

Book Review

Work and Occupations

0(0) 1–3

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Ramirez, M. (2018). *Destined for Greatness. Passions, Dreams, and Aspirations in a College Music Town*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press. 244 pp. \$29.95 (paperback).

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DOI: 10.1177/0730888419831729

It is an interesting paradox that we tend to think highly of successful musicians, while aspiring for such a position is typically frowned upon. In *Destined for Greatness*, sociologist Michael Ramirez (Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi) puts *School of Rock* (2003) character Dewey Finn forward as an archetype of this vocational ambiguity: “He is the consummate manboy, technically an adult, yet refusing to accept the responsibilities of adulthood and happily stunted in an adolescent lifestyle” (p. 50). Indeed, an occupation in popular music production is perceived to be chased and acquired during adolescence, or not at all. Through his meticulous study of 48 indie-rock musicians aspiring musical success, Ramirez sketches a captivating picture of the motivations, considerations, and concerns of these musicians and their endeavors to make music their vocation. In its essence, the book aims to answer a question that lies at the heart of most cultural work: How do persons aspiring for a job that is often perceived as leisure negotiate expectations of “serious” careers and the (gendered) economic realities offered by adulthood?

The book’s backdrop is Athens, Georgia, home to University of Georgia and celebrated for its music culture. Because of this, Athens serves as a seductive location for middle-class adolescents to furnish a career in music and obtain a college education (in that order). Although the first few chapters of the book take the reader through musicians’ life

histories in what eventually leads to their moving to Athens, the main and most interesting sections of the book focus on intersecting issues of adulthood and gender.

Ramirez demonstrates that musicians struggle with the incompatibility of widely shared preconceptions of adulthood as opposed to a career in music—especially those beyond college-age—while being confronted with expectations of peers and family members to “grow up.” Similar to other forms of creative work, the core of these negotiations result in the questioning of music as a legitimate and sustainable career. The comprehensive descriptions of these considerations are illuminative but sometimes lack a thorough embedding in the broader literature on creative work (e.g. Banks, 2007; Stahl, 2013).

Although the title of the book allows no such inference, two full chapters are dedicated to the discussion of gender, particularly masculinity (Chapter 4) and women vis-à-vis masculine culture in music (Chapter 5). The discussion of masculinity in popular music production is enriching in its effort to go beyond music itself: Masculine expectations of providing for oneself (and a family) and of normative adulthood are at the core of the intersecting problems of gender, the life course and establishing a musical career for women *and* men. Moreover, the female musicians in Ramirez’ sample provide ample accounts of gendered socialization practices, role expectations, and the possibilities of femininity to stand out in a male-dominated culture—while suffering the consequences of achieving recognition for one’s gender, rather than one’s skills. Ramirez’ attention for detail, for example, on the importance of informal mentoring and “the push” into music, is laudable.

Destined for Greatness offers a compelling thick description of adolescent creative vocational aspiration, but, also because of this, Athens and its scene come across as a social vacuum. While occasionally mentioned in the chapters’ introductions, (social) media and the larger music industry are curiously absent from the analysis. Although this could be attributed to the fact that Ramirez conducted his interviews between 2005 and 2008, none of the chapters speak of the challenges provided by digitalization, disintermediation, and social media in the music industry. As “reluctant entrepreneurs” (Haynes & Marshall, 2018), aspiring musicians are now spending more time on *Instagram* than in the rehearsal room, yet Ramirez’ account only speaks of traditional “paper” promotion at local establishments. Nowhere does the book address, for example, the financial disadvantages of streaming, or the potential uses of *YouTube* to make a career. Although offering a

wonderful close-reading of Athens and its musicians, as a whole, the book feels curiously out of touch with larger societal developments in popular music and creative work in the 21st century. Nevertheless, *Destined for Greatness* offers a rich empirical illustration on professional musicianship and its intersections with gender and adulthood. As such, it will be a valuable source for scholars working on such topics and, in particular, for (aspiring) professionals and vocational educators working in popular music.

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