

Book Review

Popular Music, Digital Technology and Society

Sergio Sorcia Reyes ^{1*}

¹ *University of Exeter*, UNITED KINGDOM

*Corresponding Author: ss1017@exeter.ac.uk

Citation: Sorcia Reyes, S. (2019). Popular Music, Digital Technology and Society, *Journal of Cultural Analysis and Social Change*, 4(2), 15. <https://doi.org/10.20897/jcasc/6359>

Published: December 11, 2019

Nick Prior (2018). *Popular Music, Digital Technology and Society*. London: SAGE, 2018, vii + 224 pages.

I found myself listening to one of my favourite ever songs while writing this review. This form of musical nostalgia was triggered by Spotify's algorithm, which definitely got it right this time. I could never have imagined such a piece of technological 'wizardry' as Spotify when I was a teenager. Back then, the craft of the mixed tape and cassette exchanges were the 'hip' ways of finding and sharing both new and old music. Before the 2000s, playlists and automatic music recommendations were far beyond the imagination of avid music listeners.

Nick Prior's book is a grounded analysis of the multiple processes that brought us to this point, one where digital technology and the ubiquitous presence of the internet-based forms of technology enable ever greater intensification of the reflexive interactions between music and society. This review addresses Prior's work as well as reflecting critically on some of the key ethical, aesthetic and social implications raised by these developments.

Prior's book is structured into seven chapters which, as he suggests, can be read separately and in no particular order, as stand-alone works. The exception to this general rule is the introduction (Chapter 1), which he uses to set out and explain various key concepts i.e. 'musicking', 'mediation', 'affordance', 'assemblage', etc. deployed throughout the book. Similarly, Prior uses the introduction to critically explore a number of the classic paradigms and themes organising debates within the field. These include the relationship between the social and technology, the distinction between 'soft' and 'hard' forms of technological determinism, and utopian and dystopian forms of discourse used by scholars to interrogate the social/technological nexus.

Following on from the introduction, Chapter 2 turns to explore the ways internet-based forms of technology impact on and shape music consumption. The central focus is on the socio-technical processes involved in the shift from analogue to digital distribution, along with the intensification of connectivity and exchanges between consumers facilitated by the internet. While highly informative, nonetheless I felt more attention needed to be devoted to the controversial use of the freedom of the internet to disseminate messages of crime, violence and hate through popular music, particularly as they relate to the genres of 'drill', 'narcocorridos' and 'reggaeton' (Dávila, 2012, Hancox, 2018; Jeffries, 2011; North and Hargreaves, 2008). Digital technology is a powerful tool enabling for traditional forms of censorship and accountability to be undermined. How young people engage with these themes and narrative forms supposes new ethical, aesthetic and social implications which arguably needed to be acknowledged more.

In Chapter 3, the use of apps, laptops, and digital technology [sampling] in music production comprise key themes and the social implications of these technological shifts are unpacked and analysed. A particular focus here concerns the ways digital technology such as sampling, has enabled 'readers to become writers' (p.69). This shift is perhaps one of the most striking changes of modern cultural production and Prior undertakes the laudable task of delving into the interactions and assemblages underpinning this shift. In Chapter 4, the section dedicated to mobile listening and urban space adopts a critical stance towards current debates surrounding mobile music listening. The author does this by drawing on primary and secondary qualitative and quantitative data from users and non-users.

The data are then used to explore the notion that mobile-music listeners are actively engaging in extended acts of sociality and alternative ways of sharing music. This suggests a departure from popular narratives depicting mobile devices as isolating and privatising listeners. Instead, Prior seeks to consider the increasing social presence of alternative modes of sociality as realised through mobile music listening.

Chapter 5 explores the role of the voice and digital vocalities, which Prior explores through a range of vocal ontologies and the human/non-human interactions implicated in and used to achieve specific hybrid assemblages. Voice manipulation software and hardware, and the transformation of the human voice into digitally encoded forms, are key themes covered in this section. Chapter 6 turns to the themes of music and games, music in games, and music as games. Prior addresses the close relationship between the gaming and music industries, stressing the importance of the the gaming industry in revitalising sales of digital music. He suggests the neologism 'playsumption' (p.167), to illustrate the relevance of gaming in digital music consumption. The final chapter (Chapter 7) of the book comprises an auto-ethnographic exploration of music production, distribution and consumption. This chapter reflects critically on the implementation of a music production project as realised through multiple assemblages of production, performance and distribution. The detailed description featured throughout this chapter is grounded in the author's knowledge of and skill in producing, distributing and performing music. And it is here that the reader begins to understand the decision to adopt a user-centred perspective throughout the book. It also explains why the examples used throughout are so vividly rendered. In addition to this, the chapter identifies the methodological challenges facing researchers seeking to understand the myriad processes by which actors, human and non-human, become wrapped up and entangled in the realisation of popular music.

This book is a significant contribution to the study of popular music and technology. Putting to work a broad range of cutting-edge theoretical concepts and analytical perspectives, such as actor-network theory, music mediation and science and technology studies, the author casts a discerning light on the socio-technical processes involved in the production, distribution and consumption of a wide range of modern popular musical forms as realised in and across multiple modalities. Rather than adopting a fixed theoretical standpoint from which to broach the issues covered, Prior elects instead to address the epistemological strengths of a range of different analytical perspectives. Doing so enables him to highlight the methodological challenges implicated in the analysis of popular music. That the book is infused with applied and relevant examples and employs a clear and unfussy prose style is, I feel, important to the book's overall success. Moreover, Prior provides the reader with a wide range of insights into the "artful practices" (Garfinkel, 1967) involved in the work of DJs, crooners, sound engineers and music producers, at the same time as demonstrating the centrality of these crafts in the development of new music technologies and practices.

This book is an invaluable contribution to readers from a range of music-related backgrounds including scholars, musicians, music educators, producers and undergraduate students. Similarly, for those working in the fields of popular music, music production, music education, cultural sociology, and the sociology of music, this book comprises a timely and thought-provoking piece of scholarship.

REFERENCES

- Dávila, C. J. B. (2012). *Mediación musical: aproximación etnográfica al narcocorrido* (Doctoral dissertation, Universitat Autònoma de Barcelona).
- Garfinkel, H. (1967). *Studies in Ethnomethodology*. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.
- Hancox, D. (2018). *Inner city pressure: The story of grime*. London: William Collins.
- Jeffries, M. P. (2011). *Thug life: Race, gender, and the meaning of hip-hop*. University of Chicago Press.
<https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226395869.001.0001>
- North, A. and Hargreaves, D. (2008). *The social and applied psychology of music*. Oxford University Press.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780198567424.001.0001>