

remember the American female nurses who served in Vietnam, whether through *China Beach* or the Vietnam Women's Memorial, as traditionally patriotic servants to the troops positions the Vietnam War not as a culmination of mass movements for social and cultural change but as the commencement of a backlash against threats to the status quo.

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**How the Beatles destroyed rock 'n' roll: an alternative history of American popular music**, by Elijah Wald, New York, Oxford University Press, 2009, 323 pp., US\$24.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-19-534154-6

"Till There Was You" always seemed like an anomaly in the Beatles catalogue. A treacly ballad originally from the Broadway show *The Music Man*, the song appeared on the Fab Four's second LP alongside better known, career-defining songs such as "All My Loving" and "It Won't Be Long."<sup>1</sup> What were the Beatles doing with such sentimental pap? Was this the stuff of revolutionary mop-top rockers? Although Elijah Wald spills little ink on this particular song, his book *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll: An Alternative History of American Popular Music* offers ample analysis and context for making sense of this apparent incongruity, much as one of his previous books, a revisionist history of archetypal bluesman Robert Johnson, explained the outstanding beguiling incongruity in Johnson's recorded oeuvre, a lively and light-hearted ditty about tamales, called "They're Red Hot."<sup>2</sup> Seen through Wald's latest book, "Till There Was You" refracts numerous complex dynamics in which the commercial and cultural fortunes of the Beatles were embedded, including the tensions between youth and adult markets, 45-rpm and LP record formats, and continuity and change in musical tastes and styles. In this respect, "Till There Was You" was a gambit offering more conservative listeners some cultural continuity to counterbalance the shock of the new.

The importance of Wald's book, however, lies far beyond what it reveals about "Till There Was You" or even about the Beatles. Indeed, the attention-grabbing title *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll*, for all its counterintuitive appeal, gives scant indication of the book's ambitions and achievements. The Beatles do appear, especially at the beginning and the end, but bandleader Paul Whiteman, arguably the leading popularizer of jazz in the 1920s, commands a more central position. What connects the Beatles and Whiteman was the fabulous success that both achieved as popularizers of already existing (African American) musical styles and the cultural legitimacy their artistically ambitious projects earned for their respective genres – rock 'n' roll and jazz. If music critics and cultural historians have shown a greater appreciation for the Beatles' impact than for Whiteman's, Wald contends, this says more about the tastes and sensibilities of the critics and historians than about the social history of music in American life. The book's subtitle hews more closely to Wald's actual project, which is a revisionist interpretation of twentieth-century popular music in the United States, an attempt to understand the most widely listened to music,

regardless of aesthetic considerations. He argues that music criticism and cultural history have overemphasized discontinuities and policed musical boundaries at the expense of the lived experiences of musicians and fans, for whom ruptures between epochs and genres have much less meaning. For critics and historians – and music industry decision-makers – genres, categories, boundaries, and historical breaks represent indispensable analytical tools. For musicians and fans, not only do such abstractions not matter, they are frequently at odds with how people hear and think about music. Thus, Wald sets out to understand the development of popular music from the perspective of what the greatest number of people listened to in a given era, that is, the cultural mainstream – the poor, ignoble middle – which has historically been either despised or neglected.

For Wald, drawing primarily on music industry trade magazines and a fairly wide range of secondary sources, “music” encompasses both recordings and live performance. Although recordings become increasingly important as his story develops, the book is distinguished by Wald’s emphasis on music as a spatial and social event, mutually constituted by audiences (usually dancers) and performers. What emerges is a dialectical retelling of the history of American popular music, showing it as the outcome of the complex and ever changing relationship between consumers and producers. Neither group is understood monolithically, however. By turns, consumers include dancers, record buyers, radio listeners, and concert spectators; producers include record industry executives, radio station programmers, established composers, singers, and instrumentalists, as well as the legions of workaday professional musicians employed by dance orchestras. Wald, himself a one-time itinerant professional musician (and now independent scholar), writes with nuance about the work of working musicians, and in some respects, they are the key to his history. Dancing to live music was one of the mainstays of popular music culture, and the livelihood of the musicians who supplied that music depended on appealing to as many people as possible, in real time, balancing tastes for both the old and the new. In effect, because most people attended dances to dance, not to listen to the band – a point Wald calls “one of the great, universal truths, often forgotten or underemphasized by music critics and historians” (p. 63) – musicians tended to avoid sounds that were too innovative or foreign, which often drove dancers from the floor.

Wald’s larger argument overlays this idea onto the development of popular music in the US generally, with the most successful artists being those who could integrate the old into the new. “One reason that the music of Whiteman and the Beatles was so phenomenally popular,” he writes, “was that it blended styles that older listeners found abrasive and unmusical with familiar elements” (p. 11). Wald shows how, in each successive era, the new sounds built upon explicit connections to the old, or to put it in terms borrowed from Raymond Williams, how the dominant and emergent strains of musical culture were continually informed by and in dialogue with the residual strains. Although Wald develops this argument assiduously across 17 chronological chapters, it is still remarkable to read in the last chapter (on the Beatles) that Paul McCartney’s father played Whiteman’s music on the family’s piano, and that George Martin, the Beatles’ producer and arranger, professed an admiration for Whiteman and Ferde Grofé, Whiteman’s pianist and arranger, and saw his work with the Beatles as extending that tradition.

Alongside the critique of discontinuity and rupture is a second theme: historicizing the reification of musical genres and categories, divisions that served the

music industry and critics but did not reflect the proximity and interpenetration of musical styles and impulses in musicians' and fans' own lives. As much as critics and historians have emphasized the distance between the great musical artists of jazz and rock, on the one hand, and their more undistinguished "pop" contemporaries, on the other, Wald shows how close the two remained and how arbitrary (and artificial) the line was that divided them. Duke Ellington, for example, openly acknowledged the influence of Paul Whiteman, and Louis Armstrong regularly named Guy Lombardo's Royal Canadians as his favorite orchestra. Historically, critics, scholars, and industry personnel (as well as some fans) have invested terms such as "jazz" and "rock" with such freighted meaning that they can appear less contingent and more natural than they really are. Regarding the division between genres, Wald notes, "There is no overriding musicological reason why Scott Joplin and Fats Waller should be placed in different categories—ragtime and jazz—while Waller and Chick Corea are both considered jazz musicians" (p. 28). Perhaps nowhere does Wald's attack on generic divisions come through as effectively as when he breaks down the dichotomy of pop and rock music in the 1950s, showing that Elvis's affinity and interconnections with Pat Boone and Perry Como may reveal as much as those with Carl Perkins and Jerry Lee Lewis. Many of the same young people who bought Elvis Presley records also bought discs by Boone and Como, both of whom also hosted popular television shows, and when "Heartbreak Hotel," Elvis's first number-one hit on the *Billboard* charts, fell after eight weeks from the top slot, its successor was "Hot Diggity," by Perry Como, whose style Elvis explicitly admired.

The significance of these generic divisions is set most sharply in relief against issues of race and economics. At every stage of development, white and black musicians borrowed and learned from each other and in many cases collaborated directly. Wald makes a salutary point when he stresses that transmission went in both directions, even if, as he also makes clear, the economic rewards and opportunities were not evenly distributed. By the late 1960s, however, the growing focus on records (as opposed to live dance music) and the rise of folk rock (under the sign of the Beatles and Bob Dylan) led to a segregation and segmentation of the pop music field, a division that is still visible today. The whitening of rock thus reversed decades of increasing exchange and collaboration, which had shaped "a series of genres—ragtime, jazz, swing, rock 'n' roll—that at their peaks could not be easily categorized by race" (p. 246). Ultimately, Wald's argument cannot bear the full weight of explaining why this situation developed – too many other factors have to be taken into account – but his examples of the decline of African American involvement in rock are subtle and revealing.

In general, history has a poor ear. Understanding what the past sounded like, including what sounds echoed in people's heads, makes for challenging work. Wald's book stands as an exemplary attempt to re-create the listening experiences of people in the past, to imagine not only the music that people listened to actively, but also the music in the background or the sounds in people's memories, and to weigh how these informed the way listeners heard new music when it was presented to them. In this, *How the Beatles Destroyed Rock 'n' Roll* demonstrates the value for historical thinking in trying to listen forward in time, without the judgments, associations, and knowledge through which we normally filter the music of the past. As in his previous books, Wald wears his scholarship lightly, but his ideas and insights are substantial; I look forward to seeing what he comes up with next.

**Notes**

1. In the UK, the Beatles' second LP was *With the Beatles* (1963); in the US it was *Meet the Beatles* (1964). "Till There Was You" appeared on both.
2. Wald, *Escaping the Delta*, 153–4.

**Bibliography**

Wald, Elijah. *Escaping the Delta: Robert Johnson and the Invention of the Blues*. New York: Amistad, 2004.

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