The development of the blues is closely connected to the development of the recording industry. Records have played a vital role in promulgating the genre, not simply 'capturing' existing performance practices but playing an active role in shaping both musicians' activities and listeners' understandings of the music. Yet many histories of the blues have relied heavily on mythologising pre-recorded and ostensibly 'unmediated' performance. Scholars such as Rasula (1995) and Hamilton (2007) have shown that such mythologising dominated historical narratives authored by white critics throughout the twentieth century. Seeking a revival of authentic jazz practice, these accounts relied on a belief in the expressive purity of unmediated performance. This was fundamentally shaped by an exoticised vision of black music making as pre-technical and anti-modern. Recordings have therefore also been a means for white enthusiasts to misrepresent and appropriate African American culture.

However, approaching these histories from this perspective becomes problematic when considering growth of the blues in postwar Britain. Here, records were the only available sources of blues performance, and there were no 'authentic' African American performers. British blues musicians compensated for these limits by drawing on the already internationalist reach of New Orleans jazz revival movement, but also the British folksong revival and postwar cosmopolitan identities. Similarly, networks of appreciation clubs came to inhabit pre-existing social spaces, such as local pubs. In this context, the blues became a 'transnational' culture, acquiring domestic meanings from its new performers and audiences that coexisted with meanings ascribed by revivalism. This paper attempts to move beyond frameworks of appropriation and exoticisation that are often applied to the international history of American music, and explores how British blues reception intersected with debates surrounding postwar British cultural identity.

Works Cited


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