

Catherine Parsonage, *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880–1935* (Ashgate Popular and Folk Music Series)
Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2005
ISBN 0 7546 5076 6. 301pp., bibl.

Reviewed by John Whiteoak

I was pleased to be asked to review *The Evolution of Jazz in Britain, 1880–1935* and felt equipped for this task having produced a monograph about (among other things) the evolution of jazz antecedents and jazz in Australia, beginning with British, American and colonial blackface minstrelsy in the 1840s, that required some study of white mediated African-American related musical influences in Britain and the USA.¹

I was further reassured by a Preface which indicated that the author had adopted a similarly inclusive approach to defining 'jazz' as I found necessary in discussing the early 'jazz' and its antecedents in white, British Australia. She says, for example, 'I have attempted to take a critical view of the history of jazz in Britain ... in which the scope of consideration is widened, rather than focused by means of imposing a spurious definition of jazz' (p. x). Parsonage also seemed well aware that playing 'jazz' or 'jazzing' (embellishing, syncopating, 'hot' soloing or sectional work, etcetera) had to be seen as an aspect of the culture, career and varied and demanding work of the 'professional dance musician.' She states, for example, that 'styles such as 'dance music' and 'symphonic syncopation,' frequently written off as inauthentic white imitations, were responses to what the contemporary public believed to be jazz, thereby rendering them of fundamental importance to this study' (p. xi).

Two things puzzled me, however. One was Parsonage's late starting date of the history (1880), given that British blackface minstrels were influencing colonial Australian popular music by the 1840s. The second thing was the cover image, a painting depicting, not a white British musician, or something clearly emblematic of British jazz, but an African-American saxophonist with a naked white flapper dancing to his music, which Parsonage later 'reads' as reflecting British fears of the evil of 'black music' (pp. 187–88).

This image concerned me because the essentialisation of 'jazz' as primarily the creation of black musicians offers little insight into what professional dance musicians of the 1920s and even later thought they were doing, or what musical models they were referring to when they played what they called 'jazz.' To discover this, it is necessary to put aside all anxieties about jazz authenticity, and, instead, investigate the culture and career of these musicians, the details of their 'jazz related' music, and how it was influenced by the requirement and preferences of their dancing and listening public, or by other factors such as visiting white and, far less commonly, black artists. Direct and indirect black influences needs to be carefully acknowledged but in correct proportion to other influences and outcomes. Unfortunately this is not the case with *The Evolution of Jazz of Britain*.

Parsonage is a clear and evocative communicator and this 301-page hard-cover book feels good, and looks good. It has twenty-one pages of bibliography: a very valuable resource in itself,

¹ John Whiteoak, *Playing Ad Lib: Improvisatory Music in Australia, 1836–1970* (Sydney: Currency Press, 1999).

dense in-text referencing throughout, and it obviously represents a huge scholarly undertaking. She also generously acknowledges a debt to her predecessors, such as Jim Godbolt, the author of *A History of Jazz in Britain: 1919–50* (1986). Her book does in fact highlight influential early figures and bands covered by Godbolt.

The *Evolution of Jazz* is divided into two parts. Part One, 'Historical and Theoretical Perspectives' contains the chapters 'The Cultural and Musical Antecedents of Jazz in Britain,' 'The Evolving Image of Jazz in Britain in Sheet Music' and 'The "Jazz Age" in Britain.'

Chapter One is problematic as history writing since it relies almost entirely and uncritically on secondary sources, and, seemingly, on the mistaken premise that pre-1880s blackface (white) minstrelsy was not significant with regards to the cultural and musical antecedents of jazz in Britain. The point is well made by an evocative 1846 sketch of the (white) Ethiopian Serenaders in ecstatic jazz-like performance action that appears in the *Illustrated London News* of 24 January 1846. Chapter Two is based largely on speculative analysis of early sheet music covers and lyrics and is intended to show how the image of ragtime and jazz was disseminated in Britain through sheet music. Curiously the analysis does not take into account the seminal influence of the introduction of Irving Berlin-style ragtime song and dance music from 1912, or note that the success of this melodically and rhythmically elegant and ultra modern ragtime style was the primary reason why lyrics with black vernacular, or visual references to black culture and the old 'hot coon' stereotype began to disappear from sheet music in the 1910s. Chapter Three critiques the 'representations and perceptions of the music and the function of the idea of jazz' (p. 35) in 1920s and '30s Britain via a cultural studies approach, and which considers the contemporaneous writings of Stanley Nelson, Constant Lambert, Theodore Adorno and others.

Part Two, 'The Evolving Presence of Jazz in Britain,' comprises six chapters: 'In Dahomey: A Negro Musical Comedy;' 'The Music and Symbolism of the Banjo;' 'The Original Dixieland Jazz Band and the Southern Syncopated Orchestra;' 'Dance Music, the "Plantation Revues" and the "Underworld of London";' 'Hot Jazz: Jack Hylton, Bert Firman and Fred Elizalde;' and 'Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington.'

The first chapter of this part provides an analysis (one of three or more already in print) of the black musical comedy, *In Dahomey*, with music by Will Marion Cook, that ran for seven months in London during 1903 and (as an aside) was the inspiration for Percy Grainger's novel piano ragtime piece *In Dahomey-Cakewalk Smasher*. The analysis of the show and its mixed reception in Britain functions to demonstrate how the British public had been conditioned via earlier minstrelsy to view black music as primitive and quaint. The 'Music and Symbolism of the Banjo' chapter demonstrates how the banjo was emblematic of black music in Britain prior to jazz, but it does this at the expense of discussing other significant aspects of minstrel, ragtime and early jazz-era banjo playing in Britain. The next chapter examines the public reception and influence of the 1919 visit and residency of the white American Original Dixieland Jazz Band. It also provides a comparative discussion of the black Southern Syncopated Orchestra which reached Britain in 1919. Parsonage claims that both were 'vital to the evolution of jazz in Britain' (p. 160). How vital depends, of course, on whether Parsonage means the 'jazz' (modern syncopated dance music) of broad British preference at the time, or what later came to be appreciated as 'jazz.'

The following chapter, 'Dance Music, the "Plantation Revues" and the "Underworld of London",' dwells interestingly but far too briefly on the seminal influence of resident early American jazz orchestras (some of which came on to Australia with comparable impact). Parsonage then examines the influence of black plantation revues, and a nefarious London night club underworld scene which she claims to have been a locus for unknown numbers of unspecified 'black people' and black musicians. The following chapter profiles three later white British bands apparently deemed to have been 'hot' enough to warrant discussion. This chapter is excellent in that it begins to identify the concept of dance band 'jazzing' that is so critical to understanding early white jazz-related music. Here, she explains some of the ways in which professional dance musicians incorporated 'hot' elements into their music, beyond those already present in stock Tin Pan Alley-style arrangements. Of course, in doing so she further essentialises 'black music' in the sense that the subjects of the next and final chapter, Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and other black musicians, are not discussed in this way.

As a cultural study of direct and indirect African-American influence upon what eventually became the British jazz movement or movements, the book is an insightful, thought provoking and invaluable resource. However, to me it represents a lost opportunity to provide a balanced and much needed warts and all history of jazz-related music in Britain, and its relationship to other British popular and light music of the era. 'The definitive history of jazz in Britain' (as stated on the back cover shout line) it certainly is not.

Byron Adams and Robin Wells (eds), *Vaughan Williams Essays*
Aldershot, Hants.: Ashgate Publishing Limited, 2003
ISBN 1 85928 387 X. xvii+280pp., ind., ill., bibls

Reviewed by Ian Burk

Never judge a book by its cover is an old adage that still holds true. This plainly presented book of Vaughan Williams essays, with its rather simple, some would say dull, dust cover, belies the interest of its contents.

The publication is designed to reflect the revitalisation and rekindling of interest of Vaughan Williams and his music. Some articles have been published elsewhere previously. As one might expect, there is a variety of writing styles. Some essays are more readable than others, but all are well edited. The book contains eleven essays by various contributors and an illuminating introduction by Byron Adams.

Specific works discussed include the Fifth and Sixth Symphonies, *A Sea Symphony*, *Job, Riders to the Sea*, *Songs of Travel*, *Four Last Songs* and *The Pilgrim's Progress*. In all of these, much valuable source material and background information to the genesis and creation of the works themselves is provided. They also provide insight into Vaughan Williams's *modus operandi*, his aesthetic, and views on nationalism and religion.

It is evident that much painstaking research has been undertaken. Previous work on Vaughan Williams and his *oeuvre* is generously acknowledged and evaluated. Because of their nature, some of the analytical essays are heavy going; there is some meaty stuff here.