

## Review

Gelly, Dave. 2014. *An Unholy Row: Jazz in Britain and its Audience 1945–1960*. Sheffield: Equinox. ISBN 978-1-84553-712-8 (hbk). 167 pp.

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Dave Gelly's *An Unholy Row: Jazz in Britain and its Audience 1945–1960* is a well-written, witty and knowledgeable book. Occasionally leaning towards the nostalgic, it is an interesting examination of the British jazz scene in the middle of the twentieth century. The book focuses on the traditional (as revived and standardized in post-World War Two Britain) and modern jazz scenes, and explores the ideological and (mostly self-imposed) class divisions between the two scenes in Britain. Although quasi-chronological the chapters alternate between trad and modern scenes, covering approximately the same time span in each of the paired chapters, and primarily focusing on the 1950s. Additionally, while the time period covered is ostensibly 1945–1960, Gelly also includes a fair amount of information from outside this time. He goes as far back as the 1930s and forward into the 1960s with occasional mentions of the 1970s to the early twenty-first century. While the book title states 'Britain', in reality there is very little mention made of the jazz scenes outside of London. The reason why is never fully explained, although in chapter 10 ('It's Trad, Dad') Gelly mentions that in the pre-motorway Britain of the 1950s it was difficult to tour.

There are some fascinating insights into these two scenes, particularly in regards to the musicians and how the trad and modern scenes formed. I found it particularly interesting that the revivalist trad scene (which included jazz, blues and skiffle) in 1950s Britain was aggressively primitive to the point that any music literacy, let alone musical professionalism, was regarded as suspicious. Creating the perception of amateurism—of singing or playing trad jazz or blues because that was all they could do, and doing it for the love of music rather than for money—was the ultimate goal for the scene. Also interesting was the exploration of how the modern jazz musicians pursued artistic ideals while at the same time working on ways that they could remain commercially viable (or at least attempting to do so).

However, as interesting as this book is, it is not without some issues. For all that the title includes the notion of the audience, there is actually very little about the audience except from the point of view of the musicians, or the musicians as audience. While this is undoubtedly interesting there is more to the audience than musicians. There seems to be little evidence that Gelly seriously attempted to research the role of the audience or fans in the jazz scene during the period covered in the book. I say 'seems to be' because there is very little in the way of citations and the bibliography/acknowledgements is very select, which gives the reader little idea of where Gelly is getting his information from. Gelly also does not appear to utilize much in the way of recent scholarship on jazz in Britain. His bibliography and notes include very little scholarship published post 1990, and occasionally it feels as if he is trying to reinvent the wheel. There are times when Gelly seems to expect the reader to take what he has written or quoted as received wisdom, which is troubling. Additionally there are times where he expects the reader to know of and understand the cultural events and issues of the period that may not be well known outside of a particular generation or outside of Britain.

Despite these criticisms this book does fill a gap in the literature on jazz in Britain. Very few authors have explicitly investigated the trad and modern jazz scenes of the mid-twentieth century, and they are usually considered diametrically opposed rather than as two parallel, and occasionally interacting, developments. *An Unholy Row* is highly entertaining and informative, and I do recommend it, but it is definitely written more for a general jazz audience rather than a scholarly one.