

Needle-Drop on the Chihuahua

## AMERICAN RHAPSODY

### THE CARTOON MUSIC BOOK

Edited by Daniel Goldmark and Yuval Taylor  
A Cappella, 336 pp., \$18.95

Every second of animation is divided into 24 separate drawings; sound effects are cued to individual frames; music is timed to six frames, or 10, or whatever signature is necessary for the on-screen mayhem. Despite such technical rigidity, the best cartoons feel joyfully anarchic — the Marx Brothers meet the Beats at Birdland to jam with Wagner. A mixture of the academic and absorbing, *The Cartoon Music Book* reflects the schizoid nature of the art form. Carl Stalling, a 9-to-5 visionary, set the bar for cartoon scores from 1936 to 1958, cranking out a weekly soundtrack to propel the antics of Bugs, Daffy, and the entire Warner Bros. cartoon posse. He stole from folk tunes, classical warhorses, jazz, and popular songs, while composing everything from full-frontal orchestral assaults to melancholy violin solos to the *boinnnngggg* of the electric-guitar chord that opens "Merrie Melodies."

Stalling is the subject of one of six interviews in the book, which also includes liner notes, essays on race relations in Betty Boop shorts (or lack thereof in Disney's), show tunes in *The Simpsons*, and such oddities as a 1920 instructional pamphlet on performing piano improvisations for silent cartoons and burlesque films. An essay on that stop-motion perennial *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* is as innocuous as its subject, while Milo Miles's primer on Japanimation separates the "tinker-toy themes" of *Gigantor* from the "avant-ambient" of *Akira*.

Jake Austen contributes a fascinating treatise on rock 'n' roll in cartoons: "Alvin [of Chipmunks fame] proved to be as anti-authoritarian as his cartoon predecessors and punk rock followers." While some contributors lament the loss of the lavish orchestras available to Stalling or Disney's composers, Devo frontman Mark Mothersbaugh discusses his second career composing highly regarded music for *Pee-wee's Playhouse* and *Rugrats* using synthesizers and stolen toy pianos. One way to recapture the "lushly plucked strings" of bygone years is through "needle-drops" — the audio equivalent of clip art. As Joseph Lanza notes, Ren and Stimpy's obsessions with vomit, flatulence, and sadistic slapstick are made strangely dreamlike through the "acoustical pillow" of such stock music, which conjures "a soft-focus vignette of lovers prancing hand in hand through Elysian Fields." Existing somewhere between Charles Ives's 19th-century masterpieces of appropriation and today's rap samples are 'toon tunes, the avant-garde at six minutes a pop. —R.C. Baker