
Jon Stratton, *Australian Rock. Essays on Popular Music*
(Perth, WA: API Network Books, 2007), 243 pp.

Reviewed by **Renata Summo-O'Connell**

Although *Australian Rock* is a book about a seemingly local phenomenon, it is poignant not only for an Australian-based person, as I have been for twenty years, but also for non-Australian based readers, as I have become recently. The constant ability of Stratton's writing not just to sound relevant but to be so, and to involve its readers as if they were reading a piece of fiction, probably has something to do with the author's starting point: "The inspiration for the essays here has been my attempt to make sense of the sounds that confronted me when I got off the plane from England in 1981" (2). For those who know Stratton's authorial 'voice', this refreshing positioning will not come as a surprise. The clearly located perspective Stratton manages to take at every turn of this rigorous study, which also makes an extremely enjoyable read, represents a striking feature of his study around post-1950s Australian rock. Moving away from the flatness of essay writing, the book presses on in an energizing and at times overwhelming journey across Australian music and society. By the time the reader reaches the last pages of *Australian Rock*, s/he realizes that the energy propelling it coincides with the author's ability to conjure a revealing encounter with Australian culture and society in a journey that makes sense even if one does not know much about Australia.

This is perhaps because Stratton chooses to face questions about the specificity of Australian music, and for that matter of American or British music, moved by the desire to "make sense of the sounds". As he says: "Australian music has evolved its own particular sound as a consequence of the particularity of the Australian culture of which it is an element"(2). It is clear from the start that, for Stratton, Australian society has to contend with race as a dominant category, a category with which no philosophical position, nor any social theory, can fail to measure itself. The profound awareness that "cultural anxieties about race continue to permeate Australian society" and that music in Australia "has remained white for a long time" (2) establishes that rock is a genre dominated by whites. In 2006, Stratton recalls, an ABC poll found that the first non-white artist ranked sixty-first in listeners' preferences.

However, this analysis goes well beyond what could be a rehearsed analysis of race in Australian society. Rather Stratton treats race as an ever-evolving construction, making the dynamics of race in Australian society actually deal with what I would call the biased epistemology of Australian society. Indeed the mythical narrative surrounding Australian post-1950s

rock is profoundly affected by one Australian-specific aspect of the narrative of race, which is dominated by omissions and exclusions. Reading this book one wonders if Stratton should not extend his study, obviously in a different context, by working on the conventional understanding of Australian general history and its exclusionary and 'forgetful' practices.

The author's statement that his book "starts from the importance of the local" (4) reminds the reader that popular music is actually created within a local context and culture, besides being addressed to them. Stratton's important contribution to the study of popular music in general is his ability to move away from the easy adherence to 'schools of thought' by constantly focusing on its specificity and the impact this has in indigenising theory itself. Stratton introduces readers to his notion of 'musical sensibility', which, despite his references to Kirshenblatt-Gimblett's "sound sensibilities" and Raymond Williams' "changing structures of feeling", works out as an alternative notion of this concept. Through this important concept the author intends to refer to the collective assumptions of Australians as to what makes popular music Australian, what genres are considered part of it, what criteria form their aesthetics, and how this reflects shared notions and beliefs:

Australian music sensibility refers to the repertoire of shared assumptions through which Australians experience and evaluate the music they make and to which they listen. This sensibility can, in practice, be inflected in different ways. The dominant musical understanding refers to that understanding most prevalent, and most taken-for-granted, in the national culture. This shared understanding overdetermines both the production and consumption of music in, in this case, Australian culture. (6)

Later, through his discussion in the first chapter of the Beat Boom bands in Australia and his investigation into why Australian bands did not find a role outside the country, we begin to understand that the author sees popular music as the product of many influences and as an always unfinished process.

The role of "global counter-flows" is a notion that allows Stratton to explain the unpredictable dynamics of cultural exchange and change. He does this especially in the fifth chapter, where the interesting case of the Scientists group, which may have influenced the Seattle elaboration of grunge, is used to propose a new theory of grunge. Here Stratton uses Appadurai's work on global flows but he recognises its shortcomings in dealing with the music industry and its dynamics, as well as identifying unexpected exchanges between places and musics in the context of a 'free', grassroots-driven, uncontrollable "cassette technology".

Discussing at one point Brabazon's analysis of the Perth music scene, and the peculiarity of phenomena such as the emergence of the beat movement from Liverpool rather than London, of 90s dance music from

Manchester instead of London, or the development of grunge in Seattle versus New York, Stratton establishes a finer point in the understanding of the texture of Australian sensibility. One aspect is the self-granted hegemonic role in shaping Australian culture embodied by Sydney and Melbourne. But although he embraces Brabazon's theory of "second tier cities" (as she calls Manchester, Brisbane, Perth and Seattle, attributing their superior innovative energy to their relative freedom from the creative, institutional and economic pressures experienced by cities like London, New York, or Sydney), he widens the scope of the discussion to consider the much argued continuity between the past White Australia Policy and the post-1970s multiculturalism policy. Stratton's analysis of the role in Australia of Anglo-Celtic culture, which is at a powerful distance from the multicultural periphery, points to the mechanisms by which this core leaves room for the acknowledgment and appreciation of 'ethnic' cultures but always from a *relative* position, measured by the principles and practices of the core. Proof of this, according to the author, is the streaming or barring of what is deemed different by the hegemonic music culture whereby ethnic music is confined to its enclaves, thus allowing a parallel, separate coexistence of Australian popular music and "those other Australian *musics*" (9). One issue Stratton tackles is the fact that the fusions or heavy reciprocal influences that shaped other genres, like rock 'n' roll in the United States or *Tejano* music, have not occurred in Australia. Not only that, but if ethnic musicians "get creative", as in the case of Susheela Raman, then they *fall out* of the music scene altogether, guilty of not being ethnic any more, as 'failed ethnic', not only not part of the dominant genre but also unrecognizing of the "privilege of the former". As Stratton points out, after her experience in Australia, Raman moved to Britain, where the diasporic music she succeeded in producing with Sawhey and Singh was considered just another facet of English popular music and her *Salt Rain* in 2001 was nominated for the popular Mercury Music Prize Award.

Stratton's extensive knowledge of Australian popular music history makes this book an indispensable reference for anyone interested in Australian popular culture and music. It shows how various musical movements and phenomena, presented with a profusion of detailed historic information, often prove to be completely different from the assumptions approved by the 'received story' of Australian rock, such as the myth of the white and male character of Australian rock. Stratton exposes this as a fallacy, but he also depicts the underlying worldviews that have reinforced such myths.

Audiences themselves are the main characters in this book as in no other study about Australian music I have read, and their relevance in the process of music-making is evident. Influenced as they are by broader cultural – not only musical – factors, the choices of the audience 'instate

the local'. For Stratton the local – whose definition is fundamental to the whole of his discussion – is a very complex notion, unlike globalisation I may add. So the main suggestion here is to rethink popular music from the point of view of the local.

One of the huge merits of this book is also to focus on the 'colonial construction' represented by Perth, and to suggest – and this is my comment – that the historic tension towards fulfilling a White Australia design has claimed the dramatic cost not just of distancing those involved from indigenous and ethnic sensibilities, but of developing an epistemology that has difficulties in valuing and recognizing the local. And it is the local now – with digitalisation and the internet – that is once again central to the production of music: they have indeed "returned music to the local". And like all studies that really have something to say, Stratton's book prompts the reader to study Australian popular music, accepting the author's final challenge that "whatever happens, Australian popular music will remain distinctive" (202).