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Review of *Atomic Tunes: The Cold War in American and British Popular Music* by Joanna and Tim Smolko, Indiana University Press, 2021

by Aldwyn Hogg Jr.

The Cold War between the United States of America (USA) and the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (USSR) persists as the overwhelmingly defining conflict of the preceding century. This battle of ideas, as it has so often been reductively framed in contemporary popular histories, spectacularly reconfigured and reordered life around the world and influenced realms of human activity including geopolitics (like the multitude of anti-colonial and independence movements and struggles in Asia, Africa, and South America), technology (like the space race), and music and media (like the ascendancy of radio and, later during the century, the television).

Indeed, as Tim and Joanna Smolko's 2021 *Atomic Tunes: The Cold War in American and British Popular Music* demonstrates, the Cold War and its constituent anxieties and frictions acted as a potent prism that significantly shaped currents in popular music. The book explores and typifies ways in which this global conflict influenced popular music and musicians in America and Britain by interweaving a loosely chronological accounting of the major theaters and crises of the Cold War (like the Cuban Missile Crisis, the Vietnam War, the Iran-Contra Affair, and the fall of the Berlin Wall) with close analyses of musicians' political influences and affiliations, and the expressions thereof in their music. This kind of study, Smolko and Smolko contend, has the potential to "give deep and substantial insight into the social history of the conflict, capturing the thoughts and emotions of everyday people who lived under the shadow of Stalin, *Sputnik*, mushroom clouds, and missiles" (2). Despite the book's title and cover page prominently framing the atomic bomb as the preeminent symbol of the Cold War, its ten chapters touch on and draw connections between many different moments, places, and objects of the conflict and aspects of American and British culture, politics, and music. The rich tapestry woven throughout *Atomic Tunes* between political history, music, and other media objects and cultural practices—like books, films, dancing, and television—makes the book an accessible and efficient introductory text on popular music and Cold War politics during the twentieth century. However, it is precisely because of this broad scope that those seeking a sustained study of the era's cultural politics or of particular music genres would likely find the text insufficient.

The book's introduction situates the text within broader musicological scholarship on the Cold War, framing it as a recuperative response to Peter J. Schmelz's assessment in 2009 that "the recently initiated, increasingly active musicological engagement with the Cold War [is] long overdue" (Schmelz 2009, 3). The introduction also delimits the scope of the musical analyses contained within the chapters as focusing primarily on song lyrics (which, throughout the book, disappointingly crowds out analysis of these songs' sonic or musical profiles), and outlines the criteria that informed Smolko and Smolko's collection and categorization of what they call "Cold War songs." These songs emerged alongside historical developments in protest music and the rise of the singer-songwriter in the mid-1960s. And Cold War songs endure today as rich and viable artifacts that reflect and refract the nuances of the cultural contexts out of which they emerged. Indeed, as

Smolko and Smolko explain, Cold War songs "give insight into the historical events of the Cold War," "reflect public opinion on Cold War issues," and "are stimulating and creative in their own right" (10). In spite of the glaring omission of Black American popular music genres (there is no discussion of soul music, funk, or rhythm and blues, for example), the book's ten chapters deftly contextualize within a fuzzy chronology of the Cold War songs from genres including (American) folk music, country music, novelty or comedy songs, early electric-rock, hard rock and heavy metal, punk rock, and finally, electronic and new wave music.

Chapter one, "Folk: From Paul Robeson to Bob Dylan," explores the confrontations and frictions between Cold War politics and Cold War songs by seminal figures of the American Folk music movement. The musicians Smolko and Smolko discuss in this chapter—whose Cold War songs, they argue, were situated at the nexus of communism, capitalism, patriotism, and fear (2)—include Woody Guthrie and Pete Seeger in the folk-music group, the Almanac Singers, and their 1948 "Dance Around My Atom Fire"; Vern Paltrow's 1945 "Old Man Atom"; and, more extensively, Bob Dylan and his 1962 "Let Me Die in My Footsteps," 1963 "Talkin' John Birch Paranoid Blues," and 1964 "With God on Our Side." This chapter also includes the eminent Black American political-artist, Paul Robeson, whose categorization by Smolko and Smolko as a folk singer in the same vein as Guthrie, Paltrow, and Dylan is surprising.[1] Robeson's performance repertoire was largely populated by Negro spirituals and other Black American songforms (like "Go Down, Moses"), western classical art-songs (including operatic arias like Mozart's "O Isis und Osiris" from *Die Zauberflöte*), popular show tunes (like his signature anthem, "Ol' Man River" from the musical, *Oklahoma!*), and, indeed, pro-union and labor songs with a decidedly leftist tint (like "Joe Hill"). Although Robeson's leftist, anti-colonial, and stridently anti-racist politics did share resonance with figures like Seeger and Guthrie—and in fact, Robeson was even institutionally and professionally affiliated with People's Songs, a music group founded by Seeger in the 1945 (which likely influenced Smolko and Smolko's decision to include Robeson in this chapter)—his incorporation here under the genre of folk as the very first musician discussed seems a misstep, particularly because of the lack of attention given to his political deployment of Negro spirituals, perhaps the closest comparable thing to a Black "folk" music.[2]

The second chapter, "Folk: Women's Voice," explores the Cold War songs of significant women in the American Folk music movement: Peggy Seeger ("Four Minute Warning," 1980, about nuclear missile salvos); Malvina Reynolds ("What Have They Done to the Rain," 1965, about nuclear fallout); Joan Baez ("Where Are You Now, My Son?," 1973, responding to the Vietnam War); and Janet Greene ("Commie Lies," 1964, an anti-communist tirade). Although this chapter follows the same structural formula and re-presents much of the same kind of content as the one prior—briefly glossing the political influences and entanglements of the musicians in question, contextualizing their songs within their genre and against historical events of the Cold War, and presenting rudimentary lyrical analyses that pin-point connections between specific lines in the songs with these historical events—it nonetheless raises several compelling questions concerning formations of gender and the particular stakes of anti-nuclear agitation by American women during the Cold War. Reynolds's "What Have They Done to the Rain," for example, emerged from her work in the Women Strike for Peace—an anti-war organization that, in the sixties, had drawn the ire and suspicion of the House Un-American Activities Committee (HUAC).

Chapter three, "Country: The Conservative Stance," explores Cold War country songs of musicians and songwriters including Lee V. McCollum and his 1950 "Jesus Hits Like an Atom Bomb" (likening the power of Christian belief to the explosive power of an atomic bomb), Riley Walker and His Rockin-R-Rangers and their 1954 "Uranium Miner's Boogie" (a song that follows the day of a fictional amateur uranium-ore prospector), and Scott Wiseman's 1952 "I'm No Communist" (a stalwart paean against communism). Although the authors reduce the politics of this entire genre as being entirely ensconced in American conservatism—"the right"—by way of it emerging out of Southern Evangelist theologies, this chapter nonetheless demonstrates one of the book's major strengths in the multitudinous connections the authors make between music, Cold War politics, and other aspects of material culture and economics; for example, in their discussion of the physical records of "Uranium Miner's Boogie," which were colored blue with a yellow label "to match the color of uranium … and to make it appear radioactive" (87) is linked to amateur uranium-prospecting.

"Novelty and Comedy Songs: The Cold War as a Big Joke," the fourth chapter of the book, focuses on a peculiar form of musical production known as novelty songs,

[1] Although Smolko and Smolko do seem to suggest that the inclusion of Robeson in this chapter, in this way—as "simply call[ing] him a folk musician would hardly do him justice" (21)—is reductive, they offer no further rationale for his inclusion here in a chapter otherwise devoted to folk musicians.

[2] Indeed, as Shana Redmond articulates, Robeson himself often argued for the inclusion of "our music—Negro music of African American derivation … in the tradition of the world's great folk music" (Redmond 2014, 108).

"popular music meant to be humorous" (105). Like the second chapter, behind the rote engagement with the lyrics of Cold War novelty songs like Dickie Goodman's 1961 "Berlin Top Ten" satirizing radio censorship in East Germany (the German Democratic Republic), and Doris Day's 1949 "Tic, Tic, Tic" mimicking the sounds of a Geiger counter, lies a thoughtful consideration of the experience of American children living under the constant threat of nuclear annihilation. "Bert the Turtle (The Duck and Cover Song)" from the 1951 civil-defense educational film, *Duck and Cover*, Smolko and Smolko explain, was a very popular and widely circulated instructional film for schoolchildren on taking shelter under their desks in the event of a bomb siren that constituted just one part of children's varied experiences and understandings of Cold War culture which included toys that were "rife with Atomic age themes"; board games like *Uranium Rush;* and comic-books and other pulp media infused with atomic themes like *Atomic Man*, *Captain Atom*, and *Nukla*.

The fifth chapter of the book, "Early Rock and Other Styles: Rocking the Bomb," explores the Cold War songs of an eclectic assortment of genres including rock and roll (Dude Martin and His Roundup Gang's 1948, "Atom Bomb Baby"), doo-wop (Sammy Salvo's 1961 "A Mushroom Cloud"), calypso (Sir Lancelot's 1947 "Atomic Energy")—erroneously described in this chapter as a Latin American rather than Anglo-Caribbean genre of music—and the blues (Sam "Lightnin'" Hopkins' 1940s "War News Blues"). Rock and roll's (in)famous sensuality, eroticism, and crude (re)formations of gender gained heightened tropes during the nuclear age, Smolko and Smolko perceptively observe, with women in song-lyrics being described as "bombshells" and requiring careful care because, "'like uranium … an unstable element[, they were] liable to explode at any moment'" (134).

Chapters six and seven, "Mainstream Rock: Bowie, U2, Sting, Billy Joel, and Springsteen" and "Hard Rock and Heavy Metal: The Electric Guitar as the Bomb," respectively, implicitly make up the book's second half, shifting focus from popular music in America to Britain. Most of the songs in this part also tend to focus on issues and events from the last three decades of the Cold War such as the dire spectacle of the Vietnam War, the Cuban Missile Crisis, everyday Soviet life during *détente* and *glasnost'*, the covert subterfuge and projects of the American war-machine in Central and South America, and life behind the Berlin Wall. Chapter six explores the Cold War songs of the rock-superstars and bands including David Bowie ("Heroes," 1977, which Smolko and Smolko suggest has since become anthemic of the fall of the Berlin Wall); U2 (their 1987 album, *The Joshua Tree*, that critiqued various elements of American Cold War foreign policy); Sting ("Russians," 1985, that lyrically joined the fates of America and the Soviet Union); Billy Joel ("Leningrad," 1989, inspired by his 1987 tour of the USSR); and Bruce Springsteen (the entirety of his 1981 performance in East Berlin). The authors' discussion of Joel's cultural ambassadorship during his 1987 summer tour of the Soviet Union gestures towards some of the transnational cultural politics and their ramifications that shaped discourse and performance of popular music during the Cold War that they focus on at greater length in the book's final chapter. Both the first rock tour of this scale and the first ever rock concert to be broadcast on state-radio in the Soviet Union, Joel's performance circuit of the Soviet Union, which adopted the theme "A Matter of Trust," brought him into contact with everyday Soviet citizens and musicians when he "appeared live on the Russian TV variety show, *The Ring*"; when he "sang medieval chants with a Georgian men's choir" in Tbilisi; and when he commiserated with young Soviet rock musicians and fans about being castigated "as a teenager for having long hair" (168).

In the book's seventh chapter, "Hard Rock and Heavy Metal: The Electric Guitar as the Bomb," the authors perform a different kind of musical analysis in their exploration of the Cold War songs of hard rock and heavy metal musicians including: Jimi Hendrix ("All Along the Watchtower" and "The Star-Spangled Banner," 1968 and 1969, respectively); Black Sabbath ("Electric Funeral" and "War Pigs," 1970); Rush ("Distant Early Warning," "Red Lenses," and "Between the Wheels," all from their 1984 album, *Grace Under Pressure*); Iron Maiden ("2 Minutes to Midnight," 1984); and Metallica ("Fight Fire with Fire," 1984). Whereas in the other chapters, the authors center song lyrics in their musical analyses, in this chapter, they instead confront the non-textual musical profile of the songs. They argue, "the actual sounds generated by the musicians allow listeners to 'feel' the tumult of warfare and contemplate the consequences of a nuclear apocalypse in a way that earlier styles of music could not" (182). This seems plausible, with the authors going on to suggest that the expanded sonic palette available to electric guitarists in the 1970s and 1980s (with things like high-output amplifiers, an aesthetic embrace of noise *à la* distortion, and devices like whammy bars and effect pedals) allowed musicians like Hendrix to imbue his performances with a newfound immediacy and harshness, whose unsettling mimetic e/affect represented and evoked in microcosm the horror, pain, and anger of the unnamed casualties of this so-called "cold" war. Unfortunately, Smolko and Smolko's analysis of Hendrix's 1969 performance at Woodstock of "The Star-Spangled Banner," like that of their subsequent analysis of Black Sabbath's "Electric Funeral," is weakened by their lack of visual musical notation. For example, Smolko and Smolko argue Black Sabbath alludes to Gustav Holst's "Mars" from *The Planets* in their song through their use of the wah pedal; and that the

use of this pedal supposedly "performs the same function as the extended bowing technique and microtonal clusters in Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody to the Victims of Hiroshima*" (190). While indeed a plausible connection, these observations would be even more compelling if accompanied by musical notation to make these clearer to us as readers. A substantiated comparison between Penderecki's musical language (and the aesthetic priorities thereof) and that of Black Sabbath would have also illuminated a unique moment of contact between Cold War popular music and avant-garde classical music aesthetics responding to the bomb. Likewise, Hendrix's creative deformations, signifyin', and (re)articulations of "The Star-Spangled Banner," the "extended barrage[s] of noise" that "depict the cataclysm of war" when Hendrix "hammers on the tritone of B-flat and E," would be much easier to visualize, audiate, and appreciate the significance of with the aid of some kind of notation (186).

One of the book's strongest chapters, chapter eight, "Punk Rock: Three Chords and the Apocalypse," explores the Cold War songs of punk groups such as: The Ramones ("My Brain is Hanging Upside Down [Bonzo Goes to Bitburg]," 1985, satirizing Ronald Reagan's visit to West Germany the same year); Crass ("Nagasaki Nightmare," 1980, a capricious threnody for the victims of the American nuclear-bombing of Japan); Discharge (their 1982 debut studio album *Hear Nothing See Nothing Say Nothing* concerning nuclear warfare); and Scars ("Your Attention Please," 1978/9, a rock-recitative in the manner of a public emergency announcement warning of an imminent nuclear strike). Like the previous chapter, the authors here attempt a different kind of analysis of "Nagasaki Nightmare." After briefly glossing the lyrical content of the song, they analyze in-depth the LP-single's physical packaging. The record was "packaged in a foldout, double-sided poster" that was "packed with text, photographs, illustrations, slogans and collages" that, in content, resembled "a Campaign for Nuclear Disarmament (CND) pamphlet" (222). This poster—this paratext—ferociously condemned nuclear weapons and proliferation, raging that "'H-bombs [hydrogen bombs] are mind-control. They kill people a little bit everyday,'" and that "'Every time you turn on a light there's a Bomb behind the switch'" (223). As Smolko and Smolko note, the poster also included visual images of the immediate aftermath of the bombing of Nagasaki (taken by Japanese photographer Yosuke Yamahata), aerial images and maps locating nuclear facilities in Britain, detailed photos of nuclear missiles, and satirical portrait collages of Queen Elizabeth II, Margaret Thatcher, Ronald Reagan, and Leonid Brezhnev. This consideration of the physicality and material existence and transmission of Cold War songs is but one of the strengths of this chapter (although one wishes the authors would have been able to reproduce this fascinating document within the text). Given Smolko and Smolko's fixation on song lyrics as their primary objects of analysis throughout the book, their brief meditation on the intentional reappropriation of the language of realpolitik by punk musicians that precedes their materialist analysis of "Nagasaki Nightmare" is much appreciated and deeply resonant. As they poignantly opine, war euphemisms—like "collateral damage," "clean bombs," "surgical strikes," and weapon names like "Tomahawk"—dehumanize humans at the same time as they humanize weapons and destruction (217).

Chapter nine, "Electronic and New Wave: The Cold War in a Synthesizer"—one of most provocative chapters of the book—primarily focuses on the Cold War songs of the seminal German electronic-music group, Kraftwerk, and the deep influence Cold War technologies had on their music. They also discuss the Cold War songs of new-wave musicians including Hazel O'Connor and her 1980 "Eighth Day," which reimagines the biblical cosmogony of Genesis as an eight-day, progressive apotheosis of weapons of mass destruction; Made for TV and their 1983 "So Afraid of the Russians," which critiques the immense economic resources required to sustain the American war-machine and its constituent technological apparatuses; and Depeche Mode and their 1984 "People Are People," which questions the futility of transnational community and peace amongst the Cold War belligerents impressed upon by various ideological state actors and apparatuses. The chapter, however, opens with some of the most compelling writing in the book with its tracing of the clandestine developmental links between the American military industrial complex and the very material technologies that allowed and, indeed, spurred the generation and proliferation of popular music genres after the second World War. Post-War research in electrical engineering led to the development of cheap transistors in the 1960s, an extremely important component in electrical circuitry used to modulate current that found great (and harrowing) military use in intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs), amongst other hawkish technological applications. Access to cheap and reliable transistors (Robert Moog is quoted as being thrilled to be able to "buy a silicon junction for 25 cents"), Smolko and Smolko convincingly argue, brought about the genesis of perhaps the most variously genre-defining electronic instrument of the twentieth century, the synthesizer, and also led to the invention of the portable transistor radio in 1954 (244). Several other influential and iconic twentieth-century musical instruments also emerged from Pre-War state military research-and-development networks and spheres of influence in the United States and the Soviet Union. Leon Theremin, who invented the theremin in 1920, worked in

his later years as an engineer of covert surveillance systems for the Soviet secret police, the *Komitet gosudarstvennoy bezopasnosti* (the KGB). Similarly, Laurens Hammond, who invented the Hammond organ and Novachord (an early kind of analog synthesizer that used vacuum tubes) in 1935 and 1939, respectively, worked in American military research centers developing and refining missile guidance systems. Kraftwerk, then, in their championing of the synthesizer in their music, can thus be understood as direct beneficiaries of the products of this complex network of military industrial technological influence and development spurred by the Cold War. Kraftwerk produced several albums that flirted with the consequences of technological developments engendered by Cold War science. Their 1975 album, *Radio-Activity*, Smolko and Smolko note, not only thematically and sonically engaged with radio-broadcasting technologies—like antennae, transistors, and electromagnetic frequency-bands—but also technologies related to the natural, yet unnaturally apprehended phenomenon of radioactivity. "Geiger Counter" overlaid a synthesizer-replication of the operational sound of the device over a sample thereof. The pointillistic background in "Radioactivity" mimics the stochastic ejection of subatomic particles that defines radioactive decay. And "Uranium," whose eerie and ethereal timbral profile—a result of Kraftwerk's crafty use of the Votrax speech synthesizer—Smolko and Smolko propose, gives the song "an aural representation of the 'strange glow' often associated with radioactivity" (249).

The tenth and final chapter, "Wind of Change: The Fall of the Wall and the End of the Cold War," focuses not on Cold War songs that supposedly ended the war, but instead presents several fascinating curios of transcultural musical contact between America (and "the West" more broadly) and the Eastern Bloc in the years immediately following the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. This chapter is noteworthy for its brief but informative table of notable popular musicians and groups who performed in the Eastern Bloc (274–275). It is a useful supplement to scholarship on Cold War cultural diplomacy programs like that of writers like Danielle Fosler-Lussier and Penny M. Von Eschen, as US-state sponsorship and support of popular music (and particularly rock music, Smolko and Smolko note) was ambiguous and ambivalent because of the perceived lack of sophistication and universal cultural appeal.[3] The moments the book's authors discuss in this chapter cast into relief and highlight some of the nuances of transcultural contact during the Cold War. Roger Waters, the co-founder of Pink Floyd, along with other guest musicians in 1990, for example, performed songs from the band's 1979 album, *The Wall*, at the Berlin Wall's death strip, a highly militarized, surveilled, and dangerous border point in the edifice. The physical wall itself figured into the concert as a kind of meta-stage prop, and the show was broadcast on television worldwide.

The greatest strengths of *Atomic Tunes: The Cold War in American and British Popular Music* by Tim and Joanna Smolko are its easy readability and the diverse array of materials the authors use to weave their text—from films, books, ephemera (like posters and pamphlets), to fanzines. The book, however—notwithstanding those critiques outlined elsewhere in this review—is made substantially weaker by its preciously scant analysis of the public reception of the Cold War songs the authors analyze. Their thesis that these songs "reflect public opinion on Cold War issues" is difficult to evaluate and contextualize given the authors present very little evidence of the public response to these songs, nor much insight into their circulation. The book's failure to include Black popular music genres—like rhythm and blues, soul, funk, and pop—is also surprising and a considerable deficiency, given the immense cultural capital Black music genres possessed in America and market-value in the American music industry. Regardless, *Atomic Tunes* no doubt succeeds in its primary goal to stimulate interest in popular music during the Cold War.

[3] See Fosler-Lussier 2013 and Von Eschen 2004.

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