system has become more insidious: “Everything corrosive and destabilizing and unfair and rapacious and voracious that we have long known about capitalism seems to be true, and even truer...” (177).



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When Taylor wrote about the rise of world music and its consequences in *Global Pop* (1997), the focus was on authenticity and exploitation, whereas now, roughly twenty years later, the rise of information technology has enabled and accelerated the implementation of a neoliberal ideology through market efficiencies and concentrations, leaving an industry that has been devastated through its own inability to adapt and is only beginning to show signs of recovery. A significant conclusion is that we now have an industry that “is increasingly organized around the creation and protection of copyrighted entities...the biggest growth area in the music industry today is the legal department” (116). Whereas under the old regime it was the acquisition and development of new talent, the focus now is on acquiring copyrightable material and monetizing the various rights associated with it. This presents special problems in an area such as world music, where authenticity, ownership, collaboration, and curation are highly contestable, where its existence as a genre is especially fluid, a field that is “continually under construction by the music industry, musicians, critics, and others” (104). Taylor illustrates these problems through an examination of the career of Angélique Kidjo, a transplanted singer from Benin living in Brooklyn who has managed to position herself variously through reinvention and diversification.

At the time of this book’s writing (2013), the music industry had reached rock bottom, even though streaming services such as Spotify and Apple Music were growing steadily and there appeared to be a resurgence in the sale of vinyl records as a means to regain some of the “tactility” lost in the digital production and distribution of music (although as a percentage of total music sales, this resurgence meant little in terms of a recovery of the industry). And in the penultimate chapter, “Singing in the Shadows of Neoliberal Capitalism,” Taylor presents a case study of Burger Records, a local store and production company in Orange County that relies on social media to create community (or, in other words, a clientele) and the cassette as its primary medium of distribution, not necessarily for nostalgic reasons (who, really, can be nostalgic about cassettes) but because it is very cheap to reproduce.

With its sweeping arguments against neoliberalist capitalism and the damage that globalization and information technologies have wrought, this book gives us a lucid and convincing picture of the music industry at a turning point. Today the industry is seeing a rise in profit for the first time in almost twenty years, although it has yet to be seen how that profit will be redistributed from the middlemen to the artists. Streaming appears to be the medium of the future, but Spotify, the world’s largest music streaming service, is still running at a loss and its payout to artists appears to be minimal. With new technologies like blockchain on the horizon, the industry may yet become rationalized in a manner that benefits artists directly and offers more financial transparency. We can only hope that the legal departments will have not completely taken over the business by then.

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