Walter Everett has gained a reputation as arguably the leading analyst working in popular music. In recent years his work has tended to focus more on the theory of rock music, most notably in his positing of six distinct tonal systems needed to account for the harmonic practices of that multi-headed hybrid. In this book his aim is, in one sense, far more modest, for his subject matter is recorded popular music from the short period 1955–70. I was led by the title to assume a full-blown theoretical text. In one sense, that is what the book is, but in another, perhaps more fundamental sense it is not, and it is this paradox that comes through most forcefully in reading it. First things first: it is a very good book that I would recommend to anyone working in the field, particularly undergraduates; it is clearly presented and shows evidence of an immense amount of work; and it contains a great deal of basic typological data that will facilitate much comparative analysis should we want to undertake it. Of course, there are certain things that I am not persuaded by and implications that I find problematic, but these should all be seen against the background of this basic assessment.

The first issue, then, is the book’s intended readership. It is, at least in part, aimed at listeners with knowledge of this repertory and a desire to understand how items in that repertory are constructed but who may have no musical literacy whatever. It attempts to cater to such people with brief explanations of such basic things as the formation of chords or the constitutive features of the electric guitar and, most important, includes multiple references to a dedicated Web site with a very wide range of specially produced examples and illustrations, such as sounds of individual timbres, a large range of pertinent chord patterns with varied voicings, a range of engineering effects, and a large number of photos. This is an impressive resource on its own, and while it is meant as a supplement to the text, it could also function (if carefully used) as a separate teaching resource. The only thing missing from the Web site is copyrighted material from the period itself—but such recordings are, for the most part, easily available.

The effort involved in developing the Web site was clearly enormous, and it succeeds admirably. However, I am not so sure that the book itself, with its orientation toward a naive listener, succeeds in the same way. A cursory comparison between the way Everett introduces topics and any educational material geared toward such a readership demonstrates a clear difference of philosophy: Everett’s text has little redundancy, introduces issues at a rapid pace, and aims at comprehensiveness. I seriously wonder how well a reader with no musical literacy would be able to cope with some aspects of Everett’s presentation or with his treatment of tricky topics. As far as presentation goes, the frequent and very extensive lists of songs exemplifying the features he identifies are exhausting to read. (The book itself has no index of examples, but the Web site does. The index of names runs to 102 double-spaced pages, and a title index to 128.) Toward the end of the book Everett resorts to tables (for example, his list of modal chord successions, 260–61), and I think this manner of presentation would have been preferable throughout—it is certainly far easier to follow. The manner of organization of Everett’s lists is almost always typological: he surveys the range of possible options within a field and then details which options are taken, providing examples. Very rarely are these options weighted in terms of commonality (which is perhaps surprising, bearing in mind the impression of comprehensiveness that he achieves), although they are generally supported by context. As to tricky topics, they tend to be given short shrift; I am thinking among many other examples of his (necessarily) cursory reference to an organ’s “mixture stops” (72) or his brief outlining of scales (158–59). For a scholarly readership, however, I am sure his extensive lists will be invaluable as a data set for studies with a comparative or intertextual focus (something outside the scope of Everett’s undertaking).

If we view this as a theory text, the book’s focus can be very clearly identified from the contents of its chapters. Five opening chapters deal, essentially, with timbre (percussion, guitars, keyboards, other
instruments, voices) combined with very basic introductions to matters of rhythm and harmony. A single chapter each on form and melody are followed by four chapters on harmony; one more extensive discussion of rhythm, meter, and time; a chapter on the peculiarities of the song as recording; and a final chapter on issues of interpretation. Each lays out what is possible, and what is achieved, within that domain. The balance (an emphasis on harmony and some key characteristics of sonic identity) is perhaps what one would expect from a knowledge of Everett’s previous work, although the marginal treatment of meaning at the expense of an exhaustive treatment of manner does, I think, misunderstand the motives that listeners (and particularly naive listeners, whom he is keen to address) have for spending time with the music he discusses (I return to this point more fully below). Nowhere is Everett willing to specify exactly what his repertory is. While on page 93 it is “the pop–rock literature,” on page 115 he distinguishes “popular-music styles” from the “rock” of his title. On page 188, he is talking about styles of country singing, which are then “taken up in many other rock styles,” and throughout his examples include such people as Joni Mitchell, Sam & Dave, Bobby Darin, and Patti Page, as well as potentially every chart hit from the period. The only style that is unambiguously barred is jazz. It is unfair to criticize Everett too much for his imprecision on this issue—nobody has yet found a successful way to explicitly delimit this repertory—but his avoidance of problematization here (and in relation to some other issues) will suggest to his desired readership, I fear, a degree of false certainty.

One of the stronger points of the book is the emphasis Everett gives to some hitherto marginalized topics. I have in mind, for instance, his typology of vocal ensembles (127–31), his list of ways in which artists relate to their material (378–82), and his typology of different regular and irregular meters and the different ways tempi are employed (chapter 12). But one sentence here really struck me. As part of this discussion, Everett asserts, “Of course, what’s really interesting is not the song that maintains its tempo, but the one in which tempo changes for one reason or another” (322). I find this assertion worth taking issue with because of its relation to his target audience. It is clear that the majority of popular songs do not change tempo, whether within his chosen period or outside it. Two assumptions seem to me to be built into the statement. The first is that a change of tempo can be interesting in its own right, irrespective of the material that actualizes that change. The second is that it is the unusual that is aesthetically better (“what’s really interesting”), with no theorization of the grounds for this aesthetic position. This failure to be explicit about his hermeneutic method is what I find least successful in Everett’s book and why I would not describe it as a theory text. On page 224, Everett briefly discusses the Angels’ “My Boyfriend’s Back,” pointing out that the lead singer sings phrases of a bar’s length over I, to which the backing singers respond, splitting the bar, over IV and then V.

In explication, we read that “the directness of the progression, without fancy embellishment, shows that they mean business.” I think it is far from self-evident why this should be the case. What is the evidence for a relationship identified by “shows”? Implicitly, what seems to be happenings is that Everett is suggesting a congruence of relationship between real life and what happens inside the song (a realist reading). A particular kind of harmonic treatment (simply using I, IV, and V) is read as “direct.” This attribute is then transferred into the world of the song and interpreted as the (psychological) motive underlying the expression of the backing singers. Within the world of the song, these people bear an uncertain relationship with the lead singer (this is an issue Everett briefly addresses in terms of “persona” elsewhere in the book) but can be characterized most clearly either as members of a friendship group or as the lead singer’s internal monologue. It is only if these other, unstated steps are made that we can accept that the interpretation “they mean business” has some validity. So, why is the argument omitted? Two possible reasons spring to mind. Possibly, the intended readership might be felt not to be able to cope with such detail, which would be an indictment of the refereeing process (and, it must be noted, the book is already long).

Alternatively, there may be an assumption that it is, actually, “self-evident.” Such readings of cross-modal congruence are commonplace in music criticism, of course, but it is worth wondering whether they do musicology a disservice. I doubt that such an implicit hermeneutic would be found acceptable in criticism of other artistic fields, and I suspect it is only because music’s analytical apparatus is so much more impressive (and seemingly formal) than that of other fields that we do not always insist on making these things explicit. It is for this reason that I do not think of the book as theory, since so much of what goes on is untheorized. I will supply some more examples to help justify this view.
At some points, Everett ventures more clearly into territories of interpretation, which I would think are natural destinations for his analyses. Here too, though, it is unclear what theoretical position is being explored. We read on page 180 that “3–5–3–5–3–5–8 . . . are the only tones of Bob Dylan’s ‘Oxford Town,’ as if the situation of that song is so foundationally clear and true that it needs no interpretive non-I tones for fancy décor.” Again, a lack of “clutter” in the melody line is read as indicative of a lack of clutter in the “situation” that the song describes. But again, this parallelism is untheorized. A lengthy passage of nearly twenty pages from page 282 is filled with such parallelisms. This is part of a discussion of twenty-five songs (which have previously been discussed in terms of their instrumental textures). This return does serve to give the book a sense of unity, but I am not sure it works. I would have thought that organization in terms of the types of relationships observable, or perhaps in terms of a range of approaches to the same issue, might have been preferable. What Everett’s book does not seem to acknowledge in these interpretive flights—and this is the real source of my disquiet—is that his interpretation is not objective. For example, in the (final) chapter devoted to interpretation, he addresses the Zombies’ “She’s Not There.” In the verse, Everett tells us, “when he [the narrator] says she’s not there, he’s talking about her being gone, history—she’s nowhere around. But the chorus . . . tells a different story still . . . when he sings ‘she’s not there,’ we know he’s referring to the lack of a human quality in her lack of caring for others. She’s not there for others, in other words; she exists for herself” (363). I have two concerns here. The first relates to the lyric. There is the implication throughout that the meaning of the song somehow equates to the meaning of the lyric. This is an unnecessary impoverishment (see, for example, Philip Tagg’s 2000 study of Abba’s “Fernando”) that potentially undervalues the effect of the music. The second is over his use of that little word we. I have known this song at least as long as Everett, and making an interpretation of the lyric here is not, I think, a matter of musical training, talent, or expertise but comes under the heading of “life skills” or something similar. I freely admit to never having heard the second “she’s not there” in the way Everett describes. Of course, this may say something about my own ineptitude in interpersonal matters, but that is beside the point. The “we” (“we know” rather than “we can guess” or “we might assume”) implies that the meaning is embodied in the lyric and is self-evident to the listener. Neither, I submit, is the case. I have happily made perfectly acceptable sense of the track for forty-five years without this insight, so it is not something I would consider self-evident.

I am now able to compare two possible ways of understanding it (and I like both, for different reasons—I can certainly see the elegance and high plausibility of Everett’s suggestion) and am enjoying doing so. Were the meaning immanent in the music, as Everett’s rhetoric seems to imply, such ambiguity would not be possible. As a second example of this, on pages 295–96 he discusses the Beach Boys’ “Good Vibrations” but finds nothing remarkable in tonicizations of scale degrees a scale step apart or, more important, in the order of these tonicizations. It is certainly possible (see Moore 2005) to make an effective interpretation that takes these tonicizations seriously. Meaning is
not an objective quality, and I am perturbed by this book’s implication that it is. This is a shame, because Everett's presentation of data makes this an otherwise useful book.

Works Cited
