

BOOK REVIEW

Rosenthal, Robert and Richard Flacks. 2012. *Playing for Change: Musicians in the Service of Social Movements*. Boulder, CO: Paradigm Publishers. 322 pp. \$23.95 Paperback (9781594517891)

This book lands in my mailbox at an interesting moment, with the recent passing of American folksinger and political activist Pete Seeger and the release of the film *Inside Llewyn Davis*, a not-so-easily disguised rendering of the early career of another folksinger, Dave van Ronk. I couldn't resist running to the collection of vinyl LPs in my attic to fetch the copy I hadn't played for years of Seeger's 1963 Carnegie Hall concert. To say that my head was swirling could be viewed as hyperbole. How about this book as a work of sociology? Here things get a little more complicated.

This book has as its theme, though not explicitly stated, that of ambivalence. It is also reflected in its argument about the place of music and musicians in the service of social movements, and how much music might be of service in solving what Mancur Olson defined as the "free-rider" problem in providing something by way of assisting in recruiting social movement adherents, motivating them for continued involvement with the movement and hence solidifying their commitment. Their presentation is historically framed in wonderful detail. Rosenthal and Flacks initially inform us of the case of the Almanac Singers in the 1940s and their performances tied to the organizing efforts of newly forming unions of the Congress of Industrial Organizations. As the authors point out, the Almanacs were not always enthusiastically greeted by movement leaders as they were seen by some as being more cheerleaders than consciousness raisers. This is central to the story as it reveals a tension that the authors demonstrate throughout their book, between art, in this case music, and politics, and that of the political and social movements that they serve. The authors convincingly demonstrate this point through examining the career of the civil rights anthem "We Shall Overcome" as it went from a black church song to signature song of the civil rights movement through its performance by Pete Seeger and Guy Garawan of The Highlander School.

The book works to explicate the link between music and social movements. The authors describe music as a resource for recruiting and

sustaining commitment to these movements. They go on to note, “But institutions typically use music to reinforce the hierarchy inherent in their structure. Such top-down production and use of music are not characteristic of social movements. Instead, grassroots cultural creativity are characteristic of social movements.” (9) The question seems to be, how are these culturally creative and egalitarian ends accomplished? Here are some considerations.

First, the authors delineate a sphere which they call “political music”, music which, “...engenders what C. Wright Mills called a ‘sociological imagination.’” By which they mean an emphasis on historical social arrangements rather than purely individual circumstances, though those circumstances are so structured by those conditions. While their emphasis is on the American case, they include noteworthy connections to political music in other places and circumstances, such as the music of Thomas Mapfumo in Zimbabwe or Gilberto Gil in Brazil. Consequently neither are they limited to what many would see as the sung-and-strum version of folk music as they also make reference to soul music, reggae and hip-hop. Political music does not stand as a thing itself, but is itself a matter of situated meaning. Attention to this comparative consideration is certainly noteworthy and commendable.

Second, their emphasis is on context, particularly in terms of musical and lyrical messages and meanings. To set the stage for understanding this they address the twin issues of what they call “the minstrel-passive audience” model with a clear message and a passive audience (28). They show how this is complicated by considerations of transmission, reception and, of course, context, which interpenetrate. Will the musicians get their musical message across? And, what inhibits or facilitates getting the message across? Is there contest, as well as context at play? The details and varieties become dizzying at times. If someone takes the position that meaning, regardless of the type of meaning, is always a problematic element of social interaction, then this will not be seen as a difficulty in appreciating this book. This is most interestingly illustrated in the controversy generated by Jesse Lemisch’s 1986 article in the *Nation* magazine over what might be seen as “appropriate” music for various social movements given the passing of generations. (189)

Third, there is the matter of theory and methods. By way of theory, they unpack the music/politics relationship through an engagement with a number of music and society formulations, including the work Theodor Adorno, though his work on popular music is somewhat tainted by a certain elitism and his work on jazz by a certain racism, which they note. Again, this work is informative as it raises the question of distraction from the ultimate goal of affecting social change. It does seem at times

that Adorno is set up as a straw figure for their argument over the claimed centrality music in social movement mobilization and commitment. Further, they cite the work of a number of subcultural theorists including George Lipshitz and Simon Frith who counter the Adorno strain respectively by pointing out that the historical origins of much popular music resides in the musics of oppressed peoples and the potential subversive values of pleasure. Finally, again, the question of meaning which is central to this work includes reference to interactionists, such as Howard S. Becker and David Reisman. They also heavily rely on Christopher Small's notion of musicking, which examines music not just as an object but as a process involving a host of participants: venue operators, ticket venders, organizers, etc. They draw on a number of sources: interviews they conducted with musicians, including the late Pete Seeger and Guy Carawan and more contemporaries such Ani DiFranco and Chuck D. They also interviewed political activists, some more recently than others and some face to face and others via phone and email. They reviewed the social movement literature to look historically for the role of music. They employed questionnaire data on music meaning distributed to students and friends. In addition, they drew on their own background in working in radio, Flacks, and record production, Rosenthal, as well as their participation in social movements.

Finally, we are brought to the core issue of this volume, the function of music and musicians for movements for social change. Here, as is so often the case in this volume, the answer is, it depends. It is contingent on meaning, context and the rest. In the end we are treated to the views of a variety of performers who take varying positions on the continuum of implicit and explicit political meanings. While music may not change the world, it will perhaps contribute to changing perceptions of issues.

While I applaud the spirit of this book and the authors' desire to celebrate this cultural dimension of social protest, I have a few reservations. First, the opening chapters could have used the blue pencil of an editor to streamline the discussion of the conceptual issues, particularly on musical meaning. Maybe this could be an audience consideration as this book might be read by persons other than sociologists. Second, short shrift is given to the interactionists in their introduction to various approaches to the study of music and social life. For example, while they cite Howard Becker's earlier work on dance-band musicians, they neglect his subsequent work on art worlds/social worlds. The role of settings and audiences could have been explored in more detail. For instance, does it make a difference if we are talking about rallies, coffee house gigs or concert performances? Whether one performs as a solo act or, if not, does it make a difference with whom one shares the stage? Details

that field research would have produced might have further enriched this book and led to some well-grounded theorizing.

Overall, *Playing for Change* is a valiant attempt to get at a very slippery topic. Furthermore, it suggests the possibility of more work on different cultural forms as they are connected to social movements, such as theater and poetry and occasions of their performance and the social worlds and conventions that surround them across a multiplicity of audiences and movements.

Johnson & Wales University

Russell R. Chabot

Russ Chabot is an associate professor of sociology at Johnson & Wales University, Providence, RI, USA. His work has been primarily on musicians and music worlds, as well as that of gatherings, including funerals, weddings, parades and demonstrations. All of it ethnographic in character and usually photographic as well as he often identifies himself primarily as a visual sociologist.

rchabot@jwu.edu