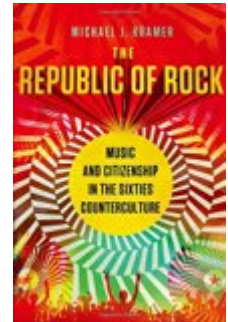


Michael J. Kramer. *The Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2013. xi + 292 pp. \$29.95, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-538486-4.



Reviewed by David Farber

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Remarkably, no one has written a well-received, broad scholarly history of the sixties-era counterculture. In the academic world, the closest thing to it is the uneven and old-ish collection, *Imagine Nation: The American Counterculture of the 1960s and '70s* (2001), edited by Michael William Doyle and the currently incarcerated Peter Braunstein. The subject just hasn't caught the interest of the history profession, perhaps, in part, because many scholars see the counterculture as a small story of feckless white middle-class youths who, in the damning words of Grace Hale, "re-made their own privilege by asserting their innocence." [1] A few scholars—Alice Echols, Julie Stephens, Peter Maguire, Andrew Kirk, Fred Turner, and David Kaiser, to name a few of the best—most of them well outside the mainstream of dominant American history fields, have fought against this sort of reductive dismissal. Still, the history of the American counterculture remains underdeveloped. Historiographically, the big questions, key debates, historical significance, and

boundary issues that pertain to the counterculture remain hazy, at best.

Michael J. Kramer, in the *Republic of Rock: Music and Citizenship in the Sixties Counterculture*, has not given us a big book on the making and meaning of the counterculture. He does provide a provocative, always smart, and well-grounded account of the role rock music played in the lived experience of the sixties-era counterculture. While the narrative drive of Kramer's book is fueled more by ditch weed than Thai stick—there is actually little historical development in the book—Kramer has accomplished what few other historians of the counterculture have done: he has found stories of men and women actively involved in the cultural rebellion of the sixties era who struggled to turn their dreams into actions. Kramer enters this producerist counterculture through the agency of rock music.

Specifically, Kramer "argues that rock most of all inspired a counterculture defined by issues of citizenship.... I call this polity of sound the repub-

lic of rock” (p. 9). Kramer goes on to explain that for many young rebellious Americans vested in the counterculture project, whether they lived in San Francisco or found themselves fighting in Vietnam, rock became a form through which they could interrogate and resist the assimilatory power of “hip capitalism” and “hip militarism” and by so doing create and maintain their own “counter-public sphere” (pp. 13, 20). In this sphere, men and women used rock to imagine and act out new forms of community and liberatory individual freedom.

Kramer’s introduction of “hip militarism” and Vietnam-based “freaks” reveals his fundamental break with other works that have examined the counterculture (with the exception of Michael Herr’s classic work, *Dispatches* [1977]). Kramer wants us to believe that rock linked at least some of the men serving in Vietnam with the hippies of the Haight-Ashbury. He is a big-tent historian of the counterculture. But unlike more jejune or poorly defined versions of counterculture inclusivity, Kramer’s common core counterculture based on the communing power of rock has critical traction.

How exactly disparate individuals located in such dissimilar locations as San Francisco’s Haight-Ashbury and Vietnam’s war zone were linked together by rock into a counterculture is for Kramer not easily reducible to a single sentence. The closest he comes to explaining his premise comes late in his deeply insightful introduction in a nice riff that is reminiscent of the prosody that used to spice up some of the more outré cultural historians’ essays in the early ’90s: It was “a tessellated social body, a psychedelically mutating set of spaces and moments in motion, proliferating to millions through the mechanisms of mass culture. Difficult to glimpse because it was always in motion, rock inspired what art critic Dave Hickey evocatively called a ‘motley republic ... of freakdom.’ It generated a radically pluralistic spirit of democratic belonging that merged a

kaleidoscopic sense of individuality with a polyglot ideal of togetherness” (p. 20). Kramer does not leave this “tessellated social body” to float free in this translucent realm of magic words—just the opposite. Unlike Nick Bromell’s brilliant *Tomorrow Never Knows: Rock and Psychedelics in the 1960s* (2000), which reads the music and drug experiences of the sixties through the perspicuous subjectivity of its author, Kramer’s *Republic of Rock* is an archival tale. He brings the relationship between rock and the counterculture, in both San Francisco and Vietnam, to ground in a series of case studies. In general these case studies are fairly small tales that he develops successfully to carry a good deal of historical weight.

The first half of the book looks to specific events that unfolded primarily in the San Francisco Bay area. Chapter 1 rethinks the familiar story of Ken Kesey and the Merry Pranksters by focusing on “the way in which they invoked citizenship, particularly American citizenship” through the psychedelic rock-infused Acid Tests (p. 23). The next chapter examines the strike by disc jockeys at the hip rock station KMPX-FM in order to ponder how countercultural values fared when faced with the imperatives of a profit-based business model: aka hip capitalism. The third and last chapter in the San Francisco-based half of the book narrates the largely forgotten story of the giant rock event that never was, the Wild West Festival, which was supposed to be a free concert and participatory extravaganza but crashed when countercultural activists condemned the whole thing as a “hip capitalist” exploit-a-thon.

In the last three chapters, Kramer moves to Vietnam. First, he writes about rock radio in Vietnam, discussing how the military allowed a fairly free flow of rock music to be broadcast so as to keep up the troops’ morale—a version of what Kramer calls “hip militarism.” The next chapter examines officially sanctioned live performance of rock music in Vietnam: “Here hip militarism rendered Vietnam into a surreal and hedonistic

playland in which the effort at morale building may have indeed improved spirits but also inspired unexpected engagements with issues of citizenship among America's citizen soldiers." The final chapter shifts ground and tells the story of the CBC Band, a group of talented Vietnamese rock musicians who became "aspiring citizens in ... Woodstock Nation" (p. 25). In all of his chapters, Kramer claims that rock infused the lives of young people, whether they were in Vietnam or in San Francisco, and provided them a tool for self-examination, social criticism, and sense of belonging to a realm separate from that of established authorities.

What's best about Kramer's kaleidoscopic take on rock and the counterculture is that it is not another look at a few iconic figures who have been made to stand in for the counterculture. Nor does he present the hoary counterculture genealogy of Beats to Hippies to Yuppies to describe a shallow arc of rebellion. Instead he has found historical events where people used rock music, whether as performers, listeners, or disseminators, to think and act out the meaning, possibilities, and limits of rebellion in a social landscape in which big money and powerful institutions (such as the US military) were willing to offer a smidge of cultural heterodoxy in exchange for social order and/or economic profit.

Kramer argues that these rebels, inspired by the liberatory possibilities of rock, saw themselves as citizens of a new realm in which alternative values could be enacted. His case studies demonstrate that at least some counterculture rebels tried to be simultaneously freer and more connected to a community of like-minded people. Kramer concludes: "To be sure, rock was compromised by its place within larger structures of power, but it also gave listeners an embedded medium in which to face this complicity. The music invited listeners to enter into its truth-seeking sounds and make them their own" (p. 223). Kramer is well aware of the kind of critique that

many on the left have made regarding the counterculture, that in David Harvey's words, "values of individual freedom and social justice are not ... necessarily compatible." [2] Still, he argues, the rock-inspired counterculture, while not dedicated to the traditional leftist concern of economic equality, was a realm in which ideals of a free community, combined with a righteous disdain for manipulative elites, was shared by a loosely drawn circle of young people. *The Republic of Rock* forces readers to move beyond those dreary histories of youth rebellion in the sixties in which the counterculture is presented as just a lame consumer fad useful only for selling crap to teenagers. Kramer understands that the counterculture was for some young people a home for their wayward hearts.

Notes

[1]. Grace Hale, *A Nation of Outsiders: How the White Middle Class Fell in Love with Rebellion in Postwar America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 228-229.

[2]. David Harvey, *A Brief History of Neoliberalism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005), 41.

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