

Reviews



General

Levi S. Gibbs, ed.

Social Voices: The Cultural Politics of Singers around the Globe

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How do individual singers become global symbols of cultural politics? This question lies at the core of *Social Voices: The Cultural Politics of Singers around the Globe*, edited by Levi S. Gibbs. The book explores how singers from diverse genres and regions come to embody broader cultural and political narratives. These singers don't just perform; they shape and challenge ideas of identity, power, and social change. Featuring individual contributions from scholars across disciplines such as anthropology, sociology, literature, music, ethnomusicology, and performance studies, this interdisciplinary volume reveals how singers can become the living, breathing embodiments of regions, nations, and pivotal historical moments. Through their voices they redefine what it means to belong.

The book is structured into four parts, each foregrounding different aspects of the relationship between singers and cultural politics. The first part, "The Politics of Authenticity and Iconicity," explores how singers achieve iconic status through claims of authenticity and authority and how they craft public personas that resonate with diverse audiences. Anthony Seeger's chapter on his uncle, American singer Pete Seeger, and Andrew Simon's chapter on Egyptian singer Shaykh Imam illustrate how these artists used their voices to challenge political narratives and connect with audiences through alternative media channels. John Lie's chapter on K-pop examines the dynamics of K-pop fandoms, revealing how fans actively construct and deconstruct the genre's icons. Lie shows how these fandoms empower individuals, providing a sense of inclusion, especially for those who feel marginalized. This empowerment extends beyond the social realm, as fans organize to influence broader cultural narratives and assert their voices as active participants in the political and cultural landscape. A delightful example is the role of K-pop fans in disrupting a 2020 Trump rally in Oklahoma by organizing to drastically reduce attendance.

The second section, “Race, Gender, Ethnicity, and Class,” explores how singers navigate and challenge societal norms. Nancy Guy’s chapter on American operatic soprano Beverly Sills and Christina D. Abreu’s chapter on Afro-Cuban icons like Celia Cruz consider how these artists used their platforms to address issues of representation and equality, turning music into a powerful medium for social commentary. Treva B. Lindsey’s chapter on Beyoncé offers a striking example of this dynamic, analyzing how Beyoncé’s work epitomizes Black female superstardom. Lindsey examines how Beyoncé’s exploration of Black womanhood, particularly within the context of the US South and the Global South, transforms her music and public persona into a potent commentary on race, gender, and class. Through these narratives, the section reveals how singers reshape the cultural landscapes around them and how their art represents a battleground for broader societal struggles.

The third section, “Multiplicities of Representations,” emphasizes the concept of “multivocality,” through which singers craft performances that resonate with diverse audiences. This section spotlights female singers who have challenged traditional norms and forged new cultural narratives. Carol Silverman’s chapter on Romani singer Esma Redzepova and Carol A. Muller’s exploration of South African artists like Thandiswa Mazwai showcase how these women have used their voices to redefine cultural boundaries. Michael K. Bourdaghs’s analysis of Teresa Teng, the Taiwanese singer who became an iconic figure during Asia’s Cold War era, further exemplifies this theme. Teng’s music received an enthusiastic response among audiences across China, Taiwan, and Southeast Asia. Her ability to sing in multiple languages and styles enabled her to navigate complex political landscapes, transforming her into a symbol of cultural unity and resistance. Multivocality, thus, allows singers to become powerful conduits for cultural connection and change.

The final section, “Singers and Songs as Interweaving Narratives,” explores how songs and singers become integral to ongoing social conversations with performances that can either unite or divide audiences depending on the context. Katherine Meizel examines how two singers—one American, one Syrian—bring distinct interpretations to the Arabic song “Ya Toyour,” highlighting how personal lenses can reshape a single song. In contrast, Natalie Sarrazin considers how a single singer can lend her voice to thousands of songs and, in doing so, navigate a complex terrain of gender and politics. Sarrazin’s chapter on legendary playback singer Lata Mangeshkar, whose voice became a cultural touchstone in India over her eight-decade career, explores how Mangeshkar’s voice often served as a unifying force, resonating with diverse audiences while embodying ideals of femininity and national pride in a male-dominated industry. Together, these chapters suggest a dynamic interplay between singers and their songs and demonstrate how individual performances shape broad cultural and political dialogues.

A strength of *Social Voices* is its thoughtful organization and thematic unity. The chapters cycle through key themes such as race and class, struggle and resistance, the tension between elite and popular culture, and the adaptability of the human voice. Central to the book is the act of listening, emphasized repeatedly as a crucial component of understanding cultural dynamics. While each chapter sings out on its own, their collective impact is even greater, making this book an ideal textbook resource for courses on global popular culture and related fields. This book is more than a collection of essays. It is a cohesive exploration that invites readers to listen deeply and think critically about the world’s most influential voices.

The book is tied together by a lovely framing structure. Each of its four sections is introduced by a scholar who provides an autobiographical interlude, sharing their academic journey and personal connection to the topic. For instance, in his introduction to the fourth section, Kwame Dawes reflects on his engagement with the aesthetics of reggae, particularly the profound influence of Bob Marley. Dawes's interlude reveals how his personal background has shaped his academic focus and deepened his understanding of the political dimension of song. This framing structure humanizes the academic discourse and also highlights the power that singers have over listeners. Scholars, like the singers they study, are deeply affected by the cultural politics of song.

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