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*Distortion and Subversion: Punk Rock Music and the Protests
for Free Public Transportation in Brazil (1996-2011)* by
Rodrigo Lopes De Barros (review)

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Reviews



RODRIGO LOPES DE BARROS. *Distortion and Subversion: Punk Rock Music and the Protests for Free Public Transportation in Brazil (1996–2011).*

Liverpool, UK: Liverpool University Press, 2022. 348 pp.

ISBN: 9781800856141.

Distortion and Subversion: Punk Rock Music and the Protests for Free Public Transportation in Brazil (1996–2011) constitutes an important contribution to the study of musical activism, a field that has recently proliferated in increasingly polarized times. The focus on the Free Fare Movement might appear narrow, but it was this social movement and its imagination of a noncapitalist world that lit the match that sparked Brazil's transformational protests of June 2013. The protests have come to represent a watershed in Brazilian political history, as they shattered the political consensus the Workers' Party had created, accelerating the polarization of Brazilian society. They were thus an important step in the tumultuous path that led to the impeachment of Dilma Rousseff and ultimately to the election of Jair Bolsonaro. As such, de Barros's meticulous documentation of the Free Fare Movement from 1996 to 2011 provides a political and cultural prehistory of the June 2013 protests that irrevocably changed the country.

The book is most successful as a documentation of the social movement itself. Drawing on interviews, personal experience, and "cyber-archaeology" of the internet as archive, de Barros traces the movement's emergence in the cities of Salvador, Florianópolis, Belo Horizonte, and São Paulo, to each of which he devotes a chapter. In parallel, he documents punk music in Brazil at the turn of the millennium, focusing on various aspects of punk culture beyond music—including DIY, vegetarianism, anarchist and socialist politics, and media. I particularly enjoyed his discussion of punk appropriations of Carnival and his application of the supposedly apolitical tradition to social movements. By circumventing Rio de Janeiro and focusing on punk, a noncanonical genre in Brazilian popular music, de Barros helps decenter scholarship on Brazilian musical culture. He also shows the importance of what he calls a "foreign" genre contributing to protest in Latin America, where protest music had often been in dialogue with local traditions in the decades before.

I say he documents punk music “in parallel” to his discussion of the Free Fare Movement, however, because frequently the narratives of the movement and the musical scene are presented in isolation and do not cross paths as much as I had hoped. The book is thus less strong as a musical account of the movement. Although he does substantiate the link between the phenomena through discussions of punk bands’ songs and concerts in support of the movement, these accounts are outweighed by the author’s analysis of the broader politics of punk lyrics and culture, often opening up a much wider scope that complicates a focus on the musicians’ protagonism in the movement. In my reading, the book does not offer an innovative framework that theoretically advances the study of music and social movements more broadly.

The shortcoming of the approach, in my view, is encapsulated by the author’s passing reflection on one interlocutor’s comments: “If I decided to concentrate this study on the relationship between the protests for free public transportation and the underground rock scene of important Brazilian cities, it was precisely because of [an] instance like this one . . . [in which a person described] the people participating in the Turnstile Revolt as potentially being rockers. (If not totally sure of such a thing, he at least raises it as a possibility)” (95). This tentative observation presents the movement and scene as certainly co-occurring and overlapping, as the author himself refers to “the converging characteristics . . . the correlation between worlds” (36). But the movement and scene end up seeming less fundamentally connected than the subtitle might imply, with punk one of several other genres connected to the movement, including hip-hop, on which the author does not focus. De Barros concludes that punk was a “path for revolt” (270), but the fact that an anarchist social movement would be connected to punk rock at a time when Brazilian youth were particularly infatuated with rock in itself does not feel surprising.

The book constitutes a substantial wealth of information but is perhaps raw material that could be further condensed, molded, and sharpened. At 348 pages, it is a sprawling manuscript that, at this size, could focus on the relationship between punk and social movements in Brazil more broadly, of which the Free Fare Movement might be only one important element. Although the city of focus changes from chapter to chapter, the text reads as one long and continuous narrative, and the chapters largely do not theoretically advance new elements of focus. Despite the length, one misses an account of the 2013 protests themselves, which could have been the culmination of the book’s narrative. The language is mostly accessible, but the exhaustive detail can hinder the reading of what is in itself an exciting topic, and the tone often oscillates between that of a study of a movement and an uncritical manifesto for the movement.

Nevertheless, it is not an understatement to say that the Free Fare Movement is key to understanding crucial transformations in contemporary Brazilian politics and culture, including the reactionary response that followed and snowballed. Moreover, the dreams of the social movement and musical scene that de Barros documents live on and will form elements of the lineage, vocabulary, and repertoires of contention for future conflagrations. As such, *Distortion and Subversion* is an invaluable account of Brazil's precarious democracy and its possible futures.

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JAIRO MORENO. *Sounding Latin Music, Hearing the Americas*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2023. 376 pp. ISBN: 9780226825687.

Jairo Moreno's *Sounding Latin Music, Hearing the Americas* explores how music making by artists Shakira, Rubén Blades, Arturo O'Farrill, and Miguel Zenón is interpreted by divergent Latinx, Latine, Latin American, and global audiences. Moreno analyzes how artists have been recognized at home in their countries, how their music has been indexed as Latin American in regional contexts, and the responses to their music by migrant and Latinx communities in the United States. He conceptualizes three interrelated spheres between hearing and sounding, what he calls "migrant creativity," "aural equality," and "modernity's syncopations" (1). Moreno requests that readers indulge him by allowing forays across multiple threads and thought processes. Therefore, the book reads as variations on a theme containing repeated rhythms with refinements. Moreno proposes terminology to theorize the in-between time and space located in Latin American music that is made and heard across diasporic, global, and at-home communities. *Latino Latin Americanism* refers to possibilities and entanglements embedded in the perspectives of Latin American immigrants and "Latino sector[s] in America" that hear and experience music in complex simultaneous and temporal ways (29). He mobilizes Román de la Campa's theorization to quantify the significant marketing sales and practices in global market capitals (10). Moreno explores the agency of a migrant artist to disrupt boundaries and take up temporal space at a given time. Calling this "migrant creativity," he refers to the entangled methods in which the music and musician challenge hegemonic practices to redistribute aesthetic experiences and create "aural equality" (2) and the resulting tensions or syncopations. For example, Shakira's success in building bilingual markets across the world is analyzed in economic detail to demonstrate that the development of mass media and "creative cosmopolitanism"