

Luxe Pop

John Howland, 2021. *Hearing Luxe Pop: glorification, glamour, & the middlebrow in American popular music*. 394 pp. Oakland, CA: University of California Press. ISBN 978-05-203-0011-8.

Luxe Pop, or the merging of ‘popular music idioms with lush string orchestrations, big-band instrumentation, traditional symphonic instruments, and other markers of musical sophistication, glamour, spectacle, theatricality, and epic or “cinematic” qualities’ (p. 1), represents what John Howland conceptualizes as *conspicuous symphonization*, and what stands at the core of his recent book *Hearing Luxe Pop* (2021). With this book, Howland offers a lengthy and well researched exploration of an important, yet easily overlooked aesthetic cornerstone in American popular music. The book has eight full chapters, alongside an introduction and an afterword, which together trace a lineage of luxurious productions and arrangements from the 1920s to the present.

The basic premise of this study is, according to Howland, ‘the value of attempting to hear the historical, cultural, and sociological signifiers embedded in popular music performance’ (p. 11). This premise is first investigated in Chapter 1 ‘Hearing Luxe Pop: Jay-Z, Isaac Hayes, and the Six Degrees of Symphonic

Soul'. The starting point of the chapter is the celebration of the ten-year anniversary for Jay-Z's debut album *Reasonable Doubt* (1996), accompanied by The Hustler Symphony Orchestra at the Carnegie Hall in 2006. The other meeting is Kanye West's performance at Abbey Road Studios with the Wired Strings in 2005. These are held as examples where hip hop meets a symphonic orchestra, embracing an already existing tension between ideas of highbrow and lowbrow culture in American culture. As an analytical pivot point, Howland presents a model consisting of six degrees of separation between Jay-Z's performance and symphonic jazz in the 1920s, a model that stands at the core of the book, and also serves as a catalyst for the musical examples discussed in the rest of the book.

In Chapter 2, for example, 'The (Symphonic) Jazz Age, Musical Vaudeville, and "Glorified" Entertainments', Howland dives deeper into the conspicuous symphonization of jazz during the 1920s. Focusing his analytical lens mainly on Paul Whiteman's music, Howland argues convincingly and in great depth for the importance of lush, luxurious string arrangements in bringing jazz music to a wider audience – as mere entertainment. This lineage is followed further through the 1930s, 40s, and 50s in Chapter 3, 'Jazz with Strings: Between Jazz and the Great American Songbook'. In this chapter, the second degree of separation surfaces with musical examples such as Artie Shaw's 'Blues in the Night' (1941), Tommy Dorsey's 'On the Sunny Side of the Street', (1944) Frank Sinatra's 'I'm Walking Behind You' (1953), Stan Kenton's 'Lonesome Road' (1950) and Charlie Parker's 'Just Friends' (1949). Together, these examples serve to underpin Howland's argument that the luxe arrangements of vocal as well as instrumental jazz in this era are the main reason that this music turned into a tradition.

In this way, while Chapter 1 certifies the relevance of the study through updated musical examples framed by the six degrees of separation-model, Chapters 2 and 3 work to lay the historical ground for Luxe Pop as a cultural entity that contributes to defining an important segment of American popular music. Also, these chapters encompass what Howland labels the first era of Luxe Pop, including the first and second degree of separation in his analytical model. In Chapters 4 through 8, then, Howland describes and discusses the post-war rise of Luxe Pop in the late 1940s and early 50s through the soft-rock and soul era in the 1960s to the alleged fall of Luxe Pop with disco music in general and Barry White in particular. Chapter 4, entitled 'Defining Populuxe: Capitol Records and the Swinging Early Hi-Fi Era', turns the focus towards the vocal American Songbook repertory. This is exemplified by the music of Nat Cole and Frank Sinatra and the tradition that arose from the addition of strings to the already sophisticated big-band arrangements within the realm of this particular repertory. In line with Jonathan Sterne (2003), Jason Toynbee (2000) and others, Howland also points to the importance of recordings from this era, and how these

recordings have related to the rise of full frequency range recordings from the late 1940s onwards.

The 1960s are honoured with two chapters. First, in Chapter 5, 'Phil Spector, Early 1960s "Teenage Symphonies" and the Fabulous Lower Middlebrow', Howland considers the entry of orchestral arrangements into mainstream pop. The central agents in this chapter are Phil Spector and arranger Jack Nitzsche, whose musical endeavours include luxe orchestral arrangements of vocal soul as well as instrumental surf music. Notably, through songs like 'Lonely Surfer' (Jack Nitzsche, 1963), 'Then He Kissed Me' (The Crystals, 1963), and 'Be My Baby' (The Ronettes, 1963), the Nitzsche/Spector-collaboration introduced what has later been labelled 'little symphonies for the kids' to a wider audience. Second, Chapter 6, 'Mining AM (White) Gold: The 1960s MOR-Pop Foundations of 1970s Soft Rock', encompasses the entry of mid- to late 1960s soft rock. MOR stands for middle-of-the road pop, and in a time where acts like Led Zeppelin, Janis Joplin, Jimi Hendrix and even the Beatles, opened the door to more expressive musical endeavours, often with a hint of psychedelia, the contrast to 'the cohesive, soft fabric' (p. 189) of bands like the Mamas and the Papas, Bread and the Carpenters was indeed remarkable. Chapter 7, 'Isaac Hayes and Hot Buttered (Orchestral) Soul, from Psychedelic to Progressive', takes into account the extensive number of generic hybridisations and crossovers that characterised the first half of the 1970s. The development from what music critics at the time labelled *psychedelic soul*, via *progressive soul* to *sweet sophistisoul* is discussed through artists such as Isaac Hayes, Temptations, Kool & the Gang and MSFB. Chapter 8, 'From Sophistisoul to Disco: Barry White and the Fall of Luxe Pop', describes the alleged fall of Luxe Pop with the introduction of disco from the mid 1970s onwards. Barry White's music stands at the core of the chapter, and in danger of anticipating the course of events, the lush arrangements, soft, yet danceable grooves, and lyrics with little or no political edge, contributed a great deal to positioning Luxe Pop among the guilty pleasure fantasies of glamorous, American lifestyle.

The key strength of Howland's study resides in his focus on the musical features of Luxe Pop, while at the same time demonstrating in great detail how these musical features both reveal and depend on high/low tensions in marketing, consumer culture and image construction. While it could be discussed whether the terms high, low and middlebrow are sufficient labels for discussing the development – the rise and fall of a music culture such as Luxe Pop, Howland is on safe ground by applying these labels based on how the music in question was promoted and received at its time of arrival. Also, his historiographical sensibility opens for considering how the boundaries between these labels are not fixed, and subject to constant negotiation. Another potential pitfall is the six degrees of separation-model, which serves as the main analytical model in this book. It could be argued that such a construction would offer a basis for speculative hermeneutics, that is, the freedom to choose whatever musical examples that

would fit to underpin the argument. This is not the case with *Hearing Luxe Pop*, which has to do with the insightful close readings of the chosen texts, underpinned by relevant notated examples and rich descriptions of the music, situated within discourses around sophistication, cosmopolitanism and glamorous lifestyles, which together make this book a dearly needed contribution to the field of popular music studies. In sum, then, with *Hearing Luxe Pop*, John Howland provides the reader with sufficient circumstantial evidence that Luxe Pop should not and cannot ever be overlooked. Again.

References

- Sterne, J., 2003. *The audible past: cultural origins of sound reproduction*. Durham: Duke University Press.
- Toynbee, J., 2000. *Making popular music: musicians, creativity and institutions*. London: Arnold.

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