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Review of David Diallo "Collective Participation and Audience Engagement in Rap Music"

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David Diallo, *Collective Participation and Audience Engagement in Rap Music*, Palgrave Pivot, 2019, 147 pages

Reviewed by John Mullen

This volume deals with aspects of real and virtual mobilization of audiences in rap music. It is published by Palgrave Pivot, who specialize in putting out shorter academic books, and is part of their *Pop Music, Culture and Identity* series, a series well worth looking at, which has so far produced around 25 books. The series covers geographical areas, thematic explorations and theoretical topics in popular music. David Diallo is Senior Lecturer at Bordeaux University and has already published a history of Black people in the USA, in French, and numerous papers on rap, including a social history of rap music in Los Angeles, and a paper on the links between rap's street culture and the music industry.

It is an aspect of rap's move from amateur party music into the music industry which is at the heart of this new book, which constitutes a welcome contribution on the question of audience engagement, a theme which has perhaps not seen as much coverage as it might in popular music studies.¹ Such engagement is, in Diallo's view, particularly central to rap music (as a music viscerally attached to the present lived moment) and has been since its beginnings. The author is interested in what happened when rap, to the initial surprise of its participants, moved from being live party music over to records which might sell a million. What happened to the centrality of engagement with the (originally dancing) audience?

After a chatty introduction, the book begins by looking at rap before 1978-9, an innovative and changing activity confined to parties and of which only a tiny number of recordings exist. While warning about the pitfalls of oral history, the author insists that careful cross-checking can allow a reliable account to be put together. In this period, MCs explored

¹ But see Auslander, P. 1999. *Liveness: Performance in a Mediatized Culture*. New York: Routledge; Bennett A. (2012) "Let Me Know You're Out There!" Male Rock Vocal and Audience Participation. In: Harrison S., Welch G., Adler A. (eds) *Perspectives on Males and Singing. Landscapes: the Arts, Aesthetics, and Education*, vol 10. Springer, Dordrecht

ways of stimulating the audience (“This wasn’t school”, insisted one (p33), “it was time to shake your ass”). The call-and-response activity is analysed as a rhetorical device and mobilization tactic, and its history traced. Diallo explains the danger of essentializing it as a device specific to “Black music”, and suggests that a strong desire to find African roots in Black US cultural activities has sometimes led to oversimplified explanations. He quotes scholar Constant-Martin to the effect that African culture was never a homogeneous entity. Call and response, in particular, existed in a wide variety of cultures around the world. He goes on to describe the tactics early MCers developed to enhance audience engagement.

Chapter 4 looks at the early records, (1974-78), which maintained, it is demonstrated, an emphasis on a “live” atmosphere despite the distance between performer and listener. The varied tactics of “maintaining a live feel” are catalogued and explained (p56). The surprise of local fans and practitioners when they found that hip hop could be sold on record, and the month by month changes at this turning point are recounted. We are treated to a fascinating comparison with the professionalization of country music in the South of the United States.

The following chapter shows, through a study of a large corpus of songs from 1978-2010, that this aspect did not subsequently change very much, despite other transformations which included the rise of “intricate storytelling, complex wordplay and socio-political consciousness” (p6).

Subsequent chapters deal with competitiveness, seemingly almost universal in rap, and with the importance of intertextuality, as rappers battle to express theatrical ego (“crafting playful boasts” p39) and radiate control, whether live or on record. Chapter 7 looks at how collective engagement is sustained during live performance, and includes a fascinating analysis of hand gestures used by rappers on stage.

Chapter 8 deals with the collision of the traditions of the rap concert, (which involve emotional audience singalong), in a period when rap fans may be of any ethnicity, and the tradition which has grown up in recent decades for White people to show a minimum of respect for Black experiences of racism by never pronouncing the N word. Ways of

managing this situation which Diallo explores include the placing of information signs at concerts exhorting White fans not to use the word. “If you are not Black” reads one such sign “A and O insists you omit this word from your vocabulary – both at our shows and in general”. Several rappers prefer to explain or to imply to their fans that the concert is a specific experience where outside rules on who should pronounce this word may be relaxed. The chapter gives some examples where a lack of consensus on the rules has led to tension during concerts, particularly when fans are invited on stage individually to sing along, and presents the views of some Black people who have been at concerts and have felt uneasy, to say the least, at hearing White fans use the word.

The final chapter is an interview with rapper Master Gee on the theme of audience engagement, the content of which is sometimes a little underwhelming, but does confirm the conclusions of the rest of the work (“Rap is totally more interactive [than other genres], that’s the origin of it”).

The entire book is precisely written and the concise explanations are easy to follow for readers who are not expert in the genealogy of rap. The theses are convincing and helpful, backed up by plenty of quantitative and qualitative evidence, and a substantial bibliography is provided for each chapter. An inside view of the rapper’s world is common, though the arguments are very thoroughly based within the frameworks of popular music and cultural studies theory, and sociological theory (Tagg, Gracyk, Bourdieu, Benjamin, Hall, Middleton, Negus, Auslander, Frith, Moore, Kristeva, Lacasse, to name some of them). The author’s priority is to deconstruct aspects of the “aesthetic richness offered by rap music” (p95). Relation and rapport between audiences and performers is still today not the most studied of subjects within popular music, so this publication is particularly welcome.

This is a collection of essays and some aspects of the format are rather annoying – abstracts and key words at the beginning of each chapter, with the first paragraph of the abstract often being the same as the first paragraph of the chapter, and some abstracts being only one sentence

long. But these are minor quibbles, for a book which brings a solid contribution to this area of study.

John Mullen est professeur de civilisation britannique à l'Université de Rouen-Normandie. Il a beaucoup publié sur l'histoire de la chanson populaire en anglais et en français, et est auteur de *Popular Song in Britain in the First World War* et éditeur de *Popular Song in the First World War -a International Perspective*. Ces deux ouvrages furent publiés chez Routledge, et le premier en français chez L'Harmattan.