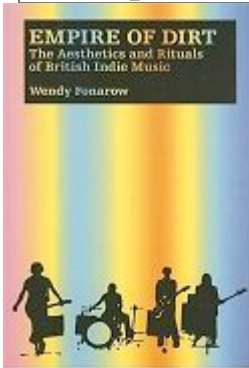


# ***Empire of Dirt*** by Wendy Fonarow WESLEYAN UNIV. PRESS



Eggheads can suck the fun outta most anything. And academics have been sniffing around the leaky arse of rock 'n' roll for years, most recently at the annual Experience Music Project Pop Conference where meticulously footnoted papers get presented on what it all means, maaan. Against all odds, then, Wendy Fonarow, holder of a Ph.D. in cultural anthropology and a former staffer at Domino, Reprise and MCA, submits a rigorous, 304-page study of “the aesthetics and rituals of British indie music” (as *Empire of Dirt*’s subtitle reads) that’s a whale of a lot of fun.

Granted, a research project on the overhyped/underwhelming U.K. indie scene circa 1993-94 (when Fonarow conducted the bulk of her observations and interviews) may leave you nonplused. And her premise is a tad hi-falutin’: “Music performance [is] a ritual. Rituals address cultural conflicts and contradictions. Indie music performances and ideology are an expression of cultural values regarding the role of art, emotion, the body, asceticism, youth and the nature of creativity in modern Western industrial society.” Indeed, my eyes glazed over when Fonarow ruminated upon the cultural parallels between indie-rock fans, the Puritans of yore and West African tribal societies. Sometimes a cigar’s just a cigar, Dr. Freud.

But most of this (meticulously footnoted) treatise rings true. The behavior patterns reported on in “Sex and the Ritual Practitioners” confirm that guy-gal relationships in pop—“the overzealous female spectator,” the “sexually rapacious groupie” and the musicians who boff 'em—are rooted in power and affirmation, not attraction. A pair of chapters detail a gig’s three “Zones of Participation,” wherein concertgoers’ activities vary according to proximity to the performers. There’s the close contact and physical/ecstatic behavior that characterizes Zone One, in front of the stage; the less densely packed Zone Two typically finds fans in deep concentration mode; and Zone Three, near the back of the venue, is where you’ll find the drinkers and schmoozers—particularly those preening music biz types who could care less about the band yet strategically display their all-access laminates.

These and other observations have universal resonance, and after reading *Empire of Dirt*, you’ll never be able to look at bands, fans and all the myriad clubcrawlers again in the same light.

**By Fred Mills**