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This volume of essays by the distinguished musicologist Charles Hamm focuses on the context of popular music: the interrelationships between popular music and other styles and genres, including classical music, the meaning of popular music for audiences, and the institutional appropriation of this music for hegemonic purposes. Specific topics include the use of popular song to rouse antislavery sentiment in mid-nineteenth-century America, the reception of such African-American styles and genres as rock 'n' roll and soul music by the black population of South Africa, the question of genre in the early songs of Irving Berlin, the attempts by the governments of South Africa and China to impose specific bodies of music on their populations, the persistence of the minstrel show in rural twentieth-century America, and the impact of modernist modes of thought on writing about popular music, with specific engagement with the work of John Cage.

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CHARLES HAMM

*Emeritus Professor of Music,
Dartmouth College*



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PREFACE

This book contains a selection of my articles and reviews on the subject of popular music, written between 1970 and the present.

When I first tried to write about this subject, in the late 1960s, the world was changing in rapid and dramatic ways, and some popular music of the day seemed to be in tune with these changes. But I found that my academic training in historical musicology, a discipline proud of its tradition of humanistic positivism, was of limited use in dealing with this music and its place in the world.

My association with John Cage proved to be more useful. Even though Cage's music and aesthetics seem remote from and even antithetical to the sounds and environments of popular music, he was saying and doing things that helped make sense of whatever new world was emerging. No one was yet using the word "postmodern," but Cage imagined a non-linear universe in which things simply existed, without the connecting tissue of cause and effect. His proto-postmodern aesthetic proposed that an uncountable number of different events take place, none of them privileged in significance or power over any others and none of them understandable from the perspective of a single dominant system of meaning. This is not rampant relativism, but rather an affirmation of the uniqueness and value of each happening. "Here we are. Let us say Yes to our presence together in Chaos" he wrote; and "now structure is not put into a work, but comes up in the person who perceives it. There is therefore no problem of understanding but the possibility of awareness."¹

By giving such elegant intellectual support to the notion, ridiculed

¹ John Cage, *Silence* (Middletown, CT, 1961), p. 259.

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PREFACE

in academic circles of the day, that every musical event is equally worthy of attention, Cage's aesthetic helped legitimize the study of any sort of music, including popular music. Just as important, since his aesthetic insisted that each musical event is unique, it seemed to follow that the goal of popular music study shouldn't be to construct one overriding interpretative scheme, but to be receptive to any given musical event and the circumstances under which it occurred.

Most of the following essays are in the nature of case studies of a repertory, or even a single piece of music, in historical, geographical, and musical context. Focused more on methodology than theory, they share several assumptions: (1) popular music, like all music, is both an acoustical and a social phenomenon and thus must be dealt with musically, though not necessarily at a technical level, as well as culturally; (2) one cannot fully understand the nature of a given musical event unless one is present at it, or can reconstruct it from critical or historical documentation; (3) popular music has never existed in isolation from other types of music and is best considered in terms of its interaction with other genres, most certainly including the classical repertory.

Though I was trained a historical musicologist, in a sense I've been a scholar without a home discipline for the last two decades. As a result, my essays have appeared in publications in a number of fields, and the chief purpose of the present volume is to bring a number of these pieces together. Since any writing about music, like music itself, takes place in a specific context, each essay is prefaced with brief autobiographical remarks placing myself at the time of writing and mentioning then-current literature on popular music. I've resisted the temptation to revise or correct: each piece is offered here as it first appeared, except that sections have been cut here and there to avoid redundancy.

*Norwich, Vermont
November 1993*