Andrew Padgett

Neil Young is an ideal object for popular music scholarship, not only because of the volume of work that he has produced over his long career – William Echard’s study, for instance, cites no fewer than 40 of the albums Young produced between 1966 and 2003, a figure that does not even cover his entire output – but also because of the eclecticism of his work, which allows Echard to draw on a wide range of theoretical models in searching for the “stable” Neil Young identity that he believes underpins Young’s music. As a result of these dual considerations, Echard’s book would have been capable of serving not only as a comprehensive introduction to Neil Young’s music, but also as a study of contemporary popular music scholarship. In the first respect, the book succeeds. There are, however, a number of significant weaknesses with Echard’s study that ensure it fails on the second count.

Untangling Neil Young

At the outset of his book, Echard positions himself as what he calls a “scholar-fan” who “is trying to find something out about how the music works, but in an intellectual frame where the distinctions between text and interpretation, knowledge and action, are necessarily blurred” (3). Nonetheless, the strongest sections of this book are those when the fan in Echard takes precedence over the scholar, such as in the chapters dedicated to untangling the seemingly random eclecticism of Young’s music, which
ranges from garage rock and soft rock in the late 1960s through to electro-pop, rockabilly, and country music in the early 1980s. Echard argues that, despite these stylistic changes, Young is essentially a rock musician who seeks to expand what Echard calls the rock “stylistic family” into areas that other rock musicians do not go (65).

Young’s eclecticism is illustrative of what Echard calls Young’s *dialogic approach* to making music (57f). According to Echard, Young “makes use of established stylistic clichés in order to simultaneously assert his place in a tradition [of rock music], but also his autonomy from that tradition” (64). As a result, Young’s work can “be read as a continual attempt to slip through interpretive loopholes” (152-3). According to Echard, this explains why the element of “surprise” and Young’s ability to “defy categorization” have been so prominent in the reception of his music (64f). Thus, as Echard writes:

> When in 1983 Neil Young suddenly dressed and sang like a rockabilly artist … previous assumptions about his persona were shaken by the force of this other voice. And yet this moment occurred as part of an utterance made by Neil Young himself, and so a play of alterity and assimilation was set up. When we look at Neil Young reception in the long term, we see that very often this kind of surprise is reabsorbed into a newly stabilized persona. After a while, intermusicality was no longer a destabilizing factor, but became a fixed part of Neil Young. He was *expected* to surprise, and his stylistic diversity was taken as a mark of authorial integrity (65).

Echard thus concludes that the strong authorial persona of the rock musician underpins Young’s “exceptional ability to work with the dialogic nature of cultural fields” (83). Paradoxically, Echard also notes that throughout his career Young has sought to defy precisely this ossification of his eclecticism into a new “identity” such as the one that Echard’s study imposes upon him. Nevertheless, “Young is,” Echard writes, “a canonized figure and an icon of rock music. He has an ambivalent relationship to both of these tendencies, but on balance that ambivalence, even though it exists on many levels, often folds back into a kind of authenticity and reinforces the same ideologies it questions” (83).

**Entangling William Echard**

The paradox of identity relating to Young results in a kind of insincerity underlying Echard’s analysis. On the one hand, Echard states that he wants to avoid trying to “pin him down” (2), but on the other he celebrates
Young’s defiance of categorisation – indeed, the primary purpose of Echard’s study is to discover how to categorise that defiance. In short, for all that the book is motivated by the fan pole of the scholar-fan dichotomy, Echard’s analysis of Young’s music is ultimately made subordinate to his scholarly desire to find a way through the “complex web of convergent and divergent readings” of it (197).

There are two obvious weaknesses with the scholarly aspect of Echard’s book.

The first lies in the elaborate vocabulary that Echard draws on in his work. This is no doubt partly due to the inherent difficulty of talking about what we hear, but nonetheless Echard’s analysis often gets swamped by the sheer number of musical terms he must introduce in order to say what he wants to say.

The second weakness mirrors the first. In those sections of the book (particularly chapter four) where the scholar takes precedence over the fan, Echard’s discussion is mired under the vast theoretical apparatus that, while enabling him to untangle Young’s music, only ends up entangling itself in the process. For example, by way of prefacing his most sustained treatment of popular music theory in the book, Echard writes:

My theoretical orientation has been deeply influenced by my encounter with [Young’s] music…. I have been led to develop or adopt a particular set of concepts in large measure because of my need to say certain things about Neil Young. And while the theoretical framework will subsequently take on a life of its own, it will always reflect the repertoire that inspired it (108).

This is indeed – and unfortunately – all too true in Echard’s case, for the vast theoretical framework that he constructs in order to say what he wants to say about Young’s music ends up becoming just as eclectic and unruly as the music that it is meant to untangle for us.

Disconcertingly, I believe that Echard recognises this, since on several occasions he seeks to provide the reader with guides on how to read his work. I believe that facilitating this guidance role was the primary motivation for Echard identifying himself as a “scholar-fan,” along with his suggesting that we should therefore expect a book that will in some parts be “too academic for some fans and other parts too casual for some academics” (3). And when Echard writes in the introduction to chapter four that his theoretical apparatus, inspired as it is by listening to Young’s music, will necessarily reflect Young’s music, this reads more like an apologia than a programme for what is to come. For while Echard argues that the eclecticism of Young’s music is evidence of what he calls Young’s “waywardness,” or
his willingness to “roam widely within the stylistic family of rock, seeming sometimes to stray outside of it altogether, but again in a manner which ultimately reasserts rock’s centripetal fortitude” (75), I cannot say the same of Echard’s theoretical apparatus, which merely roams widely. To my mind, then, the criticism that Dave Marsh directs towards Young’s music, which Echard cites, could equally be directed towards Echard’s analysis: it is “‘less diverse than erratic, his stylistic charms the result of lack of commitment rather than successful eclecticism,’ and in the end ‘[he] lacks [a] coherent, consistent world view’” (55).

As such, while the fan in Echard ensures that his book succeeds as a comprehensive introduction and guide to Neil Young’s music, the scholar in Echard too often gets bogged down in setting up, rather than actually defending, his argument, and as a result this book does not succeed as a scholarly work.

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