

Reviews:

Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy. By William Echard. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 2005, 260 + vii pp.

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The success and longevity of Neil Young's forty-year recording career rests largely on his musical eclecticism. As a solo artist, as a member of such bands as Crosby, Stills, Nash, and Young, and in a highly touted collaboration with Pearl Jam in 1995, Young has had a recorded output ranging from plaintive singer/songwriter material, to 1980s techno-pop, to the music that garnered him the title "Godfather of Grunge." This is no mean feat, and one approaches Echard's book in the hope that he will shed light on Young's achievement.

The book is extremely ambitious. Some of Echard's goals are specific to Young. For one, Echard intends to "explore issues raised by his work, to talk about why he has been read in certain ways more frequently than others, to pursue some of the ideological implications of his reception history, and to map the key landmarks in his sonic world" (2). In this endeavor, "by putting the phrase *poetics of energy* in my title, I want to indicate that various literal and metaphorical senses of energy will be key to my discussion of Neil Young's work" (6). While Echard's use of the term "energy" is discussed but not defined (5–6), "poetics" is clearly defined. His "use of the term is closest to that suggested by Krims (2000, 28), for whom poetics represents the attempt to say how particular compositional choices are motivated by and participate in the broader social work of music, with special attention to

questions of affect and aesthetic value" (6). Young's musical eclecticism prompts the energy metaphor: "the forceful and sometimes oppositional nature of Young's relationship to rock traditions will be interpreted in terms of energies which both enable and constrain identity formation" (5) and "the single idea of energetics . . . link[s] diverse strands of musical practice" (6).

Other parts of Echard's agenda reach beyond Young. For instance, he writes that "another central concern of the book is to fine-tune existing methods of describing the energetic and affective dimensions of musical meaning" (2). On top of that, he aims to present "a general theory of musical meaning and gesture (energy as a basic category in theories of virtual space and iconicity)" (5). These are but a few of the goals laid out in the book's sprawling seven page Introduction. Clearly, only the most disciplined scholar and skilled writer could hope to complete this agenda in the space of 260 pages, the length of Echard's book. While I leave it to the reader to determine how successfully the author achieves these goals, it is clear that Echard has marshaled his evidence well. He draws on a diverse body of sources, including fan websites, the vast rock critic literature found in magazines such as *Rolling Stone*, and recent work in music theory and musicology on popular music and musical meaning. The one topic that Echard has under-researched is rock harmony; this has ramifications to which I shall return.

The six chapters in *Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy* may be read in any order, according to Echard (7). Chapter 1, a "Neil Young Reception Primer," is a finely wrought chronological overview of Young's career. To set the table for more probing investigations in later chapters, Echard places the disparate elements of Young's musical style—including folk revival, progressive rock, singer/songwriter, garage rock, soft rock, and country—into a general introductory context that is admirably free of technical jargon, making it suitable for a lay audience (43–53). Chapter 2 addresses Young's stylistic diversity and musical equipment.

Correctly noting that “*surprise* is one of the central themes in Neil Young reception” (54; italics original), Echard provides a wonderfully pithy list of the factors that contribute to this theme: “Young’s tendency to juxtapose rather than blend his stylistic interests, his timing, and the nature of the traditions in which he works” (55). Echard then evokes the apt term “waywardness” to describe Young’s ability to surprise yet remain within the boundaries of “the stylistic family of rock” (75). Again, Echard hits the nail on the head here; the concept of waywardness succinctly places Young in the larger context of post-1960s rock music. Chapter 3 focuses on Young’s electric guitar improvisations and the role of noise in his music. Echard drops tantalizing hints about how Young’s solos relate to those by other unorthodox guitarists such as Derek Bailey, Jimi Hendrix, and Thurston Moore and Lee Ranaldo of Sonic Youth; the discussion also calls to mind the unconventional solos of Vernon Reid (Living Colour) and Kerry King and Jeff Hanneman (Slayer). The chapter concludes with commentary on Young’s 1991 release *Arc*, a 35 minute “collage album assembled from live recordings of feedback and other concert sounds” (100). The relation of *Arc* to certain of Sonic Youth’s extended instrumental passages and Lou Reed’s *Metal Machine Music* (1975) is fittingly noted. Chapter 4 develops “the theoretical perspective on musical signification which underlies the rest of the book” (7). Here we get the one and only glimpse into Echard’s views on music theory and analysis presented in the book:

Although the situation has changed somewhat in recent years, there is still a tendency among music theorists to regard formal analysis as a kind of discovery procedure in which consistency and clarity are required if the apparatus is to produce correct information. By contrast, my work proceeds from the belief that it is equally valid to use formal analysis simply as a descriptive language. It is possible to choose analytic techniques not for their systematicity, but because they encapsulate culturally pertinent ways of hearing and representing acoustic events . . . I aim to use analysis as a *signifying resource*, treating each analytic technique as a method for placing musical sound under a description (110–11; italics original).

Chapter 5 offers detailed discussions of Young’s musical style and harmonic language. The chapter’s subsections on Young’s rhythm guitar, harmonica, and piano playing are concise and valuable, as is the commentary on Young’s singing voice, one of the most distinctive in all rock music. The book concludes with an analysis of a single song, “Will to Love.” Since *Spectrum* readers will likely begin with Chapter 5 or Chapter 6, I will devote the bulk of this review to them.

Rather than draw on the work of others (one of the nicest features of the foregoing chapters), Echard goes it alone in Chapter 5, and he runs into trouble. His discussion of Young’s triadic chord progressions that feature root movement by third recalls similar work by David Kopp (2002, 10–11), but it is riddled with errors. Echard launches his discussion by drawing a distinction between harmonic “gestures” and “postures” (180); a gesture suggests movement by way of mobile pitches, while a posture involves a “fixed distribution of energy” (181) by way of held pitches. He then draws two more binary oppositions, one between tonality and modality and the other between “harmonic logic” and “melodic logic.” Harmonic logic explains the progressions in Young’s songs that “clearly reflect the norms of common-practice tonality, and especially the paradigm case of a strongly compelled V–I resolution” (183), while melodic logic “means more simply that the root movements themselves trace out a pattern which resembles a melodic line and that this organizing principle seems to be as strong as, or stronger than, any influence from the function of triads within a common-practice tonal context” (183–84). Two categories of stepwise root motions are then presented, “scalar” and “oscillating” (184). An example of scalar root movement is taken from “Ambulance Blues” and is listed as “B section, B \flat Ionian, V–vi–vii–I” (184). Here is the first time that the binary opposition between tonality and modality causes problems. First and most obviously, the vii chord is diminished in Ionian, not minor, and indeed the song presents F–Gm–Am–B \flat , not F–Gm–A dim–B \flat , thereby corresponding to B \flat

Lydian, not B \flat Ionian. Second, and only obvious to those who know the song, while the entire song might be cast in B \natural major, the B section clearly tonicizes F (V) through the progression F–Gm–Am–B \flat –F–C (I–ii–iii–IV–I–V).

Proceeding to third relations, Echard refers to repeated root movements that share two common tones and thus extend a posture as “color pairs” (e.g. Am–F–Am–F). Non-repeated root movements that share two common tones are “half moves” (e.g. G–Em–C); the term “indicate[s] that the shift within the posture is a precursor to leaving that posture” (184). Unfortunately, no context is provided to demonstrate how the posture is left. Finally, “mediant root movements in which one of the chords displays modal mixture, with the result that there is only one common tone between them” (185) are termed “full moves.”¹ His example of a full move is the progression C–G–B \flat –F, “VII–IV \rightarrow VI–III in D Dorian” (185) from “A Man Needs a Maid”; the progression “balance[s] the forward impetus of the full move with more static factors” (185). Echard states that “the modally altered nature of the second chord both def[ies] expectation and reduce[s] the number of common tones with the preceding chord” (185). However, the sense by which expectation is defied is not clear, and every adjacent pair of triads shares the same number of common tones (one). If the second chord were Gm, the number of common tones with the *following* chord (B \flat), not the preceding chord, would *increase* from one to two. Further, the D Dorian appellation is questionable, since all but one of the song’s sections feature B \flat major chords. A more secure portrayal of the song’s harmonic language has it centered on D, with chord roots taken from the D natural minor collection and harmonized as Dm, Em, F, G, Am, B \flat , C. And as was the case with “Ambulance Blues,” this section of “A Man Needs A Maid” features a tonicization,

here of C major: the C–G–B \flat –F progression makes more sense as I–V \rightarrow VII (or IV of IV)–IV, since the typical function of this progression is to harmonize a chromatic descending line 8–7 \rightarrow 7 \rightarrow 6. In fact, the line appears in the piano and strings. The discussion of full moves closes with remarks on “Safeway Cart,” which features the common rock progression I \rightarrow III, “two chords related by full move in an oscillating fashion, in which case a peculiar effect results, seemingly poised in the ineffable middle ground between posture and gesture” (185). Any theory of rock harmony that portrays I \rightarrow III as “peculiar” should give the reader pause, in light of the progression’s prominence in the rock repertory and its idiomatic nature on the guitar fretboard. In a footnote, the author states that “this progression is difficult to represent with clarity” (239) and hypothesizes that I \rightarrow III is perhaps “an Aeolian progression in which the tonic chord has a major quality” (239). He then proffers a second explanation: “Alternately, it could be understood simply as an alternation between major and minor qualities of the tonic chord, although I do not tend to hear it that way” (239). However, this explanation assumes the presence of a minor tonic chord that does not appear in the song, thereby sinking the argument. It is clear that these problems arise from Echard’s approach to rock harmony, which is based on common-practice harmonic theories. Why not turn to a neo-Riemannian model of triadic progression, or to the closely related theories of Kopp (2002), or to the work of Walter Everett (2000; 2004), who situates progressions such as I \rightarrow III in the context of rock harmony (as minor pentatonic scale degrees harmonized as major triads) rather than in that of common-practice harmony? Errors and faulty assumptions aside, however, the payoffs from this exercise in theory-building are meager, since the concepts are abandoned no sooner than they are introduced. Further, Echard does not distinguish the effect of root motion from common tone retention; this is an important underlying assumption that goes undiscussed in his portrayal of Young’s harmonic practice. For instance, the harmonic effect of diatonic triadic root motion by second—which

1 Echard points out that “modal mixture could create a mediant root movement with no common tones, but to my knowledge this does not occur anywhere in Neil Young’s music” (239, n. 20).

preserves no common tones and thus is generally considered to be distant, despite the minimal interval separating the chord roots—is not distinguished from that of diatonic triadic root motion by third, which forms a larger interval between the chord roots but maintains two common tones and is thus generally considered to be close.

Other generalizations about Young's harmonic practice are not secure; I shall provide two such examples. Echard describes "cases in which extended progressions of the kind which may be expected to use a conventional dominant simply do not employ the V chord at all" (186). As an example, he cites the song "Unknown Legend," a poor choice for two reasons. First, the song does not present *any* harmonic progressions; the plagal I–IV–I motions of the verses expand the $I_3^5\text{--}6_4\text{--}5_3$ pedal point of the introduction. Second, Echard does not state why the V chord "may be expected" (186): we are left to assume that the mere presence of I and IV implies V—an assumption that carries little weight in accounts of rock harmony, aside from blues-based idioms. In another instance, Echard cites the chord changes to Young's "Revolution Blues" as "highly idiosyncratic" and "clearly derived from the canonical twelve-bar blues form, yet considerably transformed" (187), presenting the progression as i–i–i–i–iv–iv–i–i–iv–iv–i–i–v–iv–i–i. There is nothing idiosyncratic at all about this progression; it is a sixteen-bar minor key blues.² But the transcription is incorrect; the correct progression reads i–i–i–i–VI–VI–i–i–iv–iv–i–i–VI–V–i–i. It is unclear whether the text refers to the correct progression.

Chapter 6 promises a big payoff: Echard's analysis of "Will to Love" will provide "a kind of summary, since it draws on most of the tools and arguments developed in this book," as well as "one example of how I envision all the materials in the book working together in practice" (198). While the analysis begins with engrossing quotations about the song from fans, critics, and Young himself, my enthusiasm

was dampened by the following passage, which borders on the absurd:

Finally, there is an important historical connection to another crucial recording session. Young rented the instruments for the "Will to Love" session from Studio Instrument Rentals, the same company which provided equipment for the *Tonight's the Night* sessions. The "Will to Love" session, then, is highly distinctive yet also deeply resonant with several other exceptional moments in Neil Young's recording history. It manages to allude simultaneously to his ambitious early suites, to his minimalist solo performances, and to the barely controlled, cathartic experiments of the mid-1970s (202).

The claim that the instrument rental company—not the actual instruments—undergirds an "important historical connection" comes across as an awkward stretch.

After an examination of the song's lyrics, a section entitled "Sonic Features" promises to discuss "the distinctive mix of instruments and sound processing techniques, the character of the voice, the chord changes, the method of recording, and the length of the song" (207). This, the capstone analysis of the book, is only two pages long. Nothing in the analysis rests on the elaborate theoretical platforms erected so painstakingly in earlier chapters; all the claims can be made (and most *are* made) without these apparatuses. More distressing still are the errors in Echard's analysis.³ Example 1 presents my block-chord reduction of the song; the author does not provide a transcription. The verse alternates FM7 and Em7 chords bound by an open string E_4 pedal; Echard incorrectly lists the voicing of FM7 as $\{F_2, A_2, F_3, A_3, C_4, E_4\}$ (155, 209). He states that the "progression is set in the mode of E Phrygian" (208) and goes on to describe the chord progression of the chorus as i–VII–i (208); but the D major chord is in $\frac{4}{4}$ position above a bass pedal E, compromising Echard's assertion that "the harmonies in the chorus display root movements of a major second rather than a semitone . . . this creates a slightly

2 Covach (2005, 68–69) details the relations among eight-, 12-, and 16-bar blues forms.

3 Contrary to Echard's form diagram (209), the fourth verse contains 24 measures, not 36.

EXAMPLE I. Neil Young, "Will To Love," Acoustic Guitar Part

more expansive movement" (208). The D chord is the result of lower neighbors to the Em barre chord formed by lifting the middle, ring, and pinky fingers of the fretting hand while holding down the index finger barre; thus, I question whether it deserves a Roman numeral at all. On the subject of Roman numerals, the $i\rightarrow VII-i$ label presumably indicates a shift from E Phrygian to E Aeolian or natural minor, but Echard indicates no such shift; the modal terminology carries a lot of baggage that Echard does not address.⁴ A better alternative would be to describe the pitch content of the verse as the $0\sharp$ diatonic collection followed by the $1\sharp$ diatonic hexachord (or $1\sharp$ diatonic collection without C) in the chorus, with emphasis on E in both sections through its role as chord root and lowest pitch. E gains further emphasis through voice-leading: in the verse, each voice in FM7 is shared by or forms a neighbor to each voice in Em7, and likewise in the chorus for D/E and Em, as mentioned.

Despite these problems, Echard deserves praise for trying to hit the ball out of the park. At the end of the book, he states, "My hope is that readers come away from this book with an intensified interest in the work of Neil Young" (214). In this regard, Echard succeeds. As an entrée into the literature on Young, as a snapshot of current academic approaches

to popular music, and as a platform for future work on Young, *Neil Young and the Poetics of Energy* is a valuable resource.

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4 Burns (2000) and Everett (2001, §7) discuss the pitfalls of bringing a tonal/modal dichotomy to the analysis of rock harmony.