

Laurie Stras, ed. 2010. *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music*. Surrey, UK, and Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing.

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Laurie Stras's edited volume *She's So Fine: Reflections on Whiteness, Femininity, Adolescence and Class in 1960s Music* is a welcome addition to the recent scholarship on music by female musicians of the 1960s that attends to the complexity of the women and girls who performed and listened to this music in the United States and the United Kingdom. So unexplored is this area of inquiry from a musicological standpoint that, in her introduction, Stras appropriately envisions *She's So Fine* to be the "beginning of a re-evaluation—with emphasis on value—of the very premises of 1950s and 1960s pop" (23). By extension, Stras's ambitions for the book not only necessitate an interrogation of the merits of the popular music canon, but also call for a reconsideration of the standard criteria for assigning and naturalizing value wherever it calcifies.

The pop music of women musicians in the 1960s has, critically and in general popular thought, been denigrated for its polish and mass appeal. Celebrated volumes on rock history such as *The Rolling Stone Encyclopedia of Rock and Roll*, (2001) or Robert Palmer's *Rock and Roll: An Unruly History* (1995) have participated in the dismissal of girl groups by crediting their success to the complex labor force of producers and song-writers "behind" the musicians. Stras observes that "Pop and its attendant girl-space, with their alleged emphasis on conformity and concomitant lack of authenticity, have been noted as a phenomenon, but one that always seems to operate as a foil to prove rock's ultimate superior cultural worth" (22). The most troubling problem posed by these gendered constructions of '60s genres is not so much that popular music is consistently gendered "female"—for as Stras observes, pop music was indeed a space dominated by teenage girls who represented the target audience (21)—but that this feminization simultaneously becomes a marker of conformity, lack, or devaluation. Clearly, the diminished social status of adolescent girls in Western culture is one explanation for the motivations behind this discursive and political suppression of '60s girl pop and the heterogeneity of the girl singers in question. *She's So Fine*, therefore, is a valuable feminist work because it resonates as the unequivocal rejoinder to all of the pejorative connotations that justify the reduction and dismissal of the category of "girl" from androcentric histories of popular culture.

This collection is divided into three main sections that are organized into a loose chronological fashion, drawing from a broad range of disciplines that include cultural studies, historical musicology, performance studies, and media studies. It uses a wide array of primary source materials that include recordings, television broadcasts, interviews (both published and personal), biographies, autobiographies, images, journalism, rock criticism, and fan-created artifacts. Its methodological and theoretical approaches to 1960s girl pop are so diverse that each reader can map a different trajectory through their arguments, but always with the sense that the essays are in conversation with each other.

Stras charts a course that does not quite resemble a conventional recovery project, whose purpose might be to make extraordinary, otherwise forgotten music more available, mostly because accessibility and public exposure have never been a significant problem for the uniquely situated status of 1960s girl groups. As Stras mentions in her introduction, '60s girl pop presently exists in an abundance of forms within popular culture, entertainment, and media (7)—so much so that the “'60s girl singer” is both a standard, camp figure. The academic and critical devaluation of girl singers, then, has little to do with our failure to acknowledge '60s girl pop and everything to do with a deliberate disempowerment of the teenage girls involved with its creation and reception.

Part of this is related to what Stras calls the “behind-every-great-man mentality,” in which “academic work that has dealt anything more than passing critical attention to the '60s girl singers and groups are those articles that point out their influence on more prestigious male artists or repertoires” (7). Scholars of girl pop are therefore caught in a double bind whereby their arguments for the inclusion of '60s girl singers within the popular music canon only confirms its legitimacy. This edited volume does a careful job negotiating the conditions of this bind through destabilizing the foundational values of male-centered histories, through passing, as it were, “from the known to the unknown” (7).

At an even less perceptible level, there is another problem that confronts those who attempt to think seriously about these girl singers when the latter “simultaneously can be celebrated and their power denied” (6). As much as there is an enduring fascination with '60s girl pop, scholars concerned with these girls as “icons of Otherness” run the risk of rearticulating marked and unmarked categories that ultimately defuse the political and creative agency of girl singers and their listeners. The additional obstacle, as Stras outlines in her introduction, is to cast a constructive and positive feminist critique out of subjects that seem to embody negative constructions of femininity through their obedience to social norms (6). But if there is anything that

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relational theories of identity formation have taught us, it is that such categories of femininity are unstable. Just as “female” no longer appears to be a fixed notion, the social category of “girl” only gains signification as a relational term.

Beyond the gendered expectations that shaped ’60s female pop artists, many of whom were adolescent girls poised at the liminal existence of adulthood, these performers (like the majority of their fans) were additionally beset by societal models of womanhood and whiteness that convey familiar pop narratives of conformity. Conversely, where the prevalence of girl singers typically ushers in unimaginative ways to reduce famous performers such as The Crystals, Brenda Lee, The Shangri-Las, or Sandie Shaw to fixed categories of “girlishness,” all eight of the contributors to *She’s So Fine* are invested in interrogating the complexities of these singers.

One of the great virtues of this book is its attention to the plural nature of “girlishness” as something shaped within an intricate configuration of gender, age, race, class, nation, sexuality, and even language. Its interrogation of the fixed and underestimated category of the “girl” is also commendable for its willingness to *hear* important moments in which those norms can be destabilized or reworked. In this way, Laurie Stras’s edited volume makes a valuable contribution to the burgeoning field of girlhood studies because, unlike many historical or cultural studies readings of girlhood, it employs sound as a unique and important category for analysis. Echoing the sentiments of Jacqueline Warwick’s foundational work, *Girl Groups, Girl Culture* (2007), Stras reminds us in her own chapter that these singers are, after all, “relatable to the listener as a personality rather than just as a singing voice” (53); to appreciate them would be to first render the most comprehensive picture of them.

In *She’s So Fine*, the process of reclaiming girl pop involves relocating the female voice and its many layers of signification that call past the linguistic designations of the lyrics and the visual spectacle of femininity. In turn, the writers’ emphasis on the music’s sonic dimension, with a particular regard for vocal identity, functions as the most prominent thread running throughout the collection. Stras’s introduction to *She’s So Fine* highlights a need to give the music a place thus far evaded even among those who write about girl groups:

There is a strong bias towards examining music and musical elements in this book, not just because most of us trained as musicians and musicologists, but also because most available writing on girl singers and girl groups is either historical or biographical journalism, or concentrates heavily on visual/textual analysis of image and lyrics, bypassing musical – and especially the vocal – content. Before one can begin to describe the interplay between the sonic and the visual, so vital to the understanding

of how popular music works – and the management of which is so crucial to adolescence – there needs to be a way to talk about and to value the sonic. (23)

Writing on girl pop rarely engages with the unique, embodied voices of these girls. If we are to achieve a more nuanced understanding of what girl singers are actively doing when they perform femininity, and more importantly, if we are to appreciate these singers “on their own terms” (6) a consideration of the sonic is fundamental to a truly detailed picture of these artists. As Stras implies above, vocal utterance is one of the most useful analytical facets of music especially as a process of negotiating cultural norms. Within the realm of ’60s girl pop, a thoughtful study of vocal identity would seem particularly valuable to projects that consider the agential potential of girl singers, especially because they seem to embody impossible ideals of womanhood that work against the basic tenets of feminist thought. In framing a positive feminist critique of ’60s girl pop, the authors of *She’s So Fine* perform a rigorous theorization of vocal identity in order to evince moments of resistance that might not otherwise be legible in visual or lyrical analyses of these singers.

Together, these essays reveal how ’60s girl singers were capable of an incredible range of vocal nuance, despite the tendency for critics to lump them together as having a single “dumb” sound. Norma Coates, for instance, in her essay on folk/pop-turned-rock singer Marianne Faithfull (Chapter 7), argues, “In Faithfull’s voice one accesses both the excess and the collateral damage of the 1960s, especially to women in the countercultural spaces such as the rock music of the era” (200). Faithfull’s *Broken English* is an album that marks a complete departure from the image of white English aristocratic womanhood that, for the most part, was fostered by her earliest producers. As Coates eloquently shows us, it is quite difficult to imagine how Faithfull’s breakthrough album could have rendered as complete a rupture from this image without her “deep, whiskey-soaked,” “croaking rasp” (199).

Annie Randall’s portrait of Dusty Springfield (Chapter 4) also underscores the significance of vocal timbre—how Springfield’s fans locate their ideas of the singer’s authenticity through the characteristic features of her “soul” sound. Interestingly, as Randall notes, this “soul” sound was not an attempt at vocal blackface, but a part of Springfield’s unique construction of a self-conscious “camp masquerade.” Randall suggests that “voices do not operate independently” (136), and so in Springfield’s voice there exist all of the “apparent contradictions between Mary [O’Brien, Springfield’s given name] and Dusty, Britpop and US pop, a blonde singer with a black sound, colonial privilege and black Americans’ commensurate lack of privilege, Dusty’s “bent” sexuality and her songs’ straight lyrics” (120). Randall’s

awareness of whiteness and vocal agency, especially when considering the white privilege of sounding black when desired, offers another important perspective that sets this book apart from other studies on 1960s girl singers that might focus primarily on visually legible indexes of social identity.

Stras asks a question in her introduction to frame much of these writers' work on girl singers: "what if girl cultures are, in fact, resistant, regardless of whether they resist in the same overt way as boy cultures do?" (22). In this book, the strategy of vocal masquerade is one of the most constructive and consistent points of entry to this question. In Susan Fast's article, "Bold Soul Trickster: The 60s Tina Signifies" (Chapter 8), we become privy to the many layers of vocal masquerade in the performances of Tina Turner that work towards destabilizing normative white male musical practices. Like Randall, Fast adopts the concept of "signifyin(g)" to describe Turner's deliberate designs of vocal parody. Fast illustrates vocal masquerade as strategy for female survival within the patriarchal hierarchy of the music industry, a strategy that acquires an even greater sense of urgency under the conditions of the intimate partner violence Turner endured at the time.

In "Voice of the Beehive: Vocal Technique at the Turn of the 1960s" (Chapter 1), Stras examines the mainstream appeal of "bad" vocal technique in doo-wop performance whose construction was the product of a considerable amount of disciplining on the part of the singers. Stras presents a thoughtful musicological reading of the so-called "untutored," "dumb sound" that became the signature characteristic of teen girl singers in order to answer how and why this "fragile teen sound" came to be a desired aesthetic quality in girl pop (50). In one explanation, the essay uncovers ways in which the Shangri-Las' performances of vocal vulnerability not only subscribed to an emotive vocal honesty, but also conveyed a "bad girl" image that appealed to many of the female fans that their songs addressed.

While the lyrical material of some pop songs of the '60s encouraged girl singers to construct (and listeners to hear) vocal vulnerability, in "Vocal Decorum: Voice, Body and Knowledge in the Prodigious Singer, Brenda Lee" (Chapter 2), Robynn Stilwell illustrates how this characteristic sound was not the sole embodiment of the '60s teen voice. In her chapter on the rockabilly singer Brenda Lee, Stilwell explores more overt forms of vocal masquerade in the figure of the child prodigy. As Stilwell details, Lee was a particularly fascinating example whose style of vocal excess not only subscribed to the characteristic features of rockabilly, but were also markers of a "knowing" sexuality. This article is most useful for scholars exploring the agential possibilities of the voice in relation to the physical presentation of the body, especially at a time during which the visual policing of femininity was so closely guarded. If vocal utterance lets us consider less visible ways

in which bodies can be conceived in the cultural imagination, Stilwell addresses what happens when the female voice articulates an active betrayal of her conveying body.

Jacqueline Warwick's contribution, "He Hit Me, and I was Glad': Violence, Masochism, and Anger in Girl Group Music" (Chapter 3), offers another example of the vocal versatility and agency that girl singers demonstrated in the face of objectifying, disempowering, and exploitative forces that worked to preserve a male-dominated order within the music industry. Like Stras and Stilwell, Warwick similarly critiques the models of female glamour (as forms of female disablement) that were cultivated by groups like the Crystals, Joanie Sommers, and Claudine Clark whose *musical* surfaces, in contrast, dissembled a seething interiority that belied their "nice girl" countenance. Warwick takes her analysis one step further when she locates a parallel notion to this "nice girl" image of teenage femininity within narratives that detail the socialization of young African Americans at the peak of desegregation activities. She offers one possible explanation to the open-ended question posed at the conclusion of Chapter 1, in which Stras contemplates why the "teen" sound of '60s girl groups became so frequently associated with a "white teen" identity. Citing bell hooks, Warwick suggests that passivity was a mask of grace, a "safe" marker of whiteness that made it marginally easier for African Americans to acquire some semblance of social mobility.

In her introduction, Stras describes one common perception that motivates such discourses on the "girl" in pop music: "We do not want girl singers to be women. The reason for this is simple: 'girls' are much easier to objectify than women—that's why we have cover *girls*, dancing *girls* and *Girl Fridays*" (5). In my mind, this text belongs to a larger project by feminist musicology to reclaim not only the genre of '60s pop, but also the category of "girl" that it immediately conjures. The practiced reduction of the fans and performers of '60s girl pop is a crucial point that Stras verifies through her invocation of the doubly condemned position of the girl singer: at once confronted with the limitations of male-centered music industries, and later as the mainstream refuse of rock music histories. Yet for many of the female artists in *She's So Fine*, girl pop is recognized as "a site of tension between conformity and resistance" (23), animating the serious and critical discussion that is warranted of such artists as Tina Turner, Marianne Faithful, and Dusty Springfield for their successful negotiation between the two. To highlight Martha Mockus's assessment in her concluding response, these essays are narratives of "female survival," and in turn the book's contributors take up similar gestures that prevent the genre from reaching critical erasure (235).

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