***Music and Capitalism: a History of the Present*. By Timothy D. Taylor. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2015. 240 pp. ISBN: 9780226311975**

Ethnomusicologist Timothy D. Taylor’s fifth book takes an ethnographic perspective on the rise of neoliberalism’s effect on the production and consumption of popular music. Taylor’s main focus is globalisation and digitalisation, which he views as both facilitators and symptoms of an increasingly pervasive neoliberal ideology. His analysis concludes that the unrelenting speed and scale of neoliberal capitalism drives ‘unremitting consumption’ (p.179) of cultural commodities, like music, as symbolic expressions of ‘the freedom to believe oneself to be the sole author of one's individuality’ (p.46). This conundrum, that freedom from the hegemony of neoliberalism can only be sought through neoliberalism is, for Taylor, what explains the miraculous success of the ideology over the past thirty years.

From his overarching Marxist and Weberian perspective, Taylor is unsurprisingly sombre about the impact of neoliberalism on music. He explores and illustrates through a range of interviews the largely negative consequences of increasingly complex and pressured labour markets. Many interviewees come across as ironically wistful for the fairer and simpler form of twentieth century pre-digitised capitalism, when the once decried, major record companies had money to invest and did so. Certainly, Taylor makes a very convincing case that neoliberalism is a far more pernicious form of capitalism than earlier iterations. Yet, had he included comparative interviews with successful millennial musicians, whose frame of professional reference is only operating under neoliberal capitalist conditions, it’s likely he could have elicited a wider and more balanced range of opinion.

The introduction, ‘Capitalism, Music and Social Theory’ outlines neoliberalism's seeming invisibility and how its acquisition agenda is shrouded by more progressive notions of globalisation. Chapter one, ‘A brief history of music and capitalism before the rise of neoliberalism,’ establishes how access to finance capital, from the mid nineteenth century, turns the song into a commodity that has a relatively easy to understand exchange value but a very complex use value. He also illustrates how, by the 1960s, music had become a powerful commodity for individual identity construction through consumption.

Chapter two, ‘Neoliberal Capitalism and the Culture Industries’ uses the Walkman as a metaphor for public space becoming populated by private preference. He argues personalisation creates a new conformity to brand conceptions that are more important than sound or genre. He observes that ‘the record industry is struggling, largely because of the rise of the digital distribution of music.’ (p.51)  However, he misses the opportunity to directly unpack how neoliberal ideologies can become self-defeating for capitalists. For example, when the use value of freedom of choice reduces the exchange value of the commodity to free - as happened with the MP3. Moreover, the ‘illegal’ exchange of the MP3 also demonstrates that whilst the off-line public space was becoming private, the on-line private space was becoming public. The lack of breadth and nuance in the analysis here suggests what Taylor is offering is only a certain perspective of a history of the present, one that focuses on inequity over opportunity.

This perspective is most evident in third chapter on globalisation. It focuses on the career of Angelique Kidjo and, although informative as a case study, by his own admission it reads like an indulgence of Taylor's own musical passions. Her example does highlight how issues of language and copyright exploitation in 'collaborations' between established Anglo-American pop stars and non-western musicians typifies the exploitation of emerging economies by multinational corporations. However, his concluding remark in the chapter that, ‘for today’s music industry it has become less important to find good new music to record, market and distribute than to exploit to the fullest the copyright that it owns’, (p.117) whilst on some level founded, seems inconsistent with the Kidjo analysis. Surely the example of an artist operating within a niche market over a thirty-plus year career, releasing thirteen albums on six different record labels, is the clearest illustration of a record industry still prepared to find, market and distribute ‘good’ new music. Once again, Taylor is so set on critiquing the destructiveness of neoliberalism he is reluctant to acknowledge any upside.

The very insightful and fundamental point of chapter four is that digitalisation is both efficient and inefficient with each scenario placing demands on workers’ time. (p.145) Taylor bemoans the lack of collaboration in music production (p.152), but ignores areas such as the increasing number of credits on pop records. Taylor is negative about the fact that neoliberalism and digitalisation have shifted the economy for recorded music from a one-off payment for a product to one of repeat payments for use. But if the song is the commodity, then digitisation is just another form of expression of the idea of the song to facilitate exchange. Evidently Taylor’s apparent affinity for physical product is why he chose Burger Records as his final case study in the fifth and final chapter, ‘Singing in the Shadows of Neoliberal Capitalism’.

This concluding chapter gives insightful anecdotes as to the decision-making processes and pressures record label owners and executives have to make, particularly in the face of harsh economic climates. Taylor once again paints a scenario of a more idealised and romanticised past when indie labels, to paraphrase, ‘just used to put out what we liked, whereas now we have to think about it’. However, his notion glosses over the seemingly obvious fact that any record label, major or indie, cannot survive for a few decades without turning a profit. Whilst Taylor wants to argue that Burger Records and other examples, like Rounder Records and Bandcamp, exist is spite of neoliberal capitalism, another reading could view their ability to exercise their freedoms to trade between the lines of copyright regulation, for example, as eminently neoliberal.

In many ways the indie label examples epitomise the dominant theme Taylor implies throughout the book. Challenging neoliberalism is slippery because it is implicit in every aspect of our culture as well as our economics. And while Taylor makes no excuses for taking an implicit approach, given his strong and substantive foregrounding of the history of music and capitalism, he seems to miss the opportunity to take the longer term view. It means that this engagingly written and informative exploration of what it is like to work in music in the early twenty-first century, leaves the opportunity for alternate histories of the present to be written. Particularly ones that deal more positively with music and capitalism.