



***The Ballad in American Popular Music: From Elvis to Beyoncé.* By David Metzger.** Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2017. 223 pp. ISBN 9781107161528.

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In the field of popular music studies, songs have received an upsurge in critical scholarly interest with books such as *A Song for Europe*, *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music*, and *Songs of the Factory*.<sup>1</sup> In these books, the *ballad* figures as a song type that bears cultural significance across a range of popular music artists, genres and contexts. Clearly deserving of study in its own right, the ballad is the focus of David Metzger's recent monograph, *The Ballad in American Popular Music*. Given the complex genealogy of the term "ballad" in poetic and musical contexts, Metzger opens with a quest for definition, deciding upon one that is simple and universal: "A ballad is a song set to a slow tempo that deals with feelings of love and loss" (p. 1).

Metzger approaches the *music* of the ballad by analyzing melody, harmony, instrumental accompaniment, form, tempo, and rhythm and the *lyrics* by interpreting the topics of love and loss. Exploring further the characteristics of the ballad, he treats the ballad as a genre, while at the same time considering the different styles of music (through which the ballad is performed) as genres. This is not as confusing as it might seem: "Rock, hip hop, and country, for example, take on the distinctive qualities of the ballad and inflect them with their own styles" (p. 25).

Grappling with a range of contexts, Metzger's historical treatment is delineated by his selection of "important moments or repertoires in the history of the ballad" (p. 27). His chapters tell the tale of the following styles: 1) the ballad in the 1950s; 2) the soul ballad of the 1960s; 3) the power ballad, from rock and metal of the 1980s; 4) indie ballads. Interspersed with these major trends that are grounded in eras and genres, Metzger also provides studies of "beloved artists and songs that fall between the cracks" (p. 28). Since his analytic purpose is to reveal how ballads explore both musical and emotional expression, Metzger unfolds another history over the course of the book: the history of emotion in popular American culture. Reading this critical approach, the reader might look for a fulsome scholarly

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1. See, *A Song for Europe: Popular Music and Politics in the Eurovision Song Contest*, edited by Ivan Raykoff and Robert Deam Tobin (London: Routledge, [2007] 2016), *Song Interpretation in 21st-Century Pop Music*, edited by Ralf von Appen, André Doehring, and Allan F. Moore (Surrey and Burlington: Ashgate, 2015), and Marek Korczynsky, *Songs of the Factory: Pop Music, Culture, and Resistance* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2014).



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engagement with writings on musical genre, as well as on the developments of emotion in popular culture. It is noteworthy that both genre theory and affect theory have received a great deal of scholarly attention in the new millennium, however this is not where Metzger has placed his emphasis. The strength of Metzger's work here is in repertoire analysis rather than in critical theory.

With these introductory foundations, the reader is set to enter Metzger's account of the intertwined histories of the ballad's musical moments, as marked by genre and stylistic era, and its emotional content, as connected to contemporaneous socio-cultural trends in America. Chapter 1 ("The 1950s") treats the ballad as a B-side phenomenon to the overshadowing rock and roll singles that dominated the music industry. The frequent placement of the ballad as a flipside to an upbeat rock and roll song revealed a sustained interest in Tin Pan Alley and fuelled critical debates over genre and taste. As Metzger writes, "It is rare to have the ballad and the beat set as strongly against each other as they were in the 1950s" (p. 39). Taking up an emblematic example of the "rockaballad" that emerged at this time, Metzger analyzes "Who's Sorry Now?"—originally written in 1923 and recorded by a range of artists in a number of genres—focusing specifically on Connie Francis' 1958 version to "[reveal] that commercial cunning, as well as genre mingling, was behind the emergence of the rockaballad" (p. 42). Through this analysis, Metzger also exposes the cultural issues for female recording artists of the rockaballad, ultimately identifying the ballad as opening a space for women in rock. Chapter 2 on soul ballads—"one of the most significant bodies of song in the history of the ballad" (p. 87)—focuses on the contributions of Sam Cooke, Ray Charles, Otis Redding and Aretha Franklin, contextualizing the major ballads of these great artists. With Chapter 3, he arrives at "The Power Ballad," an incarnation of the song type that "exceeds the emotional scope typical of ballads" (p. 135) by exploring "a process of continuous escalation" (p. 136). The musical and emotional values of the power ballad are nowhere better formulated than in Whitney Houston's 1992 cover of Dolly Parton's "I Will Always Love You" (1974), however Metzger also reviews the role of the power ballad in the genres of rock, metal, R&B, and in Classical-Pop crossovers. In contrast to these power ballads, Chapter 4 ("Indie Ballads") spotlights how indie artists such as Elliott Smith, Sufjan Stevens and Regina Spektor deliver the ballad with a spirit of restrained emotional intensity.

The design of the book, with four chapters and five analytic interludes, affords many opportunities for pleasurable focus on significant songs in the post-1950 ballad. With Interlude I, Metzger pursues the Nashville sound with Patsy Cline's "Crazy" (1962); in Interlude II, he explores a range of genre treatments of the canonic ballad, "Love Hurts" (recorded by the Everly Brothers in 1960, Roy Orbison in 1961, and Jim Capaldi, Nazareth, and Cher in 1975); Interlude III extols the emotional content of singer-songwriter Sarah McLachlan's "Angel" (1998); Interlude IV unveils the cultural challenges of bringing the ballad into hip hop, as instanced by LL Cool J's "I Need Love" (1987), Jay Z's laments over his struggles with fame in "Holy Grail" (2013), and the gender criticisms that Drake experienced for "Marvin's Room" (2011); and the final Interlude V bridges two confessional and sorrowful songs, Adele's "Someone Like You" (2011) and Frank Ocean's "Bad Religion" (2012).

With this monograph, David Metzger mobilizes a style of writing that emulates the emotional content of his objects of analysis, offering an engaging, thoughtful and responsive exploration of a repertoire that is deserving of this and further inquiry.