

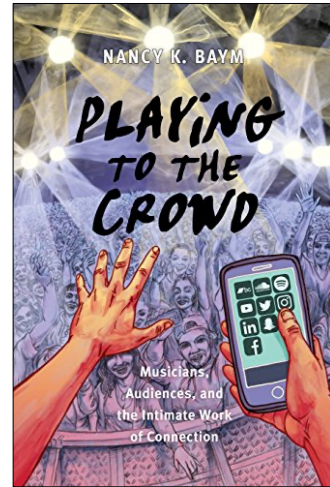
Nancy K. Baym, **Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection**, New York: New York University Press, 2018, 280 pp., \$89.00 (hardcover), \$29.00 (paperback).

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Making music is a surprisingly limited component of what is required to be a music artist, particularly an independent artist. For Zoë Keating, one of the musicians Nancy K. Baym interviewed for her book **Playing to the Crowd: Musicians, Audiences, and the Intimate Work of Connection**, her work involves not only composition and performing as a cellist but also engaging continuously with her fans on social media and “offering her audience her *self*” (p. 5) through sharing personal stories about her young family and engaging in discussion online. This activity is part of what Baym characterizes as relational labor: “the ongoing, affective, material and cognitive work of communicating with people over time to create structures that support continued work” (p. 19). Distinct from affective or emotional labor, this concept, which is one of the most significant contributions of the book, encapsulates the continual processes of interpersonal connection within a realm in which sociality and commerce are particularly interwoven.



Baym offers important insight into the complex world of interaction between music artists and their fans through a historical examination of how music fandom emerged, her own experiences as a music fan, and key findings from ethnographic work she has conducted with artists about their day-to-day practices. This is an important bridge between the study of popular music and fan studies, a discipline that has often placed much of its focus on fandoms that emerge around TV and film franchises. It exists in conversation with scholars like Henry Jenkins and Jonathan Gray as well as David Hesmondhalgh and Jonathan Sterne, because much of Baym’s analysis of fan practices is related to her critical examination of music platforms and formats. Many of the issues that are pertinent to TV and film fandoms are present here, such as intra-fandom hierarchies, boundary policing, and concerns over the ownership of cultural products as fans begin to use music in ways that artists disapprove of. However, something that Baym is attuned to is how technological change and systems that exploit artists’ labor have placed unprecedented pressure on musicians to continually engage and disclose more of their personal lives online. Especially in situations where artists are directly reliant on fan funding for projects, they feel a sense of social obligation to fans that makes the relational labor of establishing and maintaining healthy boundaries increasingly complicated. The focus on artists and managers as interview subjects, as opposed to fans themselves, is helpful because it provides a unique analysis of fandom from the vantage point of creators, some of whom are in situations of financial precarity that require as much fan support as possible. It also distinguishes this book from others, like *Popular Music Fandom: Identities, Roles and Practices*, edited by Mark Duffett (2010), which are more concerned with fan practices and less about how artist labor facilitates or limits these practices.

Chapters 1 and 2 provide an overview of how music as a tool of communication has become increasingly commoditized and how the industrialization and privatization of music-making through the label system has meant that some of the participatory frameworks around music have taken on new forms, such as fandom. Baym highlights how the systems in place to ensure that musicians get paid for their work—whether labels or rights databases—have often failed them, and that problem has only been exacerbated as music transitioned into the digital realm in the 2000s. Referring to Brooke Erin Duffy and Elizabeth Wissinger's work on cultural industries, she observes that in the current economic context of the music industry, "Musicians must be 'omniprofessional' entrepreneurs able to perform a wide range of jobs themselves" (p. 69).

In chapter 3, Baym connects her work to fan studies and to her own experiences as a devout music fan—she road-tripped across the Midwest with friends to see R.E.M. play during her college years and became an avid collector of live recordings of the band. She describes both the joys and complications of engaging with artists and connecting with other fans, particularly within the male-dominated rock scenes in which she participated.

Chapter 4 focuses on how artists negotiate control of fan spaces with the fans themselves. Baym identifies three strategies employed by artists to regain control of fandoms that have begun to function autonomously:

territorializing to locate fans' participatory practices on sites musicians own and can monetize, invoking the law to protect intellectual property against participatory practices, and datafying audiences and their communal practices in order to act strategically on knowledge gleaned from analytics. (p. 110)

She highlights how these practices run the risk of relegating fans to the status of data, or worse, setting up hierarchies based on how much fans spend for particular access or experiences. On the other hand, some artists she interviewed chose to allow fans to manage fan spaces and engage with them in a more collaborative manner, asking them to help fund and market projects in a reciprocal mode.

Chapter 5 focuses on platforms, both physical and digital, where artists interact with their fans. Baym observes that the power dynamics at play on stage are different than those of the merch table, and similarly, the characteristics of each social media platform an artist uses create different parameters, and audiences, for the exchanges taking place. Artists have to contend with unsolicited audiences and an increased presence of antifandoms online while managing the endless contact these digital spaces afford, a dynamic which differs significantly from the transience of the live show experience.

Chapter 6 is about strategies for artists to convey authenticity and offer intimacy to audiences while maintaining mystique, boundaries for personal safety, and a sense of selfhood. Many of the artists interviewed had dealt with fans stalking them and began to create guidelines for themselves in terms of self-disclosure or when not to respond to fans.

Baym challenges the assumption that artists need to use social media frequently (or at all) in order to be successful, noting that there is an absence of studies examining the ultimate profitability of this type of labor. In a period in which artists feel obligated to continually connect online, she suggests that “we should look critically, asking for what works for which people and when” (p. 198). She instead tasks platform developers with the obligation to protect artists, allow them to have more agency over their levels of engagement without being penalized or rendered irrelevant, and create mechanisms that facilitate compensation for artists.

While this book is a helpful resource for scholars of fan studies, popular music and those interested in parasocial relationships, it is also accessible to artists and their teams, especially as they think strategically about how to foster healthy communities around their music online. They can glean substantial insight from the musicians interviewed, such as David Lowery, who suggests that one method for strengthening fandom and reducing the pressure placed on artists is to find ways to encourage fans to be friends with one another (p. 132).

Baym has done an impressive job making connections with artists from indie, rock, and alternative spaces in the United States and Europe and the takeaways from these artists’ practices have relevance that extends beyond the confines of genre. And yet, the book needed greater engagement with artists of color, especially those operating in genres such as hip-hop, which became the most popular genre in the United States in 2017 (Ryan, 2018). Hip-hop in particular has not only redefined the sound of pop music but also many of the ways music fandom operates through participatory culture online. It is difficult to truly examine the characteristics of music artists and their fandoms in the past century without engaging more with artists of color and the particular participatory practices that their fans have created. It begs the question of how Baym’s conclusions about intimacy and connection play out within genres such as hip-hop, reggaeton, or kpop, and how interviews with artists operating within those genres might have changed the nature of some of her observations. Regardless, the book is definitely a valuable resource for those trying to better understand relational labor conducted by artists, and Baym’s observations largely remain relevant, even as platforms and music styles have continued to rapidly change since she concluded her interviews in 2017.

References

- Duffett, M. (2014). *Popular music fandom: Identities, roles and practices*. New York, NY: Routledge.
- Ryan, P. (2018, January 3). Rap overtakes rock as the most popular genre among music fans. Here’s why. *USA TODAY*. <https://www.usatoday.com/story/life/music/2018/01/03/rap-overtakes-rock-most-popular-genre-among-music-fans-heres-why/990873001/>