

*Sells Like Teen Spirit: Music, Youth
Culture and Social Crisis* Ryan Moore

New York: New York University Press, 2010.

(ISBN: 9780814757482) 296 pp.

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It remains a fact that, while research under the umbrella term of ‘cultural studies’ has come to encompass a broad range of social movements, certain counter-cultures, predominantly in the milieu of popular music, have remained sidelined by scholarly institutionalism. To that end, this new work by Ryan Moore attempts to redress the balance of interest by charting a detailed history of the development of ‘alternative’ music; crucially, however, Moore also identifies links between political upheaval and popular music counter-cultures from the 1970s up to the mid-1990s. Of course, conventional social wisdom would have it that music has been attached to youthful rebellion since rock ‘n’ roll surfaced in the 1950s, but it is not Moore’s purpose here to argue that this kind of sonic insurgence was simply the result of teenage angst. His book takes into account punk, hardcore, heavy metal and grunge music, exploring how such genres were linked to political fringe movements, as well as the resulting social effects on youth culture. He argues that, as American society has undergone stratospheric shifts in economic and political

temperament – from post-Fordist capitalism and the Vietnam War, from the explosion of pop culture manipulation that was the careful branding of ‘Generation X’ and the subsequent waves of anti-globalisation protesting – the musical underground has always encouraged a kind of active resistance in its band of followers. Consequently, Moore follows in the footsteps of writers such as Greil Marcus and his work concerning punk and Dada; like Marcus, Moore connects often-derided aspects of popular music culture to a platform of deeper significance in the wider cultural-historical picture.

Beginning with the punk explosion in the New York City of the 1970s, Moore reasons that social and political disorder directly influenced underground facets of popular music. According to this logic, the New York fiscal crisis set the scene for punk to articulate a generation’s frustration in facing mass unemployment and huge public sector cuts. As Moore indicates, the worst affected areas were those already suffering from social deprivation, particularly the South Bronx. He draws a comparison between burgeoning hip hop culture in New York’s northernmost borough and the punk scene that had emerged in downtown Manhattan, though unfortunately for the purposes of this book, there is not enough space to include a more detailed account of the politicisation of hip hop, nor its subsequent collaborations with other alternative scenes. Moore’s method of analysis works best in segments where he documents the lesser-known punk, hardcore and metal scenes, such as those which emerged in southern California and particularly around his native

San Diego. His years of extensive fieldwork are evidenced throughout with anecdotal accounts, including interviews with band members and fans alike.

Perhaps the strongest chapter in the book is 'Hell Awaits,' a narrative of the development of heavy metal in both the USA and the UK. Here, Moore explores firstly the materialisation of a musical form which, due in no small part to the influence of the tabloid presses, was somewhat hysterically linked to Satan-worship and occultism. The author ties the emergent metal scene to tremendous youth dissatisfaction with the growing crisis of widespread unemployment; what is most interesting here is his investigation of extreme heavy metal as a kind of pseudo-mystical escapism for a generation of angry, disenfranchised young people. One of the more disturbing elements Moore identifies, however, is the incidence of mental illness associated with teenagers in the 1980s metal scenes in particular. He includes excerpts from a number of personal interviews with young men and women forced to undergo psychiatric treatment or incarceration as a consequence of their associations with socially-marginalised counter-cultural groups. Demonstrating the all-encompassing power of financial gain, Moore draws to the chapter's conclusion the development of 'glam' metal – something that was epitomised by bands such as Mötley Crüe – indicating that their glorification of rock star excess was a reversal of earlier punk politics.

Moore's detailing of grunge music contains a noteworthy portrayal of the often-overlooked riot grrrl movement, looking at

the increasingly feminist edge punk embodied in the early 1990s. Eschewing a straightforward narrative of the rise and fall of world-famous grunge acts like Nirvana, Moore chooses to focus on the anti-globalisation movements of the Pacific Northwest and how, once again, increasing left-wing politicisation amongst these subcultures led to the development of a new genre, as well as the social subculture that grew around the grunge scene. In contrast to his earlier descriptions of metal fans as social and familial outcasts, the grunge and riot grrrl chapters engage with the more positive aspects of teenage and young adult social niches. For instance, Moore observes that young women in particular benefited from the ‘zine’ (fanzine) culture that developed around grunge and riot grrrl scenes, through their promotion of healthier body image identification. Here, the author argues the real driving force behind counter-cultural music movements was the desire to break away from capital investment, something the glam rockers of the 1980s embraced and celebrated, appropriately, to excess, but that was aggressively rejected in the 1990s with the rise of anti-globalisation movements (high-profile victims included brands such as Nike and Starbucks). Among the musicians and bands associated with the grunge scene, the desire to remain independent seemed all-important, a struggle against the influences of major record labels who maintained a front of being sympathetic to the independent cause, and ultimately and the unstoppable force that was the emergence of MTV.

Moore’s writing style is extremely engaging, weaving a mixture of anecdotal accounts into socio-political analysis, as well as including

various elements of cultural theory. Where this method becomes slightly less effective, however, is in its rather idiosyncratic nature. The text is peppered with references to Foucault and Debord, amongst other significant theorists, but it is only really in the last chapter, 'The Work of Rock in the Age of Digital Reproduction' that the author engages in detail with musicological or cultural theory. Here, Moore formulates an appealing case relating the issue of illegal music reproduction, particularly online file sharing, to Walter Benjamin's seminal essay ('The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'), comparing and contrasting Benjamin with Theodor Adorno's concept of the 'culture industry.' It is slightly patchy, and perhaps at worst feels almost extraneous, coming in at the end of a book that is essentially a sociological and historical analysis of pop music avant-gardes. However, Moore succeeds in creating a convincing link between alternative music scenes and grassroots political movements. Perhaps, then, the most successful aspect of *Sells Like Teen Spirit* is the fact it manages to raise the often academically-derided musical genres of punk, hardcore and their ilk from the popular conception of minor youthful rebellion to a genuine expression of socio-political distaste, proving that counter-cultural movements can indeed leave their mark on history. Moore's account is made on behalf of generations of punk rockers, metalheads and slackers; his deeply personalised work demonstrates that these were more than mere angry teenagers, rather they represented America's young people at the forefront of their respective revolutions.

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