

BOOK REVIEW

Shane Homan, Seamus O’Hanlon, Catherine Strong and John Tebutt. *Music City Melbourne: Urban Culture, History and Policy*
New York/London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2022
ISBN 9781501365706 (Hbk)/9781501365720 (e-book). 224pp.

E-book reviewed by Isobel D’Cruz Barnes

Documenting cultural life in contemporary Australia seems a fraught and daunting task, if not for the one-sided narratives so consistently reinforced through early scholarship, then at least due to the geographical vastness and diverse population that makes generalisation so difficult. The arrival of *Music City Melbourne: Urban Culture, History and Policy* is thus welcomed for its resolute specificity and unique historical lens. The book narrates and delineates popular music in Melbourne from the 1950s until the mid-2000s, exploring how it has shaped, and been shaped by, cultural policy and migration. The text is a much-needed contribution to scholarship on both Australian cultural policy, which focuses predominantly on the fine arts, and Australian popular music that in general fails to account for the historical contributions made by marginalised groups. Indeed, the authors describe *Music City Melbourne’s* historical emphases and use of subtly critical language (most notably, their casual use of the term ‘invasion’ as opposed to ‘settlement’ of Australia) as ‘an important *corrective* of Anglo Saxon accounts’ of Australian history (p. 3, emphasis added).

Despite the book’s title, the authors do not seek to argue for Melbourne’s status as a ‘music city’. Instead, they investigate the nuances and interrelatedness of ‘histories, policies and local behaviours’ related to music in Melbourne. This nexus is discussed through five key lenses or ‘themes’: gender and ethnicity, urban planning and policy, live music, media, and recording. The themes structure the book, with one to two chronological chapters loosely assigned to each. Elements of all themes are, however, interlaced throughout the work as a whole, which reflects the successful collaboration of the four authors: Shane Homan, Seamus O’Hanlon, Catherine Strong, and John Tebutt. While the chronological structure of the chapters can make for a slightly tedious back-and-forth when read successively, ultimately the text is simultaneously a cohesive narrative whole and a collection of valuable standalone sections.

The first three of *Music City Melbourne's* nine chapters introduce Melbourne as a city central to Australian creativity, particularly in regard to its live music culture, but also in relation to its cultural diversity. Chapter 1, 'Introduction,' details Melbourne's global recognition as a music city through the helpful analysis of data from the Australian Bureau of Statistics. Here, the authors note the differences between an economics-centred analysis of what makes a music city versus an elite arts-and-culture-oriented one, and how this plays on the different understandings of value placed on music in Australia at large. Chapter 2 explores the transformation of Melbourne from a sleepy, religiously conservative 'ethnic and social monoculture' in the 1950s to a vibrant, multiethnic cultural hub in the present day, while Chapter 3 elaborates on this same chronology through a detailing of key live-music venues. Importantly, these sections highlight the relationship between live music and cultural diversity by including many examples of non-Anglo migrant and First Nations contributions to live music in the city. These initial chapters consistently and successfully weave together histories of marginalised groups with historical accounts of Melbourne, rather than having them relegated to their own section as has been common practice in past scholarship. They also outline important class elements of live music in their interrogation of the 'cultural' versus 'creative' versus 'entertainment' industries: both how these elements vary depending on the elected government and subsequent cultural policy, and how they depend on neighbourhood demographics, gentrification, and the cultural production of specific locales. Through this, the link between the themes of gender and ethnicity, urban planning and policy and live music are artfully interwoven throughout a 'story' of the Melbourne music scene.

Music City Melbourne's opening chapters also detail the moral frameworks under which Melburnians historically have lived, how they have changed as a result of political, demographic and cultural shifts throughout time, and how these changes have affected music scenes (and vice versa). Exploring moral panic around sex, sexuality, and drug use in relation to music scenes, Chapter 3 delineates Melbourne's youth-driven move away from social conservatism. Particularly noteworthy of the first three chapters is that non-Anglo migrants, tertiary students, and unemployed young artists moving to the inner-city are continually cited as the chief proliferators of the popular music culture Melbourne is best known for. By extension, the authors credit these demographic groups as crucial to enlivening Melbourne's arts culture and to the eventual breakdown of the city as a conservative stronghold. Finally, looking toward the last twenty years (which is beyond the text's research timeline), the end of Chapter 2 concludes, significantly, that while Melbourne is a radically more progressive cultural hub than it was in the 1950s, its music scenes and industries nevertheless have further to go in becoming fully inclusive of marginalised groups.

The middle third of the book explores how media and recording industries within the larger music industry have shaped Melbourne as a music city both internationally and in relation to the other Australian cities, particularly its 'rival' Sydney. With Chapter 1 citing 'the arrival of rock'n'roll' as the commonly agreed-upon 'beginning' of Melbourne's development as a popular music hub (p. 2), the book's second section focuses predominantly on artists and bands of this style. Chapter 4 explains the role of media in promoting and disseminating rock music in Melbourne, with particular emphasis on community radio's position in reviving and providing knowledge, sustaining community, and, especially in its early days, offering an important alternative to the conservatism of mainstream broadcast media and television.

While the authors admit that mainstream media is not *purely* for purposes of marketing, they do suggest that alternative and independent media is of more importance in creating a music city due to its direct connection with fans and musicians. This is undoubtedly the case in Melbourne, and the authors' dedicated archival research and ethnographic data gathered from interviews offer a previously undocumented insight into this. Similarly, Chapter 5 explores how local recording studios were fundamental to the development of a recognisable Melbourne sound, which in turn is fundamental to cementing its status as a music city. As a 'Melbourne sound' is not one specific thing, the authors refer instead to a collection of sounds as noticeably evolved from (and thus distinct from) the Anglo-American foundations upon which Western popular music is built. This context provides a helpful backdrop for Chapter 6, where interview data is used to flesh out understandings of authenticity and uniqueness in the Melbourne scene in comparison to that of Sydney. In particular, this chapter successfully captures a 'Melburnian sensibility'—reflexive, self-conscious—through its assertion that Melbourne's DIY and alternative communities foster intangible cultural heritage through amateur musicians and fans who have a deep knowledge of their own scenes.

The final section of *Music City Melbourne* returns to the themes of gender, ethnicity, urban planning and policy, again exploring the nexus between identity and government, and discussing how these in turn shape music scenes. Chapter 7 delves deeper into the specificities of gender and race regarding live music in Melbourne, acknowledging how the scene is at once 'radically inclusive' and overtly political yet deeply divided along identity lines (p. 137). To ameliorate these divisions, the chapter aims to discuss the specifics of how women and First Nations people (and to a smaller extent queer communities) experience the scene, as well as document their contributions, both historical and recent. The chapter makes exceptional use of direct quotes from ethnographic interviews in order to privilege the perspective of these marginalised groups, offering a reparative history. However, the structure of the chapter is such that the first half discusses women, and the second First Nations groups. While the authors acknowledge they cannot address every marginalised group, and that of course there are further issues within the intersections (such as the experiences of First Nations women), this chapter's structure poses some risks that potentially make its presentation of the data unjustifiable. Firstly, placing the discussion of the marginalisation of women as separate from the discussion of racism neglects to reflect on how white women in Australia have historically enacted exclusionary practices and policies against First Nations and non-white individuals, particularly in the years before the abolition of the White Australia Policy. Additionally, in the present day, it remains notable how many gender-diverse scenes in Melbourne are still resolutely white, despite explicit attempts to be 'safe spaces' for all. The women quoted in this section of the chapter, furthermore, did not discuss race at any point, leading one to assume they themselves were also all white. This is noticeably different from the historical data presented in the first section of the book, where most themes and time periods include the perspectives of a range of ethnic groups. The inclusion of women's and First Nations perspectives would, perhaps, have best been executed in a similar fashion. Indeed, Chapter 8 achieves this in a way much more consistent with the first part of the book, in its delineation of how gentrification and commercialisation has continued to change the accessibility of the inner city. Importantly, this section notes that to foster the continuation of the scene 'younger, poorer, marginalised and emerging' artists and fans must still be able to afford to access and to live in the inner city, as was possible in the 1970s (p. 180).

Overall, *Music City Melbourne: Urban Culture, History and Policy* succeeds in its aim to provide an 'impressionistic narrative' of contemporary Melbourne and its popular music scene, as well as filling crucial gaps in Melbourne's history, told by voices that are often intentionally ignored. Its use of unedited ethnographic data and archival material is perhaps its greatest strength. Worth mentioning, too, is the authors' ability to (almost) always avoid unnecessary segregation of identity groups in the discussion of their issues. While the authors themselves urge other scholars to pick up where their book leaves off, *Music City Melbourne* is a thorough, timely and valuable addition to scholarship on Australian cultural life and the multiplicity of perspectives that it contains.

About the Author

Isobel D'Cruz Barnes is a musician and ethnomusicologist undertaking a Master of Music (Ethnomusicology) at the Melbourne Conservatorium of Music, University of Melbourne. She specialises in race and music subculture, and uses ethnographic research methods to explore how issues and discourses of identity shape music scenes in Australia.