

Making the Scene in the Garden State: Popular Music in New Jersey from Edison to Springsteen and Beyond

Dewar MacLeod

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In 2015, when Steely Dan shared the bill with Elvis Costello at the PNC Bank Arts Center in Holmdel, Donald Fagen and Walter Becker seemed downright chuffed to be playing in New Jersey. Fagen even went so far as to reference a backstage conversation in which the band came to realize that virtually everyone they've ever known in the music business was either born in—or has a deep connection with—New Jersey.

With *Making the Scene in the Garden State: Popular Music in New Jersey from Edison to Springsteen and Beyond*, Dewar MacLeod affords readers with keen insight into the Garden State's outsized role in twentieth-century American music, as well as the evolution of the Jersey Shore sound, which continues into the present day. As he astutely writes, "Beyond its reputation as the suburban outpost to Manhattan, the industrial wasteland, the barren swamps and pinelands where gangsters dump their victims, propagator of the classy and déclassé, pathway between far more interesting locales, New Jersey has been home to vital and exciting scenes of musical production and enjoyment" (1).

MacLeod perceptively focuses his writerly lens on Thomas Edison's invention and harnessing of sound recording at his West Orange factories—ground zero, in many ways, for the musical revolution in the early twentieth century and beyond. MacLeod's chapters detailing the invention of the Victrola in Camden and the development of early recording studios, including facilities associated with the Blue Note and Prestige labels, not only make for fascinating reading, but would also serve the professoriate well as primers for American music survey courses. But as

MacLeod demonstrates, the record industry's New Jersey emergence didn't stop with the mechanics and manufacture of sound recordings. In short order, a culture of nascent music promotion developed in the 1950s and 1960s, including, most notably perhaps, the Newark-based dance TV program *Disc-o-Teen*.

Making the Scene in the Garden State enjoys its greatest strengths in MacLeod's well-wrought chapters on the signal musical subcultures that have evolved across the decades in New Jersey. Take, for instance, his chapters on the music scenes in Hoboken and Asbury Park. In such moments, MacLeod offers valuable primary evidence associated with the sociocultural development of such shared creative spaces. His chapter on Asbury Park is particularly insightful, as the author traces the development and deterioration of one of the Jersey Shore's guiding musical lights. "The downtown, already in decline," MacLeod writes, "was decimated as beachgoers, tourists, and shoppers stayed away, and parents told their kids to steer clear of Asbury Park. It did not all happen at once, and Asbury continued to have a musical tradition built around clubs. The Stone Pony opened in 1973 and Bruce, Southside Johnny, and many, many others continued to play live music. If much of the Jersey Shore scene fostered cover bands rather than experimentation, the clubs still provided the places where scenes could develop" (111).

MacLeod's historical study of the Asbury Park music scene—namely, in terms of the rise and demise of the Upstage Club—offers a useful, and highly extrapolatable, object lesson about the cyclical ways in which musical cultures come into being, thrive, and ultimately, veer into less relevant spheres of being. While the Asbury Park music scene continues to operate as a working musical subculture beyond the heyday of the Upstage Club, it occupies a very different flavor of existence in the present day, with innovation and nuance being replaced by nostalgia and cover bands that cater to a beachgoing economy.

In many ways, MacLeod hits his finest notes in such instances, providing readers with useful miniature stories about the lives and times of Jersey Shore musicians and their audiences. Chockful of new information and helpfully resourced with the fruits of countless interviews, *Making the Scene in the Garden State* should enjoy a large audience both for the book's scholarly value, as well as for its engaging anecdotes about New Jersey's role in changing American musical culture for all time.

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