David Brackett. 2016. *Categorizing Sound: Genre and Twentieth-Century Popular Music*. Berkeley: University of California Press.

Reviewed by Thomas Johnson

In *Categorizing Sound*, David Brackett presents a broad and richly detailed "history of the practice of categorizing" popular music in the twentieth century (331), asking when, how, and why stylistic labels and classification schemes become legible across communities of musicians, fans, journalists, and music industry personnel. This is no simple task, as Brackett can attest, having jousted with the "chimera of genre" for over twenty years (xiii). To grapple with as slippery and cumbersome a topic as popular music categories, the book deftly moves from sharply focused comparative analyses of songs to grand narratives of popular music history in the United States, investigating the ways musical groupings intertwine with their technological, social, and cultural contexts. Brackett's book is a nuanced and far-reaching addition to recent musicological publications on genre—including works about genre and gender in popular music (Burns 2000), social mediation of genres and identities (Born 2011), genre in twentieth-century art musics (Drott 2013), metal (Smialek 2015), twenty-first century "new music" scenes (Robin 2016), and recent popular music (James 2017a, 2017b).

Brackett accomplishes two main goals through a genealogical approach: he traces a few continuous diachronic threads through categorical changes while simultaneously presenting semi-independent synchronic slices of classificatory assemblages. Through seven in-depth case studies in three chronological periods (the 1920s, 1940s, and 1960s–80s), Brackett navigates the turbulence of popular music's ever-shifting categorizational wake. Each case study engages an incisive exploration of a large-scale popular music genre or two at a particular historical moment by comparing music industry machinations with journalistic discourses and musical analysis. These explorations tend to problematize traditional narrative histories of genres (especially jazz, blues, and country) by diving into the swirling milieus of their origins and the various temporal sites of their contestations, resulting in a complex and rewarding act of historical revision.

The introduction to *Categorizing Sound* provides a surplus of theoretical underpinnings for the case studies that follow by way of an extensive meditation on genre *qua* concept. This chapter will be useful to anyone interested in musical categorization in general, and it should be required reading in any course on popular music. The depths to which Brackett

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plumbs the many concepts covered in this first chapter perhaps overprepares the reader for the rest of the book since he covers a wide range of theories of categorization that find tangential relevance later on. Most relevant for his case studies is the distinction between critic-fan genres and music-industry categories, which rely on separate strategies for musical grouping (11). Brackett also adopts Born's (2000) typology of mappings between communities of people and of music, from homological to fantasized relations, which structures much of his later discussions (20). Derridean notions of genre as citation and iteration (12–13) permeate the book as well, and a casual engagement with assemblage theories (10) springs up occasionally. Much of what follows this introduction requires only a loose understanding of the theories and ideas Brackett explores, so the reader need not follow all the connections to film studies, literature, and poststructuralist philosophy to contend with the subsequent case studies.

With this background in place, chapters 2 through 4 survey popular music at the outset of the century, exploring how newfound modes of musical (re)production emerged alongside "changes in immigration laws, demographic shifts, the redrawing of high-low cultural-aesthetic boundaries, and the reorganization of institutions involved with the circulation of music, among other factors" (43). As a way into this tenuous world, Brackett lucidly argues in chapter 2 ("Foreign Music and the Emergence of Phonography") that the contemporaneous catch-all category of musical otherness, foreign music, laid important groundwork for understanding later industry distinctions between musics by marginalized groups of people. Undergoing significant change from the turn of the century to the 1920s, foreign music was a site of contention for listeners and musicians as recent immigrants latched on to various musics to ground their identities, and industry powers fought to identify the most viable audiences, musicians, and labels for the plethora of musics subsumed under this title. Brackett shows how subcategories of foreign music expressed both homologous and exoticist/imaginary relationships with musical communities and thus exemplifies a common theme of his book: When industry and public discourses link categories of music with categories of people, they tend to conflate stereotypes with actual listening communities. The Hebrew-Yiddish musical category, for instance, was homologous "in that it referred to a preexisting demographic group, which the music industry assumed was its main audience" (57). Brackett explains, however, that it also "spoke to the exotic fantasies of consumers who did not identify with that preexisting demographic" (57), reinforcing stereotypes of Jewishness. Similar tensions and struggles over musical-identity isographies—concerning representation, identity, community, and the sounding of race—

became ever more audible and directly embodied in recordings. One positive result of this process was that musical elements like timbre, vocal inflection, groove, and microtimings, which Brackett suggests are "associated with marginal elements of the population" (154), gained aesthetic import. Along with technological advancements (especially with the rise of jukeboxes), the capital imbued into these musical elements helped generate a "sonic aesthetic" in which recordings were recognized as primary texts and as a viable format for measuring popularity. Such a recording ontology opposed an inherited song-as-text work concept that the sheet music and publishing industry pushed well into the 1940s. Brackett argues that the sonic aesthetic, unique to and characteristic of the recording era, stems from foreign music, a structuring pillar of the popular music field for the first 40 years of the twentieth century.

Chapters 3 ("Forward to the Past: Race Music in the 1920s") and 4 ("The Newness of Old-Time Music") combat presentist accounts of early blues and country, respectively. A traditional account of early blues, for instance, treats it in relative isolation, attempting to excavate the causal kernels for its assumed later *telos* in which the virile, male, non-commercial musician is taken as the blues archetype (71). Instead, Brackett enters the historical network of the blues (and subsequently of race music) *in situ*, reveling in the melee that surrounded the style and its nominal descriptor. As in his other chapters, Brackett's discussion clarifies how a genre's legibility "could only be attained via the gradual assembling together of musical sounds, the social connotations of performers and audience, and a shared sense of affect and physical movement that cut across demographic divisions, along with a term or concept that could function as a label" (77). What results is a complex view of race, gender, and identity that canonical trajectories of blues and jazz frequently gloss over. The following chapter similarly challenges orthodox histories of country, hillbilly, or old-time musics, and Brackett illuminates "the struggle over the naming of this category" (114). "Hillbilly," for instance, was neither a ubiquitous nor a well-defined term, used mostly as a "quasi-sociological" explanation of the music as "a pathological phenomenon" (125). Brackett's close analysis of sources shows how the loose constellation of generic labels surrounding "hillbilly" could be understood as simultaneously "activating both homologous and imaginary identifications" of its audiences (143), further complicating notions of Southern, rural, and/or white identity at the time. For both early blues and country, Brackett's chapters reopen a rich and varied musical landscape.

The next section of the book (chapters 5 and 6) is devoted to the 1940s, again with two case studies that focus on black and white popular musical categories respectively. Chapter 5 ("From Jazz to Pop: Swing in the 1940s")

interrogates the relationships between three of the 1940s' most important genres: swing, jazz, and popular music. The decade opened with the height of swing's popularity, a genre which spread "forms of improvisation and groove associated with African Americans among heterogeneous audiences" (185). But by the end of the decade, "within the realm of mainstream popular music, African American-ness appeared as a stereotype grouped with stereotypes of assorted Others" (185). In other words, black popular music lost mainstream viability as the decade progressed, and in order to gain popularity with mainstream audiences, race music recordings were required "to cite the conventions of the novelty genre" (184). In chapter 6 ("The Corny-ness of the Folk"), Brackett describes how the same uptick in novelty allowed country music to follow a nearly opposite narrative, from a place of ill-defined exteriority in the first half of the decade to the nominalized dual entity of "country and western" in the latter half. The chiastic trajectories of race music and country music, and the way that these large-scale categories interacted with notions of racial identity and the mainstream, closely mirrored larger trends in musical and cultural affairs. Brackett explains how "African American-ness" got drained out of the mainstream, requiring its own othered "apparatus for the valuation of economic capital" (183), reinforcing a stereotypical black identity by the late 1940s. On the other hand, country's newfound mainstream success "disturbed notions of homological" relation between the music and a rural, white, Southern identity, creating an awareness of the label's "insufficiency" (228).

These divergent paths occurred during the gradual synchronization and consolidation of the music industry, which solidified around the end of the second World War, as marketing, advertising, and demographic research reached new levels of sophistication and made possible the first quantifiable era of "mainstream" popular music. Out of these distinctions—between the unmarked mainstream and its marked others—Brackett develops a central concept in his book: crossover. Though anachronistically applied and only defined in chapter 8, for Brackett crossover is only possible when industry categories and stable rankings of popularity or success (especially charts) become widespread and relatively consistent. Only then can genres be defined by their independence from the mainstream, and only then can certain ambassadors cross from one chart to another. In the second half of his book, covering the 50-year span from the 1940s to about 1990, Brackett emphasizes the "circular logic" of crossover, or how some tracks or artists in non-mainstream genres (R&B, jazz, country, etc.) find mainstream success while others remain relegated to their marked groupings.

Brackett's chapter on R&B and Soul in the 1960s ("The Dictionary of

Soul") is in many ways exemplary of the entire project. The aim, he explains, "is to analyze the stakes involved for the musicians, fans, journalists, and music industry personnel" who associate generic labels "in a more or less consistent way with certain musical processes and gestures" (236). So, when a disjunction occurs within these more or less consistent applications of generic labels, Brackett seizes the opportunity to interrogate the generic conditions at stake. From 1963 to 1965, *Billboard* suddenly stopped printing their "R&B" popularity chart, a unique gap in an otherwise uninterrupted strand of industry-sanctioned African-American popular music categories that began with the stabilization of "race records" in the 1920s, and which lives on in *Billboard's* current "hip-hop and R&B" moniker. Surely R&B music still existed, and people still bought, sold, made, listened to, and thought about music that participated in or represented the genre, so why did *Billboard* stop their chart? For Brackett, the blip that this interregnum registers on the popular-music–genre seismometer functions as much more than a curious historical footnote of one (important) part of the popular music machine; it presents a chance to explore the confluences and contradictions of musical and social worlds, of understanding how "the struggle over racial classification itself" that structured much of the 1960s might (not) relate to concomitant musical classifications (236). By analyzing shifting usages of the word "soul," along with the effects that folk-rock and the British invasion had on the mainstream, Brackett documents competing notions of racial identity and musical expression during an especially tumultuous moment in US popular culture. Originating as an adjectival descriptor and growing into a nominalized genre, "soul" captures some of the tensions inherent in the Civil Rights Movement between an integrationist discourse (reflected by R&B's *Billboard* gap) and one of black cultural independence that required a new, unique African American genre label.

Brackett's project reaches its apotheosis in chapter 8 ("Crossover Dreams: From Urban Cowboy to the King of Pop"), a discussion of crossover and its effects in the 1980s, a time when marketing categories, radio formats, new influential genres (like punk, disco, new wave, adult contemporary), social identities, and the introduction of a new medium (MTV) produced a unique "field of tensions" in popular music (301). By again comparing the fates of black popular genres and mainstream-adjacent white popular musics, Brackett outlines the economic and social forces that policed musical borders, along with their consequent material results. Both country and R&B, for lack of better terms, bifurcated in the early 1980s between mainstream and marginal subtypes, but country more easily crossed over at the beginning of the decade (and found more finan-

cial success) since—among other reasons—its synecdochal style elements could blend directly into unmarked pop (293). Seen as more serious and wholesome than funk, disco, or R&B, crossover country exploded in popularity by adapting conventional country instrumentation into adult contemporary musics. Black popular music genres, on the other hand, were understood to be rather more "transgressive" as a general conservatism swept the nation, and they fared much worse in their ability to garner majoritarian interest. Because of this, the mega-success of Michael Jackson's *Thriller* (1983)—made possible by citation of his previous success, his inclusion of crossover stylistic elements and general stylistic eclecticism, and his collaboration with mainstream artists like Paul McCartney and Van Halen—was doubly extraordinary for an artist classified as R&B who carried with him connotations of disco. *Thriller* created a "sudden surge of interest in black crossover material" in its wake, upending the mainstream (314). The resulting categorizational turbulence, along with those new media and marketing categories mentioned above, problematized the very notion of mainstream in the 1980s. Brackett suggests "the whole idea of the mainstream underwent changes that led to a new way of conceptualizing the hierarchy of genres that might participate in it" (314) as previously marginal genres would occasionally ascend to popularity. But by the 1990s, the popular music field would again settle into a relatively stable constellation of musical categories, as music videos, Brackett suggests, provided new means of "compactly materializing associations" between sound, artists, and audiences (324).

Throughout these case studies, a few long-range strands of historical narrative emerge—e.g., how technological innovations of reproduction galvanized a novel "sonic aesthetic," how unstable industry terms for African American popular music categories stem from different sets of discourses and agencies than those of non-mainstream white music, or how the strength of "crossover effect" mutates over time. But these occasionally get lost in the microscopic specificity of Brackett's meticulous musicological research, requiring the reader to consciously track larger-range ideas as they bubble to the surface. And though these emergent continuities may not be Brackett's central aim, the fact that they arise so naturally might leave the reader in want of a synopsis of these broad themes. Nevertheless, there's plenty of theory, history, and analysis to digest, and Brackett bookends each case-study with an exemplary introductory anecdote and a few welcome pages of summary, helping the reader absorb the deluge of information in each chapter.

Though the book is comprehensive and coherent throughout, a few weaknesses pepper some sections, resulting from editorial challenges

inevitable for a project that combines so much previous work; much of chapters 1, 2, 7, and 8, at least, find precedence in Brackett's earlier publications. This upcycling is not problematic in itself, but it does result in the occasional stutter, shifting between materials from different stages of a long gestation. Prior published subtitles for the book—"Genre and Identity in Twentieth-Century Popular Music" and "A Generic History of Popular Music"—reveal two overriding goals Brackett has melded into this work, which sporadically compete for attention and space.[1] The book reads either as a broadly focused history of the relation between the mainstream and its largest tributaries or as a focused study of race and identity in popular music at particular historical moments. This means that, for example, some chapters and concepts get reutilized. Chapter 5, for instance, re-introduces its upcoming trajectory multiple times to cover distinct goals, and some concepts get repackaged in separate chapters—e.g., Hagstrom Miller's (2007) folkloristic mode of authenticity (74, 123) or Sterne's (2003) "audile technique" (37, 57). Additionally, some bibliographical entries seem culled from prior versions with no mention in the book, and there are some inevitable omissions. For instance, a couple of especially conspicuous and relevant sources include Tamara Roberts's (2011) work on Michael Jackson, race, and the mainstream, which covers much the same ground as Brackett's final case study, and Hubbs's (2014) study of country music and identity, which would certainly have provided useful contextualization for many of Brackett's claims about country and its predecessors. Overall, however, this is a diligently researched book, and necessarily so, with a bibliography that spans many inter- and subdisciplines. A few of these could be fruitfully augmented with recent literatures, opening potential avenues for scholars more directly interested in bringing feminist, critical race, or post-colonial theories to bear on popular music categories.[2]

Besides its careful research and novel historiography, *Categorizing Sound* might be most valuable for those aspects of popular music's genre-cartography it leaves unexplored. Little is said about hip hop and funk and the 1950s and 1970s serve merely as contextual fodder. Chronologically, one might extend Brackett's ideas in either direction, for example, placing them in dialogue with Stoever's (2016) recent work on race, the listening ear, and the sonic color line beginning in the nineteenth century. Moving in the other direction, researchers of our current musical era will find many uncanny similarities in the historical realms Brackett probes. The move that streaming services have made towards psychographic marketing (James 2017b) resembles paradigm shifts of categorization in the 1920s and the 1980s, and the intensification of identity and of fine-grained musical classification (e.g., as studied by Greenberg et al. 2016) finds precedence

in the minute differentiations between subcategories of foreign music—distinguishing between, for example, "Neapolitan and Italian" or "Jewish and Hebrew" (57). Diachronic studies just outside musicology's usual orbit (e.g., Lena's [2012] discussion of individual genres' trajectories through predictable stages or Mauch et al.'s [2015] scientific analysis of popular music's stylistic evolution) could also be usefully developed by incorporating Brackett's nuanced historical research. Sociologies of omnivorousness might also benefit from Brackett's deeper history of taste and audiences.

There's an inherent difficulty in applying a single methodology or theoretical apparatus to any selection of musical categories and historical contexts, and Brackett admits he has codified no single way "to do genre analysis" (331). Instead, *Categorizing Sound* presents a broad selection of tools and attitudes that might guide future investigations of the changing configurations of genre, identity, and popular music. Like any study of genre, *Categorizing Sound* ramifies across discourses, and its many valuable musicological contributions will hopefully proliferate throughout and beyond the discipline.

Notes

1. These prior subtitles can be found in the AMS book publication subvention awards listing (http://www.ams-net.org/pubs/Publication-subventions-2015-fall.php) and Brackett (2015, 205), respectively.

2. Brackett briefly mentions Judith Butler, Paul Gilroy, and Homi Bhabha when discussing genre's and identity's performativities, for instance (38n50), but I believe a theory of genre that more directly incorporates their (and similar writers') works might be a beneficial pursuit.

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