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Review

Jen Wilson, *Freedom Music: Wales, Emancipation and Jazz 1850–1950*. Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 2019. 336 pp. ISBN 9781786834072 (pbk). £24.99.

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What is the history of music in Wales? Did Wales have a jazz scene? What role did women and female-identifying performers play in the Welsh jazz scene? In *Freedom Music*, author Jen Wilson explores these questions by introducing a rich and nuanced history of the development of jazz in Wales. Her mission is to jettison the idea that Wales did not have jazz and introduce Welsh musical history through jazz—the way jazz developed similarly to other scenes, and the way Welsh jazz evolved singularly. Wilson seeks to bring Welsh memory to these points by focusing on the personal stories of abolitionists, church leaders, singers and performers, and working-class women who comprised the Welsh jazz scene and its history.

Wilson's monograph traces the history of jazz in Wales from its roots, exposing underlying systems of race, gender, and class. A jazz musician herself, Wilson also brings to the fore a focus on working-class women and jazz in Wales, their access to musical scenes and spaces, and how that informed their political and cultural participation over time. Just as important is Wilson's exploration of race, both in Wales and globally, beginning with the abolition movement and finishing with the advent of rock and roll. The author intertwines these two lines of inquiry to produce a book that presents nuanced and gendered explorations of race, and the ways in which the emancipation of African Americans was compatible with the emancipation of working-class women.

Wilson's book opens with a study of an abolitionist family, the Donaldsons, abolitionists both in Wales and as emigrants in Cincinnati in the United States. On both sides of the Atlantic, the family—especially the women—were deeply involved in the abolition of slavery. Matriarch Jessie Donaldson was involved in the abolitionist movement in Wales, while her

extended family formed connections with important abolitionists in America and harboured slaves running from nearby states. Through this exploration of abolition, Wilson explains that the songs of abolition, and later the songs of post-slavery black choral groups such as the Fisk Jubilee Singers, created roots for jazz in Wales. These roots are not just parallel to race, they are braided together.

Interestingly, Wilson connects some of the roots of jazz in Wales directly with more traditional Welsh music. For example, the author discussed the *hwyl*, a Welsh Baptist amalgamation of singing, shouting, and foot-stomping as something that resembles the cadences and movements of jazz. When linked with the deep connection to choral and choir music, it becomes clear that Wales was fertile ground for the development of its own jazz scene. This is where the book really shines in its engagement with the stories of the Welsh people themselves.

Halfway into the book Wilson follows a well-worn path through jazz history: from minstrelsy through ragtime to jazz. However, the author brings a new scene to this story: Wales (especially Swansea and southern Wales). They do so by introducing the travelling performance *In Dahomey*. A travelling version of the song and skit combination, *In Dahomey* featured both black actors and blackface in a show that mocked British imperialism in Africa. The show exemplified '[h]ow Welsh audiences appeared to relish the sight of black people satirizing imperial values' (117).

Wilson's use of the word emancipation applies not only to slaves and freed blacks, but also to Welsh women. The author explains from abolition to World War I the many ways in which white working-class women were gaining societal traction. The suffragette movement in Wales predates World War I, and Welsh women were also performing in shows, concerts, and dancing at that time. According to Wilson, there is a connection. These shows (especially dancing) gave white working-class women the ability to further develop the jazz scene as well as create jobs for other women. This development intensified during World War I, between the wars, and during World War II when Welsh men were called to serve rather than play. Wilson explains that movements such as the Welsh café society provided a space for working-class interpretations of African American music to advance and allowed women to dominate Welsh music. The availability of cheaper instruments such as pianos, the advent of gramophones, and the sales of sheet music in the same period intensified women's participation in the development of Welsh music toward jazz. Women were central to the jazz scene in Wales, from its roots to its flourishment.

At the same time, women performers in Wales dealt with some of the same calls of immorality as women in other areas did. The author calls attention to the insertion of church politics into the music scene and how church politics altered the views of women performers. As an illustration, Wilson notes the complaints against women such as the focus on performers being pretty rather than talented, even to the point of dressing up to 'hide their deficiencies'. Wilson, however, never allows the story to be untied from race. While women were dealing with their societal problems around musical performance, a renewed anti-black and anti-Semitic push in Wales had its own chilling effect on musical production. There were calls to ban jazz in Wales due to morals; morals pertaining to women in hot shows, to black performers, and to the so-called 'Hebrew' elements in jazz production. Musical performance, however, continued unabated despite these interventions. For example, Louis Armstrong brought a band to Swansea in 1934, which was to be one of many performances by black and African American musicians during this period of moral outcry, big bands, and burgeoning jazz in Wales.

For Wilson, jazz marks the beginning of modernism in Wales. The author sees the two as inextricably linked, a combination of new technologies, emancipated women, changing forms of racism, and Welsh culture. The introduction of Wales as a historical jazz scene is new to the existing literature, and an invaluable contribution. The book, however, lacks engagement with and discussion of key literature in jazz studies. For example, Wilson quotes Eric Hobsbawm's *The Jazz Scene* (1959) on minstrelsy, rather than leaning into twenty-first-century works on race, minstrelsy, and the development of jazz. The same is true for Wilson's discussion of women in jazz in general. The work makes an important contribution to the study of jazz women globally, but the work needs more engagement with key authors who focus on gender and women performers. Where it shines is in its linking abolition, racism, and the development of jazz in Wales. Finding the abolitionist roots of the development of the Welsh scene is formative of a new way of studying scene history.