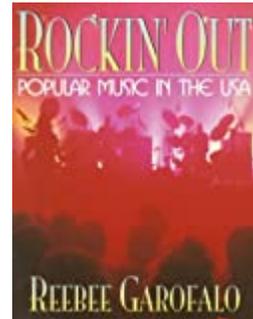


# H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences



**Reebee Garofalo.** *Rockin' Out: Popular Music in the USA.* Boston, Mass.: Allyn & Bacon, 1997. xii + 484 pp. \$24.95 (paper), ISBN 978-0-205-13703-9.



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Garofalo's comprehensive summary of U.S. popular music covers the past 150 years of mainstream sounds. At times too narrowly focused, this means his attention to detail isn't sacrificed to the broad scope of the book's subtitle. Garofalo charts the irresistible changes wrought by technology in the reproduction, enjoyment and profitability of popular music in the U.S.A.—from the invention of the phonograph in 1877, through digital satellite transmissions.

The author first distinguishes “popular music” from “classical,” folk and indigenous forms, as well as from jazz, all outside his scope. Next he highlights two “great eras of mainstream popular music,” one dominated by Tin Pan Alley, and one follows the “emergence of rock n’ roll in the early 1950s,” (p. 1) and continues through to the present. After describing the hegemonic power of Tin Pan Alley in the first half of this century, much of Garofalo's attention is paid to the blues, rockabilly, gospel, country, swing and r & b that preceded the new form and era of music.

Early on Garofalo establishes the first of many parallels between relatively autonomous phenomena, discussing how the record industry utilized categories of “race” to market distinctly separate musical genres, and thereby reinforce segregation in sales (p. 43).

Because Garofalo conceptualizes the “popular” as a reflection of “popularity,” he attaches primary significance to sales data. By relying on *Billboard* magazine's “charts,” and industry-wide Gold and Platinum “awards” (p. viii), he makes artists and trends almost totally dependent on commercial success as the measure for mention in this volume. Another of Garofalo's premises is that popular music is part of the larger social context where traditions of culture, class, race, and gender, technology, and profit have now been overlaid with recently consolidated processes of modern mass-marketing and consumption (p. 464). Finally, Garofalo is careful to assign credit to women and people of color for their contributions to the popular history of music.

After establishing themes and issues, and articulating definitions and a framework; Garofalo discusses the relations between popular taste and mass technology that lead to the “crossing of cultures” that produced something *new* (p. 93). The idea of “crossing cultures” for Garofalo means the diversity and interaction at the very roots of rock n’ roll, a music that could only emerge from a blend of ethnic, racial, musical *and* technological elements which he shows is far more complex than the often repeated equation: r & b + c & w = r & r.

Nonetheless, in the last instance, Garofalo is too mechanical in his application of dialectics. And, his empha-

sis on “commercial success” leads him to give insufficient attention to American Indian, Chicano and Women’s music, and especially reggae and ska, which all have had important influence on newly emergent artists and trends outside Garofalo’s focus. His framework is consistently bipolar, expressing itself as a series of dualist oppositions: punk versus disco (p. 301), rap versus heavy metal (p. 395). There is no doubt that two poles can be found in Pop Rock when one is looking for them in the statistics; but, the development of popular music is so much more complex and contradictory, as Garofalo’s own discourse indicates. He documents a wealth of inter-twining trends and styles that defy the easy separation implied by polarizations such as Punk/Disco and Rap/Metal.

The problem lies first in the author’s framework, but is most strongly expressed in his over-emphasis on the importance of disco, which he states, “may have scored a larger political victory than punk” (p. 305), because people of all colors were on the dance floor together. This error is accompanied by an under-emphasis on the role of those musics *outside* the mainstream, such as norten-a, reggae, salsa, ska and world beat, vital in perpetuating “American” Pop Rock. The repeated idea of “two poles” down-plays the *parallel* emergence of Disco and Hip-Hop, both simultaneously influenced by soul and funk, as well as the Djs, Toasters and dance-halls

of the Caribbean, where artists without bands, or even instruments, developed their own dancefloor banter as disc jockeys *playing* “two turn tables and a microphone” (Beck).

And though there are extensive notes and a thorough bibliography, Garofalo doesn’t always credit the sources of some of his political and theoretical formulations. Despite these shortcomings, this text is an excellent resource for any number of “popular culture” curricula.

Because this book links developments in mainstream popular music with those in business, technology, film, fashion and politics, it is an informative reference worthy of inclusion in many different syllabi. Summaries and notes follow each chapter, and the high quality photographs (BMI, Bettmann and Ochs Archives) are at times generous in size, but not obtrusive. Garofalo blends an entertaining writing style with well-documented content, and I recommend this book as a classroom text, library reference, and for general reading.

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