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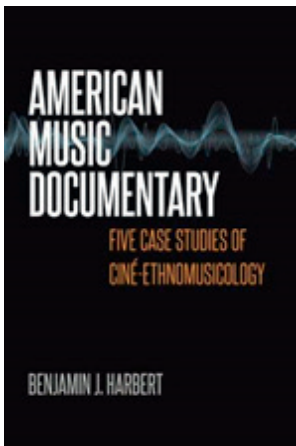
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*American Music Documentary:
Five Case Studies of Ciné-Ethnomusicology*
by Benjamin J. Harbert

Wesleyan University Press, Middletown, Connecticut, 2018



Film has long been a support in ethnomusicological research, presenting images caught during field work and helping with a better subsequent analysis of the recorded material. But what if film was a means of presentation in its own right? This question is the starting point of Georgetown University music and film professor Benjamin J. Harbert in his book *American Music Documentary: Five Case Studies of Ciné-Ethnomusicology*. The idea that the ethnomusicologist and director introduces is, in my opinion, rather novel and audacious. There aren't many writings to target this new type of

research. But what are the limitations of such a method? And what would at the end of the day be the difference between an ethnomusicological film and a documentary?

The book, published at Wesleyan University Press in 2018, has five chapters (*Where is the Music? What is Music?, Representing the Margins and Underrepresenting the Real, The Use and Abuse of Musicological Concepts, The Theater of Mass Culture and Cinematic Dub and the Multitude*), it opens with an explicit introduction and closes with a glossary of film terms. To each chapter the author associates a particular documentary, of which he goes into a detailed analysis, both musical and with regard to the filming and editing techniques that render it credible and classifiable as an ethnomusicological

film. It is worth mentioning that all five films go beyond the classical documentary, the images are designed so as to speak for themselves, there is no voice-over narrator, and the number of interviews is rather small.

The first chapter highlights Albert Maysles' 1970 *Gimme Shelter*, based on the 1969 Rolling Stones tour, which culminated with the disastrous Altamont concert when a young man died. The film captures surprising concert, studio, and press conference images, as well as glimpses of the protagonists' real lives, their feelings and emotions. Harbert's interview with Maysles, disclosing off camera information, leads to a better understanding of some of the scenes or stills.

Chapter two presents Jill Goldmilow's 1974 *Antonia: A Portrait of the Woman*, in which female conductor Antonia Brico talks about her struggle with a critical and biased society in a time when women were fighting for their rights. The chapter mostly focuses on technical descriptions, especially as concerns film and editing, and the Harbert explains how various filming techniques (the close-up, the side view of the camera) can capture very well certain moods or gestures, and how the reader's attention can easily be directed to those gestures.

In Shirley Clarke's 1958 *Ornette: Made in America*, presented in the third chapter, it is saxophonist Ornette Coleman who comes to the fore. Emphasising more the novel techniques the musician brought to the world of jazz than his personal life, the film is perhaps the most atypical of the five. It features scenes from his concerts, interviews and even reenactments of moments from his childhood. Very thorough are Harbert's musical analyses, and it's also important to notice that this is the only film where he didn't interview the director, already deceased when the study was conducted. As such, the only material he could consult were older interviews with Shirley Clarke or archival documents.

I believe that the fourth chapter is the most convincing. Based on D. A. Pennebaker & Chris Hegedus' 1988 *Depeche Mode: 101*, it builds around the issue of how a new musical genre is received by different generations. To me, this documentary comes closest to an ethnomusicological film: the *Music for the Masses* tour is presented both as seen by the band and by fans, with music playing an important role (the Rose Bowl, Pasadena concert covers a great part of the film). It's interesting to see Harbert's analogy between the film and Wagner's concept of *Gesamtkunstwerk*, accentuating both music and dance, lyrics, and show. His explicit analyses, embedded in the text, are not to be ignored either.

The last of the series is 1999 *Instrument*, created by Jem Cohen and Fugazi. Wanting to move away from the documentary world, the film comes

up with another structure: around 120 minutes of music, that is, live concerts that the director himself filmed over 10 years, to which are added short interviews with the band and a couple of fans, all edited with new techniques to which Cohen has to resort to because of, among other, lack of funds. It must be said that the musicians participate in the editing, as they do in *Gimme Shelter* or *Depeche Mode: 101*, and their opinions are rather influent.

Neither of the five movies sets out to be of the ethnomusicological kind, as Benjamin J. Harbert himself says, and were not made by ethnomusicologists, being conceived as simple documentaries. Nevertheless, after reading the book, the author's idea becomes clearer. These films can turn into a starting point for the development of a new field – each of them highlights certain musicians, is mostly built around an important moment (concert, tour), and presents how their music is received by the audience. Harbert's systematic research is to be appreciated: for each chapter he interviews the directors or consults archives or interviews, the films are analysed both from a director's and from an ethnomusicologist's point of view, and the musical analyses play an important role. We might say that Harbert himself engages in an ethnomusicological research in order to write his book. And yet, how far can this idea, of a ciné-ethnomusicology, go? What is the line that shouldn't be crossed so as not to fall into the documentary trap? Besides, in order to make such a film, the ethnomusicologist should have some knowledge of film direction or work with a specialist, which, at least financially, would augment the costs of field research. And what about the issue of editing: what, how much and how is material to be kept? Wouldn't the elimination of certain scenes, which would at first seem irrelevant, endanger the exact understanding of the subject? All these questions still need to be answered. And if this book hasn't yet convinced the reader, Benjamin J. Harbert's film *Follow Me Down: Portraits of Louisiana Prison Musicians* surely will.

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English version by Maria Monica Bojin