

Review

Matt Brennan, *When Genres Collide: Down Beat, Rolling Stone and the Struggle between Jazz and Rock*. New York and London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2017. 256 pp. ISBN 978-1501326141 (pbk). £17.49.

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In 2007, in this very journal, Simon Frith asked the question ‘Is Jazz Popular Music?’. Frith was examining the scholarly associations and critical divergence between jazz studies and popular music studies (PMS); the former in its efforts to elevate jazz beyond the popular into the academy and the latter, on the then rock-centric nature of the evolving PMS discourse. *When Genres Collide*, released under Bloomsbury’s *Alternative Takes: Critical Responses to Popular Music* series (with Brennan and Frith as series editors), is based on Matt Brennan’s PhD research conducted some ten years previous under the supervision of Frith. This work is very much positioned in the lineage of this debate, but more than that Brennan’s work brings us into the history and situates music journalism as a key battleground where the genre boundaries between jazz and rock played out. Brennan, in an interview with Monique Bourdage (2017), explained that the revision of his thesis was further influenced by two works released after the completion of his PhD. The first, Kevin Fellezs’ *Birds of Fire* (2011), explores the genre boundaries between jazz and rock in the hybrid fusion music of Herbie Hancock and others. Brennan’s work, chronologically, slots in before *Birds of Fire* and can be read in one way as a precursor to Fellezs’ work. The second, David Brackett’s *Categorizing Sound* (2016), meticulously explores the ways in which genres are produced in relation to those who perform and consume them.

As Brennan puts it, *When Genres Collide* is an examination of two historical puzzles: the first, concerning the history of the relationship between jazz and rock scholarship; the second, concerning the complex, sometimes complementary, but more often fractious relationship between jazz

and rock journalism (2). The *raison d'être* of *When Genres Collide*, then, is to highlight the limited interdisciplinary dialogue between jazz studies and PMS which still exists despite, as Brennan perceives it, the shared commonalities of the two disciplinary approaches. Brennan states that his 'underlying argument is that we cannot take for granted the fact that jazz and rock would ultimately become separate musical cultures' (2). In exploring this lack of disciplinary dialogue Brennan's work aims to foster a rapprochement between the two fractious disciplinary siblings, a rapprochement that echoes the discussion of some (perhaps the minority) of the critics discussed throughout, and clearly locates Brennan's own position here.

Methodologically, Brennan's work is based on archival research, drawing on a wide range of music periodicals. This archival work is augmented by interviews with key critics whose writing is under discussion including Dan Morgenstern, Jon Landau, Robert Christgau and Greil Marcus among others. The interviews when they appear are brief, and very much secondary to the contextual archival material, but help to provide moments of both hindsight, and insight, from those involved in the critical debates under discussion.

In terms of a brief overview, *When Genres Collide* consists of five chapters. Chapter 1 chronicles the history of jazz, up to bebop, through the lens of the music's critics, highlighting the debates and setting it up as a precursor to rock 'n' roll. Brennan points to the 'jazz age' as the beginning of popular music with swing as a subversive, dance-based, youth culture prior to jazz's transition to something more akin to an art music. While most of the content in this section will be quite familiar territory to readers of this journal, it serves to contextualize Brennan's developing argument by situating jazz culture as a precursor to rock 'n' roll culture and in doing so it does much to highlight that before pop had subverted the youth, jazz had already been there.

Chapter 2 explores how critics at *Down Beat* dealt with country music, rock 'n' roll and R&B as the magazine attempted to reinvent itself as a more general popular music periodical. Alongside this historical account of *Down Beat*, following its changing editorial roster in the light of financial challenges circa 1950, Brennan does well to illustrate how the commercial drivers, such as sales and advertising, of a magazine such as *Down Beat* directly impact the editorial direction, and thus drives how genres are written about. Early on here, Brennan notes the rise of country, or 'hillbilly' music, and its first appearance in the magazine in 1949. While the magazine's critics were resistant to the music, 'advertisements with a distinct

country flavour began to appear in the magazine, indicating that its editorial aesthetic and commercial imperatives were not always aligned' (63).

Chapter 2's discussion of the R&B debate in *Down Beat* is of particular note here, especially through the lesser-known voice of Ruth Cage, who Brennan describes as 'one of the few sane voices in the press at this time' (73). In Brennan's account Cage defended R&B against attacks from critics, such as Ralph Gleason and Leonard Feather, who argued that R&B was lacking in musical value. Indeed, during her relatively brief tenure at *Down Beat*, Cage 'examined racial assumptions about the R&B audience as the music grew in popularity with a mass audience of both white and black teenagers' (72). As Brennan observes, 'Cage prefigured arguments now common in popular music studies by maintaining that the real reason R&B was causing such a stir was that it was mobilizing the purchasing power of the teenage market' (73). Chapter 2 succeeds in illustrating that the arguments put forward to discredit jazz at the beginning of the twentieth century—jazz as mass culture; morally corrupt; aesthetically primitive music—are the same as those employed by critics at *Down Beat* to reject the validity and value of R&B and rock 'n' roll (87).

In chapter 3 Brennan asks 'why and how the American jazz press began to cover rock in 1967 and the problems that the inclusion of rock in the jazz press presented to jazz critics' (92). As *Down Beat*'s readership of young musicians were increasingly learning and listening to rock, editor Dan Morgenstern came under increasing pressure from advertisers to include more rock coverage to align the editorial content with the changing advertising direction (99–100). Brennan's discussion here interestingly reveals *how* rock was to be covered in *Down Beat*. Rather than developing or attributing aesthetic significance to rock, *Down Beat* tried to marry the music, often tenuously, with jazz, evidencing a real lack of understanding, or genuine interest, of the music on its own terms. This chapter brings to the fore the opposing views in the debate of rock's value (*vis-à-vis* jazz) by Leonard Feather and Ralph Gleason (then lead critics of *Down Beat* and *Jazz & Pop* respectively) and their clashing attitudes to the jazz-rock rapprochement. The underlying subtext here highlights the influence of market forces on the music press. With the major players vying for a greater share of the youth music audience through an increasing coverage of rock it is the ultimate failure of both magazines under discussion (*Down Beat* and *Jazz & Pop*) to truly critique and develop a rock discourse on its own aesthetic terms which opened the floodgates to the commercial success of

the then embryonic *Rolling Stone* to ultimately Hoover up the readership they had been vying for.

Beginning with an overview of rock journalism prior to 1966 (from teen magazines, to the trade press to mainstream and foreign music press), chapter 4 examines the emergence of the specialist rock press between 1966–69, featuring periodicals such as *Crawdaddy*, *Mojo-Navigator* and *Creem*, with particular focus on the rise of *Rolling Stone*. However, rather than simply historicizing *Rolling Stone*, Brennan takes a different tack and interrogates how jazz and rock criticism operated in relation to one another during this period, and in doing so highlights the influence of critical approaches of both early jazz and folk criticism, with their emphasis on authenticity, on the rock discourse. This chapter locates key figures such as Jann Wenner, Ralph Gleason and Jon Landau in the founding of *Rolling Stone* and the development of the discourse around rock which would ultimately see the magazine overtake *Down Beat* as the largest circulating popular music periodical in America by the end of the 1960s' (118). Jon Landau's key role in the construction of *Rolling Stone*'s rock aesthetic is highlighted (134), and what is particularly notable here are the parallels between his rock aesthetic (which placed value on the 'raw' and the 'primitive') and earlier jazz criticism. The highlight of this chapter is the discussion of Jon Landau's influential review of a 1968 Cream concert. Landau's trenchant criticism—referring to Clapton as 'a virtuoso of other people's ideas'—is juxtaposed with *Down Beat*'s Alan Heineman's review of the same concert, contextualizing and illustrating the divergent aesthetic value judgements in place by critics in the opposing publications and the emergent rock critical aesthetic.

In chapter 5, following on from his discussion of the emergent rock criticism in the last chapter, Brennan grounds us by highlighting that despite the divergent editorial approaches there was still a jazz/rock overlap which traversed *Down Beat*, *Jazz & Pop* and *Rolling Stone*, reminding us that the histories of the divergence of rock and jazz aren't always as clear cut as we might perceive them. Enter the likes of John Burks, Lester Bangs and Greil Marcus who Brennan labels as the 'jazz rock misfits', critics who, contrary to those discussed in the previous chapters, advocated for the blurring of these genre boundaries. This section situates us concretely in 1969, a pivotal moment in the trajectory of popular music; as Brennan puts it, 'demonstrating not only a conflict *between* jazz and rock ideologies, but *within* them as well' (174; original emphasis). Chapter 5 culminates with the chaos of the 1969 instalment of the Newport Festival, work previously published

in Vol. 1, No. 1 of this journal (Brennan 2007), and the unfolding tensions in the critical responses across these periodicals. Newport '69 is often a convenient discursive precursor to Miles Davis's foray into jazz fusion but in this chapter Brennan deftly demonstrates how 'the debates about the merging of jazz and rock were already in full flow before *Bitches Brew* was released in 1970' (176). However, as the negative reviews of Newport would ultimately materialize in the jazz press, positive interpretations of the festival such as those of Miles Davis (voiced through George Wein's account) and the critics at *Jazz & Pop* counter the dominant negative account. Brennan adds that 'the interpretation of the festival as foreshadowing the "failure" of jazz-rock only makes sense once fusion has been retrospectively marginalized in the dominant discourses of jazz and rock' (177).

Brennan's argument swings along at pace, in part as the book is comparatively short when compared to the more detailed works mentioned above, such as *Birds of Fire* and *Categorizing Sound*, which might lead some to consider it lacking detail, and I can perceive those who disagree with Brennan's readings taking this stance. For example, the overview of *Down Beat* and the parallels between the emerging rock discourse and the early jazz discourse and debate between traditionalists and modernists (146), while engaging, feels somewhat generalized. However, Brennan himself acknowledges this, highlighting the range of critical viewpoints that in fact constituted the periodicals. Nonetheless, if one is amenable to his argument this brevity works in Brennan's favour as the work is a buoyant read and flows well.

Issues of gender and power are hinted at throughout as serious rock criticism emerges as being a very male pursuit, in contrast to the writing on pop in teen magazines (124). While situating the arguments presented by the elder statesmen of jazz criticism, Brennan's work does give voice to lesser-known, or perhaps lesser discussed, female critics such as Helen Oakley, Pauline Rivelli and Ruth Cage. The case of Ruth Cage in particular, explored largely in the R&B debates in chapter 2, presents an interesting sub-plot, highlighting the narrative voice of women in the construction of these early critical and journalistic discourses. These gendered accounts are moments of interest in the book that I would have liked to see explored further, although I appreciate that this wasn't the prime focus of Brennan's argument. Nonetheless I imagine these moments would provide engaging prompts for undergraduate students interested in critically examining this area of popular music criticism.

As Brennan acknowledges, not everyone will be convinced by his argument. There are those whose take on this history cannot conceive of a rapprochement between rock and jazz. Nevertheless, Brennan has put forward a convincing argument as he invites us to think about the 'rough edges' between jazz, rock and popular music, and as a result pause to rethink and 'reconsider genre boundaries and rules' (190). Without sacrificing depth of analysis, *When Genres Collide* retains a casual readability that ensures it will be widely accessible to a broad audience. For those interested in the world of fusion, Brennan's work sits well in the company of Stephen Pond's *Headhunters* and Kevin Fellezs' *Birds of Fire*. Moreover, this is an essential text for those interested in music criticism and its role in the construction of music history, illustrating how these dividing walls are built up, plastered over and, importantly, how they can be knocked down. While useful to researchers at postgraduate level this book will really sing to an audience of undergraduate students and has the potential to turn readers of popular music to jazz to investigate its roots.

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