Stockton, Will and D. Gilson (eds.). 2020. *The 33 1/3 B-Sides: New Essays by 33 1/3 Authors on Beloved and Underrated Albums*. New York: Bloomsbury.

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The compact disc—a digital medium for musical listening that supposedly offered superior sound by expanding the dynamic range of recordings and eliminating the cracks and pops of vinyl records—was introduced onto the market in 1982 (Morris 2015). With this new medium, record labels saw a chance to cash in by reselling to consumers music they already owned on another medium. The increase in available storage space on a CD meant that labels could tack on a handful of "bonus tracks" to further sway record buyers. Later, albums rereleased on CD might come in an expanded edition with a second disc titled something like "B-Sides and Rarities." These special editions appealed especially to the completists—those who need to collect everything that their favorite artists have recorded. To the rest of the record buying public, however, B-sides were the leftovers of an artist's career. As Will Stockton and D. Gilson, editors of *The 33 1/3 B-Sides*, write, "the conventional notion of the B-side [is] an obscurity, something forgotten or appended" (vii).

Stockton and Gilson use this understanding of B-sides as a starting point for their edited volume, gathering together 55 essays on lesser-known, underrated, or forgotten albums that metaphorically qualify as "B-sides." Stockton expands on this notion in his introduction to the collection—in which he considers Prince's 1996 album, *Emancipation*. He writes, "since the invention of the vinyl record in 1948, the term 'B-side' has referred, most literally, to the second side of the disc" (8). While "B-side" has most often referred to the second side of a 45-rpm single, Stockton also considers the second side of an LP to be a B-side, noting that this was sometimes a place for filler material prior to the emergence of "the album" as a cohesive unit. For singles, he says, "the A-side featured the song the label wanted promoted to radio and consumers. The B-side housed something else, something presumably worth hearing but also something generally considered lesser, and thus accorded secondary status" (8).[1] From the idea of the B-side as something secondary but worth hearing, Stockton argues, "B-sides help to flesh out our understanding of an album, an artist, a group, a genre, or a moment in time by asking us to focus on what gets relegated

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to the margins" (9). This definition allows the authors considerable leeway in making the case as to why their albums of choice qualify as B-sides (albeit with varying degrees of success, as discussed later in this review).

As implied in the subtitle, contributors to the book are all authors of previous books in Bloomsbury's *33 1/3* series, a series of short books—typically between 100 and 200 pages—in which an author writes on a single album. Authors in the series include music journalists, pop music scholars, and a small number of musicologists and music theorists. Stockton and Gilson set these authors the task of considering "an album they might have written about, but which didn't make the cut" (viii). Thus, their collection "brings together members of the 33 1/3 family, who, like us, wanted to riff on albums they believe deserve a place in the series, albums that deserve a second glance" (viii).

The book is divided into three sections: "Juvenilia," albums that were in some way formative for the authors in the section; "Marginalia," albums on the margins of a genre or an artist's catalog; and "Memorabilia," albums tangential to an artist's catalog, such as live albums or film soundtracks (viii). In Gilson's introduction to the book—which explores the cultural history of Christina Aguilera's 2000 Spanish-language album, *Mi Reflejo*—he expands on these categories. He writes that albums in the "Juvenilia" section address "the enduring, shaping power of the music we encountered as teenagers: good music and bad, popular and unpopular; the music that introduced us to what music is and could be" (19). The "Marginalia" section collects pieces on albums that were "relatively diminished," "cobbled together," or "minimally distributed" and "recenter[s] them as important to an artist's trajectory" (Gilson 2020, 20). Finally, the "Memorabilia" section contains essays on albums that are "always tied to something else," "an accompaniment or memento" (21).

The best essays in the "Juvenilia" section capture youthful moments of musical discovery in which listeners hear something that resonates with them in a way that nothing else has before—a feeling that many readers will recognize even if they are unfamiliar with the chapter's subject matter. Will Fulton shares such a moment in his essay on Rites of Spring's 1985 eponymous album, stating, "in 1985, *Rites of Spring* was like nothing I'd ever heard before, and yet so incredibly familiar" (42). Regarding the song, "For Want Of," he writes that "[it] is somehow both intimate and public, intensely personal to the singer and yet still resonant with the listener as if reflecting their own experience" (42). By exploring the context in which the album was written and recorded, Fulton also manages to capture a coming-of-age moment in the Washington, D.C. punk scene at a time of cultural and stylistic shifts.

In his essay on the Durutti Column's 1980 *The Return of the Durutti Column*, Philip Shaw identifies a moment that expanded his understanding of what music—specifically punk music—could be. In the midst of grieving the death of Joy Division singer Ian Curtis, Shaw picked up the Durutti Column album based on the cover's stylistic similarity to Joy Division's *Unknown Pleasures*. Compared to the darkness of Joy Division and the hardness of punk more generally, this album revealed to Shaw what "punk, out of a need to present itself as hard, unflinching, and confrontational, had been forced to repress: beauty, transience, innocence, melancholy, and yearning" (37). In juxtaposing the "dark, industrial menace" of Joy Division with the "unabashed beauty" of the Durutti Column, Shaw makes a compelling case for understanding *The Return of the Durutti Column* as a B-side to the more widely recognized and more conventionally punk *Unknown Pleasures* (36).

Also noteworthy in this section are two essays that capture formative moments of discovery through the lens of Blackness during the golden age of hip hop. Shawn Taylor opens his essay on De La Soul's 1991 *De La Soul is Dead* by stating that "lived blackness can be exhausting" when faced with questions such as "are you the right kind of black for your fellow black folks? Are you safe enough so other POC (and white folks) accept you without fear?" (58). De La Soul's 1989 *3 Feet High and Rising*, with its eclectic, whimsical production style and bright packaging, helped him to negotiate these questions by providing a glimpse into "a new black world" that could encompass many different ways of being Black (59). He contends that *De La Soul is Dead* "is the ultimate B-side to *3 Feet*" because it "was an invitation to live in that [new black] world" (59). Specifically, Taylor argues that the album is "a reification of their ethos of 'black whimsy'," which he defines as playfulness, curiosity, and a sense of wonder—"the opposite of a deficit model" (59).

In his chapter on Digable Planets' 1993 *Reachin' (A New Refutation of Time and Space)*, Walter Biggins offers a similar story of negotiating his identity as a Black teenager. In his junior year of high school, Biggins formed a DJ team with his blonde-haired, blue-eyed, handsome and confident friend Aaron. Biggins calls Aaron the "A-side" of the duo, while describing himself as the B-side, "black, nerdy, awkward in gesture and statement" (61). Although hip hop was "the genre supposedly telling the story of my life better than any other at the time," he did not feel himself reflected in "A-side" artists of the time, like N.W.A, the Notorious B.I.G., Run DMC, or Tupac (62). Against those artists, he writes, "Digable Planets […] seemed like the B-side avatars of my dreams" (62). In *Reachin'*, Biggins continues, "I heard a story of blackness that I could fit inside,

that allowed for 'black *and* ______' rather than 'black *or* ______'" (62). In their essays, Biggins and Taylor offer compelling insights into the intersections of youth, racial identity, and popular culture, setting them apart not just from other chapters in the "Juvenilia" section, but from the book as a whole.

The best essays in the "Marginalia" section provide rich historical context for their albums of choice, implicitly making a case for the inclusion of these albums in the collection. This historical explication stands in stark contrast to a tendency elsewhere in the book to offer justifications for an album's B-side status that disrupt the flow of the essay or feel unconvincing when considered against Stockton and Gilson's definition of a B-side. In his chapter on the Dells' 1968 *There Is*, Joe Bucciero explores the cultural shifts that led the Dells—who initially achieved success in the 1950s performing in the doo-wop style—to record a forward-looking soul album. Notably, this album drew influence from Black musical traditions of improvisation that were, at the time, being claimed by Euro-American avant-garde composers such as John Cage. Marked by unpredictability—what Cage would call indeterminacy—and featuring sounds reminiscent of prepared piano, Bucciero contends that, although arranger Charles Stepney was certainly aware of Cage and the avant-garde, "Stepney and the Dells came to their sound not through Cage, but [through] Chicago's jazz and R&B scenes" (99). Bucciero's contextualization makes it clear why this album—which charted at the time of its release but is now seldom remarked upon—is worthy of reconsideration.

Patrick Rivers makes a similarly convincing argument for the reconsideration of Guy's 1988 album *Guy*. Rivers situates the album within the perceived divide between R&B and hip hop which emerged in the 1980s. At the time, R&B performers and DJs were often dismissive of the new genre, while hip-hop artists regarded R&B as too soft. Formed in 1987 by Teddy Riley and former Kids at Work bandmate Timmy Gatling—with the later addition of Gatling's coworker Aaron Hall—Guy collapsed the boundaries between the two genres, placing hip-hop productions behind R&B vocals. Now overshadowed by Riley's production work for other artists along with his 1990s group BLACKstreet, Rivers calls *Guy* "the first album-length manifestation from the progenitor of New Jack Swing, an inevitable stylistic merging that remains a foundation of the production and sound of high-profile black music and the amorphous genre of pop music" (147).

Kembrew McLeod's essay on Negativland's 1987 *Escape from Noise*, and Emily Mackay's essay on Kenickie's 1997 album, *At the Club*, treat their respective albums as "B-sides" to the better-known musical trends of their

individual moments. In an apt comparison, McLeod (2020) identifies *Escape from Noise* as a "B-side" to hip hop based on the influence of both Negativland's and hip-hop producers' sampling practices to what Lawrence Lessig would later describe as "remix culture" (Lessig 2008). McLeod states that "while hip hop's boisterous assault on intellectual property law went multiplatinum, crashing the culture industry's party, Negativland's oeuvre provided an arty aural B-side that also set the stage for remix culture's eventual takeover" (131).

Mackay's essay implicitly positions the 1990s UK DIY underground as a "B-side" to the commercial success of the Britpop bands of the same era. Her description of Kenickie's transition from the staunchly DIY label, Slampt, to EMI subsidiary, Emidisc, functions as a broader examination of the tensions—which occupied many DIY artists in the 1990s—between sticking to DIY principles and reaching a wider audience. While the founders of Slampt condemned the move as selling out, Mackay writes, "there was another strand of 1990s thought that recast selling out as a positive, even a moral imperative, against the exclusive elitism of the indie underground. If you want to get your message out, reasoned Britpop's big beasts […] don't you want as many people to hear it as possible?" (144). In both essays, then, the albums in question act as jumping off points for wider discussions on the implications of cultural shifts happening in their respective historical moments.

Comparatively, "Memorabilia" is the weakest section of the book. Several chapters cover less popular albums from a particular artist's body of work, fitting in with the broad theme of the book, but out of place within the narrower theme of the section—I do not intend this as an indictment of the chapters themselves, but of the structure of the book as a whole. Others that do fit the theme will likely only be of interest to diehard fans of the artist at hand—a completist impulse to possess everything by an artist extending into an impulse to read everything written about them. There are bright moments, though, particularly Rebecca Wallwork's chapter on the Village People's 1980 *Can't Stop the Music: The Original Motion Picture Soundtrack*. Wallwork makes the case that listening to *Can't Stop the Music*—a marginal album within the oeuvre of a group known by most only for the song "Y.M.C.A"—can act as a salve in our present moment of political strife. Though written prior to the impeachment of Donald Trump, a global pandemic, and mass uprisings against police brutality, the essay still resonates in a moment that feels even more uncertain than the early years of the Trump administration. Wallwork writes, "I'll take any chance I can right now to *not* be cynical, to *not* feel jaded and beaten down by the news cycle. Yes, *Can't Stop the Music* is goofy but it's *happy*, goddamn it, and it believes in the power of

music and friendship. I'm not embarrassed to stand, and dance, for that" (188). Readers desperate for moments of joy in what at times feels like a new dark age may find themselves dancing alongside her.

Despite the strength of the essays discussed here—along with many others not discussed—the collection as a whole suffers from Stockton and Gilson's broad conceptualization of "B-sides." Fans of the series will likely be excited to read previous *33 1/3* authors writing about albums that they might have chosen for the series if given a second chance. However, the limitations of Stockton and Gilson's framing quickly become apparent. Most notably, this framework leads many of the authors to attempt to justify their subjects as "B-sides" in ways that often read as clumsy or forced. Even in some of the better chapters, unconvincing attempts at justification often disrupt the momentum of the writing. Tara Murtha acknowledges this in her chapter on Sinéad O'Connor's 1990 album, *I Do Not Want What I Haven't Got*, writing, "it is difficult to think of O'Connor's album as a B-side, especially given the momentous success of its hit single" (55). Yet, she goes on to argue that the album "qualifies as a B-side because the firestorm surrounding its release ultimately produced [O'Connor's] commercial downfall" (55). This makes sense in a certain way—the album itself was overshadowed by the controversy caused by O'Connor's *Saturday Night Live* appearance, in which the singer called out child abuse in the Catholic Church and shredded a photo of the Pope—but it still feels like a stretch given the success of the album, hindering what is otherwise a compelling essay. The reader may also wonder if authors would have chosen different subjects without the imposition of the B-side metaphor.

Rather than a collection of B-sides, Stockton and Gilson could have more convincingly framed the book as a mixtape or compilation album. Kevin Courrier's description of the soundtrack album to the 1995 film, *Casino*, hints at what such a framing could achieve: "the disc itself seemed so beautifully programed, so daringly eclectic, and full of surprises. There was a fascinating selection of mixed-genre music you would normally never hear occupying the same CD" (200). Parts of this description are fitting for the book. The essays contained within it place a remarkably broad range of popular music from the English-speaking world side-by-side. Readers will likely be surprised to find themselves fascinated to read about albums they may have never heard of or given a second thought (see again Rebecca Wallwork's chapter on the Village People).

Had Stockton and Gilson adopted this frame, though, the collection would still not fully live up to the promise in Courrier's description of the ideal

compilation. In a way that will be familiar to many receivers of mixtapes or sampler albums, the reader may prefer to skip around rather than engage start to finish, going first to the artists they know and like, avoiding those they do not like, before eventually taking a chance on the unfamiliar. To carry on the mixtape metaphor, the book at times feels poorly sequenced. Courrier's own chapter, for instance, immediately follows Evie Nagy's chapter on the *Pulp Fiction* soundtrack—both are strong reads on their own, but the two albums in question, both eclectic soundtrack albums to mid-1990s underworld movies, are arguably too similar to place side-by-side. Just as those who hold up mixtapes as a form of art would scoff at back-to-back songs that sound too much alike, the reader may be put off by two contiguous essays highlighting the eclecticism of albums from the same cultural milieu, especially given that Stockton and Gilson do not in most cases group together such similar albums.

My critique of the editors' sequencing is subjective, but two further examples of the back-to-back placement of sonically similar albums reveal larger shortcomings in the book. Grouping together Shawn Taylor's chapter on De La Soul with Walter Biggins's chapter on Digable Planets, two chapters that foreground the Blackness of both author and artist, draws attention to the fact that the collection, as a whole, skews toward White men writing about other White men. The framing of the book as a reevaluation of forgotten or underrated albums suggests in a way a revision of or possible alternative to the Western pop canon, but the overwhelming Whiteness of the authors and their subjects reveals its failure to live up to that potential. This is reiterated with the grouping together of Bryan Waterman's chapter on Haruomi Hosono's 1982 album, *Philharmony*, and Andrew Schartmann's chapter on Hirokazu Tanaka's 1986 video game soundtrack album, *Metroid*. The consecutive appearance of two of only four chapters on non-Western artists—all four of whom are Japanese—highlights the collection's Western bias.

Framing aside, there is still much to appreciate in the collection. The stylistic range of the essays lend the book pedagogical value for educators in the areas of popular music and pop criticism. It could be usefully paired with another collection from the *33 1/3* series, *How to Write About Music*, edited by Marc Woodworth and Ally-Jane Grossan. Many of the essays in the *33 1/3 B-Sides* would easily serve as productive examples of the types of writing discussed in *How to Write About Music*, such as album reviews, artist profiles, analytical essays, personal essays, and cultural criticism. Educators and readers looking for musicological analysis, however, may have less to latch onto. Some analysis can be found in musicologist Susan Fast's chapter on the Cars' 1979 *Candy-O* and

music theorist Andrew Schartmann's chapter on Hirokazu Tanaka, but the bulk of the chapters are dedicated more to history and cultural criticism. Finally, for fans of the *33 1/3* series, and anyone else who enjoys pop music criticism, the overall quality of the essays collected make it a worthwhile read, even if the reader may prefer to skip a few tracks.

Notes

[1] George Plasketes offers a more nuanced historicization of B-sides in his book, *B-Sides, Undercurrents, and Overtones: Peripheries to Popular in Music, 1960 to the Present* (Plasketes 2009, 1).

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