

## History Society Lecture All that Jazz

When I was called by Master George Waller, the convention (as some will remember) was for male students to wear white tie. I was fortunate in being able to borrow my father's tails, which he had needed when he played in a jazz band in the 1950s. Throughout my childhood the house was filled with the sounds of what my father regarded as classical jazz – Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Coleman Hawkins, etc – all played at full volume, as he was deaf in one ear.

Call evening was a rather simpler affair in those days; and after the ceremony, when the Benchers had retired, the night was still young – where to go on such an auspicious day? A few of us found ourselves in Ronnie Scott's Club in Frith Street, where our outfits did not seem to raise any eyebrows. I cannot recall the music we heard, but I do remember Ronnie's jokes, delivered in his laconic style, which (unlike the music) never changed: 'I was in Hull. I said, "Take me where the action is"'. They took me where they were fishing illegally.'

The History Society Lecture on 22nd September, 'The History of Jazz in Britain', given by Catherine Tackley, Professor of Music at Liverpool University, on the first Guest Night of Michaelmas Term, brought back memories. Professor Tackley's thesis was that, although jazz in Britain shared common features with American jazz, it developed in parallel and was not wholly derivative. She advanced this in a fascinating lecture illuminated by slides and musical extracts.

Ronnie Scott was a major figure in this history. In 1948 he and John Dankworth, focusing on the Club Eleven in London, began a movement towards 'modern jazz' and Bebop. 'Ronnie Scott's Jazz Club' was founded ten years later in 1958. But for Professor Tackley the story began with the British tour of the Original Dixieland Jazz Band in 1919. Jazz, as a profoundly modern music that also had exotic and escapist appeal, had a special relevance in Britain in the traumatic aftermath of the First World War. Jazz dancing as a social activity encouraged the emerging division between generations, individual freedom of expression and the liberation and sexual freedom of women.



The Dixieland Band's visit was soon followed by the all-black Southern Syncopated Orchestra. While Dixieland's appearances on the variety stage reinforced the idea of jazz as novelty, comic music, the Southern Orchestra's concerts with repertoire including spirituals, ragtime and classical music, as well as jazz features, demonstrated a connection between jazz and a heritage of African American music, which became better appreciated as the years went by.

The main impact of jazz on the British public was as dance music, often alongside, rather than separate from, the continuation of popular dances such as the waltz. The name that stands out from the dance band era is that of Jack Hylton. Born in Lancashire, his use of unusually large ensembles for the time, his polished arrangements and his extensive tours led to his being known as the 'British King of Jazz' by the mid-1920s. Hylton is also credited with bringing Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong to Britain in the 1930s. He led the Glen Miller Orchestra when it visited England in 1943.

Ken 'Snakehips' Johnson was born in what was then British Guiana. He was educated in Britain and subsequently travelled to New York, where he immersed himself in the vibrant jazz scene of Harlem. On his return he set up the nearly all-black 'West Indian Dance Orchestra'. It became the leading swing band in Britain. From 1938 they broadcast regularly on BBC Radio and were the house band at the Café de Paris.



*Ken 'Snakehips' Johnson and his West Indian Band (1938).*

When it was hit by a bomb in 1941, sadly, Johnson and one of the band's saxophonists were killed. Professor Tackley described the band as a unique ensemble – the only one of its kind in the country – and Johnson as a pioneer and model for subsequent black musicians in Britain.

Following the successful visits in the 1920s and 30s of jazz greats, including Cab Calloway, a domestic Musicians' Union ban, with the agreement of the Ministry of Labour, was imposed on visiting American jazz musicians. So, appearances from across the Atlantic virtually ceased for 20 years. Humphrey Lyttleton illegally evaded the ban by playing and recording in London with Sidney Bechet (supposedly on holiday) in November 1949. The erratic availability of American records meant that, unlike the rest of Europe, British jazz aficionados became unfamiliar with the most recent developments. However, Ronnie Scott was able to benefit from an exchange agreement with the American Federation of Musicians, which allowed visits from leading American players.

In the 1960s and 70s, British jazz began to have more varied influences, from Africa and the Caribbean. Professor Tackley identified, in particular, Jamaican alto saxophonist Joe Harriott. He moved to the UK in 1951, one of a number of Caribbean jazz musicians who arrived here in that decade. Much influenced by Charlie Parker and the Jamaican calypso he had grown up with, he turned to what he termed as 'abstract' or 'free form' jazz.

The 1980s saw a continuing development of distinctive styles. A new generation of black British musicians, including Courtney Pine, helped to re-energise the UK jazz scene. Looking to the future, Professor Tackley drew attention to the Ezra Collective, with their combination of afro-beat, hip-hop and soul. In 2019 their instrumental single 'Quest for Coin' was nominated as 'Hottest Record in the World' by Annie Mac on Radio 1.

At the outset, Professor Tackley identified jazz as the first music genre with a complete parallel record history. To this she added the characteristics of improvisation, expression of (racial) identity, social impact and the fusion of art and popular culture. Her argument was for 'British jazz', as opposed to 'jazz in Britain'. In this she succeeded with a masterful exposition founded on scholarship, insight and enthusiasm for the music.

Finally, I should like to express thanks to Master Timothy Shuttleworth who, in commissioning this lecture, permitted (actually encouraged) me to indulge my personal reminiscences. We owe him a great debt for providing the History Society with a succession of speakers of the highest quality who have covered a broad range of subjects.

*Master Clive Osborne*