

'A New Departure': The Influence of Parlophone and His Master's Voice's 'Hot Rhythm' Record Series on British Jazz and Blues Reception, 1929-1957.

In 1929, the Parlophone record company released R.448 [SLIDE], the first disc in its 'New Rhythm-Style Series'. Each side is an apt illustration of what was known in the late 20s and early 30s as 'hot' or 'rhythmic' music, which – in this paper – I will refer to generically as 'hot rhythm' music. Let's have a quick listen: [PLAY MONTAGE]

['Freeze An' Melt' has a lively ensemble backing, with the front line musicians trading improvised solos. 'West End Blues' is more melodramatic; the solemn ensemble figures, reminiscent of a New Orleans street parade, support Armstrong's flamboyant blues-inflected slides, shakes, and growls. For our modern ears, 'hot rhythm' appears to be a far cry from the more restrained and cultivated sounds of its historical counterpart, the ballroom 'dance' orchestra.]

Parlophone's 'Rhythm-Style' series ran from 1929 until about 1957, when the series seems to disappear from contemporary catalogues. [SLIDE] Other labels followed Parlophone's lead in the early 1930s, with HMV introducing its 'Hot Rhythm Series' in 1931, and Brunswick, Columbia and Decca introducing similar series as the decade went by. The contents of these series were drawn from the catalogues of their American partners or parent companies, and often from their 'race' catalogues, which held music aimed specifically at African American audiences.¹

So how did British listeners understand 'hot rhythm' recordings, a category that conflated music that initially distinguished between white *and* African Americans? And

¹ For information on the circumstances of US-UK shared catalogues, see Andrews, Frank, and Ernie Bayly (eds.), *A Numerical Listing of the H. M. V. "B" Series of 78 rpm Records* (Wells-next-the-Sea: City of London Phonograph and Gramophone Society, 2000).

what can studying 'hot rhythm' series tell us about the reception of jazz and blues in Britain? I will begin my paper by examining the promotion of 'hot rhythm' records in the early 1930s to understand how the term 'hot rhythm' framed listeners' hearing of these records.² The 'hot' style is typically presented as having its origins in African American folk culture, and therefore antithetical to commercial, or 'sweet' dance music of the same era. Yet an examination of the promotional materials for 'hot rhythm' series suggests that these records were promoted in Britain as part of the prevailing style of 'dance music', thereby problematising the binary of 'hot' and 'sweet', authentic and commercial, in accounts of British jazz and blues reception.

At the same time, it is not so much the record's label as the *medium* of British encounters with jazz that scholars have focused on [SLIDE]. Experiencing blues and jazz through a recording is supposedly a poor substitute for a tradition of live, African American performance, meaning that British listeners came to project a well-intentioned, but misrepresentative idea of black, 'folkloric' authenticity onto the music they heard.

Scholars' focus on the medium of enthusiasts' encounters has led to a preoccupation with collecting and listening activities in studies of the period. Here the popular image of the record collector – asocial, obsessive, and concerned with the rare and exceptional – comes into play. In contrast, I will argue that 1930s 'hot rhythm' series were accessible to many, encouraging a more widespread and 'populist' attitude to collecting. Likewise, 'hot rhythm' enthusiasts participated heavily in what we might

² Cf. Osborne, Richard, *Vinyl: A History of the Analogue Record* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), 45-46, who argues that a record's label 'translates' the music that inhabits the surrounding grooves.

call 'social' forms of music appreciation, such as concert attendance, amateur performance, and other community organised activities. A closer look at 'hot rhythm' series therefore provides us with an opportunity to nuance how we think about activities such as listening and collecting and their role in shaping how listeners' interpreted of African American music.

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The musicians represented in the early HMV and Parlophone 'hot rhythm' series would not look out of place in any history of early jazz. There are larger 'orchestras' – groups like those led by Duke Ellington, Frankie Trumbauer, and Fletcher Henderson – as well as a strong contingent of smaller ensembles; these include the Mound City Blue Blowers, the Washboard Serenaders, Louis Armstrong's Hot Five, and Joe Venuti's Blue Four. There were also piano solos by Earl Hines, Fats Waller, and James P. Johnson; and 'classic' blues singers such as Ida Cox, Mamie Smith, and Bessie Smith.

In spite of the diversity extant in the series lists, these records were all marketed as part of the larger, contemporary category of 'dance' music. HMV's initial advert for their series is indicative [SLIDE], defining 'hot rhythm' music as 'a less conventional [type] of dance music'. Furthermore, both HMV and Parlophone records were listed in monthly catalogues under this general heading, with 'hot rhythm' sitting as a category side by side with 'foxtrot', 'rumba', 'tango', and 'waltz'.

It was not only the listing format that determined hot rhythm music's status as dance music. Promotional reviews celebrated both bandleaders and soloists' skill in the 'hot' interpretation of melodies; as such, 'hot' was understood as a type of aesthetic

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approach that could be applied to contemporary popular songs through orchestration and arrangement.³ Discussing Ellington's 'Echoes of the Jungle', for example, HMV's in-house reviewer commended it as a [QUOTE] masterpiece of colourful orchestration[,] interpreted with that sense of style and rhythm which belongs only to the finest exponents of the art.⁴

In reviews of 'hot rhythm' series discs, the abilities of African American musicians were frequently attributed to their ethnicity. According to HMV's in-house reviewer, for instance, Ellington's compositions gave [QUOTE] 'a deep insight into the negro spirit and mentality'.⁵ Indeed, publicity reviews rarely missed an opportunity to draw parallels between the 'musical' colour expected of 'hot' orchestration, and skin colour.

While we might balk at this rather simplistic link between ethnicity and skill, it is nevertheless a significant departure from earlier perceptions of African American music – in particular those of the 1920s – where styles and practices coded 'black' were seen to be 'raw materials' awaiting improvement by musicians with European training.⁶ Instead, reviews of hot rhythm music appear to carve out a space within the overall frame of 'dance music', where African Americans were able to excel. (*I should point out here that I don't mean to play down the racist undertones to this criticism; rather, that it is important to be aware of how it developed.*)

³ I use the term 'publicity review' to refer to record reviews published in record companies' advertising catalogues, as opposed to reviews by critics in magazines, which often deal with multiple discs from different companies.

⁴ H.M.V., '[Review of B6066]', *The catalogue of "His Master's Voice" records up to and including November 1931* (London: The Gramophone Company, 1931).

⁵ H.M.V., '[Review of B6066]', (1931).

⁶ Tackley (2005), 221.

While reviews of large ensembles focused on orchestration, the discussion of smaller ensembles focused on soloists' virtuosity and use of novelty effects. HMV's reviewer heard 'Tappin' the Time Away' by the Washboard Serenaders as relying [QUOTE] almost entirely on the ingenuity of soloists[,...]The drummer with his washboard and bell plate produces amazingly skillful rhythms and some quite unique phrases are invented by the guitar, trumpet and piano. Here is a record which [sic] is not merely good fun, but something for enthusiasts to study. They will find that there is more in it than at first meets the ear.⁷

Here, novelty and virtuosity are interpreted as cultivated, skillful and worthy of study, rather than as stereotypical tropes of black performance, as they would have been in the 1920s.

Indeed, while reviews of Ellington's records linked the composer and his performers' African American heritage to the music's 'naturalness' and characteristic 'blue' feeling,⁸ reviews of smaller ensembles were more hesitant to bind soloists' skills to ethnicity. Interestingly, some of these smaller groups were contained both white and black performers – most notably the Mound City Blue Blowers. This suggests that smaller ensembles' penchant for novelty techniques and emphasis on improvisation *bypassed* the more direct linking of musical prowess to ethnicity – whether the small group in question was black or white.⁹

⁷ H.M.V., '[Review of B6303]', (1933).

⁸ Edgar Jackson's review of 'Creole Love Call' is a case in point. For Jackson, the piece's idiom was 'that of the old-fashioned Blues...Genuine Negro Blues,...once described [by Ellington] as the "melancholy music of my race."...The record has an intensity of feeling, not the less obvious because it seems natural. Much of its success is due to some Blue scat singing, obviously by a coloured girl, which is amongst the most fascinating I have heard'. See Jackson, Edgar, 'The Charm of the Blues', *The Gramophone*, November, 1932, 222.

⁹ One potential direction here would be to map this to the activities of contemporary British dance ensembles. Some, like Spike Hughes's groups, sought to emulate the compositional efforts of Ellington, while at the same time there also saw counterpart small ensembles forming, such as the 'English hot rhythm band', the Moderniques.

The resultant picture is complex, suggesting a degree of flexibility in British listeners' understanding of 'hot' that is not present in scholarly accounts of the term. Bruce Raeburn, for example, has pointed out how American writers such as Charles Edward Smith aligned improvisation and blues-derived timbral affects to African American 'folk' culture.¹⁰ Yet in British reviews of 'hot rhythm' records, these same stylistic features were understood as learnable skills, not intuitive modes of expression bound to race.

Moreover, the fact that British record companies and critics appear to have interpreted 'hot rhythm' as a performative, not inherent, style by situating it within dance music suggests a broader point about how we think about the reception of recorded music: it is not only the record or its label that communicates meaning; rather, this is *also* shaped by the existing practices of those who purchase and listen to the recording.

So how have these practices been accounted for? In a 1947 issue of the *Harper's Magazine*, German filmmaker and critic Ernest Borneman recalled his experiences of jazz appreciation in Britain as a student, reminding his readers to bear in mind

[QUOTE]

the European jazz fan[s]...utter dependence upon phonograph records...Cut off from the living music by time as well as space, he submits to a peculiar shift of values. *The record becomes more important than the music.*¹¹

¹⁰ Raeburn (2009), 2.

¹¹ Borneman (1947), 145-146.

Borneman examines how this 'peculiar shift in values' had created a new breed of enthusiast, the record collector. Borneman recalls one such collector, named 'Chick', who [QUOTE]

had given up *listening* to records long ago so that he could more wholeheartedly devote himself to the serious business of cataloguing [his collection].¹²

Here Borneman draws a link between the inaccessibility of live music and the importance of the record. For the collectors that Borneman encountered, the act of collecting had become an obsession, in excess of their musical appreciation. Yet, while these descriptions are enticing, and provide the groundwork for the long-standing image of the jazz enthusiast and record collector, I don't think that they are necessarily representative of the average 1930s 'hot rhythm' enthusiast. While many writers on jazz have highlighted the 'diehard' collectors, concerned with the rare and exceptional, consumers of 'hot rhythm' do not fit this profile. To begin with, 'hot rhythm' records were relatively affordable, available in person or to order across the country, selling for two shillings and sixpence. We can compare this cost to other discs [SLIDE]: HMV's prices for double sided discs ranged from the inexpensive 7" AS series, priced at 1s. 6d. per disc, to the 12" DQ series at 16s. The label's 'hot rhythm' records inhabited the 10" B series, the second *cheapest* series offered by the label.

Inherent in the record series concept, too, was the regular and timely release of discs. HMV's series, for instance, promised customers 'at least one double-sided record a month'.¹³ Although the discs in Parlophone's 'Rhythm-style' series were not released in a monthly pattern, they were nevertheless numbered and dated [SLIDE]. Both

¹² Borneman (1947), 145.

¹³ H.M.V., *The catalogue of "His Master's Voice" records up to and including November 1931* (London: The Gramophone Company, 1931).

companies published special booklets [SLIDE], listing the records in each series, as well as the recording dates and personnels, so that consumers could keep track of their purchases. These publications are not 'catalogues' as such, but mirror the 'little black book' of the archetypical collector, suggesting an emerging audience of habitual consumers that might be better understood as 'casual' collectors or even 'subscribers'.

The existence of these sorts of amateur, or 'casual' collectors is also demonstrated by record companies' release of 'connoisseur' albums. HMV released a 'Connoisseur Album of Hot Rhythm Music' in February 1933, featuring ten sides not already released in their 'hot rhythm' series. In December the next year, Brunswick Records released their own 'Short Survey of Modern Rhythm'. Enthusiasts could buy each record for the standard price of 2/6, or purchase the complete album with an introductory pamphlet for a guinea.¹⁴

The production of connoisseur albums suggests that listeners valued the historical significance of hot rhythm music. Commenting on Brunswick's 'Short survey' album, critic Edgar Jackson argued that [QUOTE]

Every hot record is a chapter in the history and evolution of hot music, and when looked at as such it assumes an interest far beyond that which it has when considered merely as an isolated page torn from an unknown book.¹⁵

Yet what I think is especially significant is that the connoisseur album is no more expensive than buying each record separately, suggesting that the 'connoisseur' and the average enthusiast in were largely one and the same.

¹⁴ Jackson, Edgar, 'Dance Band and Modern Rhythmic Records', *The Gramophone*, January, 1935, 312-313.

¹⁵ Jackson, Edgar, 'Dance Band and Modern Rhythmic Records', January, 1935, 312.

That 'hot rhythm' enthusiasts were more likely to have been amateur, casual consumers, rather than specialist collectors is also borne out in their listening activities. 'Hot rhythm' enthusiasts did not simply sit at home and listen to their latest purchases; they formed local community groups, or 'rhythm clubs'. These clubs were held in venues such as hotels and pubs, and featuring record 'recitals' of important jazz discs [SLIDE].

The rhythm club movement is often regarded as the first space for 'serious' jazz appreciation and criticism in Britain,¹⁶ allowing listeners to engage with the genre in a way that was less dependent on nighttime entertainment and associations with impropriety. Some club organisers were also the first producers of regular jazz magazines. Yet rhythm clubs have also faced ridicule: they epitomise the degree to which British jazz enthusiasts were 'cut off' from a live tradition of African American performance, supposedly resorting to communal listening and discussion as a poor substitute to attending live music. More recent writers, such as Jim Godbolt and Dave Gelly have lampooned club-members' apparently over-zealous desire for organisation and formality, conjuring up images of socially awkward, misfit young men, much like Borneman's recollections of his acquaintance 'Chick'.

But to view rhythm clubs in this way does not take into account how these organisations were integrated with existing modes of music appreciation and participation, not least the extent to which they served to publicise 'hot rhythm' record series. These discs seem to have provided ample fuel for club debates; one club, for

¹⁶ Godbolt (2010), 139-145, 283.

instance, ran a competition to vote for the best disc in Brunswick's 'Short Survey' album.

What is more, Rhythm Clubs not only hosted record recitals; they organised live performance too. Interestingly, many of these concerts featured leading dance band musicians, who also often acted as patrons of their local rhythm club, suggesting yet another link between the growing appreciation of 'hot rhythm' music and the existing dance music industry. Yet, what is perhaps most important to note, is that many rhythm club members were themselves amateur and semi-professional musicians. In August 1933 the *Melody Maker* announced the formation of the Bradford Rhythm Club, on the initiative of a Mr. N. R. Hurd, of Bradford.¹⁷ In the classifieds section of the same issue, Hurd was also offering his services under the guise of 'Norman Rhodes and his Vauxhall Band', advertised as [QUOTE]

Bradford's most popular band...under the leadership of its well-known drummer. A distinctive rhythm band composed of seven Melody Maker Contest winners.¹⁸

The contest that Hurd refers to here was the Melody Maker's renowned *Dance Band* competitions, regional and national events that began in the mid-1920s, in which amateur and semi-pro ensembles competed for a cash prize, exposure (a write up in the *Melody Maker*) and the opportunity to have a rehearsal coached by a leading

¹⁷ 'The Hot Rhythm Club Movement', 2.

¹⁸ '[Classified Advertisements]', *Melody Maker*, August 19, 1933, 14. The combination of no less than seven contest winners did not, however, help Hurd's group in the York Regional Dance Band Contest the following month, where the group was awarded *fourth* place. Their foxtrot was 'bright and ambitious with, however, several palpable faults...All the front line [were] too fierce and at times ragged', while their waltz contained an 'indifferent tenor...nice trumpet solo, but insipid vocal'. Their own selection, 'Avalon' was better received, with 'plenty of punch and rhythm, but again no tone;' the band's trumpeter won a special award for being 'very good throughout, [with] great technique and good tone, style and ideas'. 'York Dance Band Contest', 17.

professional. The contests themselves were evidently an attraction for rhythm club members, who both performed in them and went to listen: in November 1933, for instance, the Croydon Rhythm Club disrupted its regular fortnightly record recitals so as to attend 'en masse' the local contest.¹⁹

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Taking these examples together – 'hot rhythm' as a stylistic label, the dissemination of 'hot rhythm' records themselves, and then how they were consumed, both individually and collectively in rhythm clubs – points to an account of jazz and blues reception in Britain where these genres were incorporated into *existing* modes of understanding and engagement. Were these record series *really* 'a new departure', as HMV had advertised? This problematises the idea that British enthusiasts' understanding of blues and jazz was informed by the medium of encounter – remember Borneman's assertion that British fans were 'cut off' from a 'living tradition' of African American music. Scholars such as Marybeth Hamilton and Roberta Schwartz have argued that record collecting and listening allowed listeners to construct a narrative of 'hot' jazz's authentic, folkloric origins, clothing the music they heard in their own fantasies of African Americans' inherent musicality. Yet it is arguably a more complex conversation between the record medium, and the way that records were *produced*, *disseminated*, and *consumed*, that will have informed British listeners' interpretations of what they listened to.

Approaching 'hot rhythm' series in this way is only fitting, given that they exerted a profound influence on British musicians and critics of later decades. Chris Barber, Humphrey Lyttelton, and Paul Oliver – to name only a few – all recall regularly

¹⁹ '[Rhythm Club News]', *Melody Maker*, November 11, 1933, 11.

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purchasing Parlophone 'rhythm style' records in the 1940s.²⁰ By the 1950s, Parlophone's 'rhythm style' series carried skiffle and trad jazz recordings by the musicians who had grown up purchasing earlier 'rhythm style' records during the Second World War. As we mark 'one century of record labels', then, it is worth taking a fresh look at the earlier reaches of the period, to ensure that we account for the complexity and diversity of listeners' encounters with recorded music.

Thank you.

²⁰ Barber, Chris, with Alyn Shipton, *Jazz Me Blues: The Autobiographer of Chris Barber* (Sheffield: Equinox Publishing, 2014), 6-8; O'Connell, Christian, *The British 'Bluesman': Paul Oliver and the Nature of Transatlantic Blues Scholarship* (PhD Diss., University of Gloucestershire, 2013), 302.

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