

## PUBLICATION REVIEWS

### **Cohen, S (2007) *Decline, Renewal and the City in Popular Music Culture: Beyond the Beatles, Aldershot: Ashgate***

Sara Cohen outlines two key aims to this important work: “to examine the impact of urban de-industrialization and economic restructuring on popular music culture” (3) in order to “consider how the specificity or distinctiveness of popular music might have an impact on the city” (4). Cohen has got the order right; emphasis is too often placed on popular music’s effects upon the city and not the other way around. In this case, Liverpool provides an excellent case study that tells us a lot more than a simpler historical narrative would allow.

The book benefits from the author’s twenty year relationship with Liverpool as an ethnographer, academic and music fan. Chapter One provides important historical context of the astonishing diversity of peoples that have settled in Liverpool as a result of internal and external migration. The city’s role as a crossroad for people and goods produced an equally diverse range of musics, with claims by various local musicians that Liverpool produced the first jazz and country music in England (90).

Cohen does not sidestep the many social and economic problems that beset the city. Given the length of unemployment queues in the 1970s and into the 1980s, it is not surprising that rock or football as a means of working class escape made sense in the North. The mini case studies of local bands which attempted to build upon strong audience or recording support, and construct a national base, continually remind the reader of the many industrial layers to overcome before ‘success’ occurs. Place ‘speaks’ in other ways too, in the expectation that any act that is serious about success needs to be in London: the location of the major recording labels and studios (101-104).

For me, the strongest section of the book is Chapter Five where Cohen offers a window into how cultural policy is constructed and delivered, where the process is not often a pretty one. Faced with competing applications (and objectives) for European Union and national government funding, the city “depended upon the continuous involvement of a small network of consultants and music-makers, and this contributed to an entrenchment of political and personal rivalries” (140). Local suspicion of ‘professional’ arts administrators and grant writers, thought to have little vested interest in the long term cultural health of Liverpool, is documented in some detail (129-143) and reveals how cultural funding often fails to square with local objectives or perceptions. The establishment of the Liverpool

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Institute of Performing Arts (LIPA) and its subsequent role in the fractured policy mix is instructive, particularly for the conflicting views about how one famous individual's involvement – Paul McCartney – came to overshadow the considerable investment and effort from a range of public sources.

If there is a flaw to Cohen's approach, it is the frustration of reading 'objective' ethnography, even as she acknowledges her own involvement in various policy organisations and outcomes. Many angles to key debates are carefully laid out, encompassing different views from fans, musicians, policy-makers and city authorities. Cohen's stance can be guessed at in some instances. The book would have been stronger for a more explicit sense of her thoughts, particularly in the areas where she was personally involved. For example, in the conclusion to Chapter Five we are told that "there was also a perceived lack of fit between music and civic policy" (153). This distanced style of writing is frustrating when we know that the author sat in on many policy meetings and witnessed much of the ideological strain between the local industry, council and policy writers.

The remaining chapters document successive local councils' realisation of the worth of the Beatles to the local tourist industry, and the subsequent rejuvenation of Beatles-based sites (music pubs, family childhood homes) complemented by Beatles museums and history ("Magical Mystery") tours that are now part of contemporary Liverpool streetscapes. It must be reassuring to surviving members Ringo Starr and Paul McCartney that "obviously, after they die, [the Beatles] will go down as the equivalent of Beethoven or Mozart", according to one Liverpool businessman (174).

Gentrification of the inner city is not just a by-product of cultural policies, but in many cases is actively sought by policy-makers who often overstate the benefits of regeneration. These last two chapters provide the necessary detail to really understand what happens when a city favours particular redevelopments (franchised/theme bars and expensive retail) that threaten to overwhelm the nuances and diversity of micro-cultures. This is a book that successfully reveals how a city's cultural history continues to have a contemporaneous impact, "infused with traces or echoes of the past" (227). Although Cohen brands this as "popular musicology" (Preface), her approach seems closer to cultural studies in blending cultural, economic and policy analyses with the many uses of popular music in the modern city.

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**Inglis, I (ed) (2006) *Performance and Popular Music: History, Place and Time*, Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate**

It seems to be a good premise from which to hang a book: put together analyses of some key performances in the rock era in chronological order, starting with a chapter on the Beatles' first US TV appearance in 1964 (Laurel Sercombe), to