
Review

Catherine Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880–1935*. Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series, 2005. 301 pp. ISBN 0-75465-076-6.

Doctor Catherine Parsonage is a research lecturer at Leeds College of Music in the UK. Her work *The Evolution of Jazz In Britain 1880–1935* published by Ashgate is a most welcome addition to popular music history studies and enhances the already significant Ashgate *Popular and Folk Music Series* edited by Derek Scott. Parsonage attempts via selected case studies to chronicle the growth in significance of something the British music lover and/or critic has periodically described as 'jazz/jass,' dance music, and then jazz again between the period 1880–1935. These dates are not chosen arbitrarily, for in chapter 1 the work discusses important late nineteenth-century antecedents of jazz that presented the images of Black music and Black people to the British public (including minstrelsy and ragtime) and introduces the reader to the American style revue and its protagonists and entrepreneurs such as Albert De Courville. The book is important for it necessarily involves the popular music student and/or researcher taking oneself out of one's present context and exploring an alternative musical world—a very important issue within the study of popular music history given the current propensity to write about post-WWII genres of music. It is well researched and revealing—especially regarding British attitudes to race and the London 'Underworld' within the 'language' of entertainment.

By her own admission, Parsonage has not sought to write a definitive history (not that this would be possible—despite the rather grandiose claims on the reverse dust-cover!) and her primary and secondary sources are generally sound. She has not only scoured the popular music press of the 1920s (principally *Melody Maker*, *Encore*, and *Era*) for important contextual comments regarding the advent of jazz, but also the daily press of the day and the many UK biographies written by those active in the inter-war dance band era: sadly now largely forgotten. So, not only do we have a proposition to historically account for this partially hidden era in British popular music history, but we have one that awards great attention to detail.

The style of writing is not only reportorial, but also interpretive in that the point of view of the thesis is to reintroduce this largely ignored era of British popular

music history into the popular music canon—left out for many years by the 'rockist' writings of the postwar generation of 'baby boomer' rock academics who have written off British popular music in the first half of the twentieth century. Parsonage largely succeeds in applying this particular historical tourniquet and while the work should not be considered in any way profound, it is undoubtedly mostly successful and should persuade those who do not wish to search for our musical lineage as reaching any further back than, on the one hand (say), Frankie Laine or, on the other (say), Alan Lomax, to look back to the arrival on these shores of various African American forms of entertainment such as Minstrelsy and Plantation Revues.

The era is sadly lost to living memory now, and therefore could have been lost to the popular music historian but Parsonage's extensive research has created a reminder to those who have been brought into popular music studies via the ferment of ideas surrounding rock and dance music subculture and identity, that a thorough contextualization of the reception of a genre of music (in this case jazz) requires us to consider hermeneutic criticism as an important part of popular music history. In other words the construction of an illuminating metaphor (in this case 'jazz') contributes to the experience of the music—in all kinds of ways—from the racially bounded prejudices of the popular music press to the Shenkerian engineering styled musicology of reducing jazz to a series of basic patterns, to the ivory tower elitism of Theodore Adorno.

The book is intended for scholarly readership, by and large, but the jazz fan should not be fearful of the text. It works well on several levels and should be considered a valuable addition to the reference shelving of any jazz aficionado. In fact, given its dance band discourse, those of us with an interest in British dance band music of the inter-war era, its dissemination, reception and (perhaps above all) mediation should take a look at this work, for it attempts to break down rather than construct the all-too-common generic barriers associated with definitions of jazz in the UK.

So, with dates, venues, personalities and the media used extensively as authentic source material we are presented with not only a social but also a political history as Britain's attitudes to the appearance of Black American musicians and 'jazz' music in this country are dealt with from a variety of perspectives, and the mixture of critical theory, social history and musicology shows us that the idea of jazz had unique power as an agent of differing ideologies dependent upon one's perspective. Above all Parsonage's approach encourages the reader to consider the idea of not simply investigating the music of Nat Gonella or Duke Ellington in order to listen to it, but to treat it like a text and read it for its importance as an intrinsic part of our society. These dates might appear long ago, but the issues

surrounding the reception of jazz in the UK in the first decades of the twentieth century have not gone away. Dating is therefore used extensively, and intelligently, and this work's very existence is an important revision of all pre-existing texts concerned with the arrival of jazz in the UK. Illustrations, notation, song charts are also used incisively. The book gives what might be described as a full-length, selective chronological picture of the subject and is clearly influenced by recent writings in a host of disciplines related to popular music. These disciplines show how popular music is related though the mediation of technological, cultural, geographical and political factors.

However, certain areas of Parsonage's historical narrative do at times appear somewhat ill-balanced. The Preface, for example, while fully justified in declaring jazz as too narrowly defined, does risk attempting to re-define the indefinable. One might consider that 'the sources speak for themselves' in that all musical activity that has links to African American music can be labelled as jazz but this is clearly not the case. In other words, the Preface does run the risk of calling everything jazz: the discussion about the Southern Syncopated Orchestra could fall into this trap, perhaps. Similarly, Parsonage accepts that the entire story cannot be told but by confining the material to London alone this limits the discourse somewhat and creates a narrative that occasionally suggests that the history is being used for the benefit of the writer. One might suggest, perhaps, that a discussion of regional activity in the dance halls of the UK would actually question the thesis that jazz (or at least ideas about 'jazz') had an affect in the way she describes. Venues, for example, in certain regions of the country were built for highly specified purposes—admittedly surrounding dancing. Some, such as the Grafton Rooms in Liverpool, made their name by not adhering to the idea of jazz as popular and The Grafton's old time dancing craze attracted dancers throughout the northwest of England. Furthermore, the bandleader of the Grafton, Mrs Mary Hamer, who attended an Ellington performance there did not really see the beauty of his music as part of a 'jazz' aesthetic at all. Therefore, music—other people's experience and understanding of music—varies considerably and this might have less to do with the aesthetic appreciation of (say) Black America and more to do with one's own locality. I have written elsewhere about how the immediate past is often written off in favour of nostalgia for the more distant and perhaps non-locatable past. This is a feature of most popular music activity at one stage or another and should not be regarded as a feature of jazz alone.

Part I of the work 'Historical and Theoretical Perspectives' introduces, as chapter 1, the cultural and musical antecedents of jazz in the UK. This is a mostly excellent chapter, which sets the scene around certain important historical fragments such as the number of Black and blackface American performers in Britain

in the nineteenth century—an excellent introduction to the thesis: well written and precise. However, one cannot but question the relevance of chapter 2 which examines 'The Evolving Image of Jazz in Britain in Sheet Music.' This is effectively an attempt at lyric analysis and is somewhat problematic. Parsonage sees the meaning of the lyrics of the sheets to be of vital importance in relaying messages to the public about jazz and race; but for this reader this is too structural and somewhat a-historical. Song lyrics cannot be examined for such specific meaning. The meaning of any song lyric cannot be exhausted by the intentions of the composer and as the work passes through the cultural melange of live and mediated performances new meanings are culled at will and at random. In fact, one might argue that this instability is one of the very characteristics of the popular song. Meaning is less fixed—especially if we think of language in a more fluid sense. We should not analyse lyrics 'just because they are there,' any more than most forms of literary criticism today examine literature just for the sake of it. There are areas of rhetoric, subversion, critical resistance, adversarial stances, and semiotic meanings that affect ways of pleading, persuading and debating—and many are related to sound rather than the 'literal' meaning of the words. There are devices in our interpretations of language that will use the most apparently banal lyrics far more productively than initially intended. Certainly, such texts belong to the world in which they are produced, but the reception of lyrics is a creative as well as a critical act.

The third chapter, entitled 'The Jazz Age In Britain,' discusses certain critical reactions to the arrival of jazz in the UK and examines several contextual interpretations of the reception of the music. Parsonage is particularly strong in her survey of the arrival of the BBC as an arbiter of taste. However, her drawing on Nott (2003: 68) isn't especially useful concerning Regal and Zonophone recordings. Many of these recordings for what were effectively the budget labels of Columbia and HMV respectively originated in the US. Indeed, Columbia later had a licence deal with its US counterpart. Many Regal and Zonophone records were re-brands of US material. Furthermore, the attention given to the writings of Theodore Adorno is, in the opinion of this writer, questionable. In fact the question should be asked why we should continue to bother with the opinionated rambles of this so-called expert? Is it not time that we put him and his ivory tower ideas to bed? Parsonage suggests he is a 'man of his time' but attributes too much importance to his limited knowledge of all popular music, let alone jazz. Certainly the works of Mendl and Lambert are good contemporary examples with which to expose high and low art ideas...but Adorno? His arrival in the UK was not until the mid-1930s and one can hardly feel that the freedom of jazz to learn music without recourse to any thing other than one's own ears that Parsonage discusses (75–76) was a

top down creation of standardized culture. Parsonage quotes Frith in a discussion of authenticity but one would have to question whether Adorno would have recognized an authentic piece of identity-giving popular culture if he fell over it! The ability to copy, away from the restraints of notation was considered liberating by many. Not, as is suggested, the other way around. Perhaps according to Adorno, 'jazz' meant all forms of popular music that he presumably didn't listen to. This writer remains highly suspicious of his targets.

Although briefly mentioned (72), some greater discussions should also have ensued concerning rhythm clubs. But this would have also required a perhaps more regional focus and jazz in the UK becomes more problematic when one begins to include the regions.

Part II of the work is entitled 'The Evolving Presence of Jazz In Britain' and chapter 4 discusses the 'Negro Musical Comedy' *In Dahomy*. This is an interesting case study and it is events such as these, rooted in the real historical conditions of the music and theatre industry, which foreground the issues surrounding the African American attempt to escape the tyranny of minstrelsy. Parsonage's work on this piece of Black Theatre is fascinating and her analysis of the musical and theatrical source material impressive. This particular chapter is highly recommended for those who continue to separate the theatrical world from that which apparently produced the more authentic worlds of jazz and blues. The evidence presented here by Parsonage puts this false dichotomy to the sword and we should all remain truly thankful for that.

Chapter 5, however, entitled 'The Music and Symbolism of the Banjo' is more problematic. Although it is clearly evident that the banjo further embedded racial stereotypes via minstrelsy, this chapter is rather puzzling and appears to be something of a diversion. I am utterly convinced of its validity, but not of its inclusion here. The nature of the book requires continued readership and I am not sure that the banjo chapter assists this process. It would perhaps serve as an appendix. I am also not convinced about Parsonage's conviction that there was (a) continued use of the banjo in UK dance bands or that (b) this use was attributable to concepts surrounding the 'Negro.' The conclusion regarding the ODJB omission of the banjo on racial grounds is speculative at best. There are certain other musical developments that are overlooked in order to establish this narrative. For example, much sheet music discussed by Parsonage in chapter 2 frequently shows ukulele chords windows, not those of the banjo (see the dance band collection at the Institute of Popular Music). This speaks volumes about the popularity of Hawaiian instruments in the 1920s. Furthermore, by the mid-1920s several musicians and singers had taken up and become accomplished guitarists (Al Bowlly, for example). This chapter requires greater contextualization within

popular music activity, rather than simply bearing a relevance to Africa America, as is implied here.

Things get back on track by chapter 6 with a discussion of 'The Original Dixieland Jazz Band and the Southern Syncopated Orchestra.' There is some good research here with some useful early information and an excellent and thorough evaluation of arrival of the ODJB in London. The complexities of the musical 'appreciation' of such apparently anarchic music of the ODJB and the sometimes outrageous claims made by band leader LaRocca provide us with examples of the uncertainties surrounding the reception of the group. This removes the apparent certainties of many previous histories concerning the ODJB. Parsonage has done this via good primary source material together with interesting secondary recollections. By contrasting this information with the more 'traditional' appreciation of the SSO she shows us some deep, fundamental insights into the British condition. This, unlike the ramblings of Adorno, shows us that by sifting through our popular music past we can discover some very important threads to our lives.

Sadly, however, there is very little about the band's repertoire and Parsonage makes an outsized claim about their music being widely disseminated. Given her focus on London, one is left asking whether she means throughout the Home Counties or are we to believe that ODJB were popular throughout the UK? (I think not). As an aside, it is at this stage that one also begins to notice a little careless proof reading via missing words and grammatical errors, also the referencing is (by 152) cluttered and rather irritating. The Bechet biography is patchy and its relevance at this stage questionable. However, by and large this chapter is another good point well made.

Chapter 7, 'Dance Music, the Plantation Revues' and the 'Underworld of London,' is somewhat disjointed but extremely useful as a document into the background of negativity concerning Black Americans and similar concepts surrounding night clubs. This is another fascinating piece of research and the conclusions drawn are very interesting. However, it would be worth suggesting three alternative reasons for the latter that are also connected with the former. The first would simply be the issue of 'enjoyment' and how that is evaluated in British society in the 1920s and early 30s—particularly after the 1929 Wall Street Crash. Secondly, that locality needs to be considered in more depth when considering 'club life'—the West End of London, for example, has a history of 'alternative lifestyles' that goes back much further than the 'jazz age.' Thirdly, the issue of anti-Americanism—especially via the BBC—not simply 'anti *Black* Americanism' remains to this day an important issue in British society and this has links to the high art/low art dichotomy that has reared its ugly head for centuries. The USA as a young country without traditions

has been constantly pitched against Britain with its 'good taste' and this, one feels infiltrates the language of the press about jazz as much as the inherent racism.

Chapter 8, 'Hot Jazz: Jack Hylton, Bert Firmin and Fred Elizalde,' is an excellent study: long awaited by those with an interest in the British dance bands of the inter-war era. Hylton was a prime mover in the popular music of this era and alongside Roy Fox, Jack Payne, and Ambrose, his importance cannot be over-emphasized. Indeed one might even suggest that, together with the BBC, Hylton almost 'created' a popular music genre—that of 'sweet'—for broadcasting. In contrast the work of Firmin and Elizalde, however, has been often marginalized or ignored (in the case of Elizalde because of his 'dubious' racial background) and is certainly worthy of our attention as far as 'hot' music is concerned. The fact that Elizalde often recorded for budget labels alongside the Staritas and that these recordings were not really considered of great importance to these bandleaders also speaks volumes about the way we view popular music in the twenty-first century is contextual and somewhat contingent.

Finally, chapter 9, 'Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington,' is a fascinating piece of comparative source material analysis and displays how Armstrong and Ellington registered with the British public and critics at very early stages distinct appeals that went way beyond their own social and cultural matrixes and were instead deeply imbricated with the social and historical mores of London. Even though the responses from the critics appear to us to be based upon 'aesthetics,' Parsonage makes it clear that all such responses were redolent of British society's placing of jazz at a specific moment in *this* country's history. A valuable point and one that has as much to say about British attitudes towards American music (and Americans) now, as it did then.

Catherine Parsonage's *The Evolution of Jazz In Britain 1880–1935*, then, is admittedly something of a 'curate's egg': good in parts while being perhaps a little unsatisfactory as a whole. But it is permeated with first-class research and for all lovers of popular music history is a most rewarding read. It therefore, despite the few reservations discussed above, thoroughly recommended.

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