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in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Neil Nehring.** *Popular Music, Gender and Postmodernism: Anger Is an Energy.* Thousand Oaks, Calif.: Sage Publications, 1997. xxxi + 203 pp. \$109.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7619-0835-7; \$57.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7619-0836-4.

POPULAR MUSIC,  
GENDER, AND  
POSTMODERNISM



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**Published on** H-PCAACA (August, 1997)

Rock music is, at its heart, a music of passion, spontaneity, fire. So why is it that many academics and music journalists dismiss the political and social value of emotion in popular music? Neil Nehring has the answer—and, he thinks, the antidote.

The problem, Nehring argues in *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism*, is postmodernism. Critical writings on 1990s grunge, punk, and Riot Grrls groups typically ridicule performers' rage as rock-and-roll scream therapy at best, or a calculated pose at worst. But, according to Nehring, such dismissals of angry music stem more from a postmodernist contempt for genuine emotion than from an understanding of how pop music functions both for performers and listeners.

To restore emotions such as anger to their rightful place in discussions of rock music, Nehring suggests the antidote lies in feminist philosophy. Just as Riot Grrls groups such as Bikini Kill and Hole (led by Courtney Love) have relied on unfettered emotion to make their point on stage, feminist philosophy argues that "emotions are rational judgments formed out of social interaction ... and that anger is the 'essential political emotion'" (p. 107).

The first half of *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism* is an unrelenting indictment of the anti-emotion

strain in music criticism. Nehring blames this "willful fatalism," in which anger is seen as just another marketing ploy by the culture industry to seduce jaded youth, on Marxist academics and other mass-cult bashers. Nehring argues that postmodernism's bleak productivist tendencies make it a poor tool for studying pop music. Focusing on rock music as text, he asserts, neglects how the music is experienced, and it is in that experience that the music shows its authenticity—and its ability, through expressions of anger, to give voice to political and social objectives.

Unlike postmodernist approaches, which treat anger more as dysfunction than dissent, feminist philosophy stresses the importance of mediating between "the irreconcilable experiences of the body and the mind" (p. 109). Far from being a deficient response, anger in Nehring's view is a constructive, even necessary, source of energy. To support this perspective, he looks at the rise of grunge and the Riot Grrls groups, grass-roots rock movements that mix the rage of 1970s punk music with an understanding of 1990s sexual politics.

Nehring's own passion is the book's greatest strength, and its main weakness. His no-hold-barred assault on postmodernism, particularly as it rears its elitist head in music criticism, effectively reveals the limitations of an approach that separates culture from context. His

populist insistence (*a la* critics such as Greil Marcus) that rock music and its emotions can be genuine regardless of how the music is produced is refreshing.

But in his enthusiasm for the music, he often gets carried away. Nehring all but canonizes the angry rock acts he loves: Nirvana's emergence, for instance, is treated as the Second Coming (with Kurt Cobain's suicide the crucifixion). And Nehring's assertions about the power of angry rock's music would be stronger if he would just include more of the music. The final chapter's exploration of Bikini Kill's "Carnival" is a thoughtful example of where Nehring wants his analysis to go; unfortunately, he does not go there often enough.

Still, *Popular Music, Gender, and Postmodernism* is a solid rebuttal of the cynicism plaguing music criticism today. At the end of the book, Nehring calls for a new critical paradigm, "open to everyone, to every cultural form, and to the undivided experience of the body and mind, nature and culture" (p. 179). This work should help lay the foundation.

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**Citation:** Chris Foran. Review of Nehring, Neil, *Popular Music, Gender and Postmodernism: Anger Is an Energy*. H-PCAACA, H-Net Reviews. August, 1997.

**URL:** <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=1185>

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