One of the most significant musical developments of the twentieth century was the British ‘traditional’ jazz movement. This was a concerted effort to preserve and revive the music of 1920s and 30s New Orleans, epitomised in the recordings of African American performers such as Louis Armstrong. Beginning with hushed murmurings in the 1930s, by the early 50s the word on the street – and in the clubs for that matter – was that ‘traditional’ jazz was the only type of true jazz. It was an exuberant, gritty, ‘people’s music’, and was the wellspring from which all other styles of jazz had sprung. What it was not was ‘swing’, a more popular style lambasted by British critic Iain Lang as ‘mass-production jazz...[an] article of commerce pumped out on the air waves at all time of the day and night.’

As a movement, traditional jazz was unprecedented in its appeal. Male and female, old and young flocked to hear musicians such as Chris Barber and Humphrey Lyttelton, at local pubs and theatres. In contrast to what we might think, the draw was not one of rebellion or disillusionment. Instead, the traditional jazz movement integrated well with postwar leisure activities; social historian Eric Hobsbawm described the average concert as ‘less like that of Storyville [the ‘red
light’ district of New Orleans], than like that of an old-fashioned youth club.’ Traditional jazz went on to spawn a subsidiary ‘skiffle’ scene, which is credited as one of the primary influences on British popular music from the 1960s onwards.

Although the influence of traditional jazz is well known, there is more debate about the birth of the traditional jazz movement. How did British musicians, audiences and critics come to identify New Orleans jazz performed by African Americans as the ‘gold standard’ of jazz? Although we take this idea for granted nowadays, it's worth remembering that many conflicting claims about jazz were made in the early decades of the twentieth century.

For example, The Original Dixieland Jazz Band, a group of white American musicians visiting Britain in 1919, had laid claim to being the originators of jazz. Throughout the 1920s, too, it was generally understood that jazz – although African American in origin – would be improved by white bandleaders’ classical training. As I will explain below, it was not until the 1930s that jazz performed by African Americans came to be widely appreciated specifically because African Americans performed it.
One way to trace the development of the ‘traditional jazz’ genre would be to identify the first British ‘traditional jazz’ band. Jazz promoter and historian Jim Godbolt did just that in his History of Jazz in Britain, 1919-1950, in which he identifies George Webb’s Dixielanders as the first British performers to cultivate the New Orleans style in their performances. From 1943 onwards, Webb’s band performed regularly at the Red Barn pub in Barnehurst, later branching out into broadcasting, recording, and other gigs around London.

As to the influence of the Dixielanders, Godbolt is not wrong; contemporary critics such as Albert McCarthy and Charles Wilford also identified their importance. Indeed, both Chris Barber and Humphrey Lyttelton – two giants of the 1950s traditional jazz scene – began their careers playing with the George Webb band. Unfortunately, identifying an ensemble as the catalyst for a whole movement can be misleading; it contradicts much of what we know about how bands and their audiences operate. Bands need to be confident that their audiences will know what to expect when they play, and in turn audiences need to be able to define the type of music they are going to hear. A band can only decide to do something different if they are already playing in an existing style – and participating in an existing music scene – that contains some shared meanings with the new style they are in the process of developing. This process can only happen over time; to fully understand it, we need to be looking more closely at the development of a new style rather than pinpointing the first, fully-formed appearance of it. This means searching beyond the actions of musicians and groups, toward other ways of communicating musical meaning to audiences. In short, the question we should be asking is not ‘how did British “traditional jazz” start,’ but instead ‘what conditions allowed the meanings given to “traditional jazz” to flourish?’

An important, but relatively neglected, avenue to look at is that of several record ‘series’ produced by labels such as Parlophone and His Master’s Voice. Parlophone led the way in 1929, with HMV following in 1931; each label made regular releases, many of which remained in circulation on 10” 78rpm discs well into the 1950s. Using names like
‘Rhythm Style Series’ and ‘Hot Rhythm Series’, these companies set about reissuing sides from American labels such as Okeh, ARC, and (American) Brunswick. Parlophone’s ‘Rhythm Style’ releases had the series name and number printed on the label, above the performance title. HMV’s ‘Hot Rhythm Series’ releases were not labeled on the disc itself. Instead, HMV’s catalogues included a separate heading in their Dance Music listings for ‘Hot Rhythm’, amongst ‘Foxtrot’, ‘Waltz’ and other dance styles.

The table below lists the ‘top five’ artists with the most released sides in Parlophone’s ‘First New “Rhythm-Style” Series’ (1929-1932):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Artist</th>
<th>Number of Sides Released</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Louis Armstrong</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joe Venuti</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duke Ellington</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frankie Trumbauer</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Eddie Lang</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Miff Mole</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Luis Russell</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>OK Rhythm Kings</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Now, it’s important to note that these record series did not purely release music from New Orleans. From Parlophone’s 1929-31 ‘First New “Rhythm-Style” Series’, only Louis Armstrong hailed from the city. The first year of HMV’s ‘Hot Rhythm Series’ was similar, with none of its top selling artists (Duke Ellington, McKinney’s Cotton Pickers, and the Mound City Blue Blowers) from New Orleans. Yet what is most immediately interesting about these record series is that they are beginning to exhibit what we might call ‘traditionalist’ values that would come to the fore during the traditional jazz movement.
To begin with, record series distinguished a particular segment of dance music repertoire to be ‘different’ in some way from the overall mass of contemporary dance releases. This can be seen in HMV’s initial advertisement for their ‘Hot Rhythm Series of Modern Dance Music’ in the catalogue of November 1931:

In response to insistent demands from the ever-increasing number of enthusiasts for the less conventional types of dance music, we have pleasure in announcing the inauguration of the 'His Master’s Voice' series of hot rhythm records. It will consist entirely of hot novelties, the performances illustrating the most advanced trains of thought in modern rhythmic interpretation by the world’s most famous white and coloured soloists and dance orchestras.

Here, HMV clearly demarcates the items in the series to be ‘less conventional’, and the preserve of a particular group of enthusiasts. Moreover, these recordings are distinguished by particular musical qualities: their style is ‘advanced’, ‘rhythmic’ and ‘hot’.

The idea that one type of contemporary dance music was the preserve of a smaller ‘connoisseur’ group of listeners resonates with the way later traditional jazz audiences idolised authentic jazz based on the New Orleans style. For HMV, and presumably its customers as well, ‘Hot Rhythm’ was an innovation: its sound was modern, its performers at the forefront of the dance music style. Yet, for 1940s traditionalists, these same artists were regarded as precisely the opposite of ‘modern.’ Writing in 1946, French critic Hugues Panassié declared that ‘the famous New Orleans style, of which so much has been said, is none other than the original and primitive Jazz music – the style from which all others have sprung.’

The first of HMV’s ‘Hot Rhythm’ releases was B.6066: ‘Limehouse Blues’ backed with ‘Echoes of the Jungle’, performed by Duke Ellington and his Cotton Club Orchestra. HMV’s in-house reviewer introduced it as follows:

In addition to being renowned as the leader of the world’s finest negro dance band, Duke Ellington – himself a coloured man – is renowned as a brilliant pianist, a clever composer, and a genius of modern rhythm orchestration. His technique and originality are amazing, and his work gives us a deep insight into the negro spirit and mentality. One of his greatest admirers is Paul Robeson, who has known Ellington since the early days when both were struggling for renown. 'Limehouse Blues' shows Ellington in one of his most imaginative moods, while 'Echoes of the Jungle,' perhaps more characteristic, is an Ellington masterpiece of colourful orchestration interpreted with that
sense of style and rhythm which belong only to the finest exponents of the art.

Here, another aspect of traditionalist value is apparent; descriptions of Ellington’s skill make reference to his ethnicity. This is in keeping with a widespread contemporary belief that African American’s possessed innate musical skill. Moreover, the perceived strength of African Americans’ musical tradition meant that audiences heard Ellington’s performances as being able to speak – with ‘deep insight’ – on behalf of African Americans as a group. A review later that year of Ellington’s ‘Creole Love Call’ coupled with ‘Tailspin Blues’ by the Mound City Blue Blowers on B.6252 declared

Hot music can be more than just good dance rhythm and amusing instrumental effects. Like all other music it has a story to tell – the story of the soul and life of the coloured folk.

In contrast to the 1920s, when jazz’s African American attributes were thought to be in need of ‘civilising’, by the 1930s ‘Hot Rhythm’ is being appreciated precisely because these attributes were clearly audible.

Interestingly, too, the HMV ‘Hot Rhythm’ series preview included 'both white and coloured soloists and dance orchestras.' Casting a look back to the table of Parlophone artists, many of the most popular artists are white, notwithstanding the clear preference for Louis Armstrong releases. It is also worth highlighting that HMV’s in-house reviewer thought that 'Tailspin Blues' could 'tell the story' of African American life even though the Mound City Blue Blowers were in fact a white band!

The multi-racial makeup of these record series is due to a number of factors, not least the distribution deals between HMV, Parlophone, and the American labels whose music they were reissuing. Yet it may also suggest that, in the early 1930s at least, British listeners’
understanding of what was authentic in jazz was not inextricably linked to ethnicity. By the 1940s, however, many traditionalist critics’ positions on jazz and race had hardened. Rudi Blesh, a particularly polemic critic whose writings were popular in Britain, exclaimed

Let us learn from Negro music, and refrain from giving it the kiss of death of our improvement; encourage the Negroes – not to ruin it in order to please us – but to revive and develop it. Improve it[?] White men cannot even play it!

Record series such as Parlophone’s ‘Rhythm Style’, and HMV’s ‘Hot Rhythm Style’, laid what we might call an interpretive foundation for the British traditional jazz movement. There were several similarities: the way in which the record series categorised some dance music as more ‘artistic’ and ‘authentic’, often asserting that this authenticity relied on the presence of African American musical attributes, such as ‘hot’ tone and an emphasis on rhythm. In contrast, questions remain as to why music that was regarded as a gold standard because of its modernity in 1931 came to be heard a decade later as the only remaining link with an authentic musical past.

Similarly, it is important to ascertain how an appetite for music that sounded ‘African American’ was gradually extended into a demand for music performed by African Americans. Later traditionalists’ insistence on this raises an interesting tension: if the authentic qualities of traditional jazz were so dependent on ethnicity, then what implications did this have for the white, British musicians such as George Webb, Humphrey Lyttelton, and Chris Barber, who were earnestly beginning to perform in this style? This is a question I hope to be able to answer in the future.

Most fundamentally, the roots of British traditional jazz can be found much earlier than many historians have thought to look. These roots are located not only in written criticism and in the actions of musicians, but also in the way record labels marketed music to audiences. In this article I have touched only briefly on two series, but there are many more in need of further research.

Lawrence Davies researches the history of traditional jazz and blues in Britain and America, and is a PhD candidate at King’s College London. He blogs about his research at http://allthirteenkeys.wordpress.com
Further Reading


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The Restoration of early Vladimir Horowitz Live Performances...

Written By Jon M. Samuels

A brief behind the scenes look at the preparation of the Vladimir Horowitz - 'Live at Carnegie Hall', CD Set - Restored by Jon M. Samuels

In early 1989, I was asked by the distinguished music critic, Harold C. Schonberg to compile a discography to be added to his soon to be published Vladimir Horowitz biography. In order to do so properly, I needed to track down and listen to every surviving Horowitz recording that I could locate.

By September 1990, in part due to my Horowitz discography, I was hired by BMG (the successor to RCA) to remaster their historic recordings, including many of Horowitz' own.

Over the next thirteen years, I looked for every Horowitz recording I could find in the BMG vaults. (Although it may be hard to believe, RCA did not keep paper records of what concerts they recorded of any artist, let alone Horowitz, so this turned out to be a monumental task.) Among other things, I discovered that many of the unedited concert tapes no longer survived in their original form. At the time these recordings were made, no one thought of them as important historical documents worth preserving for posterity. Their purpose was simply as raw material for a final edited, possible released LP. Sadly, very often the original tapes were discarded after the edited masters were approved. Still, I was able to find many bits and pieces, here and there. For example, I found part of one recital as tape "padding" on an unrelated Horowitz tape. I also turned out to be very lucky; one day a friend and fellow record collector found LP test pressings of Horowitz' three 1950s recitals, unedited, and was kind enough to buy them for me.