

Review

Richard Lysons, *Were You There? Popular Music at Manchester's Free Trade Hall, 1951–1996*. Manchester: Empire Publications, 2020. 272 pp. ISBN 9781909360815 (hbk). £20.00.

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I thought I knew a lot about Manchester's great music scenes (for a Cockney). As a child of the 'Chemical Generation', I'd been to the legendary Hacienda nightclub with my girlfriend, where we indulged in a hedonistic night, dancing til dawn to the squelchy synths and thunderous beats of acid house amidst the dense fog of the smoke machines, ricocheting lasers and blinking strobe lights. I'm a fan of Manchester rock bands Joy Division, New Order, The Smiths, Happy Mondays and The Stone Roses, as well as electronic dance acts 808 State and A Guy Called Gerald. Some of these bands revealed to me the historical importance of Manchester as a city where rock and dance music were synthesized during the 1990s. Factory Records was well known 'down south' in my part of the world, and for me all of these great bands aroused my curiosity, opening the door on myriad other historical genres such as psychedelic rock, blues and folk-rock bands from as far back as the 1960s on both sides of the Atlantic. I knew very little, however, about the city's important venues, not a great deal about the Manchester Free Trade Hall, and even less about the social, political and cultural significance of this grand institution—until I read Richard Lyson's book *Were You There? Popular Music at Manchester's Free Trade Hall, 1951–1996*.

Meticulously researched, this book methodically documents the most important artists that played at the Free Trade Hall (and its smaller Lesser Free Trade Hall) across four decades, the dates that the gigs took place, who was involved, and the support acts, from the venue's opening on 16 November 1951—following its reconstruction having been battered in the Manchester Blitz—to its closure by Manchester City Council in 1996. There are a staggering 34 different musical genres represented in the book from jazz, skiffle and rock 'n' roll to 'world' music, punk-rock, reggae

and pop. Each gig, event and performance are contextualized and placed within individual commentary ranging from journalistic reviews by the music press to insightful anecdotal reports from musicians, performers and fans.

A number of monumental gigs took place at the Manchester Free Trade Hall and have subsequently been mythologized. Lysons sheds light on these events through a wide range of sources. One of the most infamous moments was on 17 May 1966 at the Bob Dylan gig, in which an audience member shouted 'Judas' at the singer-songwriter. This episode has been immortalized in 'two recommended books, radio documentaries, umpteen web discussions and articles about the incident' (p. 77) giving the Free Trade Hall global recognition and notoriety. Another is the two Sex Pistols shows that took place at the Lesser Free Trade Hall on 4 June 1976 and six weeks later on 20 July. David Nolan wrote the book *I Swear I was There* (2016) in response to the droves of people that came out of the woodwork claiming they were at the first gig. However, 'tickets were 50p each' and the Free Trade Hall's 'financial records state that takings were just £14' (Lysons, p. 163). One example that I found particularly fascinating was an eyewitness account by New Order's Bernard Sumner of the 1974 Lou Reed gig at the Free Trade Hall, in which rioting broke out inside the venue. Sumner recalls how the crowd grew restless when Reed failed to reappear for an encore. A fan who resembled 'a Rod Stewart clone', recalls Sumner, 'lobbed this beer bottle from about five hundred yards, with phenomenal accuracy, straight through the skin of the bass drum' (p. 143). That incident sparked 'pandemonium; people started swarming onto the stage, getting into fights with the roadies and security, everything. Lou Reed never came back to Manchester after that, all because of one bloke with a dodgy haircut and incredible aim' (p. 143).

The book does, however, offer much more than witty anecdotes and enthralling detailed commentary on the historic nights at the venue. It is also more than a painstaking chronology of the wide-ranging genres, musicians, performers and bands that the venue hosted. The book goes well beyond that, evoking the social, political and cultural significance of the Free Trade Hall, documenting the inter-generational links between education, music, and the people of Manchester. As Lysons points out, the venue 'hosted everything from world renowned musicians and "stars" to school speech days, degree ceremonies and children's concerts' (p. ix), demonstrating that it was much more than merely a popular music venue. In this way the book illuminates how the Free Trade Hall was woven into the social fabric of Manchester, bringing together the city's people and enlightening them philosophically as well as musically.

This is perhaps established more so through this local music venue's pivotal role in educating the people of Manchester in global issues around racial injustice. Jazz icons, activists and soul divas Billy Holiday, Paul Robeson, Nina Simone, and

countless other African American artists, performed at the Manchester Free Trade Hall throughout its lifetime. Robeson 'was always linked to politically radical causes and was blacklisted in the USA from 1950 to 1955' (p. 28). Having his right to travel restored 'after he had been denied a passport ... Robeson undertook a world tour in 1958 which included Manchester as the fourth of twenty British dates' (p. 28). As the author of the book explains, 'a separate tome could be written on the importance of the Free Trade Hall in civil rights and racial equality' (p. x) alone.

During 1981, rock gigs were declining at the venue, but the early 1990s saw a rise in the number of homegrown bands perform there. Local heroes Happy Mondays stormed the stage with their drugged-out blend of dance, psych and poetry on 18 October 1992, while Manchester dance aficionados M People played two sold-out nights on 25 and 26 February 1994. There were also many comedy nights at the venue during this period with shows by the likes of Victoria Wood, Ben Elton, Norman Wisdom and Jack Dee. The Free Trade Hall's final curtain came down in 1996 when it was sold to private developers. Sadly, during 2004, this grand site of British social, political and musical history was reopened as a hotel.

This book speaks to a wide range of scholarship on the importance of the live music venue on local space, community, and cultural heritage. The impact of gentrification on live music venues has been felt not only in Britain, but also in major cities throughout Europe and all over the world. Arno van der Hoeven (2019) has argued that the 'value' of live music venues needs to be 'supported in urban planning and policymaking' (2019: 268). This is especially true considering that, as Marie Thompson (2016: 5) has pointed out, 'music venues are frequently part of what makes an area appealing to ... property developers, investors, and landlords' in the first place. Matt Brennan, Emma Webster, Martin Cloonan and Jake Ansell's *The UK Live Music Census* (2020) research project, a 'tool for illustrating the value of music to policymakers' is intended to 'help measure live music's social, cultural, and economic value, discover what challenges the sector is facing, and make suggestions for evidence-based policy' (2020: 169). Lysons's *Were You There?* makes a significant contribution to these debates, not least because it demonstrates the social, cultural and educational importance of the Free Trade Hall in the cultural memory of Manchester, and perhaps helps to strengthen arguments put forward by other writers and practitioners about the importance of these venues when developing spatial policy.

From my own perspective, one can't help but feel saddened by the vanishing music venues in every major city in Britain. Venues which have, to a large degree, not only been the glue that binds communities together, but have also been significant spaces in the personal histories of thousands of people, educating and mobilizing the spirit of entire cities. Many of these have now been obliterated at the hands of

capital, big business and rapacious property developers, hence, why the work of Lysons, Cloonan et al. on music venues and policymakers is so important. What I found interesting was the notion that the Free Trade Hall—an independent people's palace and central in the popular cultural memory of Manchester—was demolished while emblems of high culture, the Opera House and Albert Hall, remain standing. That these places endure is, to my mind, undoubtedly a good thing, but one can't help think about the ways in which spaces of popular culture across Britain—the lifeblood of cities—from Manchester to London's Soho have been destroyed to make way for plush apartments and gleaming office blocks. A consolation is, at least, that books like *Were You There?* preserves the memory of these venues. Not only that but the book shines a light on their importance to people like me that would otherwise have been unfamiliar with the cultural legacy and social history of a grand institution like the Manchester Free Trade Hall. Thus, the venue's memory lives on and continues to educate the masses.

References

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