

Rock History and Culture

Christophe Pirenne, *Une histoire musicale du rock* (Paris: Fayard, 2011, 800 p.); Claude Chastagner, *De la culture rock* (Paris: PUF, 2011, 277 p.)

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**Electronic version**

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/521>

DOI: 10.4000/inmedia.521

ISSN: 2259-4728

Publisher

Center for Research on the English-Speaking World (CREW)

Electronic reference

Éric Gonzalez, « Rock History and Culture », *InMedia* [Online], 2 | 2012, Online since 28 January 2013, connection on 22 September 2020. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/inmedia/521> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/inmedia.521>

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- 1 Two ambitious works written by French-speaking scholars tackle rock music as a research object, from different but complementary perspectives. Both are a definite must-read for anyone interested in the contextualisation of rock music in western popular culture.
- 2 In *Une histoire musicale du rock* (i.e. *A Musical History of Rock*), rock music is approached from the point of view of the people – musicians and industry – behind the music. Christophe Pirenne endeavours to examine that field from a musicologist's perspective. He chooses to define rock as a generic term designating recorded music “encompassing the legacies of African-American music in North America, ie rock in the strict sense of the word, but also a myriad of related genres, such as soul music, funk, rap, electronic music or reggae” (11-13). The passages describing the modus operandi of the music industry are quite illuminating and shed light on the numerous and concise musicological analyses of songs which punctuate this quasi-comprehensive history of numerous types of music, ranging from early rock 'n' roll to techno, hip-hop and even doom metal. Pirenne's knowledge of the subjects he deals with is nothing short of impressive. Popular music fans, who will enjoy the accessible style of the author, will at – very rare – times question Pirenne's assertions¹, but *Une histoire musicale du rock* will prove an invaluable reference book to music lovers and researchers alike. However, both types of readers will lament an editorial work which is not always on a par with the quality and the scope of the author's research. The index is limited to names of musicians and song titles, but entries like 'blue notes,' 'power chords' or – to choose an admittedly less common phrase – 'skank beats'² would have made such an ambitious and expansive work much easier to use.³
- 3 In *De la culture rock* (i.e. *Of Rock Culture*) Claude Chastagner focuses less on the music itself than on the social, political and cultural significance of rock, and more particularly its subversive content. His is a cross-disciplinary methodology in which he draws conceptual tools chosen from various fields – sociology of culture, philosophy,

aesthetics and cultural history – to find a third way between the blind optimism of cultural studies and postmodernist theory’s fatalistic premises and assumptions. Chastagner’s thematic approach is particularly enlightening not only in our understanding of rock music and musicians, but also certain crucial aspects of western culture as a whole, with keywords such as institutionalisation, cultural hierarchy and creative industries serving as points of reference. The pervasiveness of rock enables him to depart from academics’ tendency to shy away from expressing and substantiating actual opinions about aspects which would lead them to step outside their research domain. Some of his conclusions – for example the parallel he draws between rock’s loss of rebel potential and Christianity’s loss of relevance in the 21st century – are arguable, of course, but all are extremely stimulating and written in a clear and concise style. Chastagner’s knowledge of rock and his command of the concepts he uses are equal to the task he sets himself. Few essays have managed to take the study of that subject to such levels of competence and critical distance. Once again though, an index would have been a welcome addition.

NOTES

1. For instance, in “Rock Music” on the Pixies’ *Bossanova* album, Black Francis does not rumble pseudo-lyrics that make no sense (468), but pronounces actual words: “Your mouth’s a mile away/I’m already gone/Hey you know me/Encantuse ». The example of Yes’ “Owner of a Lonely Heart” to illustrate the ubiquity of the C major, F major and G major chord sequence is not totally convincing either (66).
 2. ‘Blue note’ is the name given to the seventh, and, to a lesser extent, third degrees of a scale when they are flattened by a semitone or less, giving jazz, blues and rock music an unmistakably ‘bluesy’ feel. Rock guitar players very often use ‘power chords’ which consist of only the tonic and the fifth; the third is omitted, which makes it possible to play a power chord in both major and minor keys. A ‘skank beat’ is a snare on the downbeat and kick on the upbeat drum pattern, very often used in thrash metal, giving the illusion of a doubling of the tempo.
 3. A complementary online index could be relatively easy to implement, Cf. Frederic Martel, *Mainstream* (Paris : Flammarion, 2010), 6, 455.
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