

Is Rock Dead? By Kevin J.H. Dettmar. New York: Routledge, 2006. xvii, 184 p. ISBN 0-415-97033-2. \$19.95 US

Of all the styles and genres of popular music, the one that has drawn the most vitriolic criticism is rock. It is widely accepted that rock and roll appeared around 1955, give or take a year, and since that time it has been blamed for a legion of social ills, most notably the corruption of youth. It has also been criticized as being simplistic compared to more serious forms like classical or jazz. Only within the last twenty years has it been considered a legitimate subject of academic study.

Given rock's seemingly simultaneous streams of praise and critique, and independence and commercialism, it is not surprising that time and again rock music is thought to have "died." Throughout its history it has suffered from musical entropy, surviving with a Phoenix-like rebirth every ten years or so, rising from the ashes to triumphantly retake the mainstream throne with something new. The question, then, becomes, has rock *really* died? Evidence would suggest it is alive and well, if its various offspring like punk, heavy metal, and grunge are any indication. Others would claim there is only one true rock, and it died either with Buddy Holly, Jimi Hendrix, the breakup of the Beatles, the assassination of John Lennon, or Kurt Cobain's suicide—take your pick.

The title of Kevin Dettmar's book, *Is Rock Dead?*, is excellent, in that even before a page is turned it provokes discussion. After all, who doesn't have an opinion of the vitality, validity, and health of rock music? Dettmar, an English professor at Southern Illinois

University and co-editor of *Rock and Roll: Authenticity, Appropriation, Aesthetics*, does not to claim to really have the answer, but instead opts for a literary review of the theme. He points out, "This is a book not so much about rock & roll per se but about the ways we find to talk about the music, more than about the music itself" (xi). He amasses what seems like every fragment of relevant information on the subject. This is organized into chapters that provide an overview of the various methods, means, and discussions surrounding rock's mortality, categorized by journalism, academic writing, public opinion, and the music itself. The book, which includes footnotes, a bibliography, and comprehensive index, spans the gamut of rock history from its first appearance in Memphis to contemporary rap and hip hop artists, whom many see as the new standard-bearers.

It comes as no surprise, given Dettmar's background, that he would draw parallels with literary themes. With this in mind, Chapter 1 presents an overview of the "rock is dead" thesis beginning with its genesis in other art forms, such as literature and theatre. Modern authors Faulkner, Woolf, and Stein are seen as leaving the nineteenth-century Victorian novel for dead, just as Stravinsky "killed" classical ballet with *Le sacre du printemps*. Dettmar states, "Stories of birth and death, of course, are the very warp and woof of Western narrative tradition—from creation myths to apocalypse, Genesis to Revelation—and their ubiquity in histories of rock & roll should therefore come as no surprise" (29).

Chapter 2 delves into the myth with rock and roll's emergence in the 1950s and its association with juvenile delinquency, especially in light of the 1955 films, *The Blackboard Jungle* and *Rebel Without A Cause*. Dettmar then moves on to popular B-movies of the time, illuminating their similarities to much 1950s rock and roll and drawing parallels with the zombie movie craze of the period. From here, Chapters 3 and 4 cover popular and academic writing that focusses on rock's death. Dettmar notes, "In popular writing the death of rock is treated something like a hoary rumor for which definitive evidence is lacking ... and the newcomer to the debate gets his scoop by being the guy finally to produce evidence of the death" (76). This is contrasted in Chapter 4 as he alludes that scholarly writers treat their subject as if it were already dead, "... [W]hen a generation of scholars first began to turn its attention to the music of its youth, it found it convenient to treat it as dead rather than living ..." (77).

In Dettmar's view, humanities scholars "are inclined to historicize their observation" and "favor phenomena that have already run their course" (77). Noting the perceived supremacy of so-called classic rock, he points out it is "the boomer's narrative of rock as the authentic sound of freedom that remains dominant" (121). Still, in spite of the journalistic and scholarly attempts to support the notion of the death of rock, both camps of writing have more in common than not.

Chapter 5, "Dancing on its Own Grave: The Strange Logics of the 'Rock is Dead' Song," has Dettmar shifting attention more toward the music. He sifts through the myriad of songs on

rock's mortality and states that rock is the first music to "take hold of the premature announcement of its demise and embrace it as a subject for its ongoing production," ironically proving that rock is not dead because rock continues to sing about itself (123). He creates eight categories for rock songs that range from the rock elegy, such as Don McLean's "American Pie," to songs that declare "simply and rather uninterestingly, that rock is dead, without providing any kind of either argument or evidence ..." (147).

Dettmar is quite thorough with his exploration of the rock is dead subject. He brings together disparate writers and sources that proclaim the same thing. The writing is clear and easy to read, albeit casual at times despite the conflicting views of much of the material, and it is often humorous and insightful. Dettmar captures the essence of the myth and effectively guides the reader through its various permutations using song and literary examples.

Yet, it is readily apparent from Dettmar's sources that aesthetics plays a much larger role in supporting the myth than what is brought out in the book. Rock's death is proclaimed, more often than not, when the aesthetic value of established popular music is threatened or overturned by something new. For example, much of the discourse in the 1950s centered on musical value and how rock and roll was inferior when compared to songwriters and stars like Irving Berlin or Frank Sinatra—that is, when rock wasn't blamed for everything else. Grunge's incursion into popular music mainstream in the 1990s sounded the death knell of rock, as far as fans of so-called classic rock were concerned.

Even popular and academic writers can teeter precariously on the edge of aesthetics when dealing with their subject matter. Dettmar touches on the relationship between aesthetics and the myth, but he does not explore it in any great detail, and if there is any failing in the book, this would be it. Having said that, the breadth of material and Dettmar's overview adequately make up for what is missing.

Of course, Dettmar cannot go through rock history gathering musical obituaries without coming to some sort of conclusion. Even though he says early on that the book would not attempt to

answer the question, he still manages to: "They say it's dead—and they only want to kill it—because it's so obviously, threateningly, joyously alive" (158). Indeed, Dettmar's own enthusiasm for the music pervades the topic. *Is Rock Dead?* is a fine addition to the pantheon of writing on popular music. As well as being an entertaining read, it's a wonderful resource for researching pertinent popular and scholarly writing. To sum up: Rock is dead—long live rock!

Gordon Ross
York University