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Remaking the World of Music

by *Thomas Turner*

Michael Denning, *Noise Uprising: the Audiopolitics of a World Musical Revolution*, Verso, London and New York, 2015; pp. 306; \$24.99/£17.99.

We live in a world of recorded music. Even when we do not actively seek them, popular recordings provide a soundtrack to the most mundane of

everyday activities. Musics recorded miles and years apart rub up against one another, while long dead performers and musical styles enjoy a strange afterlife. It is possible to browse a trove of music spanning decades and continents, bringing together styles and artists that could rarely, if ever, have combined in the real world. Much of this music can be traced to marginalized and marginal communities. Whether it is hip hop, grime, rock'n' roll, disco, EDM, reggae, or 'world' music, the sounds we hear most frequently are not those associated with the supposedly high art of classical composition. Instead, musics rooted in everyday working-class experience provide an aural backdrop to much of modern life.

In *Noise Uprising*, Michael Denning seeks to expose the origins of our musical world. The current soundscape took shape, he argues, between 1925 and 1930, when engineers and executives from western record companies embarked on a speculative recording frenzy, travelling the globe in search of performers whose music could be pressed onto 78rpm shellac discs to be exported and resold to local consumers. This recording boom was bookended by the development of the electrical microphone and loud-speaker in the early 1920s and the Wall Street Crash in 1929, when many recording companies collapsed. In this brief window, a wealth of music was committed to discs that circulated the world with far-reaching consequences. Among the styles to emerge were jazz, son, tango, samba, tarab, marabi, hula and kroncong. These had shared characteristics but were the product of local traditions and the circulation of musics and people through colonial shipping routes. Although it was driven by commercial impulses and technical innovation, Denning argues that the 1920s recording boom – and the originality of the music it captured – caused a fundamental remaking of the world of music, a transformative revolution that can still be felt today.

As Denning shows, western record companies eager to cater to colonial consumers would record almost anything they thought might find buyers in local markets. Many of their recording sessions therefore took place in what Denning describes as a global archipelago of colonial ports, which were, he suggests, incubators of new and vibrant musical cultures. Between 1910 and 1930, millions of working-class migrants thronged into ramshackle, cosmopolitan portside environments. Disparate and established musical traditions were thrown together, resulting in new forms of cultural expression. In New Orleans, Havana, Lagos, Honolulu, Rio de Janeiro, Marseille, Shanghai and other locations, the sounds of rural immigrants mixed with those of classically-trained musicians or the hymns of Christian missionaries. Traditional artisan-made instruments rang out alongside the steel-stringed guitars, accordions and brass instruments produced in American and European factories. The musical traditions of seaborne immigrants mixed with those of local musicians. Focusing on three transnational arcs marked by diaspora peoples – the African Atlantic, the gypsy Mediterranean, and the Polynesian Pacific – Denning argues that ports were sites of cross-cultural exchange and fertilization, melting pots in which new styles and

approaches to music were born. It was these emerging musical fusions that were discovered and recorded by travelling engineers.

Port environments were attractive to the record companies because they provided an easy source of raw material. In the traditional musical centres of London, New York, Paris and Berlin classically trained musicians had already organized into unions and taken a stand against recorded or 'canned' music. In port cities, by contrast, engineers could set up shop in local hotels, record obliging local musicians, and then, taking advantage of the easy transport links provided by steam ships, return home or move on to other recording locations. The sounds they captured would be pressed onto 78rpm shellac discs and in this form exported back to the localities from which they came. As Denning notes, millions of discs flooded out of pressing plants in Britain, the United States, France and Germany destined for global markets. This may have been a capitalist colonial enterprise, but Denning argues it had a profound cultural impact. In their rush to record, western record companies legitimized and spread what Denning calls vernacular music. The terminology is important. This was not the folk music of rural peasantry nor the high traditions of classical music. Rather, it was the modern, urban, polyglot sounds of the colonial port, music belonging to everyday life, made and listened to by ordinary people. Although they were driven by commercial impulses, western record companies gave voice to an emerging modernity, to forms of musical expression that were overlooked, ignored, or condemned by the social establishment. As Denning points out, the recording and circulation of this music was a radical move that challenged existing musical hierarchies, a shift he compares to the invention of the printing press and the support it gave to vernacular languages over classical Latin.

Denning describes the shifts toward recorded and vernacular music as 'twin Copernican revolutions' in the world of music. His analysis of their impact is compelling. Pressed into the grooves of 78rpm discs, music travelled far more easily than did its performers. The result was a phonograph culture in which recordings were not bound by time or place: the beginning of what we experience today. As Denning argues, a world musical space developed in which a new relation between sound and space, music and territory was forged. It was here that Jimmie Rodgers's yodel could become popular on the west coast of Africa, or the Hawaiian slide guitar integral to American country music. More prosaically, as working-class access to phonograph machines increased, recorded music became the background to everyday life. When not confined to live performance at special occasions, music escaped social and cultural boundaries to become a principal form of entertainment. Perhaps most significantly, these recordings transformed how music was made, heard, and exchanged. Music circulated more freely, songs and styles could be learnt from records, and recording became part of musical life. The record itself emerged as a distinct entity, with orchestrations and timings developed to fit its limitations. At the

same time, the clashing timbres, the rhythmic beat embodied by the 'rhythm section', the 'weird' harmonies and improvised performances that characterized these recordings challenged existing conceptions of music and laid the foundations for much of the popular music we enjoy today. Ample evidence, notably Theodor Adorno's revulsion at modern dance music, of how shocking these records sounded to some contemporaries is provided. Yet as Denning suggests, it is difficult now to hear these recordings as they were heard by their earliest critics: 'our ears are the product of the very success of these recorded vernacular musics over the last hundred years'.

The influence of the recording boom of the 1920s was not confined to the world of music. As Denning notes, it coincided with the first stirrings of anticolonial activism, and it is here, in his elision of music and politics, that he makes his boldest claims. In his analysis, the vernacular records of the 1920s were heralds of the process of decolonization, part of a cultural revolution that made possible the subsequent political revolutions and the emergence of at least a hundred new nations in the second half of the twentieth century. Decolonization was built, he argues, on the 'decolonization of the ear'. He is careful to note that this was not a uniform process, and he emphasizes the variety of ways in which music was used by activists and enmeshed with anticolonial struggles. Equally, he acknowledges that these musics were themselves products of colonial enterprise. Yet despite the various and numerous trajectories described, he is emphatic about the political power of music: even when an overtly political message was not conveyed, he argues, the disruptive noise of vernacular music gave voice to marginalized peoples and in so doing challenged colonial ideals. This is a reading rooted in the cultural studies of the Birmingham School and the belief that cultural forms can constitute sites of opposition and resistance. It is an analysis that can, of course, be questioned. Is this what performers intended? Is this how listeners heard and interpreted these sounds? More empirically minded readers may want concrete evidence. Moreover, the sheer variety of anticolonial endeavour described makes one wonder whether this really was, as Denning claims, part of a global pattern, and his claim that these musics were a 'guerrilla insurgency' is perhaps a little hyperbolic. Nevertheless, as a call for music to be treated as the subject of serious study, and for it to be understood as a medium through which oppositional politics could be constituted and conveyed, the book is clear. As Denning points out, music and sound are fundamental to social and political analysis.

The global scope of this book is impressive and Denning's arguments, about both the impact of recording and the political and cultural significance of music, make for compelling reading. Yet when taken together as a book, *Noise Uprising* struggles to cohere. The transnational, cross-genre perspective provides new interpretation and insight into a wealth of material, but Denning skips quickly from one artist, genre, or national context to the next, often combining several into a single sentence. Dozens

of musicians and styles spanning five continents are brought into the mix, and at points extensive lists of artists, protagonists or phenomena, threaten to overwhelm the reader. The effect can be confusing, and one wonders whether each example is as closely connected as Denning suggests. (This breadth also leads to a profusion of sentences with the formulations ‘if . . . then . . .’, ‘not only . . . but also . . .’, and ‘from . . . to . . .’ that ought to have been highlighted by Verso’s copyeditors.) Moreover, the scope of the book itself is fuzzy. Much of the analysis focuses on the arcs of the Atlantic, Pacific and Mediterranean, yet cases from further afield crop up in support of individual points. How American country artists like the Carter Family and Jimmie Rodgers relate to the broader arguments about the ‘polyphony of colonial ports’ is never quite made clear. If anything, their inclusion indicates how far and widely the recording revolution reached. With the abundant diversity of material being considered, there is a nagging sense that the evidence has been carefully selected and made to fit the argument rather than the other way around.

Given the richness of its subject, the book is also oddly lacking in colour. The opening chapter provides a series of vignettes of the performers and recording sessions that gave birth to this new musical culture, but thereafter the glimpses of those involved are fleeting. As Denning notes, however, the only traces left by many of them are the names inscribed on shellac discs, and so it is perhaps unfair to criticize on these grounds. More relevantly, and as already stated, this is a cultural-studies text that seeks to provide an analysis of musical styles and events. It seeks less to uncover or tell the stories of those involved in great detail than it does to create an ambitious map of the connections between them, and an overarching evaluation of their musical, cultural, and political significance. Denning brings together and builds on an impressive range of existing historical scholarship about each of these vernacular musics, drawing global parallels and comparisons that would not be possible in more localized studies. The loss of detail – and the attendant grit – is possibly an inevitable consequence of the book’s broad scope. That said, it is still a shame not to learn more about the subaltern worlds from which much of this music emerged; for that, one should turn to the scholars listed in Denning’s notes. Fortunately, however, Denning does provide a Spotify playlist of the recordings discussed. It is here that the book really comes alive. Listening to the collected tracks while reading along, it becomes possible to evaluate Denning’s claims more closely and to hear the sounds he describes. The reader-listener can better assess Denning’s conclusions: can these musical styles really be considered similar? That much of the music sounds startlingly contemporary or familiar underlines Denning’s point that this was when our modern musical vocabulary was formed. Many of these musical styles, once so radical, are now so commonplace and canonical that they sound almost like parodies of themselves.

This is a bold and engaging book that offers an ambitious analysis of the music recorded at the beginning of the twentieth century. Denning offers a convincing description of the transformative power of recording and the mass circulation of recorded music, and sheds light on the conditions out of which the vernacular music of the 1920s emerged. By combining history with musicology and cultural studies, *Noise Uprising* forces us to consider how music and sound can be used to gain greater insight into societies and cultures, and how music can be incorporated into social and political analysis. Even if some of the arguments can be contested, it contains valuable insights into the political power of popular music that should inform future scholarship. Historians should take note of Denning's assertion that the stuff of mass culture is worthy of serious contemplation. The book succeeds in highlighting the birth of modern musical idioms. Through the inclusion of a digitally streamed playlist and a hint that it will be relocated as 'vehicles of online music change', it shows too that the world of popular music exists in a state of constant flux, and that that how we consume and engage with recordings continues to shift.

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The Makers and Shakers of India *by Layli Uddin*

Sunil Khilnani, *Incarnations: India in 50 Lives*, Allen Lane, London, 2016.

Often, as I wandered from meeting to meeting, I spoke to my audience of this India of ours, of Hindustan and of *Bharata*, the old Sanskrit name derived from the mythical founder of the race. I seldom did so in the cities, for there the audiences were more sophisticated and wanted stronger fare. But to the peasant, with his limited outlook, I spoke of this great country for whose freedom we were struggling, of how each part differed from the other 59 and yet was India, of common problems of the