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1 **Mark Slobin. *Motor City Music: A Detroit Looks back*. Oxford: Oxford University**  
2 **Press, 2018. 248 pp.**

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4 “In my day,” Mark Slobin writes near the beginning of the fourth chapter of *Motor City Music*, “most  
5 people in Detroit came from somewhere else.” In many ways, this trope of mobility and the encounter of  
6 continuous and varied negotiations of diverse identities in specific urban contexts stands at the core of  
7 Slobin’s book. In so doing, *Motor City Music* communicates with a well-established field of scholarship  
8 that is interested in migratory sounds and spaces within urban contexts, and that reaches beyond music  
9 studies. Much existing research describes what is effectively narrated as a paradoxical relation between  
10 migratory spaces and urban places. In mobilities studies, for example, the focus on movement rather than  
11 fixity sits at the core of the workings of the city, while also contrasting its physical stasis (see, for example,  
12 Mimi Sheller and John Urry, *The New Mobilities Paradigm*, 2006). Ayşe Çağlar and Nina Glick Schiller  
13 (*Migrants and City-making*, 2018) argue that migrants are what makes a city, and their mobile and  
14 heterogeneous voices sound it into being. Even so, Çağlar and Glick Schiller highlight unequal networks of  
15 power that disadvantage migrant voices. When it comes to migrants, then, cities are often described as hubs  
16 and gateways, as places of departure and arrival, but rarely as spaces of belonging. Migrants move in and  
17 out of cities and engage with them, but they are nonetheless not fully of them, continuously confronted with  
18 enforcements and unenforcements.

19 Mark Slobin’s book is an important contribution to this debate. For him, all those who engage with the  
20 city, for whichever period of time and in whichever capacity, contribute towards its soundscape and to the  
21 micro-geographies of everyday life. Like Çağlar, Glick Schiller and many others, Slobin acknowledges  
22 unequal power hierarchies and exclusionary politics and realities. Even so, Slobin is careful to shift his  
23 focus onto highlighting the voices that make the urban soundscape of his narrative, rather than emphasising  
24 attempts to silence these voices. What emerges is an image of extraordinary richness and diversity, in  
25 which each of the figures of Slobin’s narrative is given space to be heard. Indeed, at first glance, *Motor*  
26 *City Music* appears predominantly descriptive. Slobin employs numerous biographical vignettes,  
27 sometimes of musicians known beyond the city, but more often of local figures. More so, at first reading  
28 one might be tempted to label his book almost auto-biographical, for Slobin’s metropolis is his birth city,  
29 Detroit—and the subtitle of the book is “A Detroit looks back.” And yet, upon closer reading, a more  
30 nuanced picture quickly emerges.

31 Following an introductory first chapter, the second concerns his childhood and immediate family.  
32 Stressing the migratory journey of his family, who had come to the city via Rumania as Ukrainian refugees,  
33 Slobin acknowledges that he was a Detroiters almost by coincidence: “no one was in Detroit more  
34 accidentally than I,” he writes. Slobin describes the rich musical variety of his childhood. On the road to a  
35 holiday in Mexico, the Slobins mix Irish popular songs with Russian folklore. Elsewhere, Brahms and  
36 Tchaikovsky are reminders of powerful European musical presences. Slobin remembers Yiddish folklore  
37 and recalls his aunt, Ann Liepah, who sang partisan songs to Holocaust survivors in postwar Germany.  
38 Slobin recounts singing Christian songs as a Jewish American child, occasionally changing the lyrics.  
39 Americana feature, too, of course, including rock n’roll and jazz, which entered the Slobin household via  
40 records and radio. Subsequent chapters move outwards, structurally referencing the city’s mobility, from  
41 parental home to ever further reaching networks. Chapters are entitled accordingly. The third, for example,  
42 which focusses on music making in the school system, with specific focus on Cass Technical High School,  
43 is called “The Traffic Circle,” while the fourth chapter, “Local Traffic,” concentrates on neighbourhood  
44 musicking.

45 Chapters 4 and 5 are concerned with what Slobin calls “neighbourhood subcultural sounds” and, for me,  
46 stand at the core of the book’s success. Slobin starts Chapter 4 by moving effortlessly between various  
47 communities of European heritage, pausing along his narrative journey to zoom in on Armenian, Polish,  
48 Ukrainian, and Italian immigrants who made Detroit, as Slobin puts it, “a very European city.” Next up are  
49 white Appalachian immigrants, the “hillbillies,” who enriched Detroit’s soundscape with country music.  
50 Slobin’s discussion of African American arrivals, mostly from the southern United States, adds yet another  
51 layer of richness to his description, and I was moved by his account of the destruction of Paradise Valley to  
52 make way for the Chrysler Freeway that witnessed the effective destruction of a thriving, and musical,  
53 community. The Jewish community of Detroit is treated to a separate chapter, in part perhaps because it is  
54 closest to Slobin’s own experience. Evocatively entitled “Border Traffic,” Slobin acknowledges the city’s  
55 history of rampant anti-Semitism, but, for the most part, highlights the abundance and diversity of Jewish

1 sounds, as the narrative moves across religious, Zionist, Yiddish, and leftist musics. Slobin writes of Jewish  
2 Detroit's musical responses to the Holocaust, and Jewish efforts to construct, and uphold, a classical music  
3 concert life in the city. Throughout these chapters, Slobin acknowledges histories of divisiveness, but  
4 continuously emphasises music's potential to bridge boundaries and enable communication and interaction.  
5 Slobin only mentions cosmopolitanism a handful of times throughout his text, but I kept being struck by the  
6 book's potential to act as a passionate *cri du cœur* in defence of cosmopolitanism, notably inclusive of  
7 those often narrated as outsiders.

8 Indeed, Slobin's narrative frequently plays with the dichotomy of margin versus centre, placing musics  
9 and musicians at the heart of developments while simultaneously noting notions of periphery. In Chapter 6,  
10 "Merging Traffic," this is perhaps most apparent. Motown, to give one example, the famous record label  
11 which became almost a nickname for Detroit itself, is perhaps the city's most illustrious musical export.  
12 Slobin acknowledges the centrality of Detroit in the creation of a sound that achieved global fame, placing  
13 it at the centre of popular music history. And yet, even here, marginality comes to the fore.  
14 Characteristically, Slobin makes his point by foregrounding the voices of others, in this case that of Detroit-  
15 born funk rock musician and record producer, Don Was, who ascribes the Motown sound to the city's  
16 "provincial setting," and fellow Detroiter, guitarist Dennis Coffey, who stresses that Motown was "a  
17 regional sound," distinct only in the urban quality of local vocalists. Throughout and beyond Motown,  
18 "Merging Traffic" foregrounds efforts "to unite Detroiters through music," as Slobin puts it, by  
19 corporations, unions, the counterculture, the music industry, and the media.

20 The common theme, then, to which Slobin returns time and again, is collaboration and commonality.  
21 Violin teachers from Cass Tech appear on Motown records, and Jewish musicians pop up in Latin bands.  
22 Even in cases where it may perhaps have been more straightforward to emphasise division and antagonism,  
23 Slobin isn't tempted to play his characters off one another. Rather than emphasising the bitter battle  
24 between Henry Ford and the unions, for example, Slobin points out musical similarities between Ford's  
25 obsession with square dancing and Communist workers music. This is not to say that Slobin brushes  
26 oppression and segregation under the carpet. In several places, he acknowledges violence, pointing out, for  
27 example, the extent to which African Americans were effectively barred from playing in symphony  
28 orchestras. Slobin quotes Charlie Burrell telling the story of Flournoy Hocker, who took his own life after  
29 being rejected from playing in the Detroit Symphony. Even so, the prose always returns to successful  
30 attempts at togetherness quickly. Genre, too, is mobile, and its boundaries marked by fluidity. Many  
31 musicians Slobin writes about move from classical to jazz to pop with seeming ease, showcasing their  
32 versatility. One example of many is harpist Pat Terry-Ross, classically trained, who recorded for Motown  
33 at night while being an elementary school teacher during the day.

34 Detroit's story could easily have invited narratives of dystopia. The city's riots of 1967 rank amongst  
35 the most brutal of US postwar history, and the decline of the 1970s was as drawn out as it was drastic.  
36 Slobin adopts a different route. While acknowledging Detroit's changing fates, Slobin is always on the  
37 lookout for hope, open-mindedness, community, and creativity. A sense of togetherness is, indeed, ever-  
38 present. On a personal level, for example, Slobin mentions how his family experienced the race riots  
39 of 1943 in "the beautiful park of Belle Isle," emphasising that "we spent countless idyllic hours there." The  
40 city's radio stations, to name another example, are emphasised as enablers of cultural unity. "In Detroit  
41 style," as Slobin puts it, "listeners could even come together in their separate cars." Slobin acknowledges  
42 the potentially divisive policy of what he calls ethnic programming and also refers to the extent to which  
43 mass media act as a lens into generational conflicts. But here, too, Slobin ends on a positive note,  
44 emphasising that "Detroiters credit DJs for opening, not narrowing, the passage of music," in a city in  
45 which "the producers, purveyors, and consumers of music all had big, open ears."

46 If I highlight Slobin's approach to stress positive forces, I do not seek to imply that his book is  
47 pollyannaish or overly celebratory, and certainly not naïve. Slobin is highly alert to the nuances of Detroit's  
48 mobile soundscape and takes care to envoice those he writes about in a non-judgmental and enabling  
49 manner. The authorial voice of *Motor City Music* is gentle and unobtrusive. Slobin does include himself in  
50 the overall narrative at various moments, remembering, and sometimes reminiscing, autobiographical  
51 moments, but there is always good cause to do so. His is one voice amongst many that sound the city. It is  
52 noteworthy that the final chapter, "The City in the Rearview Mirror," gives voice to other Detroiters—  
53 artists, writers, poets—as they give account of their own memories of the city, rather than foregrounding  
54 Slobin's own voice. All the while, Slobin's writing is clear, his focus precise, and his methodology  
55 rigorous. Reading the book, I found myself again and again admiring this approach, which offers a  
56 welcome alternative model to the more narcissistic writing that is present in some of contemporary music  
57 studies. Footnotes are absent and references notably light touch. Sources for quotations are provided, but

1 they are unobtrusive, included towards the end of the book. While it is clear that Slobin builds his narrative  
2 on an extremely well-founded methodological base, the prose is nonetheless consistently light on theory,  
3 making this one of those rare books that have the potential to appeal to academic and non-academic readers  
4 alike. *Motor City Music* not only describes musical diversity in an urban context as enriching. It also invites  
5 diverse ways of reading it. One could view it as a story of Detroit's sounds. But equally, one could read it  
6 as a profound contribution to urban studies, or, more broadly, as a model for academic writing in music  
7 studies. Either way, it is an important book, with the potential to shape our discipline.

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