

**Stan Hawkins: *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality* (Routledge Studies in Popular Music). Routledge, 2016.**

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“Astonishment helps one surpass the limitations of an alienating presentness and allows one to see a different time and place” (Muñoz 5).

1 Professor Stan Hawkins’s latest book, *Queerness in Pop Music: Aesthetics, Gender Norms, and Temporality*, takes up the queer aesthetics and politics of performance within pop music as its subject. Over the course of seven chapters, Hawkins invites his readers to “partake in his own experiences, delights, and impressions” (Hawkins 2) of such figures as Madonna, George Michael, and David Bowie. This volume joins recent works in analyzing the political and social dimensions of pop music and its performers as *Gaga Feminism: Sex, Gender, and the End of Normal* (2012) by Jack Halberstam, *Gender, Branding, and the Modern Music Industry: The Social Construction of Female Popular Music Stars* (2013) by Kristin Lieb, and *Women and Popular Music: Sexuality, Identity, and Subjectivity* (2013) by Sheila Whitley. Drawing on his training as a musicologist, Hawkins’s work emphasizes how performers in pop music foreground a queer sense to normative representations of gender and sexuality. It is this queer sense, the author argues, that helps unsettle dominant social conventions and provide new frameworks for imagining the future.

2 As with many works in queer studies, Hawkins foregrounds his investigation using José Esteban Muñoz’s model of queer utopia as a form of desire for the “not-yet” of a future social world (Muñoz 26; Hawkins 7). This desire, addressed against the present’s lack (Hawkins 7), attunes his inquiry into the social function of pop music. *Queerness*, provocatively, works toward a reparative understanding of this genre as a space where queer bodies can “reorientate themselves” and “rethink our [their] own being in the world” (Hawkins 220). This attention to popular music’s queerness intimates how disruptive strategies of performance can stoke longing for political and social transformation. With this implication in mind, the queer potential of pop music directs us to consider how audiences experience and fulfill fantasies of disrupted gender and sexual norms. By focusing on these reorientations, Hawkins’s book provides a counterpoint to some of the work being done on postfeminism by complicating understandings of the

problematic relationship between sexualized bodies and fantasies of agency forwarded by marketing rhetoric. While there are clear issues to this relationship, *Queerness* acknowledges and emphasizes how audiences are oriented toward the limitations of the social and political present through the visual and sonic ecstasies of pop music.

3 A limitation of this work is, perhaps, due to its use of thematic structuring. Each chapter focuses on broad topics like art-pop aesthetics, camp, queer masculinity, and futurity among others. While this array is well suited for an anthology volume in Routledge's Popular Music series, it creates the impression that the entire work hews too closely to its chapter's subjects and limits its interrogation into the meta-discourses of queerness, utopia, or pop music more broadly. This limitation is most evident in Chapter 5, "'Talking Blah Blah': Camp into Queer," which interrogates how musical styles communicate the sounds and sensibilities of subcultures like the urban drag ball scene in the case of Lelf. In dealing with these subcultural dimensions, Hawkins's comments on camp raise important questions about how the symbolic economies of the past are disrupted, re-produced, or re-imagined in queer performance. The author's analysis of camp as a subcultural mode makes use of Susan Sontag's assertion in "Notes on Camp" that camp is more a sensibility than a concrete and visually-identifiable style (Hawkins 134). A methodological quandary surfaces here due to the instability of 'camp' as an aesthetic object since this categorization relies on subjective, internal logics of the spectator/listener. If 'camp' cannot be claimed as a concrete aesthetic or object, the use of Sontag provides strong justification to consider camp as an encounter between the audience and the pop music text, an encounter in which the spectator's affective relationship with a specific performer would take precedence. As such, Hawkins raises interest into the audience's engagement with the textures of queerness within pop music. A greater attention to the audience's encounter with the pop music text might yield further reflection on how queer performance is authored not in terms of a purely expressive or artistic perspective but as a calculated design of capitalist enterprise. Such reflection might ask how industrial and generic pressures structure the production of subversive, queer texts for pop music's contemporary markets. The resulting analysis might, indeed, find no different conclusion about how queerness modulates political and social norms. However, an attention to how advertising and marketing interests define issues of identity and queerness are intriguing research directions raised by this work, particularly as some studies now suggest that U.S. teen populations have become quite friendly with the label 'Queer' (Rodriguez).

4 On this point, however, Hawkins's project is, decidedly, strengthened by its investment in how pop music might be understood through its *cultural context* than strictly through its capitalist modes of production. In Chapter 3, "'In and Out': Games of Truth and Disclosure," David Bowie, Madonna, and Diana Ross are all considered in how the 'closet' is a recurring metaphor in pop music. Hawkins analyzes how the gender-play of pop stars represents a genre of performance that privileges the confession of self and identity. For this argument, the author borrows Foucault's treatment of confession as a "transformation of knowledge and consciousness" (Hawkins 72) to interrogate the queer transgression and pleasure of these celebrities. For these personae, the coherence of identity is problematized by highlighting its performativity and its production as an object of self-presentation. Here, Hawkins astutely intimates how identity has become an object of freedom within pop music's songwriting such that the genre's declarations of self transforms and augments the audience's conscious experience of that identity. This insight is a notable strength of Hawkins's work as it encourages further debate into how queerness in pop music is influenced by discourses of American liberalism and its interaction with artists and listening populations.

5 In her inquiry into the utopian dimensions of queerness, Angela Jones remarks, "If queer politics is about freedom, it might simply mean the freedom to breathe" (Jones 2). Hawkins's work draws similar conclusions from the queered presentation of social identities within popular music. His emphasis on disrupted gender and sexual norms are privileged precisely for their capacity to allow audiences the freedom to breathe, simply and queerly. *Queerness in Popular Music* makes strong use of its author's musicology training to raise this compelling insight. Further, Hawkins's analysis of self and identity in popular music provides excellent groundwork for further exploration into the affective dimensions of this genre. These resulting studies would investigate what queer and radical discourses pop music makes possible and how it interacts with broader segments of American culture and political discourse. In doing so, this promising research area would yield further insight into the affective forms of belonging found within popular music and how integral queerness might be to these forms. These types of investigations are ones that Hawkins is clearly capable of leading, and I look forward to his future work that makes such answers possible.

### Works Cited

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