

Book Reviews

Michael James Roberts, *Tell Tchaikovsky the News: Rock 'n' Roll, the Labor Question, and the Musicians' Union, 1942 – 1968* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). 280 pp. \$23.95 Paperback.

“My heart’s beating rhythm and my soul keeps on singing the blues,” musical pioneer Chuck Berry relayed on his hit record from the spring of 1956, “Roll over Beethoven and tell Tchaikovsky the news.”¹ The deeply disturbing news, of course, was that the symphonic music of these illustrious composers was giving way to the raucous sounds of rock ‘n’ roll. There was heft to this lyrical bravado. Berry and his musical ilk were indeed disrupting the highbrow-lowbrow cultural binary that was prevalent in American society at the time, much to the dismay of those who had been benefitting tremendously from the hierarchal *status quo*.

In *Tell Tchaikovsky the News*, Michael James Roberts examines the ways in which the oldest and largest labour union representing professional musicians in Canada and the United States, the American Federation of Musicians (AFM), responded to the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll music. He aims to unpack how the labour movement went into such steep decline from the 1960s onward. In addition to significant political-economic structural changes, the author innovatively considers the role that the elitist culture of the AFM played in American labour’s misfortunes. The sociologically grounded Marxist cultural analysis found throughout this work should pique the interest of music and labour history scholars alike.

Particularly noteworthy is how this book contributes to the scrutiny of rock ‘n’ roll music by emphasizing communal class conflict, instead of arranging class as an indicator of personality. “Class conflict and class as a collective phenomenon are rarely considered,” Michael James Roberts writes, referring to most historical accounts of rock ‘n’ roll, “especially as forces that shape the music, rather than merely describe the status of the individual musician.” (44-45) According to Roberts, the essence of rock ‘n’ roll in the 1950s — the boastfulness of the performers, the turbulent musical material, plus an attitude embracing pleasure and immediate gratification — developed out of the working-class culture that prevailed in the United States during the 1940s. (112) The author argues that most of the AFM leadership and several famous rank-and-file members vociferously denounced rock ‘n’ roll music for many years, largely along class lines.

Tell Tchaikovsky the News sets off detailing how the AFM garnered major concessions from American radio and record companies regarding labour-saving technology. These deals fostered union solidarity and showed what organized workers could accomplish together in the early 1940s. The cohesion that had developed within the AFM began to disintegrate in the 1950s as high-profile members, bol-

stered by their middle-class status and confident in their bourgeois aesthetic, took to the trade magazines to voice their disdain for rock ‘n’ roll music. Michael James Roberts maintains that because the AFM leadership continued to position the union against rock ‘n’ roll musicians — and the youth and countercultures to which they became intricately tied — in the 1960s primarily for reasons of class, the musicians’ union cultivated the decline of its power and influence within the American music industries and Left politics in subsequent decades.

Tell Tchaikovsky the News relies heavily on secondary source material to help demonstrate how and why the elitist culture of the AFM reacted the way it did to the rise and unexpected longevity of rock ‘n’ roll music. Dependence on James P. Kraft’s work on American professional musicians in the second quarter of the twentieth century, *Stage to Studio*, for instance, is particularly strong in the first half of this book. To his credit, however, Michael James Roberts utilizes archival files on the Beatles to deftly unfurl the intense exchange between fans of the Fab Four and the AFM administration that erupted when the musicians’ union tried to ban the British rock ‘n’ roll group from playing in the United States again after their immensely popular first tour there in 1964.

The theoretical framework of *Tell Tchaikovsky the News* suffers from overlooking the intersectionality of class. While the author clearly acknowledges the importance of race and gender as vectors of social critique, especially considering the history of racism and misogyny in the American music industries, his goal is to develop the examination of class in rock ‘n’ roll music. Michael James Roberts deals with class as an isolated category of analysis that is generally stable and largely uniform. Granted, several times the class dimension is *displaced* through race in this work. And Roberts does highlight communal class conflict throughout. Nonetheless, treating class as historically constructed *in relation* to other ever-shifting categories — such as race, gender, age, ability, and sexuality — and contingent upon subject position could have added layers of complexity to the theoretical outlook.

That being said, this book is a remarkable read. It excels in tracing American class conflict from the early 1940s to the late 1960s through the responses of the AFM’s leadership and some well-established rank-and-file members to the advent and enduring appeal of rock ‘n’ roll music. *Tell Tchaikovsky the News* also offers a cultural study of that working-class musical form which helps chart the post-Depression history of labour relations in the recording industries of the United States.

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¹ Chuck Berry, “Roll Over Beethoven,” *The Definitive Collection*. Geffen Records B0004417-02, 2005, compact disc. Chess Records originally issued the song as a single in May 1956.