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Review | *Unfree Masters: Recording Artists and the Politics of Work* by Matt Stahl

Submitted by *Whitney Slaten* on March 16, 2014 - 9:01pm



Unfree Masters: Recording Artists and the Politics of Work. By Matt Stahl. Durham: Duke University Press, 2012. [xi, 312 p. ISBN 9780822353430. \$22.46.] Bibliography, Index.

Reviewed by Whitney Slaten

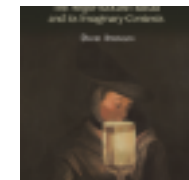
Matt Stahl's *Unfree Masters: Recording Artists and the Politics of Work* examines popular music and experiences of popular music laborers. In his analysis of labor among recording artists in the United States, Stahl examines how state and federal legislations affect the political and economic regulations

of their work. Stahl extends Marxist analyses of labor through the “creative labor” framework, which allows him to move popular music scholarship closer towards an understanding about recording artists in complex relation to the labor challenges that their listeners experience in everyday life. Through this move beyond the scope of traditional wage labor towards creative labor and its elaborate commodifications, between the self and other, this book offers ways of considering popular music as an expression of labor culture in the United States. The book also contributes an analysis of recording artists that demystifies romantic definitions of artistic autonomy in favor of assessments of these artists as members of the larger American working public that resist and accept contractual, employer, governmental and industrial regulations. As such, Stahl encourages an analytical regard for the dynamism of popular music labor, through examples of how recording artists present labor possibilities for audiences at the levels of affect and policy. *Unfree Masters* presents ethnomusicology and popular music studies a necessary framework for understanding societal difficulties and opportunities through which recording artists navigate and present themselves, foregrounding labor experiences as useful for considering the new challenges and creative agencies of the American worker.

The monograph divides into two parts: representation and regulation. Chapter one analyzes *American Idol*, juxtaposing the show's ratings and its portrayal of success and failure among its contestants. Stahl observes the extent to which the promise of artistic autonomy generally attracts the singers, but he also details instances in which the singers negotiate the pressures to conform to stylistic conventions and the maintenance of self during each phase of the competition. The author cites Frederic Jameson when describing the *American Idol* narrative as a “principle cultural mechanism through which people apprehend and negotiate the social world” (44). Stahl continues, “Mass cultural texts like *American Idol* are ‘socially symbolic acts’ and ‘individual utterance[s] of that vaster system . . . of class discourse’ that mediates between the cultural and social worlds—the realms of meaning and of institutions” (44). He also includes Richard Sennett’s writings about “the culture of new capitalism” and the “idealized self,” as well as William Ian Miller’s definition of humiliation as, “the emotional experience of being caught inappropriately crossing group boundaries into territory one has no

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The Anglo-Scottish Ballad and its Imaginary Contexts. By David Atkinson.

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business being in” (54). Stahl foregrounds examples from the show to describe how the *American Idol* narrative operates for artists and audiences.

“Audition” is a key aspect that resonates with *American Idol* viewers. Stahl explains that the current neoliberal economic context, in which companies are less apt to keep many American workers in stable positions over the course of long careers, foregrounds auditioning as a central aspect of securing jobs. Stahl argues that auditioning is one of many similarities between recording artists as creative laborers and the American public of wage laborers.

Indie professionalization and its relationships to autonomy and authenticity is the focus of chapter two. The stories of the Dandy Warhols and the Brian Jonestown Massacre, two indie rock bands from the West Coast, are the subject of the 2004 independent film rockumentary, *Dig!*. Stahl analyzes both the content and context of *Dig!*, revealing the similarities between musical and cinematographic artists of popular culture. In the film, the two bands start on equal footing but as the film continues, the Dandy Warhols reach greater heights of success in reaching larger audiences and Brian Jonestown Massacre fall prey to the ways of its leader’s deteriorating mental state. Following Robert C. Allen and Douglas Gomery, the author backgrounds *Dig!* as a form of filmmaking that expresses “American Liberalism,” “a postwar political mood and orientation rooted in the idea that the improvement of society will come through rational action and gradual, piecemeal change guided by expert (social) scientific knowledge, ‘rather than in total and drastic [that is, revolutionary] resolution of all its problems . . . viewers would make rational judgments’” (69). However, *Dig!*’s filmmakers pose challenges to such judgments, as Stahl describes the film as presenting a bait and switch tactic to its viewers. He argues that the presentation of the Dandy Warhols seems to fulfill viewers’ desire for the achievement of autonomy, while the Brian Jonestown Massacre story shatters these aspirations but allows the filmmakers the chance to achieve a realness that contrasts the common rags to riches narratives of other rockumentaries. This chapter about *Dig!* includes Axel Honneth’s acknowledgments of “a new, late-modern stage of conscious individualism” and Thomas Frank’s descriptions of “a hip consumerism driven by disgust with mass society itself”(69). Stahl represents *Dig!* as an example of direct cinema of new individualism and mass society critique that had first emerged in the mid-twentieth-century but currently persists.

Chapter three is the first chapter in part two and addresses regulation. Here, the author analyzes the Recording Industry Association of America’s (RIAA) push for the California legislation that prohibits recording artists from protection by the state’s “seven year rule.” This rule limited the enforcement of employment contracts to seven years. Stahl analyzes this regulation with a discussion of alienation, in both social-psychological and political-legal domains. He juxtaposes Robert Blauner’s assessment of alienation that “makes it more possible to use people as means rather than [treat them] as ends” and Mike Jones’ demystification of “artist development” as a “feel good” phrase that “masks . . . a process that is likely to be experienced by the pop act in anything but a pleasant way,” a process that alters the “sound, image and narrative of an act into an attractive commodity” (110-111). Stahl understands the role of contracts as integral to the process of “commodifying and alienating the artist’s labor” highlighting Karl Polanyi’s declaration of labor as a “fictitious commodity” that affects the human experience of the individual who labors under such agreements (111). Stahl examines the “seven year rule” in these terms and also locates this legislation within a context of the consolidation of the music industry into fewer, more powerful corporations that sought primary profits from successful artists without the limitation of the “seven year rule.” The author describes the legislation as the industry’s demand for pre-modern labor exploitation set within a contemporary moment.

The fourth chapter describes the 2001-2002 attempts of recording artists, advocates and lawmakers to combat the 1987 (“seven year rule”) decision in California. The artists’ use of rhetoric—a rhetoric making analogies to slavery and indentured servitude—is the primary site in which Stahl interrogates the tension between liberalism and democracy, represented in the relations of contracts and employment. Stahl understands the rhetorical practices of the recording artists as demonstrative of Robert Steinfield’s descriptions of free and unfree labor. Stahl argues that the complex status of labor, free or unfree “does not derive from inherent characteristics of the work or the relationship between worker and employer but it is a social construction or story, produced by the people as they interact, that can serve all kinds of social purposes” (147). Many recording artists willingly signed contracts as workers who were excluded from the “seven year rule,” determining the failure of the appeal. The author cites John Stuart Mill, stating “An individual may choose to enter a contract, but ‘he abdicates



his liberty' and 'foregoes any future of [his liberty] beyond that single act'" (148). Stahl posits that the artists' failure to appeal also inhibited their audiences from critically engaging with the dynamics of labor possibility within the political economy and employment relations.

Stahl concludes the book in a chapter that analyzes the 1999 change to the federal copyright law that the RIAA had inspired, one that rendered sound recordings as "works made for hire." Under such an arrangement, the creative labor of recording artists would be the property of the employer of recording artists. Recording artists repealed the law, insisting that they operated as independent contractors who, in turn, employed a series of creative and technical workers. Stahl shows how this maneuver of recording artists was similar to those that Mark Linder describes in an analysis of nineteenth-century labor policies, stating "the legal status of the employee was so denigrated in the nineteenth century that it led to the 'spectacle of employees' claiming to be independent contractors in order to escape the harsh consequences' of the laws governing employment" (185). The author indicates that the distinction between the artist as employee or employer was more compelling than the status of authorship of the work. In stark contrast to the rhetoric of artists during the hearings in California, recording artists before the US Congress were successful in being recognized as employers to which the law granted ownership of copyright under the auspice of "work for hire."

Stahl's insistence on presenting an equal balance between the autonomy and the alienation that recording artists experience throughout the book marks the prowess of *Unfree Masters* in describing the conditions and contexts of their labor as dynamic. He posits what readers might encounter as a series of contradictions about recording artists in his analyses. Pseudo-contradictions and oppositions are pervasive throughout the book to the extent that Stahl gleans the book's title from a quote in Carole Pateman's 1988 book, *The Sexual Contract*, in which she theorizes the husband of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries as "that curiosity, an unfree master." Husbands, in Pateman's analysis, continually experienced contrasts between their sovereignty over their households and the limit of their freedoms and rights as a worker within a market society. Stahl applies the "unfree master" term and related factors about labor contexts it invokes in his presentation of recording artists. Including distinctions of struggles and triumphs, fame and obscurity, vulnerability and protection, artists and audiences, employees and independent contractors, records and films, industries and governments, the book and its title address being unfree and being a master and do well in representing analyses of pseudo-contradictions and binary oppositions that recording artists continually mediate.

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