Moore, A. (2008). Review of *Empire of Dirt: The Aesthetics and Rituals of British Indie Music*. By Wendy Fonarow. . pp. xiv + 315. (Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Conn., 2006, \$24.95. ISBN 0-8195-6811-3.). *Music and Letters* (2008) 89 (2): 292-293. Doi: 10.1093/ml/gcm062

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The subject of Wendy Fonarow's study is precisely stated: 'This book is about how a group of people feel when they listen to a particular type of music and use their bodies to experience it' (p. 242). As a topic this seems laudable, although difficult to assess, and I find it very well pursued. If the book has a significant problem, it hangs on those two words: 'particular type'. Exactly what is this 'type' (indeed, can it be defined as a single 'type' at all?), and to what extent is it 'particular'?

Studies of genres of popular music are pretty commonplace these days. And, as befits current understandings of genre—that they are defined by characteristics of reception rather than production—it is seemly that participant observation and ethnography dominate the methods of enquiry. Such work tends most commonly to be undertaken from within the field of sociology and, to my mind, not always successfully, for description does not always result in convincing explanation. Fonarow's study is similar in both aim and execution, but her approach to these methods is subtly different, which I suspect is accounted for by her presence within a department of anthropology. Indeed, the explanatory analogy she offers for the 'indie' scene would not, I suspect, appear in a sociological study of indie. Fonarow argues that the indie scene has as its 'core values' a curious mix of what she identifies as Puritan and Romantic values, the Puritan amounting to a 'distrust of authority, a preference for non-corporate, independently owned commercial operations, an avocation of simplicity in musical form, production, and style, a promotion of high moral standards regarding issues of sexuality and conduct, an emphasis on education, and an underlying theme of austerity and absence' (p. 28). This set of values enters into an uneasy relationship with Romantic hedonism: 'indie's ideology expresses ... contradictory values at every turn, demonstrating Romantic Bohemian youth still deeply embedded in a Puritan aesthetic moral system' (pp. 183–4). While it is refreshing to see such a globalizing explanatory model, I sense that it is perhaps made to do too much work. It doesn't for instance, even begin to explain how it is that the sound-complexes which characterize indie music fit into this schema, or even whether they do (it doesn't, that is, either conceptualize or demonstrate such thorny issues in music discourse as 'simplicity in musical form, production, and style').

Fonarow's approach is very different from how one would expect a historian or musician to approach this repertory. Nowhere does she focus on whose music it is that constitutes it—knowledge of what is incorporated in the indie scene is, rather, assumed, and I don't think this is altogether successful. In particular, she falls prey to the common fallacy of insisting, without analysis, that 'the musical lineage of rock [*tout court*, it seems] preserves this [drumming and physical movement effacing the distinction between rationality and sensuality] West African metaphysic' (p. 170) and, because 'indie' is treated as a brand of 'rock', it retains this undiluted lineage. Her sources for this declaration, which are vital to her argument, are widespread, but they are treated uncritically: the stylistic passage from the blues to Radiohead, for example, is collapsed into nothing, and this lack of nuance does raise questions about her analysis.

Fonarow does provide, somewhat in passing, an extensive list of bands (p. 41), and asserts that indie is 'a category characterized by a particular sound' (p. 40), but her field of references for this sound are vague, journalistic, and sit oddly alongside the sophistication of her own analytical apparatus. Now Radiohead, for instance, are among the musicians who appear on her list. Explicit references to the band's music are restricted to their early output (pre-*OK Computer*), while a footnote acknowledges that they subsequently 'expanded upon them in production and in song length while maintaining ties to the indie community' (p. 266). What is hidden here, though, and is not addressed elsewhere, is the extent to which the musical practices changed. If *The Bends* (Radiohead's second album) is 'indie', is *Kid A* (their fourth)? The implication is that it is not, but that leaves this reader with a degree of uncertainty about the musical constitution of the genre. And, to be fair to Fonarow, that issue does not seem entirely germane to her narrative—she appears much more interested in the *idea* of indie, rather than its *aural* trace. I had almost written 'documents' here, which is even wider of the mark, for

Fonarow is particularly interested in how live audiences behave at an indie gig. Here is both a particular strength and a generic weakness of her study. To deal with the latter first: she persuades me of the accuracy both of her observation and her analysis by her rhetoric and by the correlation of her descriptions with my own (unsystematic) experience. With work of this nature, there is no other evidence (since the issues she describes are not as a rule publicly aired), and a great deal has to be taken on trust. For instance, her description of the different modes of entry for punters to a gig, the strategies different kinds of people employ (particularly to avoid having to pay) ring true, but are not easy for a reader to corroborate. Crucial to her explanation is her analysis of zones of participation for members of the audience within a conventional gig, specifically three of them, with different functions, the result of a great deal of observation. But again, corroboration even of her analysis data is not easy to find. To deal with the strengths, however: once one is convinced by her account, this leads to a pretty forceful explanation of the rites of passage involved in participation in the indie scene.

I have focused here on the (few) negatives, on my frustration at a lack of explanation as to why it is that these particular sounds are connected to these particular patterns of behaviour. Such negatives are, however, outweighed by the positives. These patterns of behaviour, summarized in terms of the Puritan values Fonarow identifies, are fully traced, explored, and exemplified in an engaging manner that also finds space for discussions of topics such as the musician as trickster; a concise analysis of the commodification processes of the 'mainstream'; the effect of gender differences; the enactment of ritual in contemporary society. And throughout, the book is rich in ethnographic detail. Provided you know what this 'particular type' of music sounds like, Wendy Fonarow's study goes a very long way to explaining the pleasures of those who spend time with it.