



The History of Live Music in Britain, Volume I: 1950-1967: From Dance Hall to the 100 Club

Simon Frith, Matt Brennan, Martin Cloonan and Emma Webster
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Christopher Johnson

Texas A&M University
cjosejohnson1@neo.tamu.edu

The History of Live Music in Britain series by Simon Frith, Matt Brennan, Martin Cloonan, and Emma Webster provides an unprecedented history of live performance of British popular music. The insightful first volume of the series covers 1950-1967 and details how post-war politics, musicians' unions and a burgeoning youth culture shaped the live music industry. Framing live music in this period as a product of post-war reconstruction, the book demonstrates how the live music landscape was created through interventions of state promotion and regulation as much as youth culture and taste. The seven chapters highlight the various entities that shaped the industry such as the State, musicians, and promoters. Three "snapshots" of the live music scenes in Bristol, Glasgow, and Sheffield in the fall of 1962 are placed throughout the book, focusing on prominent venues, genres and audiences of the live music industry. The preface promises: "Each volume will conclude with a description of a Rolling Stones show" (x), and this volume follows the band's 1963 residency in Richmond.

The book's strongest contribution is the primacy it places on the institutions, and economic and cultural forces that shaped the live music industry. As a history of the British live music industry, this volume focuses mainly on the ways in which live music was mediated through public institutions. The authors provide extensive discussion of the restrictions that the musicians unions and government licensing placed on performers and venues. The strong grip that a few promoters and the musician's union had on the live music industry following World War II affected who, where, and how much live music was regularly performed. As rock-n-roll and its riotous effects entered the public consciousness, national concerns over a presumed correlation between dancing, drinking and general immorality was evident in licensing regulations placed on specific venues: "Historically, live music promotion has been affected by a variety of laws and regulations. Many of these have concerned alcohol, but other significant regulatory areas are health and safety, planning, immigration and labour law" (32).

From the reinstitution of cultural performances following the war to the advent of the recorded music industry, this book takes full advantage of the period in offering astute insight into the intersections of music and culture. The opening chapter, "Getting Back to

Business” outlines how government initiatives privileged classical genres over more contemporary ones, while folk and popular genres had to rely exclusively on commercial and enthusiast promoters. Noting similar biases evident in radio (and later in television) broadcasts, the authors’ attention to the dissemination and accessibility of live music serve as the backbone of this exploration. In a later chapter, the book marks a change in the live music landscape as amateur folk, jazz, and skiffle musicians began to alter the way music was produced and consumed.

The shift in live music performance from concert halls and dancehalls to small clubs and television programs illustrates the trajectory that would shape popular music in Britain and elsewhere in the second half of the twentieth century. The book lacks, to some extent, direct analyses of these musical trends. It attends to the music itself almost as an afterthought of the live music industry, and as though devoid of agency. For example the authors explain that, “the folk club (like the jazz club) gave way to the blues club as the centre of British musical life not for ideological reasons but for practical ones” (113). These shifts in the musical landscape are largely charted as effects of economy, politics, and infrastructure. But in doing so, it highlights that popular music is very much dependent on the industries that support it. Through this perspective, the authors succeed in illustrating the dynamic ways in which popular culture is reflected, shaped, and restricted through music and its related institutions and industries.

The History of Live Music in Britain fills this gap in music history. It serves as useful reference in its clear and thorough presentation of historical evidence. And its consideration of a broad scope of institutional forces provides an encompassing account despite its limited musical analysis. More than just a foundational history of the music, the book provides insight into the political, social, and economic landscape of post-war reconstruction, as well as a vivid glimpse into the role of popular music at a pivotal period for British culture.