

Review

Michael E. Veal and E. Tammy Kim, eds. 2016. *Punk Ethnography: Artists and Scholars Listen to Sublime Frequencies*. Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press. ISBN 978-0-8195-7652-1 (pbk). 429 pp.

Reviewed by: Nabeel Zuberi, University of Auckland, New Zealand
n.zuberi@auckland.ac.nz

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This study devoted to the independent Seattle-based record company Sublime Frequencies is divided into three parts of chapters and interviews ('Background Context', 'Visual and Sonic Culture', 'Local Forays'), as well as 'interludes' of interviews with music industry listeners connected to or influenced by the label. Veal and Kim have collected previously published writing by ethnomusicologists, journalists and musicians alongside new chapters that are assembled in a way that nods to the structures of the label's own compilations and radiophonic mixes. Essays on particular artists, recordings and film releases explore familiar but still prescient debates about sound recording and media technologies, collage and curatorial sensibilities, avant-garde approaches to popular music, sonic tourism, cosmopolitanism and exoticism, and the ethics of the West mediating the music of the rest.

I have bought and listened to Sublime Frequencies' CDs and LPs since the label was set up in 2003, but 'punk' wasn't the first word that came to mind to describe its output, even if its ethnographic practices have sometimes been controversial. SF remains known primarily as a world music label famous for its collages of media sound bites and music in its Radio series (e.g. *Radio Palestine*, *Radio Morocco*, *Radio India*), its beautifully packaged vinyl compilations of old recordings from around the world (e.g. *Pakistan: Instrumental and Folk Music 1966-1976* and *Pop Yeh Yeh: Psychedelic Rock from Singapore and Malaysia 1964-1970*) and its ethnographic films on DVD (e.g. *Nat Pwe: Burma's Carnival of Spirit Soul* and *The Divine River: Ceremonial Pageantry in the Sahel*). SF has also released music by contemporary artists such as the western Saharan Group Doueh and Syrian wedding singer Omar Souleyman, whose music careers have expanded due to the label's exposure of their work.

Veal and Kim argue for punk as a framework for understanding SF due to its avowed subversion of academic ethnomusicology, and the influence of punk ide-

ologies and aesthetics in its music and film releases. Co-founders Alan and Richard Bishop, who are members of US post-punk group Sun City Girls, have asserted the desire for encounters with the sounds of other people and places that do not demand the conventional scholarly methods of contextualization, citation and translation to make sense of music. Several chapters deal with SF's attraction to the lo-fi production techniques and distortion valued by punk discourses. Lynda Paul's discussion of 'rawness as aesthetic-ideological fulcrum' in SF's videos stands out for its non-judgmental perspective on the many resonances of rawness in the label's work, even if no audiovisual text or event can be an unmediated or 'uncooked' entrée to the real. In its focus on punk and post-punk ideas, the book reminds us of punk's link to the long established ethnographic fantasies of the western avant-garde, and encourages more scholarship on the relatively unexplored area of punk's racial imagination, for example, of (post-)punk's encounter with Jamaican reggae and dub; the Slits' primitivism represented by the cover of their *Cut* album in which they appear naked, covered in mud with 'tribal' markings; Siouxsie and the Banshees' orientalism in, for example, 'Hong Kong Garden' and 'Arabian Nights'; or the camp representation of Native American culture with Burundian drumming styles in the work of Adam and the Ants and Bow Wow Wow.

Another thread of *Punk Ethnography* follows the rearticulation of analogue music media in digital media, introduced by David Nowak's excellent essay on SF as 'new old media'. SF was part of the same archive fever of music blogs such as Ghost Capital and Awesome Tapes From Africa in the early 2000s, which posted MP3s of forgotten or rare vinyl records and cassettes from around the world. Many of SF's compilations reveal a taste for foreign sounds that have been influenced by US rock'n'roll, psychedelia, funk and soul, rather than the other drive in 'world music' to capture roots or traditional music. On the one hand, this approach to curating frames the music from elsewhere through North American and European music genre categories and western record collectors' tastes while obscuring local discourses on the music. On the other, these SF compilations reveal the cosmopolitan and alternative modernities of non-western musical locations that might challenge western and Eurocentric histories of genres such as rock and techno. Several chapters explore the remediation of broadcasting in the Radio series and deconstruct the editing techniques and methods of their collagists.

The lasting impression of this media studies thread of the book is that SF has no singular attitude to curating old music, but quite varied approaches depending on the nature of the music, and the predilections and local research experiences of particular compilers such as Olivia Wyatt, Mark Gergis and Hisham Mayet. As punk as it might be, SF's media ethnography often lines up with traditional eth-

nomusicology and field recording, while some of its work belongs in the more poetic strands of ethnography informed by modernism and avant-garde movements such as surrealism. *Punk Ethnography* doesn't resolve any of the postcolonial dilemmas of mediating or writing about music from other places, but its detailed and well-written chapters not only respect the contributions of Sublime Frequencies, but do the work of filling in some of the gaps in the label's curating practices, so grounding and historicizing the music and its remediation.

Several chapters describe two aspects of the label that might have been elaborated and warrant further examination. Firstly, the fact that many of the label's main players (the Bishops, Gergis and Mayet) are Arab Americans might have warranted a more sustained examination of how diasporic sensibilities might be distinctive in shaping SF's approach to 'World Music 2.0'. Secondly, though Rachel Lears discusses record collecting as key to SF's sensibilities in her chapter on *Latina-mericarpet*, a collection of psychedelic music from the 1960s, there might have been more on SF vinyl releases as material culture. Apart from the graphic design of their LP covers, their heavyweight vinyl and thick cardboard sleeves also draw on the sensory and haptic aspects of nostalgic affects associated with the vinyl revival. Notwithstanding these underdeveloped areas of investigation, this collection's essays with their varied methods are insightful and helpful for researchers interested in the ethnographic imagination, aesthetics and industrial practices of record companies in the age of the Internet.