“Of books on American popular music there seems to be no end,” wrote David Ewen, the author of many by his seventieth year, as he delivered his nimble-toed, eight-hundred-page *All the Years of American Popular Music*, promising an “entire world . . . in all its varied facets within a single volume” (Ewen, 1977, p. vii). In “attempting what no book so far has attempted,” Ewen sketches musical milieus, songwriters, and singers from the congregations of colonial New England to the soul of Aretha Franklin and James Brown. Most comfortable chronicling Tin Pan Alley, musical theater, and Hollywood soundtracks, Ewen dutifully follows the left political culture of the 1930s into the 1950s Folk Revival. An open ear to oncoming sounds and a curiosity about commodity forms set him grappling with LPs, 45s, radio DJs, television dance parties, and the rock and roll juggernaut with which teen culture supplanted the centrality of show tunes, swing bands, and croony ballads. It’s all requisite and too much, with still so much unexamined. Bo Diddley’s 1959 warning that “you can’t judge a book by looking at the cover” goes unsung in the now out-of-print *All the Years of American Popular Music*.

Meanwhile, crusty Carl Sandburg’s help-yourself collection of tunes and lyrics, *The American Songbag* (first published in 1927), still thrives, as do similar compilations by various Lomaxes and Seegers, all manner of hymnals and gospel softbacks, keyboard fake books, Sousa march scores, as well as Dixieland and ragtime how-to’s. Old musics for new covers. Seedbeds of song waiting to sprout wings and fly.

“If there is a single feature which both characterizes and defines American music,” concludes David Nicholls (1998, p. xiii), editor of *The Cambridge History of American Music*, “it is diversity.” Susan McClary, a crossover musicologist tracing the currents of European classical music while coming to terms with American popular repertories, agrees, arguing for tributaries and channels, but “no single main stream” (2000, p. 32). American music has found many rivers to cross, skate away on, dive into, roll on, or be washed or drowned in. The murmurings of these streams entrance children, punch their way out of juke boxes, mingle with the glow of dashboard lights, transport sinners, conjure melancholy and memory, get squeezed into elevators, and are downloaded by college students until the bandwidth chokes and the campus servers crash again.

The author would like to thank Cynthia Blakeley, Tim Dowd, Walt Reed, and Nick Spitzer for their readings and helpful suggestions.
All of these musical flows and popular traffickings have chroniclers and critics. “There are probably already more anthologies devoted to jazz than to any other twentieth-century musical genre,” prefaces Robert Walser in his excellent jazz history reader, *Keeping Time* (1999, p. ix). Bookshelves sag with the weight of the blues, with rock paeans, with lives and times of country and western stars, with biographical regards to Broadway, and encyclopedias of pop. Late twentieth-century scenes such as punk, rap, and metal quickly attracted journalists and doctoral students. Hipper-than-thou critics, along with determined producers of specialized albums and CDs, harvest reviews and liner notes into published collections. Writing or listening, who can keep afloat, sort the hype, check out the venues and CD bins, count the money, assess the talent on myriad labels and formats bundled together and hustled mainly by a handful of global entertainment corporations? Any pretense of commanding the liquid landscape of American popular music perches on an eroding watchtower while dissidents laugh and spray graffiti in broad daylight before clearing away a site for, say, the Lounge Music Hall of Fame.

**Unchained Melodies**

In the years immediately following World War II, as the decline of big band swing gave way to finger-snapping pop vocalists doing their renditions of melodic “standards” and novelty songs from the handful of major record companies, a domestic climate settled in that complemented the Truman foreign policy of containment. “The values of the white middle class,” argues Elaine Tyler May (1988, p. 13), “shaped the dominant political and economic institutions that affected all Americans. Those who did not conform to them were likely to be marginalized, stigmatized, and disadvantaged as a result.” Mainly from the young and the marginal, in late-night dance clubs and juke joints, on upstart labels and regional radio stations ushering in the golden age of the disk jockey, came the speeding, noisy musics which rattled the wheels off the vehicles of domesticated, sentimental tunes and shook up America’s sexual, racial, and class conventions.

“As was the case with television and film,” notes George Lipsitz (1994, p. 304), attuned to the American cultural rainbow and the working-class origins of rock and roll, “industrial modes of production, commodity form, monopoly control, private censorship, and state regulation all narrowed the range of what could be done within popular music.” Yet, he adds, “for all of its shortcomings, commercial popular music in the postwar period emerged as one site where the blasted hopes and utopian aspirations of working-class life found expression.” Russell and David Sanjek’s indispensable *Pennies From Heaven* (1996), which tracks the business of popular music throughout the twentieth century, notes the flowering of hundreds of small record companies by the mid-1950s (see also Gillett, 1970).

Reading the postwar alternatives can begin with the move from swing to bebop as expressive of shifting racial and professional possibilities for musicians in the city, across the generations, and on the road between gigs. It has taken time, however, to assemble the complexities. First came books placing the music and its players in history and on a lasting map. These extend from Rudi Blesh’s retrospective *Shining Trumpets* (1946), Leonard Feather’s *Inside Be-Bop* (1949) and *The Encyclopedia of Jazz* (1955), to Nat Hentoff’s *The Jazz Life* (1961), Martin Williams’s *The Jazz
Tradition (1970), and many, many others. While blowing jazz’s horn, US writer-aficionados frequently neglected discussion of the cash nexus. “One of the most striking aspects of the writing on jazz,” observes Scott DeVeaux, “is a reluctance to relate the history of the music to the messy and occasionally sordid economic circumstances of its production.”

Many of the most prolific proselytizers for jazz – Leonard Feather, Martin Williams, Dan Morgenstern, Stanley Dance, John Hammond, Gene Lees, Gunther Schuller – have been intimately familiar with the business side of music. . . . These experiences, however, seem to have made them more determined than ever to present jazz as something other than a form of entertainment shaped by mass consumer preferences. (DeVeaux, 1997, pp. 12, 13)

Characteristic of the best new writing about popular music, DeVeaux’s The Birth of Bebop is a dust-settled revisiting that wrestles the legendary while gauging the social, personal, economic, and musical pressures present at a form’s creation.

A suggestive list of recent jazz books reveals the formats through which American writers continue to deepen the scrutiny of key practices and performers. Paul F. Berliner’s Thinking in Jazz (1994) combines oral history, music theory, and cultural interpretation to delve into learning, transmission, and making it up as you go. Veteran critic Gary Giddens’s Visions of Jazz (1998) moves among over eighty major American performers exploring the distinct, yet intertwined, stylistics of each. Mark Tucker (1993) anthologizes the sole subject of Duke Ellington. From the Institute for Research in African American Studies at Columbia University comes Robert G. O’Meally’s The Jazz Cadence of American Culture (1998), an essential collection of some three dozen wide-ranging essays featuring writers such as Zora Neale Hurston, Olly Wilson, Albert Murray, and Hazel Carby. Narrating from style to style, Ted Gioia’s The History of Jazz (1997) offers a synthesis of the music that, as Louis Armstrong put it, is never played the same way once. Preston Love’s A Thousand Honey Creeks Later (1997) invites readers into the life and times of a working, thoughtful instrumentalist who played the full range of African American musics.

In the territory between jazz and pop, many wonderful singers – a partial list includes Ella Fitzgerald, Peggy Lee, Nat “King” Cole, Sarah Vaughan, Bing Crosby, Frank Sinatra, Barbra Streisand, and Tony Bennett – are the subjects of biographies and autobiographies, but are missing the kind of historicized grouping and cultural analysis such as Angela Y. Davis (1998) has given Billie Holiday in her book about classic blues women, or Richard Peterson (1997) has given to country music stars. Margo Jefferson’s brief essay on Sinatra (1998), for example, has more smart things to offer than a whole shelf of filiopietisms. Having said that, however, readers will enjoy Henry Pleasants’s The Great American Popular Singers (1974) as an instance of an appreciative, unfluffing narrative. Charles L. Granata’s Sessions with Sinatra (1999), a chronological close study of representative studio sessions, combines interviews with Sinatra collaborators (musicians, engineers, producers, executives) and unedited studio discs and tapes to develop a (still overly reverent) musical biography alongside a fifty-year history of recording technology and music industry trends.

The situation is similar when it comes to the theatrical musical, despite Broadway’s presence at the crossroads of American entertainment, commerce, song
and dance, and dress-up fantasy. Readers might begin with Joseph P. Swain’s *The Broadway Musical* (1990), then venture on to Geoffrey and Fred Block’s *Enchanted Evenings* (1997), and veteran writer Gerald Martin Bordman’s *American Musical Theatre* (2001). D. A. Miller’s meditation on homosexuality and Broadway, *A Place for Us* (2000) opens new possibilities for engagement with the musical. Two aptly titled works, Roy Pendergast’s *Film Music: A Neglected Art* (1992) and Laurence E. MacDonald’s *The Invisible Art of Film Music* (1998), present another major popular form that has yet to draw sufficient historical-critical analysis.

Remarkable in his ability to listen with equivalent urgency, concern, and excitement to Broadway’s Sondheim, alongside John Cage, Philip Glass, Laurie Anderson, Ornette Coleman, Eddie Palmieri, Neil Young, and other selected worthies of “composition,” classically honed critic John Rockwell welcomes the prospects for an *All American Music* (1983) increasingly ecumenical, catholic, technologically sophisticated, and open to world influences.

**Blues People**

Books which take the blues as their main subject begin with Samuel Charters’s *The Country Blues* (1959) and Paul Oliver’s *Blues Fell This Morning* (1960). *Blues People* (1963) by Amiri Baraka [LeRoi Jones] remains one of the most provocative and important works in its seeking of the social meanings of the blues and jazz, and in connecting African American music with the African diaspora. Charles Keil’s *Urban Blues* (1966) is an impassioned, personalized effort at depicting roles of black masculinity through the figure and context of the bluesman. With the widening realization of the blues’ expressive nuances and emotional power, and its inflection upon twentieth-century popular music of all stripes, has come a continuous river of writing. Paul Oliver’s edited series of blues paperbacks for Stein and Day/Studio Vista in the early 1970s enabled a number of young American, British, and European students of the form (David Evans, Bill Ferris, Bruce Bastin, Tony Russell, Bengt Olsson, et al.) to publish research and fieldwork that extended from Mississippi to West Africa.

Outstanding ethnomusicological studies include Titon’s *Early Downhome Blues* (1977), Evans’s *Big Road Blues* (1982), and Alan Lomax’s *The Land Where the Blues Began* (1993). Richard Wright’s *Black Boy/American Hunger* (1945/1991) tells how it felt to have the hellhound on your trail. Lawrence Levine’s influential *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977) synthesized generations of work by song collectors, anthropologists, historians, and folklorists in showing how African Americans shaped the contours of West African culture in New World situations, creating such forms as the spiritual, blues, jazz, gospel, Bad Man ballads, toasts, and dozens. Robert Palmer’s *Deep Blues* (1981) pursues the origins of the Delta sound and the move up Highway 61 to Chicago and electrification. Nadine Cohodas’s *Spinning Blues into Gold* (2000) is a thorough accounting of the immigrant Polish Jewish Chess Brothers and their legendary label.

From the restless moment in which young, white, British men of the late 1950s and early 1960s transformed the blues and the bluesman into terms expressive of their own needs for satisfaction, McClary has pointed to “an ideology of
noncommercial authenticity” as a major constituent of the rebellious self-images of performers such as John Mayhall, Eric Clapton, and Mick Jagger. Reminiscent of DeVeaux’s commentary on writers about jazz, she suggests that this ideology “continues to inform many of the rock critics who emerged . . . as the historians, theorists, and arbiters of popular taste” (McClary, 2000, p. 60).

As a revision of writers who have had difficulty hearing or knowing what to do with the anomalous but unforgettable women consigned to the “classic blues,” feminist scholars have placed singers such as Gertrude “Ma” Rainey, Bessie Smith, Ida Cox, and Billie Holiday in a complex racial entertainment milieu. Sustained through a commercial nexus of vaudeville, jazz, Tin Pan Alley, club dates, and recordings, these blues women sought strategies of survival and creativity, which included the voicing of their own expressions of sexuality. Central to this perspective are Carby (1998 [1986]), Daphne Duval Harrison’s Black Pearls (1988), and Davis’s Blues Legacies and Black Feminism (1998).

American Routes

Decades-long efforts by scholars and fieldworkers, small-label record producers, specialized journals, and cultural institutes have led to a deepening knowledge of American roots musics such as Cajun and zydeco, jazz, Appalachian vocal and instrumental traditions, conjunto and orquesta, gospel, and occupational and protest song. Serge Denisoff’s Great Day Coming (1971), an examination of the use of folk music by the political left, and Archie Green’s Only a Miner: Studies in Recorded Coal-Mining Songs (1972) were the first two of many books in the ongoing Music in American Life series (guided by the general editorship of Judith McCulloh) from the University of Illinois Press. This consistently thoughtful and well-researched series has ranged across genres such as doowop, Piedmont blues, railroad song, Texas swing, and sixties rock.

Religious music, which may be the most frequently heard and widely performed of American popular musics, persists and permutes in urban, suburban, and grass-roots places, yet there are precious few books devoted to the subject. Major singular examples of Thomas Dorsey (1992). Recent work on American sacred music tends toward close, particular studies such as those by Jeff Todd Titon (1988) and Beverly Bush Patterson (1995) in Southern Appalachia, Kip Lornell (1988) and Alan Young (1997) in Memphis and environs, Ray Allen (1991) in New York City, and Jacqueline DjeDje and Eddie Meadows in California (1998). As part of their general concern with music and social change, Brian Ward (1998) and Craig Werner (1999) take up the influence of African American religious song upon the freedom struggle. An exemplary ethnography of the black gospel service as form and experience is Glenn Hinson’s Fire in My Bones (2000).

Through an inquiry into invented traditions such as the fiddle convention and the folk school, and introduced instruments such as the dulcimer, David Whisnant’s All


The first books to consider how the white, working-class, honky tonk milieu (as expressed in steel guitar-based amplified music and cheating songs) met the pressures and temptations, pushes and pulls of farm to city migration, the changing ways of work, and new sexual situations include Robert Shelton and Burt Goldblatt’s The Country Music Story (1966), and Bill Malone’s landmark Country Music U.S.A. (1968). Across many years, Charles K. Wolfe has proved himself country music’s most authoritative grassroots-based chronicler. On the other hand, Cecelia Tichi (1994) leaps geographies, eras, and literary and artistic canons in connecting a personal vision of “country” with transcendent “American” themes. More helpful is her anthology, Reading Country Music (1998). Cantwell (1984) and Neil Rosenberg (1985) delve into the roots and leaves of bluegrass. Loretta Lynn’s Coal Miner’s Daughter (1976) tells candidly of the life and career of a major singer-songwriter whose experiences span country’s history. Gerald Haslam’s Workin’ Man Blues (1999) considers country music in California, while Nicholas Dawidoff’s In the Country of Country (1997) is an evocative geocultural foray.

Richard Peterson’s indispensable Creating Country Music: Fabricating Authenticity (1997) follows the music’s institutionalization from its hillbilly Opry era through several stages of reinvention. The Encyclopedia of Country Music (1998), edited by Paul Kingsbury, is the genre’s most helpful reference book. More often than not, writing about country fails to address the music’s chronic reactionary politics, its sexism, jingoism, and racism. Glimpses of the possible are raised in Mary Bufwack and Robert Oermann’s compendium on women in country music, Finding Her Voice (1993). Dorothy Allison’s novel, Bastard Out of Carolina (1992), powerfully conveys how country and gospel were felt and put to use in fantasy and everyday life at one site of their reception during the 1950s.
Highways Revisited

As for all those rock and rollers stirring out of the mid-1950s and early 1960s, books since Charlie Gillett’s *The Sound of the City* (1970) have visited and revisited the primal scenes out of which rhythm and blues, rockabilly, and gospel propelled the emergence of a music that threatened to transform everything in its path. Greil Marcus, whose unequivocal commentaries and analysis began in the 1960s and continue into the post-punk, dead Elvis years, remains most widely known for *Mystery Train* (1976), a regularly revised milestone-millstone of rock and roll origins that spins insight and casts hard-to-break spells. Peter Guralnick’s years of intrepid labor in, around, and out of the cradle of Memphis make for required reading in *Sweet Soul Music: Rhythm and Blues and the Southern Dream of Freedom* (1986); *Last Train to Memphis: The Rise of Elvis Presley* (1994); and *Careless Love: The Unmaking of Elvis Presley* (1999).


Stepping back at the end of the 1990s to survey aspects of African American music in the post-World War II history, Ward (1998), Werner (1999), and Suzanne E. Smith (1999) examine how shifts in the popularity of musical forms and the development of markets relate to struggles for desegregation, empowerment, and social justice. “The most popular black musical styles and artists of the past forty years,” observes Ward, “have achieved their popularity precisely because they have dramatized and expressed, but also helped to shape and define, a succession of black consciousnesses” (1998, p. 15).

Ward reconstructs emblematic scenes of the 1950s and 1960s that reveal the disparity between white responses to, and white understanding of, black music. He notes that black music was “enthusiastically admired when it fulfilled romanticized white expectations about black grace and ease with leisure, pleasure, sex, and style. “But this,” Ward insists, “required no real consideration of, or empathy with, the frequently unromantic circumstances from whence those qualities in black culture emerged” (p. 360). Through her study of Motown, Smith reveals how the music of black Detroit engaged the issues of African Americans in that center of industrial
worker migration. Beyond Motown’s relationship to the cultural politics of Detroit, her work is a demonstration that “place matters – that productive social, cultural, economic, and political changes emerge from distinctive communities” (1999, p. 259). Ranging more broadly in space and time than Smith, Mark Anthony Neal’s *What the Music Said* (1999) is a strongly argued, passionately felt articulation of music and the politics of resistance proceeding on the assumption that, from bebop to hip hop, “the black popular music tradition has served as a primary vehicle for communally derived critiques of the African-American experience” (p. xi).

Rock and roll writing seldom presses social justice to the fore as urgently as the tradition linking Jones [Baraka], Keil, Werner, Ward, Smith, Rose, and Neal. One recent attempt is Michael Bertrand’s *Race, Rock, and Elvis* (2000). But with rock, there is always scads of money to track. Steve Chapple and Garofalo (1977) bring venerable muckraking tools to bear, while, despite its too-contrived categories, Philip Ennis’s *The Seventh Stream* (1992) keeps the economic as well as stylistic constituents of rock in mind. Fred Goodman lays out the schemes and ambitions of managers and promoters in *The Mansion on the Hill* (1997). John Jackson’s *American Bandstand* (1997) meticulously trails Dick Clark’s pocket-lining as well as his central role in mediating rock and roll to an emerging mass television audience. Tired of simplistic arguments over whether “production determines consumption or whether audiences can subvert the power of corporate controlled production,” Keith Negus moves “to consider some of the ways that popular music is mediated by a series of technological, cultural, historical, geographical and political factors” (1996, p. 65).

Important as deep background for the artistic resources and survival practices needed to understand rap are Roger D. Abrahams’s study of the toasts and dozens in Philadelphia, *Deep Down in the Jungle* (1964, 1970), and Henry Louis Gates’s theorizing of the speakerly text in *The Signifying Monkey* (1988). Alan Light’s *The Vibe History of Hip Hop* (1999) offers an introduction to a subcultural style gone very large. Nelson George’s *Hip Hop America* (1998) is helpful, despite George’s slighting women performers and gender politics. Straight outta the Music/Culture Series of Wesleyan University Press comes Tricia Rose’s exemplary *Black Noise* (1994), a study of how rap’s reportage emerged to represent the South Bronx in the 1970s. Rose tackles many difficult things head on, including the sexual politics, critiquing limitations in white feminism while arguing that “black women rappers have effectively changed the interpretive framework for the work of male rappers” (p. 182).

A major assemblage of women’s music criticism is *Rock She Wrote* (1995), edited by Evelyn McDonnell and Ann Powers. Here, gathered in one place, but not of one mind, are Ellen Willis from the 1960s, Patti Smith from the 1970s, Thulani Davis from the 1980s, bell hooks from the 1990s, and many others forgotten or separated in the library stacks. Also not to be missed is McClary’s take on Madonna the musician in *Feminine Endings* (1991). The most significant and sustained exploration of the interplay between feminist issues and musical cultures is Shelia Whiteley’s *Women and Popular Music* (2000).

Building upon lessons learned from British cultural studies, an exciting new approach to popular music takes the interplay of instrumentation, creative longing, capitalist marketing, and the changing values ascribed to sonority as its subject. In *Any Sound You Can Imagine*, Paul Théberge pursues the hybridity of digital
music-making and sound reproduction since the early 1980s as a way of studying not only the effects of high tech on popular music, but of examining the tension “between the desire to create, communicate, and consume” in which musicians simultaneously define themselves and in which they find themselves caught (1997, p. 255). Extending Théberge, but fundamentally inspired by the French musicologist Jacques Attali (1985), Steve Waksman’s *Instruments of Desire* combines a history of the electric guitar with a study of modes of musical practice that emphasizes musicians’ engagement with particular ways of shaping sound (1999, p. 8). As Waksman shows in a series of case studies, noisy new instruments and reorganizations of musical practice by no means guarantee “progressive or liberatory” reconceptualizations of “social and political differences through music” (p. 12).

**Dangerous Crossroads**

By the mid-1980s, writes David Sanjek, “while record companies and retailers exerted a stranglehold on the music business, consumers began to purchase an increasingly diverse body of music.” Much as rhythm and blues, and rock and roll, had done beginning in the mid-1940s, emerging genres such as punk, new wave, women’s music, rap, and heavy metal appeared first on small independent labels which the A&R staffs of the majors treated “as farm teams, waiting to see which of their artists found a constituency and then offering them lucrative contracts” (Sanjek and Sanjek, 1996, p. 657).

Echoing Sanjek, but from deep within the rhetorical thicket thrown up in *Dancing In Spite of Myself* (1997), Lawrence Grossberg announces that the “rock formation” which “emerged in the 1950s to become the dominant cultural formation of youth (if not of the United States) from the 1960s until the mid-1980s” had, by the end of the 1980s, been replaced by a new dominant formation of “eclecticism and hybridity,” “a network of scenes,” that, for better and worse, “willingly and simultaneously embraces the global megastar and the local rebel” (p. 21). Grossberg ponders how rock has tangled with alienation, powerlessness, and boredom to provide “strategies of survival and pleasure for its fans.” Selectively combining approaches of two British scholars, he extends a Simon Frith functionalism “on the ways rock and roll produces the material context within which its fans find themselves” into a concern with fans’ “affective investments.”

Invoking and revising Dick Hebdige, Grossberg treats “rock and roll as a set of practices, but practices of strategic empowerment rather than of signification” (pp. 30–2). Claiming that rock only rarely challenged the major dimensions of American ideology, he argues that, at best, it “sought to change the possibilities – the rhythms – within everyday life itself,” projecting “a world in which every moment could be lived as Saturday night” (pp. 99, 115). Here, Grossberg’s assessment recalls Susan Douglas’s revelatory rereading of the “girl groups” of the late 1950s and early 1960s. “The main purpose of pop music,” she writes, “is to make us feel a kind of euphoria that convinces us that we can transcend the shackles of conventional life” (1994, p. 98). Whether or not euphoria best locates Jimi Hendrix’s imagined footsoldier humping it through Vietnamese rice paddies to the tune of “Machine Gun,” or Kurt Cobain nailing the lid on his “Heartshaped Box,” suggests that just as there is no mainstream, perhaps there is no main purpose.
McClary presses further, proposing a Raymond Williams-like assignment: “We need to be able to grasp present-day musical culture in all its complexity. And that means being prepared to recognize the structures of feeling underlying many different repertories, as well as their processes of dynamic change and their strategic fusions.” Musicians, whatever their various situations, are “concerned with performing some active negotiation with the cultural past for the sake of the here and now” (McClary, 2000, p. 168).

How it is possible to grasp, for a shimmering moment, these contingent, strategic fusions is on the order of learning more from a three-minute record than you ever learned in school. Try the koans of quick-take artist par excellence Robert Christgau (1990, 1998, 2000) and a pith-dense text like his Grown Up All Wrong. Or stretch with the anti-essentialist potential of popular music “as a site for experimentation with cultural and social roles not yet possible in politics,” as proposed and examined by Lipsitz in Dangerous Crossroads (1997, p. 17).

Certainly the slackening riptide of rock and the rising waters of postmodernity have loosed a flood of musical forms, reappreciations, and cross-influences including, in the United States, assertions and celebrations of ethnicity in the klezmer and polka revivals (Henry Sapoznik, 1999; Victor Greene, 1992), and the resurgence of regional musics from south Louisiana (Nicholas Spitzer, 1985; Jason Berry, Jonathan Foose, and Tad Jones, 1986; Barry Ancelet, Jay Edwards, and Glen Pitre, 1991) to Hawaii (George Kanakele, 1979). College radio and standing-room venues featuring upstart bands with passionate devotees have spawned musical movements from Athens to Austin to Seattle. Places continue to turn up all over, and more compelling books than can be mentioned here to accompany them. A few suggestive examples would include the richness and diversity in African American music described in the anthology California Soul (1998), edited by DjeDje and Meadows; various Los Angeles scenes (Barney Hoskyns, 1996); Nathan Pearson’s Goin’ to Kansas City (1987); and Rick Koster’s Texas Music (1998). There is also the ecstatic realm of the dance floor with its techno, rave, and electronica presided over by DJs in many materializations (Simon Reynolds, 1998; Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton, 2000). And, unearthed for those with ears to see, is the humdrum, everyday world’s dialectic with “the sheer wonderland of the cosmo drama” via John Szwed’s illumination of Sun Ra (1997, p. 288).

As the millennium turns, the sounds of the wider world increasingly come through on US airways, in the streets, and across the pipes of the Worldwide Web. “It would be difficult,” writes Philip V. Bohlman, “to take a taxi in any large American city without experiencing an immigrant music on the radio, Pakistani or Nigerian music in Chicago, or Haitian or Ukrainian in Baltimore” (1998, p. 280). But differences that make any difference often get lost in hearing, dancing around, appropriating, or reprocessing the life experiences, historical cultures, and social pressures carried through cultural sounds and rhythms. By placing the power of US music within a critique of globalization, George Lipsitz in Dangerous Crossroads scrutinizes practices such as Paul Simon’s and David Byrne’s collaborations with South African and South American musicians. North American pop stars frequently define delight in difference as a process organized around exotic images from overseas, with no corollary inspection of their own identities. Their escapes into postmodern
multi-culturalism, however well-motivated, hide the construction of “whiteness” in America – its privileges, evasions, and contradictions. (1997, p. 63)

Instead of searching for somewhere to run to, somewhere to hide, Lipsitz urges us to consider “how our identities have been constructed and at whose expense” and “how we can pay back the debts we incur as examples from others show us the way out of the little tyrannies of our own parochial and prejudiced backgrounds” (p. 64).

Intent on mixing a new bohemia from the juices of indie rock, hip hop culture, and gay rights activism, music critic Ann Powers’s coming-of-age tale, Weird Like Us (2000), locates the cultural spaces out of which came the wrenching, chilling, electrifying, introspective, raving music and alternative social possibilities in the 1980s and 1990s. “The average person may not see herself in the pierced and tattooed body and black leather pants of the stereotypical freak,” Powers writes, “but she may be surprised to discover that this wild creature’s reinventions of kinship, the work ethic, consumerism, and even desire . . . intersect with her own quandaries and solutions” (p. 37). Add Lipsitz’s poetics of place, multiply Powers’s numbers, and that sounds about right. For now.

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FURTHER READING