Review


**Reviewed by:** Dan Bendrups, University of Otago

In this book, Johnson and Cloonan take on the formidable task of positioning violence as a research theme within the field of popular music studies. In doing so, they mobilize an impressive array of research from a range of sources both within and outside the field of popular music studies, generating a convincing and intellectually stimulating line of enquiry. This investigation of music and violence is not a new or unique topic *per se*. Seminal works such as Attali’s *Noise: The Political Economy of Music* (1985) and Schafer’s *The Tuning of the World* (1977) presage many of the issues raised here by Johnson and Cloonan. However, this book extends the discussion to actual physical violence, as well as engaging with allied symbolic or conceptual issues of power, control, subversion and oppression. The authors assemble many disparate studies of, and media references to, music and violence into a coherent corpus, enhanced and expanded by their own original research on certain topics.

The book is divided into chapters dealing, firstly, with the scholarly, scientific, technological and historical contexts for the interplay between music and violence, and secondly with music as an accompaniment to violence, an incitement to violence, as arousal of violence or as violence itself. The final chapter, ‘Policy’, positions these perspectives in relation to the governance and negotiation of music and power in everyday life.

The eruditeness of the authors is conveyed in the introduction (‘Musical Violence and Popular Music Studies’) where Johnson and Cloonan systematically deconstruct the field of popular music studies and argue for a place for the study of ‘violence’ within this field. One of their chief criticisms of the status quo concerns the unquestioned ‘positivity’ of music, reflected as much in historical quotations that have entered popular usage as in the tendency for popular music scholars to work with musics that they find favourable and for which they seek to advocate. While this apparent problem in popular music scholarship is not universal, it does deserve critical reflection, and it is therefore useful for it to be raised in the context of this discussion.
The introduction also sets up the conceptual framework within which the cultural focus of the book is best understood. From the outset, quotes from English literature sources make it clear that the authors situate their work specifically within the Western intellectual tradition, and that their critique of scholarship pertains specifically to this tradition as it is played out in (mostly) Anglophone popular music studies. This, I feel, is a necessary limitation, although it does become a problem in the few instances where the authors assert notions of universality in the way humans experience music and violence. Such assertions are plagued by the Anglo-centric characteristics of the extant research consulted, and it is a shame that the authors did not include some discussions about this cultural bias, which in turn reflects a long history of ‘epistemic violence’ in scholarship, where the epistemologies of the ‘West’ are taken as applying to the ‘rest’. The authors’ use of potentially pejorative terms like ‘exotic’ to describe non-Western cultures (97) compounds this issue. The residual perception of cultural bias that this creates could have been averted through the inclusion of some specifically non-Western or non-Anglophone scholarly sources for the interplay between music and violence.

Chapter 1 (‘Context: the Sound of Music’) deserves special mention for the way that it theorizes sound as a physical entity—an approach that is largely absent within the discipline of musicology, whether ‘popular’ or otherwise. In this section, Johnson cites enthusiastically from sources in neuropsychology that deal with the brain’s reception of sound stimuli, and constructs a case for music to be treated as sound events unburdened by issues of cultural reception or interpretation. Johnson’s objective here is to nullify any assertion that the violence attributed to music is a matter of reception; rather, he asserts that sound can be inherently violent. One of the examples Johnson uses to illustrate this point concerns the destabilizing power of the well-known shark motive in the film *Jaws*, a power he attributes to the innate human association between hidden menace and low frequency noise (19). While this may be true, this particular example also has a musicological explanation, in that the non-resolving semitone interval on which the motive is constructed sounds unstable, and therefore menacing, to audiences conditioned to the functional diatonic harmonic structures that underpin the classical and popular music traditions of the West.

The casual sidestepping of the field of musicology is a blind spot in the otherwise capacious range of sources and disciplines consulted in the pages of this book. As the authors identify early on, musicological knowledge is not a prerequisite for the study of popular music. However, there are well-known instances of the mobilization of violence in musicology, such as Susan McClary’s portrayals of symbolic misogynistic violence (1991), that could have been addressed, deconstructed or
critiqued here. Similarly, there are notions of instability or ‘dissonance’ in Western diatonic music (the ‘devil’s interval’; the filmic use of twelve-tone music) that could have provided opportunities for discussion in a book dealing with the multifaceted ways in which music and violence are entwined and understood socially. Musical analysis could also have helped to enhance specific examples raised in the book, such as the description of violent lyrics being contradicted by other elements within the music and production characteristics of particular songs (95).

Beyond the clear and well-managed organization of chapters by theme, there are some more general themes that weave through the book. The most insistent is the authors’ repeated references to the misconceived relationship between violence and genre. While this often takes on the form of a defence of metal and hip hop as discursive modes, it is convincingly deployed to help maintain the authors’ stance that ‘the negative side of music was most often to be found in the familiar texture of life’ (161) as opposed to marginal or subversive subcultural styles. Another undercurrent of the book is the critique of how music is mobilized in instances of ‘moral panic’, the extent of which is clearly demonstrated in the numerous newspaper articles consulted by the authors. While these citations are from only a few newspaper titles, they serve as apt representations of the behaviour and cultural influence of Anglophone print media more generally. These critiques are effectively applied to case study examples such as the analysis of Woodstock 1999 (84–94).

Dark Side of the Tune is a timely reassessment of music and violence in popular culture, and the authors’ wide scope of references provides a theoretical platform for further research in this area. This book has the potential to become a seminal work of required reading for future studies in this highly topical twenty-first-century area of scholarly enquiry.

References

