




BOOK REVIEW

The Subcultures Network. Let's Spend the Night Together: Sex, Pop Music and British Youth Culture, 1950s–80s

Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2023. Pp. 336. \$150.00 (cloth).

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The introduction to *Let's Spend the Night Together*—credited pretty much to the entire organizational board of the Subcultures Network, which is located at the University of Reading, where Matthew Worley is a professor of modern history—declares that the book's "aim is to home in on experiences and representations of sex in the physical and media spaces opened up through music-based cultures" (3). As more than one of the chapters in this collection recognize, this makes the book's title a little misleading—pop music, and even music-based cultures are not necessarily the prism through which the reader approaches some of these representations of sex in mid-twentieth-century popular culture. In fact, two chapters, by Sarah Kenny and Sian Edwards, barely even bother with pop music in discussing how young women negotiated the expression of their sexuality in magazines and on the rural dating scene, respectively, while in the chapters on the movies *Blowup* (1966) and *Deep End* (1971), the inclusion of any discussion of pop music at all almost seems like a sop by which to get the chapters to fit into the context of the rest of the book. It's easily understandable, though. Subtitled the book *Representations of Sex in Physical and Media Spaces Opened Up Through Music-based Cultures* would be a little unwieldy and turn away the casual or even academically informed reader of this book. Shoehorning all of these chapters under the defining term "pop music" will have to do, and even those chapters that don't meet that criterion are well worth reading.

The Subcultures Network is an assemblage of academics working mostly on popular music in the rock and roll era, many of whom I have already read in other contexts. Their remit is to pursue the multidisciplinary history of subcultures represented mostly by pop groups (Northern soul being an exception) and fashion trends. In the case of this book, its chapters are largely focused on how sex, sexuality, and occasionally gender roles provided a theme around which so much of the music, journalism, club patronage, and fashions were organized. As pointed out in the introduction, even the etymologies of jazz, rock and roll, funk, and punk were rooted in sex, so naturally any culture or subculture focused around these popular musics would have sex as a foundational principle (2). Even when the idea of pursuing sex at a nightclub was frowned upon in comparison to dancing and sharing a sense of community, as it was with Northern soul, as noted by Sarah Raine and Caitlin Shentall, the concept of sex provided a boundary for the outer limits of the subculture: it was not cool to be on the prowl for a sexual mate in a Northern soul disco. The interest in this book's chapters is sustained by the authors' individual and collective abilities to flip the subcultural and popular culture message about sex on its head. Instead of showing

how sex was reflected in a subculture, a song, a dance hall, a movie, clothing, or a magazine, the chapters are about young people and their sexual energies, and the songs, dances, magazines, and other cultural outlets are just another way they let those energies flow. It's an eye-opening juxtaposition of ideas.

Two of the best chapters are personal reflections made by people of color. William "Lez" Henry, a DJ, writes about the reggae subgenre of slackness, with its in-your-face sexuality. Henry describes his experience of the music growing up in Jamaica and notes that, just because a performer like Max Romeo performs a song identified as representing slackness does not mean that he can be defined that way as a performer—nor can a listener like himself at a prepubescent age be dismissed as having been culturally oversexed at a young age. Nabeel Zuberi's "Coming of age Asian and Muslim in post-punk West Yorkshire" is a thoughtful story of the push and pull he felt in assimilating into youth culture in Ilkley in the early 1980s when he was so often slagged off by kids because of his Pakistani heritage.

As with most collections of essays like this one, it will likely be hard for this to sell beyond libraries, but the authors and editors certainly do everything possible to make it accessible. No chapter in the book extends for even twenty pages from introduction through footnotes—any teacher in a popular culture seminar would find it easy to assign a chapter to a student and have them read it overnight. There is a solid balance between chapters on national pop culture and how it was meant to be received by audiences, versus chapters on the average teenager or young adult and how pop music provided a soundtrack to their sexual experiences. Standouts include Sian Edwards's chapter on young women dating and indulging in furtive sexual encounters in rural England, Daryl Leeworthy's story of artists like David Bowie and Tom Robinson helping young men define a new gay subculture in the 1970s (why name it after Elton John, though? He's only mentioned at the end of the chapter), and Matthew Worley's story of the permutations of Vivienne Westwood and Malcolm McLaren's fashion shop on King's Road, which he defines as being derived from the effort to work out a statement found in a Nik Cohn book: "*I am different; I am tough; I fuck*" (244).

This is a probing book and easy to read for anyone with even a cursory knowledge of British pop culture and its history over the past seventy-five years. It will surely show up in lots of libraries, but it's worth picking up, as noted, by academics looking to teach the subject, or by the average university-educated reader who finds it in their recommended book feed on Amazon.