

## Book review

**Title:** *Shakin' All Over: Popular Music and Disability*

**Author:** George McKay

**Publisher:** Ann Arbor: Michigan, 2013. In *Corporealities: Discourses of Disability* series. Editors, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder.

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**Reviewer:** Steven E. Brown, PhD

When I opened *Shakin' All Over* I had no idea how much I would learn. Immersed in the book, I continually found myself looking up musicians I had not heard about, like Steve Harley and Cockney Rebel; Kevin Coyne and Kata Kolbert; Joy Division and the Epileptics; and ones I thought I knew a lot about, but did not realize they had a disability connection, such as Judy Collins, Donovan, and Dinah Shore.

McKay manages to discuss all of the above musicians and many more, while surprisingly (to him as much, or more, than to readers), disclosing his own disability and what he has learned about it in the process of writing this book. He deftly analyzes how disability fits in and influences popular music, such as the common shaking of many rock musicians; and how music has created disabilities, particularly, but not only, hearing impairments.

In the Introduction, McKay writes that purpose of this book is:

“to explore the common cultural and social territory of popular music and disability, which has been a hitherto neglected topic. It is situated at a nexus of disciplinary or sub-disciplinary concerns: disability studies, popular music studies, cultural studies, performance studies, gender studies, and theory. It is intended as a timely musical contribution to the critical dialogue of recent years around disability culture, as one corrective to the relative silence of popular music studies here” (pp. 1-2).

This is an academic book about popular music and disability from a professor of cultural studies, who is also a musician and, as we find out throughout the book, a person recognizing his own disability and his personal and professional life are more intertwined than he realized. The author informs us early in the book his publisher has been reminded to focus on music that is popular and therefore does not focus much on musicians with disabilities, like Ian Stanton or Johnny Crescendo, writing and singing about disability issues--though they are mentioned.

The five chapters following McKay's introduction focus on particular aspects of his subject, including polio survivors and their influence on popular music, with a particular focus on Ian Dury, and discussions of many others, including Israel Vibrations, Gene Vincent, and Carl Perkins (the jazz musician, not the country singer), and Neil Young, who receives more focus in the second chapter on voicing the disabled body. That chapter also looks at Hank Williams and

Mel Tillis, country singers with disabilities, and Curtis Mayfield, who became a quadriplegic during an accident while performing.

In the third chapter, focused on performing disability in pop and rock, McKay looks at unknowns, like Kata Kolbert, who is difficult even to find via search engines; and at Teddy Pendergrass and Robert Wyatt, performers who acquired a disability after becoming popular, like Mayfield. He also dissects epilepsy and its impact on performing and performers, with particular emphasis on Neil Young (whose epilepsy appeared when he was a young man; his polio as a child) and Ian Curtis of Joy Division.

The fourth chapter features Johnny Ray, an early pop star vocalist, pianist, and songwriter, who was deaf in one ear and wore a visible hearing aid, and seems to have been the only popular musician with deafness to this day. This chapter gives McKay a chance to integrate Deaf culture and studies into the book. This is also a chapter where McKay discusses music creating disabilities, particularly hearing impairments for both musicians and audience members exposed to loud music, and even to those of us listening at home, who might turn up the volume, especially with today's devices often in our ears for hours at a time.

McKay concludes with a chapter on "Crippin' the Light Fandango: An Industry that Kills and Maddens *and* Campaigns," with a look at Amy Winehouse who sang about rehab (or not) and committed suicide; Michael Jackson and Elvis Presley and their doctors; and a slew of others. It also includes activism, such as Neil Young's Bridge School, the origin of the March of Dimes, and continued efforts today to eradicate polio, with a poster featuring the Congolese band, Staff Benda Bilili, a group of street musicians who had polio and who have in recent years become popular.

McKay ends the book, surprised to be attending and enjoying a Stevie Wonder concert, since he is usually more interested in lesser know performers in smaller venues. But he finds Wonder to demand disability access and awareness, "delivered onstage by the disabled musician at the pop concert, and the way that that utterance had been so cheered by everyone that powerfully struck me. The shakin's not all over is it? The world still needs shaking up" (p. 194).

Throughout the book, McKay also incorporates many authors of disability studies into his analyses, including Rosemarie Garland Thomson, Petra Kuppers, Alex Lubet, Joseph Straus, David Mitchell, and Sharon Snyder, among many others. The integration of disability studies analysis with a cultural studies perspective is one of the many gifts of this book, which I want in my own disability studies and culture library and which will hopefully be in many other libraries and used in many disability, cultural, and music studies courses.

**Steven E. Brown**, PhD is Professor of Disability Studies and *Review of Disability Studies* Media Reviews Editor at the Center on Disability Studies, University of Hawaii. He can be contacted at [sebrown@hawaii.edu](mailto:sebrown@hawaii.edu).