

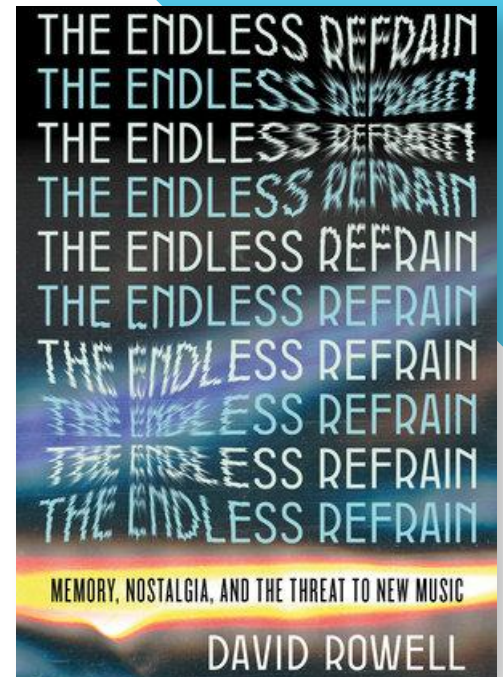
THE ENDLESS REFRAIN

Memory, Nostalgia, and the Threat to New Music

David Rowell

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“Readers will be captivated by Rowell’s fine-grained music criticism and sharp analysis of the culture industry, rendered in evocative prose. . . The result is a provocative and entertaining critique of the music industry.”

— *Publishers Weekly*

“A musical road trip with that friend who knows just about everything and has control of the radio. David Rowell’s deep knowledge of music—and sense of humor—make you feel at least some hope that somebody’s still listening.... David Rowell is the cultural anthropologist we need in a society that is forgetting how to listen.”

— **Geoff Edgers, author of *Walk This Way: Run-DMC, Aerosmith, and the Song that Changed American Music Forever***

INTRODUCTION

A veteran music journalist argues that the rise of music streaming and the consolidation of digital platforms is decimating the musical landscape, with dire consequences for the future of our culture...

In *The Endless Refrain*, former *Washington Post* writer and editor David Rowell lays out how commercial and cultural forces have laid waste to the cultural ecosystems that have produced decades of great American music. From the scorched-earth demonetizing of artist revenue accomplished by Spotify and its ilk to the rise of dead artists “touring” via hologram, Rowell examines how a perfect storm of conditions have drained our shared musical landscape of vitality.

Combining personal memoir, intimate on-the-ground reporting, industry research, and cultural criticism, Rowell’s book is a powerful indictment of a music culture gone awry, driven by conformity and subverted by the ways the internet and media influence what we listen to and how we listen to it.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. In the Introduction, Rowell describes his definition of “we” as a generalized version of himself. How does this audience or “we” work in the rest of the book? Do all audiences and demographics lack a desire for new music, or is this phenomenon limited to older generations?
2. Who is most to blame for the lack of new and lasting music? Is it the fault of the music industry? Artists? Or a broader cultural issue?
3. How does music create community in the book? Does nostalgia enhance or disrupt this sense of community?

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4. How is streaming discussed in this book? How does streaming change our relationship to music (as opposed to downloading or physically purchasing an album)?
5. How do cover bands play into nostalgia to make a profit? Do they innovate the music they play? Or do they rely entirely on imitation and replication?
6. How has technology influenced the music industry? More specifically: how did music videos change the industry? Digital reconstructions of songs (like the Beatles' *Now and Then*)?
7. How might technology — especially AI and social media platforms like TikTok — change the music industry moving forward?
8. Do you think that hologram performances of deceased artists are ethical? Do they respect the artists' legacies? Why or why not?
9. Do you agree with Rowell's claim that nostalgia is different today than it was in previous generations? Why or why not?
10. How do hologram performances and tribute bands impact "authenticity" in music?

LISTENING GUIDE

Make a list, either by yourself and in a group, of songs you hear often. For each song, research the following and discuss:

1. What year was the song recorded?
2. Where did you hear it last? (drugstore, ballpark, etc.)
3. What is it about that you dislike or that you are tired of?
4. Can you play devil's advocate and think of reasons why people might still love it?
5. Why it is still being played today?



ABOUT THE AUTHOR

David Rowell is a journalist and author. An editor at *The Washington Post Magazine* and author of *The Train of Small Mercies*, he attended the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and taught literary journalism in the MFA department at American University. He lives in Silver Spring, Maryland, with his wife and their two sons.

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