While many sociological works on music have recently gravitated towards history and the development of different genres, Jennifer C. Lena’s new book *Banding Together* provides a prerequisite of sorts to all the rest—highlighting the importance of understanding the underlying social elements of a form. Over the course of her book she provides a dense and intricate look into the process of music genre development, showing that, in fact, formal similarities exist across musical communities. Lena, a Professor at Barnard College and sociologist of hip-hop, takes a big cut at the question of how and why some styles of music gain mass popularity, while others are able to thrive in small niches, and ultimately ends up inside a rigorous study of classification systems, revealing the extent to which our individual music tastes serve as instruments of power, through our participation in musical communities.

It’s quite the convoluted project, but her ability to make it understandable by any music lover is a testament to her writing ability. Throughout the work she references prominent music artists and trends, which not only illustrates the work, but also shows how grounded of a project it is. She begins the book with an extensive outline in which she defines her terms and lays out her objectives, which leaves the rest of the book flowing much more smoothly, as she doesn’t have to stop to explain what she’s talking about. This is most effective in her thorough explanations of the difference between genre and community, which can be simplified to genre as a system of orientations,
expectations, and conventions of a style, with a community referring to the networks of
distribution, production, and consumption that work around it.

Although Lena mentions at least sixty different genres, her research is most
effective when doing detailed case studies of genre development, as she does of
bluegrass, bebop jazz, and rap. In order to better understand the process, she comes up
with four dominant forms: avant-garde, scene-based, industry-based, and traditionalist,
which help to characterize the similarities of different genres. She follows these three
genres throughout the four forms, highlighting how hip-hop went from a DJ-based
movement in public parks and local clubs (avant-garde) to a technologically-advanced
scene-based genre incorporating multiple turntables to craft loops from two copies of the
same vinyl album.

In her characterization of the industry-based genre, Lena reflects on the demise of
bebop jazz, which lost many of its fans upon the rise of rock & R&B. She explains the
process within the musical community, from the stop of media coverage to the record
companies reduction in marketing and financial support, to the eventual release of bebop
artists from labels, or the primary industry organization. This allows her to provide a
strong example of the Traditionalist genre, which focused on the purification of the style
through “eradicating excesses of the Industry-based genre and reenacting a version of
what the music was like in its Scene-based period.” (47) This set off the creation of
modern bebop (which became an important modern art form worthy of scholarly
attention.)

Lena’s work is strongest when she is demonstrating her ideas through the
application of popular music artists. She has a very thick knowledge of popular culture
and music history, and her incorporation of important moments (like Chuck D of Public Enemy’s declaration of rap as “black folks’ CNN”) that help illustrate what is otherwise a very complicated book that attempts to redefine our classification systems.

A few chapters in, Lena adds another compelling element to her research: global music communities. Lena explains that many foreign governments, or other groups with a “direct interest in the ideological content of popular music” (117), are responsible for financially supporting popular music genres. For this chapter she studies music communities in China, Serbia, Nigeria, and Chile, highlighting the active promotion of propaganda music in China, and nueva canción, an anti-state genre popularized in the middle of the 20th century in Chile. Through her survey of music in countries with very different musical cultures and political economies, we get a strong sense that these community aspects are very much embedded in music across the globe.

As a music lover, I found Lena’s book to be very compelling, even though at times I wished it was less theoretical. Lena is definitely more interested in the structure of genres than their content, and this can be dry at times without sufficient examples from the music world. I believe that it will play a very strong role in the field of music sociology, as while many have focused upon style, rarely does a scholar take the time to understand how these music communities drive their music, or how participants in a community get to empower their tastes. Though there were a few arguments that I wasn’t completely sold on (including her discussion of Grandmaster Flash’s “The Message”, and how it was chosen to the National Archive of Historic Recordings only because they wanted to include a Black Nationalist song), ultimately I found her arguments to be
smart, and her writing to be very clean. To invoke Lena herself from the introduction,

“Like most books, this one has something to prove.” (xi)