

Rockin' in Time: A Social History of Rock and Roll. By David P. Szatmary. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice-Hall, 1987. ISBN 0-13-782285-5. Pp. xv, 239. \$17.95.

Of the plethora of books on rock and roll history that have flooded the market recently, one of the most admirable and well-written is David P. Szatmary's *Rockin' in Time: A Social History of Rock and Roll*. Szatmary states in his preface that his book "intends to be a social history of rock and roll. It will guide the reader through American history from roughly 1950–1986, using rock music as a prism through which the many-faceted American experience hopefully will become more apparent." He further clarifies that his book "is more interested in understanding rock than in presenting an exhaustive compilation." His preface outlines some of the book's main themes: "[T]he connection between rock and roll and black American culture; . . . the impact of technological advances upon rock; . . . [how] the economic climate also affected rock and roll; . . . [how] American business influenced the course of rock and roll;" and "the relationship between politics and rock." He succeeds in covering his stated goals by organizing the subject matter into ten chapters that progress in a basically chronological order, beginning with the roots of rock and eventually arriving at the present day: The Blues, Rock 'n' Roll, and Racism; Elvis and Rockabilly; Dick Clark, Philadelphia Schlock, and Payola; Bob Dylan and the New Frontier; The Mods vs. the Rockers and the British Invasion of America; Acid Rock; The Violent Years: the White Blues and the Soul Explosion; Corporate Rock; Punk Rock: the Politics of Aggression; and The 1980s: the Age of Revivalism and the Future of Rock.

The general aspect of the book is pleasant and appealing. It is attractively presented with numerous black-and-white photographs. Chapter subheadings are in bold-face type and serve as clear guideposts for the reader. The margins are wide, enhancing the book's utility as a possible course textbook since there is ample room for notes and cross-references on each page. Furthermore, the book is the perfect length to serve as a collegiate text.

Szatmary's writing style is fluid, well-organized, and always engaging (although once or twice his colorful prose ventures perhaps a step too far in its glowing enthusiasm). He begins each chapter with a clever introduction intended to pique the reader's curiosity. He then depicts the social conditions and political climate of the era in question, successfully summing up the prevailing attitudes and supporting his theses with fascinating data and documentation where appropriate. He never bogs down, however, in trivial or irrelevant statistics. After laying a historical foundation he introduces the musicians and compositions that sprang up from this foundation. Subsequently he presents the reactions and counterreactions to each musical and historical development and then pulls each chapter to a convincing close. Szatmary takes care to provide links—both logical and verbal ones—between chapter subheadings. As a result each chapter flows nicely. In addition Szatmary differs from most rock historians in that he scrupulously avoids digressions into overly sentimental and irrelevant reminiscences of his own childhood—how refreshing.

A representative example of Szatmary's organizational and writing skills is seen in his chapter "Elvis and Rockabilly." He hooks the reader from the start with the introductory words: "Elvis Presley—a kinetic image in white suede shoes. His black zoot-suit pants violently shook as he gyrated his hips and legs. He wore an oversized, white checkered jacket over a jet-black shirt with an up-turned collar, and *no tie*. . . ." The average college student would not put down this book from sheer boredom after such an introduction. The chapter soon delves into the biographical backgrounds of "rockabilly" stars and depicts the poor rural heritage from which they all sprang. Having established this social backdrop Szatmary then aptly shows how the music indigenous to the rural South—the blues and country music—were logically the two seminal influences of the emerging "rockabilly" style. Much to Szatmary's credit, he treats not only Elvis Presley but also gives the lesser-known purveyors of the rockabilly style (Jerry Lee Lewis and Carl Perkins) their rightful due. In exploring the life of Elvis, he does more than line up the chronological sequence of successes and set-backs of the "King": he shows how the social and economic conditions in America both enabled Elvis to rise to fame and produced his eventual demise. Biography, economics, politics, and sociology are all masterfully intertwined. The chapter closes with an eloquent summation of the preceding material's significance while simultaneously supplying a provocative link to the ensuing chapter, "Dick Clark, Philadelphia Schlock, and Payola." In Szatmary's words, "Elvis was transformed from an innocent country boy who belted out a new kind of music with an animalistic intensity to a well-groomed, multi-million dollar product. The change, which had begun by 1958 when Presley entered the Army, spelled the end of rockabilly rock. Soon, teenage crooners schooled by Dick Clark would vie for the mantle of the King." The same insight and quality of expression is seen in the other chapters. Chapter 6, "Acid Rock," is one of the most perceptive yet concise descriptions of how American youth's flirtation with drugs, sexual liberation, and communal values spawned the psychedelic rock movement of the late 1960s. His treatment of the "Punk movement" is perhaps the most lucid account written to date.

I also laud Szatmary's overall success in accomplishing the goals he spells out in his preface. He does indeed connect rock and roll with black American culture, both in his opening chapter on the blues and in his later treatment of the Civil Rights Movement; they are superb. There are numerous sections ("The Selling of Elvis Presley," pp. 43–46; "The Payola Scandal," pp. 58–60; "The Record Industry Closes Ranks," pp. 167–69; "The Making and Marketing of a Record," pp. 169–71; "Corporate Rock Rides the New Wave," pp. 189–91; and many more) that eloquently intertwine rock music with the technological advances, economic climate, business ventures, and politics of each era. And true to his word, Szatmary does help the reader to understand rock by habitually focusing on ideas, concepts, and issues—he mentions rock artists frequently, but his discussion never degenerates into a shallow list of "Who's Who in Rock and Roll."

In spite of its numerous stellar qualities, the book has a few weaknesses. The most serious problem arises from Szatmary's reluctance to actually talk about the *sound* of the music. Granted, if he were to embark helter-skelter into detailed analyses he would soon stray from his stated purpose of presenting a "social history of rock and roll." Nevertheless, musical sound does have social implications. For example, the Beatles' album *Sgt. Pepper* is predicated on studio capabilities that could not be replicated in a live concert

situation. It is chock-full of such tape manipulations as double-tracking, recording at half-speed, playing a tape "backwards" from the direction it was initially recorded, incorporating the barnyard noises of cock crows and horse neighs, etc. In creating this album the Beatles had radically changed the very essence of what it meant to be a rock and roll band: they freed the artist from obligatory live performances and shifted the emphasis to the actual act of placing sound on vinyl or tape. A band could virtually live in the studio, never tour, and still reach and influence an enormous audience. This change in the way rock artists interacted and communicated with their audience merits some discussion in a social history of rock music; such a discussion also falls under the umbrella of Szatmary's stated goal of exploring "the impact of technological advances upon rock." The same Achilles' heel is found in other chapters. For example, in the otherwise brilliant Chapter 6, "Acid Rock," Szatmary never really elucidates how the social ideals of the hippie movement were directly reflected in the sounds of the San Francisco rock bands. The carefree spontaneity of the San Francisco "flower children," for instance, was reflected in the psychedelic groups' predilection for loosely constructed songs that offered considerable leeway for spur-of-the-moment departures into fanciful improvisation. The social phenomenon of the hippie commune also had its audible manifestation in the psychedelic rock bands; they emphasized communal interaction of the group as a whole and did not feature a single "star" performer. Contrast their spontaneous and communal creations to the carefully crafted tunes of the Motown sound, where the arranger-composer carved out and predetermined every note ahead of time. Once again, the attitudes about musical *sound* are inextricably bound up with the attitudes of the society that produced them and as such deserve more attention in Szatmary's book.

A second area in which Szatmary falls short of the mark once or twice is American history. The book has one glaring omission—it skirts the Vietnam War as if it had never taken place. And of all the social issues in recent American history, the Vietnam War was probably *the* issue! True, he does talk about a protest movement (although he places it only in the context of the Civil Rights Movement), the Berkeley Free Speech Movement, a hippie community "based on love and understanding," etc., but he never relates these phenomena to reactions against the war in Indochina. On one occasion he remarks in passing that the invasion of Cambodia in 1970 sparked the student protest and senseless killings on the Kent State campus. But never again does he hit the issue head on. Also, Szatmary is limited in his concept of what constitutes "American" history. Native Americans and Hispanics never appear. A book that purports to "guide the reader through American history" could devote at least a few words to Chicano rock artists (such as Santana, Azteca, El Chicano, Al Hurricane, and Sam the Sham) and Indian rock artists (such as Buffy Sainte-Marie, Jesse Ed Davis, John Trudell, and X-IT).

There is also a minor error that should be corrected. Simon and Garfunkel's *Wednesday Morning, 3 A.M.* includes the Dylan song "The Times They Are A-Changin'" and not Dylan's "Don't Think Twice" (p. 76).

All told, however, the book's virtues far outweigh its few deficiencies. David Szatmary has written an engaging book on a difficult topic and has admirably accomplished the goals he set for himself. In my opinion, *Rockin' in Time* is one of the best books on rock music published, is an ideal text for a collegiate course, and would be a valuable addition to any rock fan's library.

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