

Book Review: Studying Popular Music Culture

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*Popular music entertains, inspires and even empowers, but where did it come from, how is it made, what does it mean, and how does it eventually reach our ears? Tim Wall seeks to guide students through the many ways we can analyse music and the music industries, highlighting crucial skills and useful research tips. **Studying Popular Music Culture** equips readers with useful analytical tools for understanding a subject that is embedded in almost everyone's everyday life, writes **Catherine Baker**.*

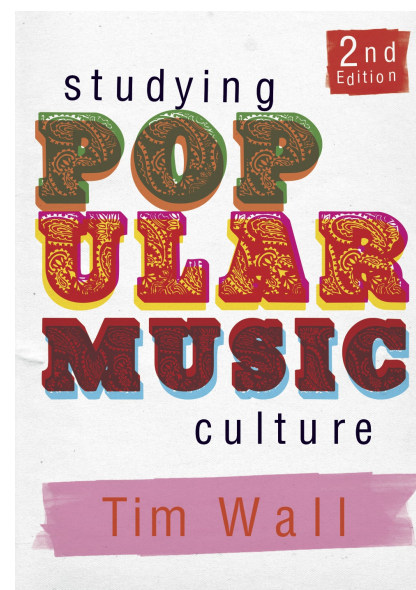


Studying Popular Music Culture. Second Edition. Tim Wall. Sage. March 2013.

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More than most industries, the successful sale of recorded popular music depends on being endlessly able to produce something new: as Tim Wall points out in this introduction to the economics and cultures of popular music in the West, a buyer who likes a certain brand of food will probably come back to buy the same item again, but music-lovers rarely make a repeat purchase of exactly the same record. The likelihood that a textbook's examples may become outdated quickly is in the nature of popular music studies.

Since 2003, however, when the first edition of *Studying Popular Music Culture* appeared, the degree of structural change affecting the music industries has been even greater than might have been anticipated, most of all when it comes to the ways that people acquire, organise and share music in the present day. Discussing change in the economics of popular music, as Wall accepts, 'badly need less hyperbole and more research' (p. 150). There is nevertheless more than enough rationale for publishing a second edition of this book.



Studying Popular Music Culture now contains fourteen chapters arranged in four parts. Each chapter contains at least one case study (sometimes drawn from Wall's own research on jazz, commercial radio, and northern soul) and a few activities that could easily be adapted into a tutor's own teaching (suitable for online activities as well as face-to-face).

The approaches of the different parts could broadly be described as historical, economic, interpretive or literary, and sociological. Part 1, 'Histories', sets up the book's framework for understanding the social, economic and technological factors affecting popular music in the past and present. Part 2, 'Industries and institutions', presents the structural background of popular music production, with informed commentary on criticisms of the record industry that readers are likely to have encountered in popular music criticism. Part 3, 'Form, meaning and representation', discusses approaches to interpreting the sonic, linguistic and visual texts of popular music, and the final part, 'Audiences and consumption', brings together chapters on various sociological topics – from fandoms, through practices of listening and looking, through dancing, to a chapter on downloading and file-sharing that has had to significantly diversify the material on record-collecting in the earlier edition.

Wall's openness about the aims of the book and the different kinds of knowledge that anyone with interests in popular music – students, researchers, cultural workers, journalists, fans – bring to the subject will make *Studying Popular Music Culture* useful to courses in sociology, cultural studies and interdisciplinary popular music studies, but perhaps especially in cultural history. The very first chapter, 'Constructing popular music histories', explores the observation that 'most histories of popular music share common features in the way they are constructed' (p. 5) and suggest that these simplify popular music's much more complex past.

Wall picks out three discourses in particular as examples of grand narratives that the reader ought to approach critically: the organisation of popular music histories around moments of abrupt disruption; the repeated narrative of music moving from an underground into the mainstream; and the trope of roots, which he argues is often overly restricted to sounds rather than broader cultural meanings. His implication is that, since most widely available music criticism is susceptible to these, this is what students are most likely to repeat uncritically. To go beyond them, students must be able to recognise them as grand narratives which therefore have these limitations. Doing this will help them to write analyses which are simultaneously more insightful and more original – and to be more critical of universal narratives in future. This awareness of how students learn and progress makes the book useful in teaching any subject, but his explanations of 'totalising' history and postmodern critiques of this approach (p. 13) can usefully reinforce the understanding of students who are also learning about historiography.

There are some limitations in the organisation of the book. A dedicated chapter on gender or sexuality might have been useful, although gender is referred to in the discussions of subcultures, collectors and stars. From certain perspectives, some nodes in the book's central basis – the 'relationship between music, the industry and consumers' (p. viii) – could also be said to be missing. The state, for instance, appears here to have a minimal impact on popular music culture, although authors such as Martin Cloonan (in [Popular Music and the State in the UK](#)) have found ways to write it in.

What is more, the equivalent relationships in other socio-political systems may contain nodes that are not important in Anglo-American popular music culture – for instance, the node that the Party would represent in thinking about (a) popular music culture under socialism, or the node that the *absence* of the Party might represent in the popular music cultures of post-socialism. To be fair, the book does not set out to be a text in *Studying Global Popular Music Cultures* – but a companion volume with that purpose might be valuable.

Studying Popular Music Culture nonetheless equips readers with useful analytical tools for understanding a subject that is embedded in almost everyone's everyday life, and it will support teaching valuably. Wall's message to the writers of popular music histories – to look beyond 'our own distinctions, hierarchies and fields of knowledge' (p. 288) – is important no matter the level at which one is doing research, even though it is impossible for a historian not to have been shaped by them in some way.

Catherine Baker is Lecturer in 20th Century History at the University of Hull. Her research interests include nationalism and identity in popular music. She is the author of [Sounds of the Borderland: Popular Music, War and Nationalism in Croatia since 1991](#) (Ashgate, 2010). She currently teaches the module 'Music, Politics and Violence' as well as modules on nationalism in the contemporary world and on the history of Yugoslavia. [Read more reviews by Catherine.](#)