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The twenty-first century has been marked by the emergence of new disciplines reacting to the environmental crisis we currently face. One of those disciplines is Ecomusicology, a field of research that focuses on exploring the relationship between music, nature, and culture in the context of our increasingly globalized and polluted world. In his 229-page long monograph, Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk and the Environment, Mark Pedelty investigates whether the most popular music genres on the planet—pop and rock—can reconnect us to our natural surroundings and create a positive environmental impact. To this end, he uses techniques employed by other ecomusicologists, such as philosophical discussion and lyrical analysis, but also draws on his background in anthropology to try out novel, field-based approaches.

Ecomusicology opens with a compelling introductory section, detailing the excesses of the rock group U2’s 2009 tour. According to the author, the most memorable aspect of this tour was a giant metal structure overlooking the stage that had to be shipped across countries and continents using dozens of trucks, consuming large amounts of fuel in the process. This example effectively sets the stage for Pedelty’s main criticism of rock: that it is an extravagant, resource-intensive form of expression, and that at first glance it is difficult to see how a genre advocating for consumerism both in its physical aspects and its lyrics could be employed for a positive environmental impact. After explaining this, the author brings forward further questions that his book endeavours to answer: Can rock and pop be made sustainable? And if yes, would they still qualify as rock and pop? What impact does the music made and performed by local bands have? And, most importantly, is music an effective medium to create positive environmental change?

In Chapter 1, “Pop Goes the Planet,” the author focuses on the global aspects of popular music. Her devotes a large portion of this chapter to discussing mega-benefit concerts (ex: Live Aid, Live Eight) and evaluating their influence. Pedelty
analyses in greatest detail the Live Earth event, a series of mega-benefit concerts held in major cities in July 2007 to promote the environment, featuring international pop stars. The author’s criticism of Live Earth is harsh: “Live Earth”, he says, “ritually legitimated high consumption lifestyles by obfuscating their real consequences” (27). Pedelty supports this criticism with compelling evidence, pointing out that Live Earth failed to make strong statements against the private companies and the capitalist system that cause most of the environmental degradation in our world. Instead it even suggested—in part through distributed flyers—that consumerism and environmentalism were compatible. He then highlights other issues with the series, such as how Live Earth failed to gain the trust of environmentalists, who quickly classified the spectacle as greenwashing when DOW, the company that caused the chemical incident of Bhopal in 2004, sponsored subsequent iterations of the event. Finally, citing Rolling Stones Magazine, Pedelty criticises the event as a poor musical performance altogether, while also highlighting the discrepancy between stars with lavish lifestyles and their advocacy for sustainable action. Pedelty’s analysis is thorough and convincing; however, as the description of Live Earth itself is scarce (ex: stars featured, cities involved), this passage may be confusing for readers lacking the proper background.

After this discussion, the author moves on to discuss whether the world’s most famous pop stars effectively integrate environmentalism into their careers. The main examples he uses are the band Guster—who founded the organization Reverb to help other stars lighten their environmental footprint—and Jack Johnson, whose eco-friendly concerts and initiatives such as the social network All At Once helped raise the environmental awareness of thousands of fans.

The remainder of the chapter tackles a few philosophical themes regarding music and its link to the environment. These include the following concepts: music as social ritual, music as a way of connecting us to our immediate surroundings, and, most importantly, the pros and cons of the globalization of music. Many of those themes are effectively connected back to the case studies Pedelty explores in the chapter; for example, because music is a form of social ritual, he explains that the underwhelming performance of Live Earth caused it to fail as a musical ritual. Pedelty’s discussion of the globalization of music is also well executed and serves as an appropriate conclusion for the first chapter. Here, he argues that while we now have access to music from all around the world, this may not actually make us more aware of global issues. Instead, this context may disconnect us from our local surroundings: “Does our ability to download Tibetan throat singing make us more concerned about Tibet or less aware of what is happening in our local wetland?” he compellingly challenges (44). Overall, Ecomusicology’s first chapter is well rounded, discusses a wide range of topics, and leaves the reader intrigued about the remainder of the book.

Chapter 2, “The Musical Nation,” restricts its scope to the national level, focusing on American music. It begins by contrasting three American patriotic songs, “America the Beautiful,” “God Bless America,” and “This Land is Your Land.” In this section, Pedelty analyses the lyrics and political meanings of these songs and the way they have been reused—sometimes with entirely different intents—by various political parties. These songs provide another illustration of music as a way to connect people to specific places (in this case, the people of the United States to their homeland), as discussed in the introduction and first chapter. “The Musical Nation” also provides the reader with a history of musical and political activism in America,
showing how music was always a part of activism, because of its efficacy in transmitting political ideologies.

Pedelty then relates his analysis to efforts of today by presenting the results of a survey where 676 activists were asked how music influenced their desire to inspire environmental change. Through his results, he shows that while music does have the power to inspire people to action, most songs that do so are not from a local band; usually they are international hits. This calls into question the power of local music to promote change.

The rest of the chapter is devoted to the discussion of two further topics. First, Pedelty summarizes the history of rock and folk as environmental genres, and then he analyses their suitability for fostering environmental activism. One of his main points is that rock and folk are “two sides of the same coin” (66): While rock connects us to our urban environments, folk brings our attention to our natural surroundings. Second, Pedelty discusses the concept of “Nature” in the American mind, debating questions such as: “What is nature?”, “Can man-made, artificial nature still be considered nature?”, and “How do these distinctions influence the way we relate to those places, and connect with them through music?”

Compared to chapter 1, chapter 2 delves more into the realm of politics, sometimes at the expense of discussing music and the environment. Luckily, Pedelty always manages to link those digressions back to the chapter’s main topic: American music and sustainability. In this chapter, the author also analyses the lyrics of his three case-study songs, introducing to his discussion a new type of information concerning musical activism, thus maintaining the reader’s interest.

Chapters 3 and 4 deal with music on the regional and local level, and contain the most detailed case studies of the book. In Chapter 3 “Regional Geography in Song,” Pedelty shows how music can have both a positive and negative impact on the environment. To do so, he intelligently contrasts the involvement of two artists in projects related to two American rivers. Being for the most part a two-part case study, “Regional Geography in Song” differs in structure from the previous chapters of Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk and the Environment, and provides the reader with a refreshing change.

The first example involves folk singer Woody Guthrie’s participation in a documentary promoting the construction of dams on the Columbia River. The documentary led to the acceptance of the damming project, with serious consequences for the Columbia river, heavily disrupting its ecology and causing the extinction of two of its salmon species. The second artist, Pete Seeger, successfully raised funds for the Clearwater project through his concerts. This intervention allowed the river to be restored and raised awareness in a large number of citizens about conservation.

Chapter 4, “Local Music,” discusses music made by local artists and differs from the previous chapters of the book, because it is the first chapter wherein Mark Pedelty ceases to analyse his topic from an academic, outsider’s perspective. Instead, he immerses himself in the local music scene by forming an environmentalist rock band, the Hypoxic Punks. Much of chapter 4 recounts Pedelty’s experiences in this band. Here, he details each step of the music-making process, from the act of composing and rehearsing to the performance, making this chapter particularly interesting for aspiring musicians. Because of its autobiographical aspect, this
chapter engages the reader in a more intimate way than the other material in *Ecomusicology*, and, like chapter 3, creates a pleasant contrast to the rest of the book.

Pedelty also explains the difficulties a local band faces when advocating for environmental protection. According to the author, this arose partly because of the venues in which the Hypoxic Punks performed, and also because of the tendency of audiences to listen passively to song lyrics. Finally, he discusses more successful local activist bands, and ends the chapter by arguing that, regardless of direct environmental impact, local music is important because it helps connect communities together and, according to the author, “the physical health of ecosystems depends in part on the cultural health of human communities” (198).

In a brief concluding section, Pedelty summarises the main points of the book and delivers a message about environmental music that is at best ambivalent. Whether rock and pop music can have a positive environmental impact is predominantly uncertain, he says, and to perform music with this intent is mainly an act of faith. Overwhelmingly, the environmental impact of rock and pop is either negative or irrelevant, due to a general lack of interest, usually apolitical lyrics, and the discrepancy between the consumerist-advocating medium and the environmental message Pedelty discusses. *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk and the Environment* ends with the author recommending ecomusicologists pay more attention to the intertextuality of music—how it relates to other arts, media, and activities—suggesting a more comprehensive approach to the study of Ecomusicology.

Overall, *Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk and the Environment* makes a significant contribution to the field. First, as Pedelty mentions, so far ecomusicology has not devoted much attention to popular music genres, most of the focus being on classical and world music. This is a problem, as rock and pop are highly impactful genres on a global scale, and so could be expected to have the highest cultural impact. In fact, the only other work that devotes itself entirely to popular music and ecomusicology is *The Jukebox in the Garden*, by David Ingram. While *The Jukebox in the Garden* and *Ecomusicology* are rather similar and were published only two years apart, they are not redundant; in *The Jukebox in the Garden*, Ingram states: “The extent to which popular music has actually inspired environmental activism is an empirical question beyond the scope of this book.” Indeed, while *The Jukebox in the Garden* includes many more musical genres than *Ecomusicology* and analyses them more in detail, it limits itself to philosophical discussions of the genres and their connection to nature. By making sustainability and musical activism the main topic of his book, Pedelty has created a work that is complementary to Ingram’s.

This brings us to the second aspect of *Ecomusicology* that makes it so unique: of all ecomusicological texts, Mark Pedelty’s is one of the only ones entirely devoted to studying the impact of music on the environment, both materially and ideologically. Indeed, when searching for publications on ecomusicology, it is relatively easy to find articles analysing how music is shaped by its local ecosystems (and sometimes,


by its degradation), or articles discussing the theories and gaps of ecomusicology as a discipline. One particular study even analysed the ways music was used during a debate over coal mining in the Appalachian region, but whether these different uses actually affected the debate’s outcome was not noted. Only one study effectively linked music production with its impact on a local ecosystem (in this case, the impact of music festivals and advertisements on the Gulf coast following the BP oil spill in 2010).

Thus, there are serious gaps that make the discipline less relevant to solving our current environmental problems, a common criticism of ecomusicology. As Alexander Rehding states: “while themes and methodologies are still in flux, [ecomusicology] derives much of its relevance from a sense of urgency and from an inherent bent toward awareness-raising…and activism. These political aspects, to be sure, are not always followed up in practice.” This lack of activism may be in part because ecomusicology is still a relatively young discipline; indeed, Aaron Allen, a leading ecomusicologist, only wrote the first official definition of ecomusicology in the Grove Dictionary of American Music in 2010. Because of this, the field may still be defining itself, making it difficult for this group of scholars to make assertive political statements. Nevertheless, Pedelty bridges this gap, as his book revolves around musical activism. He is also unafraid to highlight the flaws in the main cultural systems of our society, as he accuses our mostly apolitical music industry of failing to raise environmental awareness in audiences and creating a musical culture that makes us “laugh, dance and look away.”

Lack of activism is not the only issue associated with ecomusicology. In his paper “Prospects and Problems for Ecomusicology for Confronting a Crisis of Culture,” Aaron Allen points out other lacunas in ecomusicology, including education and transdisciplinarity. Ecomusicologists should make a greater effort to transmit their knowledge to general audiences and use approaches from other scholarly fields to deepen their analyses. Again, Pedelty addresses both those issues, first, by using his experience as an anthropologist, where he treats the musical scene as a culture of its own and immerses himself in it as a participant and observer. This approach gives him access to other types of information and allows him to understand the context of his research better than if he had limited himself to

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6 Pedelty, Ecomusicology, 75.

studying the problem on paper. Pedelty’s work is also highly educational, as his writing is both compelling and easy to read. This makes Ecomusicology accessible to lay audiences as well as ecomusicologists.

Yet, for all the good it brings to the field of ecomusicology, Pedelty’s book does have a few notable flaws. For one, the author includes a large amount of superfluous detail that detracts from the book’s main purpose. For example, the discussion of the history of activism found in chapter two has only a weak link to the main arguments of the book, and though it allows the reader to gain a better understanding of musical activism, the section could well have been shortened.

Further, while the four-chapter structure Dr Pedelty proposed for this book is in theory an elegant and interesting choice, it does not work entirely in the end. The main reason being that many of the topics discussed in the book are philosophical in nature and transcend the global, national, regional and local scales that frame each chapter. Pedelty’s solution, it seems, is to discuss the same topics (for example: What is the best music genre to transmit environmental messages?) in all chapters, and to link them to the chapter’s general topic (nationalism, globalization, and so on). Though this succeeds in some cases, most of the time this approach results in quite a bit of repetition, which often makes the reading tedious.

Overall, despite its flaws, Ecomusicology: Rock, Folk and the Environment is definitely a worthwhile read for ecomusicologists, because of the novel elements it brings to the field. These innovations include Pedelty’s discussion of whether music has an environmental impact and his unique anthropological approach to this question. The author’s insights concerning his experiences as a band musician and the process of music making also cause this book to be interesting for aspiring musicians with an activist streak. It is also interesting for non-musicians as well: whether we can play an instrument or not, each of us has been and may be at some point members of a musical audience. Hence, Ecomusicology could make us aware that, as music consumers, our actions also have an impact on the planet and that we have a responsibility towards it.

For Further Reading:


