

best books on the history of contemporary music

best books on the history of contemporary music provide invaluable insights into the evolution, cultural impact, and artistic innovations of music from the mid-20th century to the present. Exploring these works offers a comprehensive understanding of genres such as rock, pop, hip-hop, electronic, and alternative music, as well as the sociopolitical contexts that shaped them. These books often blend biographical details, critical analysis, and historical narratives to paint a vivid picture of contemporary music's dynamic landscape. For scholars, enthusiasts, and professionals alike, having a curated list of authoritative texts enriches knowledge and appreciation of modern musical developments. This article delves into some of the most influential and well-regarded publications covering the history of contemporary music. It highlights key themes, notable authors, and essential reading to deepen one's grasp of this vibrant subject matter.

- Comprehensive Overviews of Contemporary Music History
- Genre-Specific Historical Accounts
- Biographical and Autobiographical Works
- Analytical and Theoretical Perspectives
- Essential Reading Lists and Recommendations

Comprehensive Overviews of Contemporary Music History

Comprehensive overviews serve as foundational resources for understanding the broad timeline and major movements within contemporary music. These books typically cover multiple genres and trace the evolution of music from post-World War II influences to the digital age. They provide historical context, key artists, technological advancements, and cultural shifts that have influenced musical trends.

Characteristics of Comprehensive Music Histories

Books in this category offer a panoramic view of contemporary music history. They include detailed chronologies, discussions of influential albums and artists, and analysis of industry changes. Readers can expect to find

coverage of musical innovation, societal impact, and the role of media in shaping public perception of music.

Notable Titles in This Category

Some of the best books on the history of contemporary music in this group include:

- **"The History of Rock & Roll"** – A detailed examination of rock music's development and its influence on global culture.
- **"Last Night a DJ Saved My Life"** – Focuses on the rise of dance music and DJ culture, charting the evolution of electronic music genres.
- **"Music in the 20th Century: The Oxford History"** – Offers a scholarly yet accessible overview of 20th-century music trends, including contemporary styles.

Genre-Specific Historical Accounts

Focusing on individual genres provides a more nuanced understanding of the distinct cultural and musical developments within each style. Genre-specific histories illuminate the origins, key figures, and stylistic transformations that define movements such as hip-hop, punk, jazz fusion, and electronic music.

Hip-Hop and Rap Histories

Hip-hop's history is rich with social commentary and innovation. Books dedicated to this genre explore its roots in urban communities, the rise of influential artists, and its global impact.

Rock and Alternative Music

Rock music's diverse subgenres and its role as a voice of rebellion and change are well documented in specialized volumes. These works often analyze lyrical themes, production techniques, and cultural significance.

Electronic and Dance Music

Electronic music's history covers early experimental sounds through to mainstream EDM. These accounts highlight technological breakthroughs and the fusion of electronic with other genres.

Biographical and Autobiographical Works

Biographies and autobiographies of prominent contemporary musicians provide personal insights into the creative processes, struggles, and achievements behind the music. These narratives often reveal the human stories that shaped entire genres and movements.

Influential Musician Biographies

Detailed biographies of iconic artists give context to their contributions and place their work within the larger musical landscape. Such books often include interviews, archival materials, and critical analysis.

Autobiographies and Memoirs

First-person accounts offer intimate perspectives on the music industry, creativity, and the cultural conditions of the time. They are valuable for understanding the motivations and challenges faced by musicians.

Analytical and Theoretical Perspectives

Analytical books delve into the technical and theoretical aspects of contemporary music, including composition, production, and cultural theory. These works often appeal to musicians, scholars, and serious students of music history.

Music Theory and Composition in Contemporary Genres

Texts focusing on theory analyze the structures, harmonies, and rhythms characteristic of modern music styles, providing tools to understand and create contemporary compositions.

Cultural and Sociological Analyses

These books examine how contemporary music intersects with identity, politics, and society. They explore themes such as race, gender, globalization, and media influence in shaping musical expression.

Essential Reading Lists and Recommendations

For those seeking to build a personal library on the history of contemporary music, curated reading lists highlight foundational and cutting-edge works. These collections are invaluable for both academic study and general

interest.

Recommended Titles for Beginners

Beginners benefit from accessible and engaging books that provide clear narratives without assuming prior knowledge. These typically include illustrated histories and introductory surveys.

Advanced and Academic Recommendations

Advanced readers and scholars may prefer detailed analyses, primary source collections, and critical essays that demand a deeper engagement with the material.

Key Books to Consider

1. **"This Is Your Brain on Music"** – Explores the psychology and neuroscience behind musical experience.
2. **"Rip It Up and Start Again"** – Chronicles post-punk music's influence on contemporary sounds.
3. **"Can't Stop Won't Stop"** – A definitive history of hip-hop culture and music.
4. **"How Music Works"** – Investigates music from cultural, economic, and technical perspectives.

Frequently Asked Questions

What are some of the best books on the history of contemporary music?

Some of the best books on the history of contemporary music include 'How Music Works' by David Byrne, 'Love Goes to Buildings on Fire' by Will Hermes, 'Rip It Up and Start Again' by Simon Reynolds, 'The Rest Is Noise' by Alex Ross, 'Yeah! Yeah! Yeah!: The Story of Modern Pop' by Bob Stanley, and 'Meet Me in the Bathroom' by Lizzy Goodman.

Which book provides a comprehensive overview of the evolution of popular music in the 20th century?

'The Rest Is Noise' by Alex Ross offers a detailed and scholarly exploration of 20th-century music, covering a wide range of genres and historical contexts, making it a great choice for understanding the evolution of popular and contemporary music.

Are there any books that focus specifically on the history of rock and indie music?

'Rip It Up and Start Again' by Simon Reynolds is a highly recommended book that delves into the post-punk and indie music scenes from 1978 to 1984, providing valuable insight into the roots of contemporary rock music.

Which books explore the cultural and social impact of contemporary music?

Books like 'Love Goes to Buildings on Fire' by Will Hermes and 'Meet Me in the Bathroom' by Lizzy Goodman explore the cultural and social dynamics surrounding contemporary music scenes, especially in New York City, highlighting how music intersects with societal changes.

Can you recommend a book that combines music theory with the history of contemporary music?

'How Music Works' by David Byrne combines personal anecdotes, music theory, and history to explain how contemporary music has developed, making it an engaging read for those interested in both the technical and historical aspects.

What recent books on contemporary music history have received critical acclaim?

'Meet Me in the Bathroom' by Lizzy Goodman and 'Love Goes to Buildings on Fire' by Will Hermes are recent critically acclaimed books that provide fresh perspectives on contemporary music history, focusing on vibrant music scenes and influential artists.

Additional Resources

1. *"Rip It Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978–1984"* by Simon Reynolds
This book delves into the post-punk movement, exploring how artists in the late 1970s and early 1980s reinvented music after punk rock. Simon Reynolds provides a detailed analysis of influential bands and the cultural shifts that shaped contemporary music. It's an essential read for understanding the

roots of many modern genres.

2. *"How Music Works" by David Byrne*

David Byrne combines memoir, history, and music theory in this insightful book that examines how music has evolved in contemporary times. He explores the impact of technology, geography, and the music industry on the creative process. Byrne's perspective bridges the gap between musical creation and cultural context.

3. *"The Rest Is Noise: Listening to the Twentieth Century" by Alex Ross*

While focusing broadly on twentieth-century classical music, this book provides vital context for the development of contemporary music styles. Alex Ross discusses how political and social upheavals influenced composers and the evolution of sound. It's a richly detailed narrative that connects classical traditions with modern musical innovations.

4. *"Love Goes To Buildings On Fire: Five Years in New York That Changed Music Forever" by Will Hermes*

This book captures the vibrant and transformative music scene of New York City between 1973 and 1977. Will Hermes highlights the convergence of punk, hip-hop, disco, and other genres that laid the foundation for contemporary music. It's a vivid portrayal of a pivotal era in music history.

5. *"Can't Stop Won't Stop: A History of the Hip-Hop Generation" by Jeff Chang*

Jeff Chang offers an in-depth look at the rise of hip-hop culture and its profound impact on contemporary music and society. The book chronicles the genre's origins in the Bronx and its expansion into a global phenomenon. It blends music history with social commentary, making it essential for understanding modern music's cultural roots.

6. *"Electric Eden: Unearthing Britain's Visionary Music" by Rob Young*

This book explores the fusion of traditional British folk music with contemporary styles from the 1960s onward. Rob Young examines artists who redefined music by blending the old with the new, influencing the wider landscape of contemporary music. It's a compelling study of innovation and heritage.

7. *"Last Night a DJ Saved My Life: The History of the Disc Jockey" by Bill Brewster and Frank Broughton*

Tracing the evolution of the DJ from the early 20th century to the digital age, this book highlights the DJ's role in shaping contemporary music genres like house, techno, and hip-hop. The authors provide a comprehensive history of club culture and the technological advances that transformed music consumption. It's an indispensable resource for understanding modern music's social and technological dynamics.

8. *"Our Band Could Be Your Life: Scenes from the American Indie Underground 1981-1991" by Michael Azerrad*

Focusing on the American indie rock scene, Michael Azerrad profiles influential bands that helped define alternative music in the 1980s and early 1990s. The book captures the DIY ethos and cultural shifts that challenged

mainstream music. It's a passionate tribute to a vital chapter in contemporary music history.

9. *"The Song Machine: Inside the Hit Factory"* by John Seabrook

John Seabrook investigates the modern pop music industry's hit-making process, revealing how contemporary songs are crafted by teams of writers and producers. The book sheds light on the business and technology behind chart-topping music. It offers a fascinating look at how contemporary music is both art and industry.

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on musical activity today, and shows how it can be analyzed from different points of view, working within a diverse theoretical framework. It is organized into three sections, the first of which discusses the changing contexts of musical work compositions over the 20th century. The second part offers a rich and in-depth musical analysis, rigorously connected to the performative and interpretative dimension, while the third considers the relationship between technology and music, and its influence on the creation of new paradigms for musical performance and creation. Covering practical and theoretical problems, the collection will be of great interest to scholars, professionals, students of music, composers, and performers.

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