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Jonathyne Briggs, *Sounds French: Globalization, Cultural Communities, and Pop Music, 1958-1980*. Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2015. xi + 226 pp. 8 half-tones, notes, bibliography, and index. \$45.00 U.S. (cl.). ISBN 9780199377060.

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There has never been much glory to be had as a scholar of French pop and rock music. Of all the facets of modern French culture that one could devote oneself to, few have as benighted a reputation as those musics of the 1960s, 1970s, and early 1980s that sought to translate popular Anglo-American styles into French. As David Looseley has memorably remarked, the standard “Anglo-Saxon representation of French pop” that crystallized during the *yé-yé* boom of the early 1960s—the sense that it was “vacuous and embarrassingly inauthentic, a colonised music that eternally misses the point”—proved remarkably durable.[1] Ironically, this was nowhere more the case than in France itself, where successive generations of rock critics made it a habit to enumerate the many ways local artists paled in comparison to the American and British models they emulated.[2]

Compared to other hybrids born out of the encounter of Anglo-American musical practices and French musical practitioners, rock in particular has fared poorly. The French jazz scene has long been recognized as one of the most vibrant and consequential outside the United States, not only for its role in conferring legitimacy on a musical tradition that American cultural institutions were slower to embrace, but also as an incubator of a number of important artists and styles in its own right (most famously Django Reinhardt and so-called *jazz manouche*). More recently, rap has become an object of sustained, serious reflection among scholars, even if it is often valued more as a kind of sociological document, a means of tracing the fault lines that run through contemporary France, than as a form of artistic expression bearing intrinsic musical value. Between these two high-water marks in the history of transatlantic musical exchange during the twentieth century, pop-rock music seems to represent instead something of a trough—which might explain why it has heretofore received so little attention from historians.

Jonathyne Briggs’s new book, *Sounds French: Globalization, Cultural Communities, and Pop Music, 1958-1980*, goes a long way towards filling this lacuna, offering one of the most extensive treatments to date of how the influence exercised by American popular music after 1955 made itself felt in France. For this reason alone Briggs’s volume marks an important intervention in the nascent field of French popular music studies. Up to now the vast majority of French-language studies devoted to this subject have been more sociological than historical or musicological in orientation, while most English-language studies have focused on *chanson*. [3] Those not centered on *chanson* but on *variétés*—and more specifically, on those styles heavily indebted to Anglo-American popular musics—have for their part tended to skim over the history of pop-rock’s establishment in France, usually on the way to some other, more narrowly delimited issue that is the principal object of scholarly concern. Such is the case with David Looseley’s pioneering study of the political, intellectual, and policy debates that swirled around popular

music in the final decades of the twentieth-century, or Barbara Lebrun's work on popular music and protest in France since the 1980s.[4]

In those cases where scholars have developed more finely grained histories, they have generally focused on a single moment in the evolution of French pop: the arrival of rock 'n' roll and the moral panic generated by the *blousons noirs*; the *vague yé-yé* of the sixties; the post-'68 rock counterculture; or the *rock alternatif* of the 1980s.[5] What has largely been lacking—and what *Sounds French* provides—is an account whose breadth is matched by its depth.[6] Not only does Briggs offer readers a coherent account of French popular music's evolution in response to global pressures; he also—and perhaps more significantly—exhibits a detailed knowledge of and appreciation for the diverse music scenes, musicians, and types of music he discusses. Unlike so many studies of French popular music, which limit their observations to textual analyses of song lyrics, Briggs attends to the sonic materiality of the records he considers, providing readers with incisive descriptions of the musical textures, production techniques, mixes, and melodic contours that distinguish different songs. (In this regard, the online supplement, which provides links to recordings of many of the tracks discussed in the book, is particularly valuable.)

Even a book-length study of French pop, one that spans just over two decades of its history, is obliged to be selective as to which artists, scenes, and styles it surveys. *Sounds French* thus narrates the impact of rock 'n' roll's arrival and aftermath across five key episodes. The first chapter recounts the early years of rock music culture in France, paying particular attention to the youth subculture of *copains* that emerged in the wake of the music's popularization via the radio program *Salut les copains* and the magazine of the same name. Chapter two turns to *chanson* and its consecration during the 1950s and 1960s in the hands of the canonical figures of Brel, Brassens, Ferré, and Gainsbourg. In some respects the odd chapter out, in that it deals with a form of music that is widely seen to be indigenous to France rather than imported from abroad, Briggs's discussion of the *chanson's* changing status is nonetheless illuminating in showing the extent to which its elevation was a relational effect, impelled by the entry of rock 'n' roll and *yé-yé* into the field of musical production. Here as elsewhere what is at issue is the impact that these novel musical currents had on the French musical scene, the difference being that in this instance the impact was registered indirectly rather than directly.

Chapter 3 returns to local French adaptations of transnational musical trends, surveying the progressive rock bands that formed in the wake of the events of May-June 1968. A key theme concerns the varied ways in which bands associated with what Briggs dubs the "freak left" (to be distinguished from the more politically orthodox elements that comprised the French new left) sought to cross musical boundaries, usually as part of a more or less explicit political agenda. Examples include the merger of rock and free jazz in the music of Red Noise, or the influence exerted by Igor Stravinsky and Carl Orff on the symphonic progressive rock of Magma. This concern with musical hybridization continues in the next scene Briggs examines, that of Breton music, which, along with Occitan, Alsatian, Corsican, and other regional music revivals of the 1970s, drew energy from the renewal (and ideological reorientation) of regional activism in the years after 1968. Here the process of hybridization that Briggs explores is that which conjugates tradition and modernity, Breton folk music with Anglo-American rock, incarnated most vividly in the *œuvre* of Alan Stivell.

The final chapter turns to the arrival of punk in France in the mid-1970s. In many ways it marks a fitting place to end the book. The chapter brings us full circle, as the difficulties local groups encountered in making punk French echo the difficulties the first generation of rockers experienced a decade and a half beforehand; as Briggs notes, the challenge in establishing "an aesthetic that distinguished a particular French form of punk" was "not unlike the phenomenon of French rock and roll" (p. 148). While this leads him to a rather glum assessment of its significance—he writes in concluding the chapter that "the reality of French punk reveals how the French could not quite find their place yet on the international stage" (p. 177)—one might limn a more optimistic reading of punk's legacy in France. After all, the radical rupture it effected with respect to sedimented conventions of pop-

rock music opened the way to the emergence of styles and sounds less beholden to Anglo-American models, and less obsessed by their perceived shortcomings vis-à-vis those deemed more “authentic.”

A thread that runs through these chapters and through the different music scenes they patiently reconstruct concerns music’s capacity to fashion communities. This is, if anything, the book’s principal argument. Already in the acknowledgments Briggs notes how his project “started as a way of understanding how music brings us all together” (p. xi). This understanding of music as a force for social bonding is almost immediately put into play in the first of the series of vignettes that will begin each chapter, in this instance a sketch of Johnny Hallyday’s valedictory performance at the Stade de France as part of his 2009 “Route 66” tour. For Briggs, the audience’s response to the concert, above all “the sadness unabashedly expressed for Hallyday’s departure as he took his supposed final bow,” is illustrative of nothing less than the “deep connection the French had through popular music” (p. 1).

At one level, there is nothing new in Briggs’s assertion that music possesses an exceptional ability to foster a sense of community. This has long been a major line of inquiry within music studies, especially since the 1990s, and Briggs (to his credit) folds a number of insights generated by recent research into the cultural communities that music genres mobilize into his book’s arguments. What is novel about *Sounds French* is the particular socio-cultural milieu upon which these claims are brought to bear, and the specific conditions under which music’s capacity to bring people together operated within early Fifth Republic France. One of the virtues of Briggs’s book is the care he takes to describe the fissures within French society that music, in each of the different scenes he discusses, responded to. These include the differences of class and taste that progressive rock musicians sought to transcend via their integration of “high” and “low” aesthetics, the ethnic and class distinctions that membership in the imagined community of *copains* bracketed (if only momentarily), or the apparent opposition of regional and cosmopolitan identity that Stivell’s folk-rock deconstructed.

Still, it is hard not to harbor doubts about some of the more outsized claims Briggs makes about music’s powers, and the efficacy he imputes to it: not so much as regards its efficacy to forge communities per se, which is well documented, but its ability to forge communities of sufficient consequence that they might cut across deep-rooted divisions of ideology, class, ethnicity, gender, age, or geography. A temptation that music scholars such as myself have to resist is that of being so blinded by an enthusiasm for the object of our scholarly labors that we fail to maintain a critical distance with regard to it. The risk is not just that one might overestimate music’s significance or powers. It is as much that one might underestimate them, specifically, the way in which these powers can be deployed for less agreeable ends. If music is endowed with a special capacity to bring people together, it possesses no less a capacity to drive them apart. Curiously, Briggs tends to downplay this latter affordance of music, seldom dwelling on its widely recognized utility as a marker of difference.

Thus, in describing how progressive groups like Holden and Magma introduced elements drawn from modern art music into their records and performances, Briggs advances the claim that such “use of legitimate, high culture within the context of rock” aimed at creating “a new, holistic sound for a community of listeners interested in tearing down barriers and creating a new France” (p. 100). Perhaps. But one might wonder if there is a different way of interpreting such gestures. Did they really serve to undo long-standing forms of cultural distinctions? Or were they instead the means by which a new form of subcultural distinction was instituted within the world of French rock? Even if one casts the intentions of progressive groups in the most charitable light possible, one shouldn’t shy away from soberly assessing the real-world effects of their actions.

Similar questions may be raised about music’s ability to foster feelings of community. Here too it is important to note that inasmuch as music can serve as a source of consensus, it can just as well serve as a source of disagreement. Briggs’s tendency to discount the ambivalence of music’s social effects results in a rather rosy picture of some of the genre communities he describes, particularly in the early chapters

of the book. Typical are assertions concerning “the importance of *chanson* for unifying listeners in contemporary France” (p. 65), or that depict the *copains* as “a new kind of community ... at once open to global influences ... and inclusive of different classes, races, and genders” (p. 15). When divisions within and across cultural communities are acknowledged, they tend to appear as qualifications that do not fundamentally alter the otherwise tranquil image Briggs paints of them. For instance, towards the end of the first chapter, Briggs remarks that “the *copain* community did have divisions,” stemming as much from disputes over how the *copain* ideal was best to be realized as from entrenched disparities in class, education, and life chances; but just a few lines further down the page, one is assured that “these differences were bridged by the aesthetic similarities that unified the genre of *yé-yé*” (p. 41).

What this desire to minimize disagreement overlooks is the degree to which conflict, far from being antithetical to the construction of cultural communities, is one of the forces that binds them together. As Bourdieu once observed, “struggle presupposes an agreement among the antagonists on what merits being struggled over.”<sup>[7]</sup> Later chapters are more successful in avoiding this pitfall. This is especially true of the final chapter, with its focus on disputes over language choice and authenticity within the French punk scene. That myths about music’s power to unite people prove harder to sustain with regard to punk is perhaps to be expected, given how contentious a mode of cultural expression it was (and continues to be). But it does make one wish that the same sensitivity to the tensions that ran through punk and that were a major source of its vitality could have been manifest in the treatment of other genre communities discussed in the book. Just because they weren’t thematized to the same degree in Breton song, progressive rock, or *chanson* as they were in punk doesn’t mean that such tensions were altogether absent.

Such objections as to how music communities might best be conceptualized and interpreted should not be taken to diminish the importance of the contribution that *Sounds French* makes. One might dispute the book’s characterization of music’s ability to palliate the contradictions running through French society in the early years of the Fifth Republic, without however disputing its underlying claim: that these musics held an importance for the publics they animated, and that they therefore should have a continuing importance for us, as historians of modern French culture. With its expansive vision of French pop and its attentiveness to musical texts, *Sounds French* is a foundation upon which future work in French popular music studies may fruitfully build.

#### NOTES

[1] David Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France, Authenticity, Politics, Debate* (Oxford: Berg, 2003), p. 30.

[2] Some examples of this inferiority complex are documented in Elisabeth Donato, “Suis-je rock? Defining French rock and roll and rock artists in Rock & Folk, 1966-1967,” *Contemporary French Civilization* 36(2011):5-18.

[3] Examples of the latter include Peter Hawkins, *Chanson: the French singer-songwriter from Aristide Bruant to the present day* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); Chris Tinker, *Georges Brassens and Jacques Brel: Personal and Social Narratives in Post-War Chanson* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2005); and Adeline Cordier, *Post-War French Popular Music: Cultural Identity and the Brel-Brassens-Ferré Myth* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

[4] David Looseley, *Popular Music in Contemporary France*; Barbara Lebrun, *Protest Music in France: Production, Identity and Audiences* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009).

[5] See for instance Chris Tinker, *Mixed Messages: Youth Magazine Discourse and Sociocultural Shifts in Salut Les Copains (1962-1976)* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 2010); Chris Warne, “Music, youth and

moral panics,” *Historia Actual Online* 11(2006):51-64; Florence Tamagne, “« C’mon Everybody »: Rock’n’roll et identités juvéniles en France,” in Ludivine Bantigny, ed., *Jeunesse oblige* (Paris: Presses universitaires de France, 2009), pp. 199-212; Eric Drott, *Music and the Elusive Revolution: Cultural Politics and Political Culture in France, 1968-1981* (Berkeley, CA: California, 2011), ch. 4; and Lebrun, *Protest Music in France*, ch. 1.

[6] A notable exception is G r me Guibert, *La production de la culture: Le cas des musiques amplifi es en France* (Paris: IRMA, 2006).

[7] Pierre Bourdieu, *Questions de sociologie* (Paris: Minuit, 2002), p. 115.

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