

Eric Weisbard, *Songbooks: The Literature of American Popular Music*

Kristine Dizon



Electronic version

URL: <https://journals.openedition.org/ejas/17605>

DOI: 10.4000/ejas.17605

ISSN: 1991-9336

Publisher

European Association for American Studies

Electronic reference

Kristine Dizon, "Eric Weisbard, *Songbooks: The Literature of American Popular Music*", *European journal of American studies* [Online], Book reviews, Online since 06 December 2021, connection on 31 August 2022. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/ejas/17605> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/ejas.17605>

This text was automatically generated on 31 August 2022.



Creative Commons - Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International - CC BY-NC 4.0
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>

Eric Weisbard, *Songbooks: The Literature of American Popular Music*

Kristine Dizon

- 1 Eric Weisbard, *Songbooks: The Literature of American Popular Music*.
- 2 Duke University Press, 2021. Pp. 552. ISBN: 978-1-4780-1408-9
- 3 Author: Kristine Dizon, Catholic University of Portugal, Lisbon
- 4 American popular music compasses a vast history that is deeply rooted to the everchanging nature of trends and culture through race, gender, and capitalism. Early evidence of “popular” music can be found in William Billings’ Hymns, Stephen Foster’s parlor songs, and blackface minstrelsy and in the development of the music publishing center “Tin Pan Alley” that was responsible for publishing “sentimental” songs. Popular musical genres like ragtime, jazz, and swing become more prominent after the invention of the phonograph cylinder by Thomas Edison, which led to the birth of recorded music.
- 5 *Songbooks* captures these changes and provides a critical guide on books on American popular music from William Billings’ 1770 New-England Psalm-Singer to Jay-Z’s 2010 memoir *Decoded* from a historical, musicological and cultural studies perspective. Weisbard provides a useful explanation of the density of American popular music in the preface along with suggestions to how approach the reading of the book. This explanation is useful for the reader as he provides clear instructions on how to approach the book and his thought processes to its organization. The preface must be read to understand his thought process in the organizational structure of this text, otherwise it will be difficult to follow unless one is clear with what their objective is in their reading. He stated in the Preface that the title for each part of the book is purely chronological and is divided into seven parts: Setting the Scene, The Jazz Age, Midcentury Icons; Vernacular Counterculture; After the Revolution; New Voices, New Methods; Topics in Progress. Within these larger categories, Weisbard uses themes to describe the commonalities each of the books have in their respective sections that make sense.

- 6 The connective tissue that holds these chapters together is in how the books are organized according in each of the sections along with the ongoing argument in the “sentimental” and “vernacular” American popular music and how they relate to race, gender, and capitalism that are still very relevant today in the music industry. Brief commentary is provided about each of the books that either focuses on prominent writers or musical figures that suggests its importance and chosen placement in this text from a modern perspective. This collection includes a diverse selection of authors: women, people of color, queer writers, self-educated scholars, poets, musicians, and elites, the book-by-book analysis provides a very unclear view (or perhaps it is supposed to be like this) of the role these authors have in the retelling of how popular music in America evolved using the suggested themes by the author.
- 7 In “Setting the Scene”, Weisbard discusses literature relating to race, gender, and minstrelsy and provides insightful commentary about each of the texts in each of the chapters. While it provides several valuable resources about American popular music, the brevity of the chapters is dense with information, that make it difficult at times to connect with subsequent chapters that followed throughout each of the sections. While these chapters can exist independently, the disadvantage of creating a book-by-book analysis in explaining the significance of these different narratives together in a meaningful way that it can also be easily understood by the reader.
- 8 The book addresses a wide range of literature that exists on American popular music that is comprehensive and fascinating for those who are interested in expanding their knowledge. This book was written with a multi-disciplinary approach in mind, it would have been useful to delve more in depth into each of the aforementioned themes from a cultural studies perspective in tying together the significance between race, gender, and sexual identity in performance as seen in *Dramatizing Blackness from a Distance: Ethel Waters with Charles Samuels, His Eye Is on the Sparrow* that provides an account on what it meant to be the “other” from the Water’s perspective (Weisbard 120). Weisbard does an excellent job recreating Waters’ narrative for the reader in an engaging way, and while he mentions that race, sexuality, and identity played an important role, it would have been good to know how these themes shape our understanding of American popular music from a cultural studies perspective and perhaps informing readers of its connections to our current history.
- 9 Throughout the book, Weisbard emphasizes what the vernacular vs. the sentimental meant in American popular music. The example that he uses involves picturing “respectable women all feeling moved, emphasis on tears and the domestic sphere – the parlor” (Weisbard 7). The vernacular being that of “regular guys talking shit, emphasis on laughter and the public sphere – the streets” (Weisbard 7). While this paints an image to the reader of how the author defines the terms for himself, it suggests that there is the idea of the sentimental and vernacular, which relates to the idea of gender identity and social space. The examples that he uses are strong and strengthen the connections of the book-by-book approach in tying together the multitude of themes relevant to American popular music. While I do not agree with the initial definitions of the vernacular and sentimental through these examples, Weisbard does an excellent job of communicating these themes in a more concise way throughout the course of the book in different ways to the reader in the short chapters.
- 10 It is apparent that Weisbard is a multifaceted writer and comfortable writing about a wide range of topics within American popular music. Weisbard’s book is a

valuable resource for those who are interested in researching and learning more about the history of American popular music. Those who have had no background in it might find this text difficult to read from beginning to end as at times the short chapters seem disjoint due to it being a book-by-book analysis. The good part is that the different sections can exist independently to allow more dialogue about how race, gender, and capitalism that existed in American popular music from a cultural studies perspective.