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Book Review: Morrissey: Fandom, Representation and Identities (Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane and Martin J. Power (eds))

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Eoin Devereux, Aileen Dillane and Martin J. Power (eds),
Morrissey: Fandom, Representations and Identities

Bristol: Intellect, 2011. 354pp, £32.50 ISBN: 978-1-84150-596-1

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Popular music and, specifically, academic treatments of popular music icons occupy an uneasy place within media and cultural studies. Despite the fact that studies of popular music genres, subcultures, reception and audience engagement have been central to the development of the cultural studies tradition, it is curiously something of a minority interest within the mainstream literature of the discipline. In part, this may be because popular music is almost uniquely a domain of fandom, in which the critic and cultural theorist occasionally sits somewhat uneasily within a domain that elicits such passionate loyalty and engagement from audiences. It is therefore with some trepidation that cultural studies scholars might approach a subject such as Morrissey; that is unless they happen to be deeply committed, ardent fans themselves. *Morrissey: Fandom, Representations and Identities* is one such work. Originating in the symposium 'The Songs that Saved your Life' organised in 2008 by Dr Eoin Devereux at the University of Limerick, this is a collection comprising 17 wide-ranging essays on encounters with the work of Morrissey. Focusing exclusively on Morrissey's solo career, this is not quite an introduction to the work of one of Manchester's most enduring and idiosyncratic contributions to popular culture. Instead, it is an uncompromising, detailed, and challenging examination of the many textual layers, symbolic codes, and cultural resonances of the Morrissey canon.

This is indeed rich material by any standards. Popular literature already attests to the legendary status of the artist known as Morrissey and his work. His solo career – beginning following the demise of The Smiths – stretches back to 1988. Building on his radical, Northern English politics, defined by staunch opposition to Thatcherism, he developed a string of successful solo albums, and acquired a reputation for charismatic and intense live performances, aided by a famously fanatical audience as well as a penchant for courting media controversy. There is, in other words, huge scope for critical engagement. That there has not been more serious academic attention is something of a surprise. There is the 2010 University of Manchester Press collection *Why Pamper Life's Complexities?: Essays on The Smiths*, edited by Sean Campbell and Colin Coulter, which brought together essays by a range of critical theorists and music commentators on the seminal influence of the 1980s band. *Morrissey: Fandom, Representations and Identities* now acts as a very worthy successor, and brings a similar treatment to the very particular concerns of the solo work that followed. Drawing on a range of disciplinary approaches, including musicology, sociology, media and cultural studies, as well as gender studies and queer theory, these essays range across the full spectrum of Morrissey's work. The contributions are quite heterogeneous and there is no overt attempt to force individual positions into a particular interpretative or qualitative assessment of Morrissey. As such, this is quite a sensitive work, as befits its subject matter, and individual authors articulate their own, sometimes complex, relationship with the subject matter and their own engagement with it.

Each essay, as the editors point out, acts as a particular starting point into what is a complex playing-out through recorded song of late twentieth century/early twenty-first century concerns of gender, sexuality and power, among other themes. As a collection, many essays are particularly concerned with representational aspects of identities, and the song as text provides the principal point of entry. However, as highlighted throughout, there is no escaping the fact that this is music intended to be performed and experienced, and much of the material draws on the very rich, multi-layered visual, aural, linguistic and performative aspects of Morrissey's music. The topics covered will be accessible to a wide readership and not just fans: Morrissey's relationship to class and culture – foundational themes in popular music studies – is explored in Power's chapter on representations of the working class and underclass and also in Baker's chapter on Morrissey's encounter with skinhead culture. Similarly, there is much material looking at themes of gendered identities: Woronzoff's discussion of the negotiation and performance of non-normative sexualities is a good example, as is Cope's analysis of the gestural in Morrissey iconography. The many layers of allusion – visual, poetic and allegorical – are mined to good effect, with some chapters focusing specifically on Morrissey the *bricoleur*, his art of appropriation, and the many echoes of literary and cultural tradition in his work. There is also an interesting thematic strand applying Barthes's notion of the 'grain of the voice' to the work of Morrissey; extending an important area of interest in the expressive and performed nature of meaning in popular music.

On one level, the exploration of fandom implied in the book's subtitle appears to be somewhat underplayed within the different studies represented in the collection. That is to say, there is relatively little by way of formal research of the diversity of reception practices or audience appropriation of Morrissey in favour of the individual authors' own, largely fan-oriented readings. But this is a different kind of work in that it gains hugely in fascinating insight and detail through an authorship comprised of those who 'proclaim firm commitment to, and a deep-felt personal ownership of, his sounds, sentiments and semiotics' (p. 15). The 'Notes on Contributors' section interestingly sees each author asked to nominate their favourite Morrissey song. That there is so little repetition is an indication of the breadth of the subject matter. The treatment it receives in this collection equally does justice to its interpretation. In bringing this work together, the editors have made a substantial contribution to writing in the genre, and to the potential for serious engagement with popular music in an academic context.

REVIEWER

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