



**David Simonelli.** *Working Class Heroes: Rock Music and British Society in the 1960s and 1970s.* Lanham: Lexington Books, 2013. xxi + 301 pp. \$90.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-7391-7051-9; \$37.99 (paper), ISBN 978-0-7391-7052-6.



**Reviewed by** Patrick Glen (University of Sheffield)

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**Commissioned by** Zachary J. Lechner (Thomas Nelson Community College)

## “Still Fking Peasants”? Probing the Intersection of British Rock and Class

David Simonelli's *Working Class Heroes*, an expansion of his PhD dissertation, is a lucid examination of British rock from its direct antecedents—folk and skiffle—to the Sex Pistols's bile, blood, and methadone-flecked demise in 1978. Between the late 1950s and late 1970s, the huge commercial success of British popular music, especially rock, resulted in a considerable, but elusive, social and cultural influence. The pop and rock industry sold an incredible amount of records, concert tickets, music papers, and various ephemera. Music made a soundtrack for youth and subcultures and mediated conversations on politics, identity, and society. It brought people together in concerts, pubs, and festivals, allowing radical social mixing. Despite the abundance of often very pertinent and incisive writing on British popular music and rock, including Ashgate's Folk and Popular Music series, such work has mostly been written by non-historians. This oversight among scholars makes Simonelli's work much needed. *Working Class Heroes* is a useful introduction to a thorough, historically minded consideration of British popular music. While estab-

lished scholars, such as Matthew Worley and Marcus Collins, have started to write about British popular music historically, Simonelli, like Adrian Horn, has proved that the topic is worthy of full-length monographs.[1]

Simonelli focuses on British rock music's intersections with class. He argues that, to westerners, class remains the preeminent way to describe their economic, social and cultural status (p. xiii). Furthermore, he argues, in British society, rock music was the most vibrant area for discussing social change: rock helped redefine the socioeconomic categories assigned to older generations through an entirely different, more culturally based fashion. Rock music developed the sense that questioning authority and freedom of expression were enshrined as rights rather than privileges (p. xx). This provoked an emphasis on individuality and diversity. To some extent Simonelli is right: British rock often used a language of rebellion and individual autonomy. Still, class is a challenging and contested concept. Rock's precise influence on class is difficult to gauge without a systematic survey of how rock and pop's mes-

sages were decoded, understood, and affected.

The book begins by describing the social and cultural context of British music before 1963. This includes a discussion of folk, the music hall, and mass music from the late Victorian era onward. It takes in the cultural paternalism of the English Folk Dance and Song Society and the BBC's John Reith. Then, however, it bursts into the brash excitement of 1950s teenage consumption, skiffle, and rock and roll.

The first half of the book concentrates on the 1960s. It starts with a chapter on the Beatles. Simonelli deems the group "classless in outlook" (p. 19), which is debatable. Nonetheless his focus on Liverpool, identity, and respectability (however short-lived the Beatles' respectability was!) is interesting when explaining Beatlemania; their success in the United States; and the development of provincial, and more precisely aspirational, music scenes. Subsequently, and like the bands with a chance of success, Simonelli moves from the provinces to London, the loci of post-affluence British social and cultural change and its culture industry. He focuses on rhythm and blues, the main London scene protagonists and Bob Dylan's influential visits.

The following two chapters discuss Mods and marketing a specific lifestyle, two subjects that mix nicely. The book moves from a discussion of subculture, pop art, and Mod style to the business that sustained, exploited, and communicated the messages, symbolism, and styles (although more on the music press would have been useful). Chapters 6 through 8 investigate psychedelia, folk rock, and the counterculture. These genres, Simonelli posits, have created distinctions in taste, politics, sophistication, and indeed class that departed from the class-laden post-rock and roll mass youth culture.

The next three chapters discuss three 1970s phenomena: progressive rock, heavy metal and hard rock, and glam rock. "Prog" formed part of a post-psychedelic and countercultural continuum; it deepened "pop" and "art" distinctions, which are seen by Simonelli to demonstrate novel class divisions. Heavy music was, he argues, conversely steeped in a certain working-class masculine, even sexist, sensibility, which glam subverted through flamboyant bourgeois consumption (albeit often by people who were socioeconomically working class). The final two chapters draw an often-stated dichotomy between the 1970s music business, which was seen as bloated and cautious, and the punk challenge that for some bands (within a very diverse genre) mixed working-class rhetoric with mass market success.

Simonelli adeptly explains British rock's domestic antecedents within the surrounding consumer and mass culture in an extremely useful and eclectic chapter for those who want to place rock music within its historical context. Here Simonelli describes folk and the music hall, the radio's mass culture, the move from austerity to consumption, and the arrival of rock and roll to Elvis Presley. Popular music's success was contingent on reaching a mass culture by appeasing cultural gatekeepers; it gained a following in middle-class teenage culture and inspired a number of local musicians. Simonelli argues that this mass culture followed from earlier musical traditions that were seen as representing more significant meanings. In the first decades of the twentieth century, folk and the music hall were seen as the people's music. This gave commentators a chance to define the nature of "the people," so music was said to indicate standards of propriety that were enmeshed in class-based thought. This process of definition reflected a bias against commercial culture from professionals, critics, intellectuals, and politicians. As rock and roll and skiffle emerged, the music was justified to elite culture's professional standards and, in skiffle's case, an intellectual notion of folk authenticity, therefore allowing key cultural gatekeepers, the BBC for instance, to catapult proto-rock musicians into mass prominence. The connotations that informed the idea of the people's music were retained in popular, modern, and professionalized genres: Simonelli argues that this is the way to understand popular music's relationship with class. This is a convincing account of how rock music developed from genres that observers perceived as having a social base and cultural relevance.

Simonelli then explains how rock music mediated new values regarding class using a mass media platform to speak to its burgeoning audience. He follows a similar trajectory to Iain Chambers's *Urban Rhythms: Pop Music and Popular Culture* (1985) as he investigates the main protagonists in British rock, charting the Beatles, the London scene, Mods, "Swinging London," psychedelia, folk, and the counterculture's well-trodden ground in the wider academic literature on British popular music. The broad narrative is again a useful introduction to the key people and events in British rock history but does not depart too far from conventional knowledge. The book's explanation of the cultural impact of the Beatles is, however, entertaining and informative, illustrated by accounts of head teachers reprimanding long-haired boys and factory workers stopping work when the foreman turned off "Love Me Do." Simonelli explains that the Beatles's values defined rock professionalism and the

prerogatives of youth. Yet his view of the Beatles's role in class debates seems a little inconsistent. The Beatles are seen simultaneously as "classless" and providing "classless" values to youth but also as representatives of the working class, which bestowed them their authenticity. This might be a reflection of the fluidity of British class and the disjuncture between the Beatles as modern youths with varied class origins and the preconceptions of the mass media that saw them as just-washed northern scruffs. While I understand why Simonelli has not gone into great theoretical detail regarding these questions of complex and contradictory understandings of class identities—such dense analysis might alienate the book's intended audience—he leaves unresolved incongruities that would benefit from further discussion and a more robust explanation.

The success of provincial artistes, illustrated by the Beatles, is eclipsed in later chapters by the influence of London-based music and the surrounding culture industry. London was where British pop and rock was professionalized. Nevertheless within the London music milieu, according to Simonelli, were quite bohemian, university- or art school-educated individuals who together created a new cultural establishment that valorized working-class values. Simonelli argues that musicians, like the Beatles, used rock music to step outside of existing class distinctions and redefine professionalism. Simonelli equates rock's professionalism to disrupting traditional class conceptions. Some working-class musicians contributed to this process, but it first seemed rather middle-class dominated and, second, although working-class tropes were used for musical effect, London's role as a diverse cauldron of cosmopolitanism enmeshed many competing visions of class and identity. This is encapsulated by such artists as the Rolling Stones and the Who. The Who, for example, mixed Gustav Metzger's autodestructive art with working-class motifs and lyrics. Again, rock, as Simonelli argues, had a lot to say about class, but a wider reflection would be very useful to underline the significance of the class argument and to define precisely how "respectability" or "professionalism" corresponded exactly to changing notions of class identity. This consideration would help buttress Simonelli's claim that the acceptance of rock musicians as professional artists redefined "mainstream British culture" as psychedelic bands and folk artistes flaunted their inward-looking, commercially apathetic, and creative tendencies while explaining how it conflicted or cohered with the counterculture's and progressive rock's "revolutionary" agendas.

While there may be some issues when it comes to

class semantics, contested motives, and meanings, the most enlightening aspects of the book involve Simonelli's explanations of the culture industry and consumption. Chapter 5 does this very well. It brings together the business of rock from fashion, radio, record labels, management, television, films, and, of course, records. It is a great starting point to understanding the industry behind the music and fashion. Simonelli is sensitive to how becoming involved in the commercial culture clashed with bohemian fetishization of working-class values while noting that commercialization was rather inevitable for popular musicians. The section on "Pirate Radio"—broadcast from ships with radio transmitters anchored in the North Sea so they could illegally circumvent the BBC's radio monopoly—is extremely interesting. It demonstrates how popular music transformed the British media as popular demand for pop hits, left wanting by the BBC's Reithian distaste for rock's Americanisms, prompted profound changes. It established a lucrative precedent for advertising on British radio and, to Prime Minister Harold Wilson's shock, was supported by the Council of Europe. The government's moved to create domestic legislation against pirate radio resulted in the formation of Radio One and Radio Two. In other words, it created a popular music radio station in Britain. The chapter thus underlines rock music's huge commercial and political impact.

Simonelli also contributes to an understudied element of British pop and rock music that has only really been noted for its radical aesthetic rather than its class context. Progressive rock, a much (and to some extent fairly) maligned genre, was still a significant element of British popular music culture. Simonelli argues that it was elitist and harked back to romantic cultural values that clashed with the ideas of late 1960s youths's notions of authenticity. Progressive musicians perceived themselves as artistes who were "serious" and "progressive," thus distinguishing themselves from more commercial and hedonistic working-class genres. This point may be slightly unfair, but at least progressive rock receives a mention. It is an area that would benefit from a longer study that develops Simonelli's social approach and tries to disentangle post-punk assumptions about the genre's supposed pretensions and eschewal of a social role (ironically some post-punk music adhered to similar values and embraced musical mutations and experimentation). But still "prog" never had that much to say explicitly about class.

Simonelli describes punk, unlike "prog," as "the most stimulating, exciting and culturally significant music of

the 1970sâ (p. 225). This is where class really comes into sharp relief. Simonelli argues that punk reestablished amateurish standards in a departure from musical professionalism, espoused a class-based rhetoric that threatened adult society, and was forged from a mix of art school pretension and intellectual rebelliousness that harnessed the energy and identity of economically depressed working-class youth. It exposed Britain to the ideas of working-class youth revolution in a brilliantly grotesque way. Yet Simonelli ends his account prematurely with the Sex Pistolsâ breakup and John Lydon forming Public Image Ltd. After all, punk continued to critique society and represent class to a large, in some respects even larger, audience during the early 1980s in response to Thatcherism.

*Working Class Heroes* is an admirable attempt to reinvigorate class as a focus for studies on popular music and will have a definite audience; however, there are a few of issues that need to be addressed. First, rock stars did sing and talk about class; however, the language of rebellion and autonomy was highly contested. Even in a single band, the Hollies or the Sex Pistols, for instance, there were competing ideas regarding the role of a rock musician, class identity, commercialism, regional identity, and youth rebellion. Arguably by focusing on class alone, Simonelli has missed the way rock music provided a polyvalent forum to debate politics, economics, gender, sexuality, and social mores, and to define youth as a discrete social category. Negotiating class was one element of a pluralistic rock culture that could be somewhat obscured for a casual reader by Simonelliâs limited analytical lens. If anything, *Working Class Heroes* serves to demonstrate the difficulties when it comes to reading class.

Second, from a methodological standpoint, Simonelli often relies on the music press without explaining the social, economic, and cultural forces that produced papers. To some extent, this means that much of the primary evidence that *Working Class Heroes* uses is based on a very metropolitan, middle-class milieu whose interests were commercially aligned with artists. These publications mixed salesmanship, mythology, polemic, and even amateur sociology, and constructed a perception that class and rock were entwined. Yet Simonelli should have questioned this brew more systematically. The music pressâs notion of class was somewhat confused and unsteady, and many lower-middle-class musicians were narrated as working class. Dr. Feelgoodâs Wilco Johnson, for example, was frequently described as working-class; his parents were, but he was a

Newcastle University-educated school teacher. Simonelli could have rectified such methodological issues by including a discussion of the music press in his chapter on rockâs commercial culture. Of course, music papers were very important in creating meanings and mediating musiciansâ messages and representing aspects of personal identity; they were read by millions each week (as each issue of the major papers, with circulations of over two hundred thousand copies per week, were shared by between six and ten readers per issue). Yet as a source, it is important to acknowledge how they often balanced commercial concerns with alternative ideas. For instance, The History of Rock series, which Simonelli often uses, coincided with record labels reacting to a new format, compact discs, and dredging-up digital remasterings from their back catalogs.

Third, I am not convinced that rock alone changed the way class was perceived in Britain other than disrupting the class backgrounds of working-class musicians and providing an arena for debate. People might describe class in cultural terms now, but there are a fair amount of economic, geographic, and social factors that contribute to class identity. The research that Simonelli cites in his conclusion to prove a culturally middle-class Britainâa 2011 paper from a think-tank called Britain Thinksâhas been refuted by another report based on Ipsos MORI polling in 2013 that found that 60 percent of Britons see themselves as working-class in response to the Conservative government and recession.[2] If anything, this polling suggests that ideas of class are fluid and diverse, and respond to a variety of competing influences. It would have been useful if Simonelli had employed a methodology that allowed for a greater discussion of local attitudes to class and the way fans responded to rockâs conception of class. Such attention would help differentiate rockâs influence on changing attitudes toward class from such factors as affluence, full employment, and messages encoded in other influential media. In some cases, I am sure rock did have a profound effect on the way people thought about, discussed, and enacted their class identity. But it was one of many factors that represented and perhaps precipitated social change.

Overall, Simonelliâs book is a useful addition to the literature on British popular music. The book provides a helpful grounding in the key protagonists and events for newcomers to British popular music history. Those who are interested in teaching modules on British cultural change, popular music, and rock would be well served by including this text on reading lists. It is well positioned for first- and second-year undergraduates, with

its straightforward but entertaining prose and relative brevity. I do have reservations with the central thesis: rock music did not work alone in providing the language and symbolism for a new culturally based understanding of class. But if anything, Simonelli has laid the foundations for a deeper study of rock music and class that truly comes to grips with those individuals and groups that took rock's messages seriously. It would be fruitful if further research investigated how rock fans have affected musical meanings and revealed how this process contributed to social and cultural change.

## Notes

[1]. Marcus Collins, "The Age of the Beatles: Parliament and Popular Music in the 1960s," *Contemporary British History* 27, no. 1 (2013): 85-107; Matthew Worley, "Shot by Both Sides: Punk, Politics and the End of Consensus," *Contemporary British History* 26, no. 3 (2012): 333-354; and Adrian Horn, *Juke Box Britain: Americanisation and Youth Culture, 1945-60* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2011).

[2]. Rachel Jolley, ed., *State of the Nation: Where Is Bittersweet Britain Heading?* (London: British Future, 2013), <http://www.britishfuture.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/01/State-of-the-Nation-2013.pdf>.

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