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reviews

Murray Forman, *One Night on TV is Worth Weeks at the Paramount: Popular Music on Early Television (Console-ing Passions: Television and Cultural Power series)*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012, 405 pp.

CAROLYN BIRDSALL

Media events can provide evocative explanations for the shifts and breaks in the histories of media such as radio, film and television. In the case of US cultural history, one such ‘historic’ moment is found in Elvis Presley’s televised music performances that started in January 1956. These television appearances have fuelled a popular myth about the ‘arrival’ of music on US television, and are frequently credited with facilitating the meteoric rise of rock’n’roll, Presley’s stardom and postwar youth culture. In *One Night on TV is Worth Weeks at the Paramount*, Murray Forman challenges this conventional periodization and posits that television music in 1956 be necessarily understood as a reflection of already-established efforts to achieve confluence between music and television. Rather than only celebrate the effects of this television debut, Forman asserts that Presley and his audiences were, in fact, already familiar with a broad range of television music programming and personalities.

Against this background, Forman’s study sets out to investigate the entwined histories of popular music and television in early television broadcasting. In doing so, Forman joins a small but growing number of scholars who have sought to redress the neglect in both television and popular music studies of this mutual influence by conducting *television music* history.¹ Even in recent research, however, Forman identifies an ongoing tendency to downplay the appeal and diversity of pre-1956 music programming, which is rarely subject to close analysis. In response, Forman investigates a series of technical improvements and experiments in generic form and style from the 1930s, but also crucially foregrounds postwar industrial disputes between musicians’ unions and television networks over contracts, recording and live performances. These large-

¹ Forman points to a number of key exceptions to this usual trend, and acknowledges several recent monographs and edited volumes that examine the role of music and sound in US television. Forman also contributed in 2002 to one of the first special issues on the topic of music in television, *Popular Music*, vol. 21, no. 3 (2002), ed. Keith Negus and John Street.

scale disputes, moreover, support Forman's claim that both unions and television industry executives recognized the commercial potential represented by the intersection of music and television. His analysis of NBC internal correspondence and media commentary indicates that not only musical talent but also outward appearance and performance emerged as crucial criteria within television's 'visual regime'.

The remaining chapters establish the major part of Forman's cultural and industrial history of early television music. Based on extensive historical research, these chapters include instructive reflections on early television stardom, as hosts, musicians and many amateur performers negotiated this new cultural form with varying degrees of success. As many performers had previously honed their skills in theatre, film and radio, they were now required to readjust to the visual aesthetics and performance conditions created within television production. In this context, Forman generates an insightful analysis of the contrasting performance logics represented by 'musicking' and 'televising'. While some performers maintained a restrained or intimate performance style, the networks' emphasis on visual performance forced many acts to compromise their musical integrity for the sake of novelty or comedic elements, described as 'funny hat routines'.

While questions of race and representation are raised throughout the study, the final two chapters crucially revolve around the careers of African American and Latino and Hispanic performers in early television. Forman recovers the frequent presence of black musicians in variety and music programming, which differs somewhat from other genres of representation, yet affirms overall how television on the whole confirmed existing racist power structures of the time. Forman examines internal documents that demonstrate how NBC developed a sensitivity to racist language in programming. At the same time, however, the network made decisions related to hiring and censorship that reflected a perceived need to accommodate the 'sensibilities' of an expanding white audience market in the US south. While the career paths of black musicians and hosts were by no means homogeneous, Forman emphasizes that they 'mainly performed among white artists for a majority white studio and viewing audience' (p. 264). His final chapter investigates the enormous popularity and reach of Latin American music in the 1940s and 1950s, particularly in the context of postwar US international relations and discourses of global travel, mobility and exoticism. In addition to a more general theme of 'imagined' musical journeys to Latin America, Forman examines at length the bandleader Desi Arnaz, whose appearances with his wife Lucille Ball in *I Love Lucy*, from 1951, provided 'pseudo-Cuban song renditions' for US consumption. Latin and Hispanic performers provided flair, sensuality and novelty for the North American small screen, yet their relevance was strictly limited to the realm of music, dance and costume.

Forman's fascinating and rich account appears in the established series 'Console-ing Passions: Television and Cultural Power'. This series has demonstrated a strong interest in early television, as

evidenced by volumes and monographs that foreground the broader cultural contexts in which television was introduced and exhibited in 1940s America. Forman's study is consistent with the series' focus on the cultural politics of television. However, in contrast to much of the scholarship associated with *Console-ing Passions*, Forman's reflections on gender are not positioned as a central concern to the study. To give an illustration, 'gender', 'sexuality' and 'women' are not included in the index, unlike a series of terms related to teen and youth culture, and black, Latino and Hispanic musicians. Given Forman's aim of revealing the social and cultural conditions in which early television emerged, an interesting point of reference could have been scholarship about the social construction of popular entertainment technologies, which has revealed the particular ways in which gendered voices and bodies have been central to the development, promotion and normalization of these technologies.²

One important contribution of Forman's study is his attention to regional and local stations, such as the on-location programming of the Los Angeles KTLA, which differed from the largely 'ersatz' nightclub settings used by East Coast stations. Forman also insightfully explains how teen music was established in a series of programmes around 1950 that variously incorporated dance, youth identities, radio DJ-ing and recorded music culture. Forman rightly emphasizes how early music programming genres drew on vaudeville and music hall stage traditions as well as the production numbers of film, nightclub and Broadway-style performance. In this context, it may have been productive to further consider the broader legacy of radio broadcasting for television or the role of sound technologies like the microphone in the formation of vocal performance styles, such as crooning. Radio broadcasting might equally have been explored in terms of its earlier influence on popular music culture and the development of genre conventions, audience address and sound techniques. There are also significant examples of 'media convergence' between the radio, recording and film industries in the 1920s, which prefigure and inform the period under study here. While Forman is attuned to early television's experimental phase and its uncertain identity in the 1930s, his own 'prehistory' might have made further acknowledgement of the longer cultural imagination of 'television' or even recent scholarship on the broader context of 'television sound'.³

Forman's study is a welcome contribution to a neglected topic within both popular music and television history. The study offers astute insights on the period from 1930 to 1955, which are generated from his combination of industrial and cultural history with theoretical reflections and close analysis. Early television music, moreover, is situated as part of, and subject to, a nexus of other socioeconomic and political factors in the postwar era. As Forman himself puts it, the introduction and development of television was influenced by a set of factors including 'the economy, labor issues, technology, art and design aesthetics, consumer practices, and audience tastes and behaviours' (p. 51). He successfully charts

2 On this point, see, for instance, the work of Lisa Gitelman or Emily Thompson on the phonograph, and in specific relation to television, monographs by Janet Thumim, Mary Beth Haralovich, Lynn Spigel, Charlotte Brunsdon, Dorothy Hobson and Michele Hilmes.

3 See, for instance, the media archaeologies of television investigated in Siegfried Zielinski, *Audiovisions: Cinema and Television as Entr'actes in History*, trans. Gloria Custance (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 1999). Contributions to the broader discussion of television sound have been made by scholars such as John Ellis, Rick Altman, Michel Chion, Michele Hilmes, Shawn VanCour and Jacob Smith.

television's emergence and impact on the US cultural sphere, pinpointing how popular music was affected by, and contributed to, this process. Some further contextualization would have been useful, since few comparisons are made to other, non-musical programming on US television at the time. Forman's notion of media history is also occasionally short-sighted in its understanding of the 'beginnings' of television in the 1930s and the 'ends' of music television in the present. Moreover, Forman's conclusion, which posits television as being 'at risk' and 'under threat' from digital media, is inconsistent with recent television scholarship that emphasizes not only the persistence of television in the domestic media ensemble, but also the constant change of televisual technologies that mean the medium has never been a singular or stable phenomenon.⁴ Nonetheless, the study significantly redresses numerous orthodoxies in the respective histories of popular music and television, and will hopefully shift the undue emphasis on Presley's television debut, which has overshadowed the contributions made by a multitude of musicians, hosts and performers to early television's musical history. For scholars in American studies, the book further reveals a critical juncture in twentieth-century history, establishing broader reflections on the cultural industries and media production, as well as key instances of developments in generic form, performance aesthetics, (raced) representation and audience consumption.

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Sean Cubitt and Stephen Partridge (eds), *REWIND: British Artists' Video of the 1970s and 1980s*. New Barnet: John Libbey, 2012, 233 pp.

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2008 marked a significant video out point: JVC, creator of the VHS format, stopped production of its standalone VHS recorders.¹ The writing had been on the wall for some time, evidenced by the number of projects seeking to digitize video collections. Between 2006 and 2009, the 'Capturing the Past' project digitized the UK's National Review of Live Art's 1800 hours of performance documentation, which was stored on such near-defunct formats as VHS, U-matic, and Hi-8.² Meanwhile, YouTube's 2005 launch began the exponential growth of the global transformation of tape and film to digital codecs designed for networked delivery of 'moving' images. In short, the past decade has witnessed the swift movement of video from the live event of its time-based and often spatially specific material flux³ to the digital archive.

Yet, the prehistory of these events dates perhaps to 2003, when video art pioneer Stephen Partridge submitted a proposal to the Arts and Humanities Research Council that outlined plans to locate, digitize and preserve British artists' video from the 1970s and 1980s. The aim was to

⁴ See, for instance, James Bennett and Niki Strange (eds), *Television as New Media* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011).

¹ Jem Noble, 'VHS: a posthumanist aesthetics of distribution and recording', in Paul Graves-Brown, Rodney Harrison and Angela Piccini (eds), *The Oxford Handbook of the Archaeology of the Contemporary World* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), p. 726.

² See *National Review of Live Art*, <<http://www.bristol.ac.uk/nrla/>>, and *NRLA Archive*, <<https://dedefi.ilrt.bris.ac.uk/>> the online searchable database of digitized documentation dating through to 2011, both accessed 10 June 2013.

³ Jackie Hatfield, 'Expanded cinema – and "cinema of attractions"', *Art In-Sight*, vol. 27, no. 1 (2005), pp. 5–9.