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The Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture

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Book Review

The Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture

MICHAEL, J. KRAMER

New York: Oxford University Press, 2013

ISBN: 978-0-19-538486-4

304 pp., \$39.95 (hb)

Northwestern University historian Michael J. Kramer explores the audio roots of political socialization in *The Republic of Rock*. He asserts that rock music fostered rethinking of citizenship responsibilities among many Americans and Vietnamese during the 1960s. Specifically, Kramer contends that San Francisco and Saigon became centers for audio-inspired re-examinations of personal allegiances to local, regional, national, and global communities. The United States faced serious domestic problems related to civil rights, political assassinations, labor unrest, and economic inequality when the military conflict in Indochina erupted. The intrusion of 500,000 US troops paralleled similar migrations of young people across the US to the Haight-Ashbury district. It also echoed the clashes between campus police and students at several California universities over free speech issues, the experimentation with hallucinogenic drugs throughout the Bay area, and other counter-cultural manifestations within San Francisco.

Kramer asserts that rock recordings offered a kaleidoscopic maze of citizenship options that challenged both political traditions and legal obligations. The disruption of civic norms was not limited to anti-war music, although many rock lyrics praised peace and condemned military conflicts. Kramer contends that the cultural chaos in San Francisco and Saigon beckoned for resolutions that would overthrow not just the “masters of war” who were directing the Vietnam conflict, but also the bigots, racists, and capitalists who denied freedom, equality, and justice to all citizens of the world. Fueled by recordings by Jefferson Airplane, Vanilla Fudge, Sly and the Family Stone, and others, many advocates of the new global democracy rejected the bonds of tradition and authority. A new sonic counterculture demanded change.

The Republic of Rock consists of six chapters that probe a decade of music-related events. In his introduction, Kramer argues that rock and roll has always been “an oddly commodified expression of revolt [and] a music of cross-racial, gender-bending, class-defying dimensions that has never lost its non-commercial energies of civic confrontation and experimentation” (3). Chapter 1 traces the attempts of Ken Kesey and his Merry Pranksters to redefine personal meaning and global citizenship through the use of loud music, strobe lights, and LSD and other hallucinogens to stimulate personal joy and political discovery. Chapter 2 explores

the operational contradictions and leadership squabbles that undermined the free-form rock broadcasting of San Francisco's KMPX radio. The staff's ideals of community, individuality, flexibility, and creativity ultimately fell prey to the competing realities of egotism, commercialism, and lack of organization. Chapter 3 reviews the fate of the ill-conceived and poorly funded Wild West Music Festival of 1969, which was ultimately cancelled. In Chapter 4 Kramer shifts his geographical perspective from America's left coast to Vietnam's right coast. From bunkers near the Tan Son Nhut Airbase to domestic shelters in Quan Tri Province, the author examines the influence of rock music on American troops. Influential lyrics arrived via radios transmitting popular music from the Armed Forces Vietnam Network, on discs played on privately owned record players, and over open wavelengths blasting pirate radio music along with the musings of radicalized GIs. Chapter 5 explores the emergence of teams of singing soldiers who were recruited from the ranks to perform cover versions of rock tunes under the aegis of the Command Military Touring Shows, the entertainment branch of the US Army. In his concluding chapter, Kramer highlights the cover recordings and ultimate expatriation of a five-member Vietnamese group called CBC, which, though based in Saigon, sounded like a Haight-Ashbury-in-exile musical unit.

Kramer notes that various rock songs broadcast on radio and television and performed at concerts and on street corners contributed to a citywide countercultural upheaval in San Francisco between 1960 and 1970. Lifestyles changed. Musical heroes emerged as political pundits. But lurking beneath the utopian plans to alter American society was an absence of coherent leadership and the lack of any structural means of directing participatory democracy toward long-range social goals. Rather than achieving genuine community togetherness or individual liberation, most rock-related movements in the Bay Area failed and left participants feeling exploited and isolated, proving that rock music is "utopian and sinister in equal parts" (128). Kramer elaborates on this point in respect of America's fiasco in Indochina, writing, "Amorphous, hedonistic, unpredictable, electric, sounding out the war by beckoning to the home front and imitating the sounds of the Vietnam conflict itself, rock did not deliver truths so much as it cut through any false pretenses with the feeling something had become unglued in Vietnam" (192).

Despite this harsh assessment of rock's role in macro-social reform, Kramer remains committed to the possibilities of improving individual lives through micro-musical engagements. That is, persons who reflect on their own feelings, thoughts, and actions after encountering rock recordings may benefit from the exhilaration that frames lyrical ideas. Citizens remain free to ponder their binary commitments to labor and leisure ("Takin' Care of Business"), production and consumption ("Shoppin' for Clothes"), and industriousness and play ("A Natural Man") via recordings, readings, reflections, and spirited debates with other citizens. For Kramer, rock music offers potential for change while remaining a neutral commodity that can be manipulated by GIs or generals, disc jockeys or station owners, assembly line workers or corporate directors, and voters or politicians.

The Republic of Rock is an important book on several levels. Ostensibly, it offers valuable insights into the culture of rock music in San Francisco and Saigon during the 1960s. But the author offers much more to his readers. First, in his notes he assembles a dazzling number of print and electronic resources that can assist scholars in examining music and social change in the United States. Second, he unveils the duplicity of “hip capitalism” (13–14) and “hip militarism” (135–36), where music can be used as a smokescreen to deflect attention from questionable bureaucratic decisions and devastating political policies. Third, Kramer offers a fascinating rationale concerning the primacy of Jimi Hendrix among American soldiers of all colors, classes, ages, and means in Vietnam. Finally, this well-documented study is relentless in illustrating point-after-point with the specific recordings—from “All Along the Watchtower,” “Piece of My Heart,” and “Machine Gun” to “For What It’s Worth,” “Eight Miles High,” and “I-Feel-like-I’m-Fixin’-to-Die Rag”—that were played by American soldiers in Vietnam. Kramer has also done a remarkable job of investigating specific historical events (e.g. the Human Be-In/Gathering of Tribes in Golden Gate Park in January 1967 and the “Radio First Termer” underground broadcasts of January 1971) and of tracing the actions of key individuals (American radio personality Tom “Big Daddy” Donahue, guitarist Phan Linh of the CBC band, and GI broadcaster Dave Delay, Jr. of radio Phan Rang in Vietnam) to illustrate the complex human struggles over contrasting perceptions of freedom and citizenship. Clearly, the virtues of peace, love, and understanding did not prevail over the demons of war, fear, and community conflict. Kramer’s book provides an informed and informative retrospective on a decade when sonic expectations for humanity soared, only to be brought back to earth by other musical depictions of ghetto lives (“Dead End Street”), police harassment (“Mad Dog”), mindless capitalism (“Mr. Businessman”), drug abuse (“The Pusher”), and military madness (“2 + 2 = ?”).

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