King Street Blues

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King Street Blues: Jazz and the Left in Britain in the 1930s–1940s

Just before the war a young Mass-Observer, Hugh Clegg, was mingling with London’s dance band players at their Archer Street meeting ground. As usual the street was buzzing, for, with its cafés, pubs, Musicians’ Union office and scores of nearby clubs and theatres, it provided the capital’s musicians with both an out-of-hours rendezvous and an informal labour exchange. One of them, a much-travelled saxophonist named Charles Bohm, invited Clegg back to his Ebury Street flat. There, as like any good Mass-Observer Clegg earnestly inventoried the furniture, one item stood out for special notice: a bookcase stuffed, not with *Rhythm* or the *Melody Maker*, but with Left Book Club editions and Lenin’s selected works.\(^1\)

Seven years and a world war later, a central London hall was packed solid to hear both the newest and the oldest sound in British jazz: the pioneering revivalist efforts of George Webb and his Dixielanders. Before the band could begin, a figure took the stage, a little self-consciously perhaps, on behalf of the event’s organisers. ‘Friends,’ he began, ‘and comrades,’ and then read out what a sceptical observer called ‘a farrago of nonsense composed by an anonymous committee ... about jazz being the music of the proletariat’. This, then, was the famous *Challenge* Jazz Club, *Challenge* being the organ of the Young Communist League.\(^2\)

In jazz terms these two milieux, of professional dance bands and the New Orleans revival, could hardly have been further removed. For the revivalist, indeed, there was no more scornful epithet than ‘Archer Street’, connoting as it did a dreary, time-serving commercialism. What both had in common, however, was the significant left-wing presence attested in our opening scenes, a presence broadly but not exclusively associated with the Communist Party. Peripheral to histories of both jazz and communism, these interconnections are today largely forgotten. To some of those
involved they can seem an embarrassment or professional liability, while high culture and labour history alike appear to have ruled out of consideration such frivolities. Only Eric Hobsbawm has provided some sort of serious analysis and even that appeared, under an incognito. The story is nevertheless worth recovering, not just for jazz-inclined 'musico-sociological politicians' but for its allusions to broader cultural dilemmas. Colliding as they often did, the worlds of Archer Street and jazz purism – 'jazz popular' and 'jazz proper' as Humphrey Lyttelton distinguished them – illuminate a host of unresolved tensions as between the left and popular culture. Questions of commercialism, authenticity and professional control all play a part, along with the contingencies of communist politics in a period swinging, if one can so put it, from a broad-minded progressivism to the bigotries of Zhdanovism. Rootless and hedonistic, subversive and plebeian, no other art form inspired such passion and revulsion in the variegated ranks of protest.

Our first musical environment, however, is not at all obviously one of social turbulence. If today we think of the dance-band era, our likeliest images are those of dapper men with batons and their well-groomed orchestras, cocooning West End nightspots with their lulling arrangements. As one veteran put it, ‘We were a typical society band of the 1930s, playing sweet music in a rather sedate manner, as required by the management, under soft lights in elegant surroundings.’ The bandleaders themselves, bearing suave and savvy names like Ambrose or Geraldo, seemed the very personification of musical escapism, a svelte divertimento in a world of constant discord. Even in their humbler manifestations, at local Mecca ballrooms where paste stood for diamonds, the dance bands’ reflected musical ambiences was that of Mayfair, conjuring away social barriers through the engulfing medium of radio. This, of course, is to define jazz according to its broader contemporary usage: ‘one of those things,’ as a 1930s wireless owner put it, ‘like advertisements and modern warfare – you cannot dodge it if you want to.’ Nothing perhaps could have seemed further removed than this music from left-wing politics. Richard Acland, ever the optimist, did, it is true, have hopes of syncopating his Forward March. ‘I wonder if it would be worth trying to convert any of these [bandleaders] to our ideas and try to get them to express them in dance tunes,’ he mused. ‘I can imagine, for example, an immense popularity for something with the refrain “When are they going to let us build that better world?”’ Any such progressive hit remained elusive, however, the worlds of aspiration and contentment seemingly proving incompatible. ‘No regiment of dance band-boys marched off to the Spanish Civil War,’ concludes one historian of popular music. ‘No dance or jazz bands accompanied the Jarrow marchers.’

So plausible a deduction is nevertheless misleading, for by the end of the 1930s leading dance-band boys were routinely engaged in precisely this sort of activity. The transformation, remarkably, was one of but a few
years; from ‘individualists and reactionaries’, according to Charles Bohm, to political progressives, many of them active members of the Left Book Club or Unity Theatre. ‘The dance musicians provided the largest section on May Day,’ Bohm noted in 1939, ‘yet a few years ago there was not a dance musician in the Union.’ If they did not accompany the Hunger Marchers, the musicians were by no means absent from other, slighter later campaigns. The wartime People’s Convention, organised by the communists, numbered bandleaders like Lew Stone, Eddie Carroll, Phil Cardew and Sidney Lipton among its supporters and enlivened the early war years with performances by the Convention Swingsters. In London, where the top dance bands were concentrated, communist spectacles had even come under criticism from King Street for featuring ‘hot trumpeters’ at the expense of political propaganda. For some sympathisers, the possible threat to engagements or broadcasting contracts meant that support was necessarily confined to unpublicised donations to good party causes. Nevertheless, by the 1940s it seemed that there was hardly a name dance band without its communist faction, quite literally so in the case of the Geraldo Orchestra where it was organised by guitarist Ivor Mairants. Through the help of Mairants, the Daily Worker news editor Douglas Hyde was even able to recruit a healthy supply of dance musicians for his CP education classes on dialectical materialism.  

The causes of this unsuspected politicisation lay not in the music itself but in the conditions in which it was produced. For many of the leading players, nightly exposure to the vile young bodies of class privilege provoked considerable revulsion. Billy Amstell was one such musician, a veteran of several years with Ambrose and many other prestigious engagements. ‘All the luxury and all the beautiful places that we played,’ he recalled, ‘Ciro’s Embassy Club, Café de Paris, Mayfair Hotel, people used to come and they were well fed and they used to guzzle into their food and drink, and only round the corner people were sleeping in doorways, wrapped in paper.’ Van Phillips, once of the Savoy Havana Band, also recalled that ‘all those rich people were beneath contempt’, and similar sentiments were expressed to Hyde by his musicians’ group tutees. ‘If you weren’t a communist already, you’d be a bloody communist if you’d seen what we’d seen of the ruling class,’ they told him. The constant reminders of their own subordinate status, notably their separate and often inadequate amenities and their proscription from mixing with clients, must also have fed the musicians’ sense of grievance.  

That was all the stronger, perhaps, because of the very different social backgrounds of so many of the musicians themselves. Typically of working-class origin, their sybaritic workplaces could taunt memories of family hardship and continuing roots among the unprivileged. Billy Amstell, who like so many musicians came from London’s East End, was again a case in point. Making his daily journey from Stepney to Mayfair, a metaphor in itself for a divided Britain, his conversion to socialism came aptly
enough en route from one world to the other, listening in to the soapbox oratory in the Commercial Road. Amstell was doubly a representative figure in that his parents, like those of Mairants, Harry Gold and other left-leaning musicians, were Jewish immigrants from Eastern Europe, their culture of self-improvement and educational achievement finding one outlet in rich inherited traditions of music-making.\footnote{12}

This involvement of Jews in jazz was much remarked on by contemporaries, from the Nazis, who saw it as a further proof of ‘Judaeo-Negroid’ degeneracy, to the American communist Mike Gold, who in the US \textit{Daily Worker} expounded on the music’s ‘Afro-Yiddish’ character, to a Mr Leslie Frewin, who in 1939 put a similar case to the South West London Rhythm Club.\footnote{13} This Jewish presence was also strongly marked in the British dance bands, where among the Ambrose sidemen alone there was a trumpeter son of a Canadian rabbi, a drummer specialising in ‘Yiddisher’ comedy numbers and a saxophonist who later recorded an album of Jewish party tunes. On Archer Street that presence met with a certain amount of anti-Semitic feeling and it may be that the hostility of some conventional musicians for dance-band players was similarly infected.\footnote{14} What seems inescapable is that the politicisation of these young musicians was part of a wider process of Jewish radicalisation to which the rise of Fascism was fundamental.

While such social factors help explain the higher than usual incidence of individuals gravitating to the left, the existence of a veritable movement of such individuals is best seen in the context of musicians’ trade unionism. Formed in Manchester in 1893, the Musicians’ Union was a classic example of a small craft union in which militancy and strength of organisation increasingly had to make up for the essential fragility of its craft basis. In the musicians’ case, the main threats to craft control were, albeit in distinctive variants, familiar ones: new technology, foreign competition and semi-skilled labour. Of these, the first was critical, for nothing was to prove crueler to live musicians than the twentieth-century juggernaut of mechanised entertainment. Particularly damaging was the introduction of the talkies at the end of the 1920s. Where once flickering dramas had needed scores of musicians to fill the silence, now these fleapit bandsmen found themselves redundant at a stroke. Coinciding as this did with the arrival of world slump, the effects were devastating. One poignant image is of the ‘Manchester Unemployed Symphony Orchestra’, busking for coppers in Albert Square as no doubt its counterparts did elsewhere.\footnote{15} Musicians’ employment and MU membership alike were decimated, and un- or under-employment remained an acute problem throughout the decade.\footnote{16}

Associated technologies posed a similar if less dramatic threat. Recorded sound, a blessing perhaps if confined to private consumption, became a scourge the moment it invaded the musician’s public sphere. MU wrangles with the BBC had as much to do with the restriction of ‘needle time’ – the...
slots given over to records – as with the actual broadcasting rates for musicians. Another concern from just before the war was with the introduction of television to public places. Later, with the spread of high-quality sound equipment, the battle was joined with public address engineers as they sought to dislodge musicians everywhere from working men’s clubs to the Royal Shakespeare Company. Further possible competition was threatened by incoming musicians, whether bearing the glamour of Americanism or the kudos of the European concert tradition. This could provoke strongly protectionist responses in the MU, most notably the virtual ban on US jazz musicians imposed with Ministry of Labour support from 1935. Where musicians did slip through it was either as variety artists or even, in the case of Coleman Hawkins in 1939, as a demonstrator for a musical instrument firm performing so-called ‘students’ concerts’.

Finally, there were the incursions of the ‘semi-pro’, described by the communist MU activist Harry Francis as ‘our main bugbear’. That view was a widely held one. The issue was less one of dilution, perhaps, than of a beleaguered profession seeking to extend its controls to areas previously free of regulation; as Bohm succinctly put it, ‘It was not the semi-pro who had invaded the pro’s field, but vice-versa.’ Strictly speaking the MU was not a craft union in that it had no membership requirements comparable to the literacy tests imposed by some US musicians’ union locals. What it sought instead was that all remunerative engagements be paid at union rates and all musicians thus employed, whatever their main occupation, classified as professionals and thus organised in the union’s ranks. The semi-pro, in other words, had no status in the union and the frank intention of union officials was that its insistence on full rates should eventually eradicate this source of competition. ‘What the MU wants to see is a profession sufficiently remunerative for there to be no need for a man to have two occupations,’ stated assistant secretary Hardie Ratcliffe.

From its inception that had set the union at loggerheads with such leisure-time devotees as had long made up the northern brass band movement. More recently, the threat of undercutting by mere enthusiasts had become identified above all with budding dance-band players. Ratcliffe attached much of the blame to the aura of glamour with which papers like the Melody Maker surrounded the profession. ‘Many will play just for the fun of the thing,’ he noted sourly, ‘and will do anything to have a seat behind a set of drums and dress up in a dinner suit.’ Despite its endorsement in 1926 by the TUC, the MU’s position also brought it into constant conflict with other Labour Movement bodies, concerned either to nurture their own choirs and orchestras or to hold events and benefits at less than professional rates. ‘In memory of trade union martyrs, they danced to the music of a non-union band,’ was the indignant reaction to a Tolpuddle commemoration by Dorchester Trades Council. The delicacy of the situation is well conveyed by the union’s own contingents of top musicians
at successive postwar May Day rallies, the first, in 1946, performing gratis, the second a year later marching at full union rates.20

Despite their particular vulnerability to the semi-pro, dance-band professionals were not at first much very much involved in the union. Nor indeed did MU officials show much hope or intention of organising this sector. ‘Most of the people are young,’ complained one, a professed enemy of jazz, ‘and they don’t see why they should be organised.’21 It was the inadequacy of such attitudes which provided the left with its opening in the union. Moved by the uncertainty of work and erosion of wages, sometimes admittedly from very high levels, in 1935 a group of London musicians set up a so-called Voluntary Organising Committee [VOC] to circumvent official inertia. Its moving spirit, Charles Kahn, was, according to Bohm, ‘officially recognised as a Communist – a strict Marxist’. Among Kahn’s collaborators were other such communists or future communists as Bohm himself, a veteran of six impressionable months amidst Leningrad’s ‘musicians without woe’; Alec Mitchell, Bohm’s companion in Russia and future MU London organiser; and two late defectors from the wage-cutting Roy Fox band, Ivor Mairants and Harry Gold. The aims, according to another communist participant, Harry Francis, were ‘not only [to] enrol members by the thousand, many of whom were dance musicians, but also to teach them to think in terms of being members of a Trade Union rather than of an old-fashioned craft Guild’. The result by 1939 was that MU membership had recovered from a low point of 7000 to nearer 9000, with swinging, militant London very much leading the way. As Bohm put it, there was by then ‘no outside the Union as far as London is concerned’.

With the sweeping success of a VOC slate, the union’s London district committee was transformed politically, stylistically and generationally all at a stroke. Out went the ‘bald-headed old guys’, as Harry Gold remembered them, and in came a younger breed of dance-band leftists, gathering in the small hours in West End cafés and then setting their alarm clocks for the next morning’s union business. ‘It is practically a new committee with the dance musicians to the fore,’ Bohm observed. ‘The old reactionary element is in opposition, and a very poor opposition it is too – with the fascists trying to work through it.’ As against that further suggestion of anti-Semitism among the older musicians, the dance-band boys were determinedly progressive. Their daily gathering in Archer Street, sometimes two to three hundred strong, generated its own fraternalism and opportunity for political discussion, as Lew Lewis, who was recruited there by the Communist Party, well remembers. ‘You couldn’t have talked politics among the rank and file 6 or 7 years ago,’ Bohm reflected in 1939. ‘I don’t know any part of the population that has changed quicker.’22

While the provinces lagged far behind the capital in this respect, the ‘forward movement’ gradually took root across the entire country. By the late 1940s MU membership had trebled to nearly 30,000 and the
communists were by now the dominant presence in the union. That was best represented by the election as union chairman and assistant secretary respectively of Van Phillips and Harry Francis, both of them veterans of the VOC. Phillips in particular was an extraordinary instance of gamekeeper turned poacher. An expatriate American and well-known broadcaster, he was briefly the highest paid musician in the British film industry, orchestrating for Jack Buchanan his ‘luxurious never-never land of West End theatres, Mayfair nightclubs, Home Counties mansions, four-star hotels, Cunard liners and a Riviera where the champagne flowed without pause’. Phillips’s real vocation, however, which eventually led to his virtual blacklisting, was as one of life’s irrepressible instigators and organisers. In this he was driven on by the strong communist commitments evidenced in 1939 by his working on Ivor Montagu’s CP propaganda short, *Peace and Plenty*.

By this time Phillips was already secretary of that unlikeliest of trade unions, the Dance Band Directors’ Association, and chairman and secretary of the Musicians’ Social and Benevolent Council. The latter body, essentially the creation of MU militants, is remembered chiefly for its immensely popular Jazz Jamborees, held annually from just before the war. Through his West End contacts, Phillips also helped spread the ideas of the VOC to the acting profession, where, with the help of CP industrial organiser Peter Kerrigan, a Voluntary Chorus Committee campaigned to secure representation of chorus members and supporting actors on Equity’s ruling council.

That same year, 1940, Phillips was first elected to the MU’s executive. Subsequently he was the ‘prime mover’ behind the union’s Music Development Committee which, chaired by that ‘strict Marxist’ Charles Kahn, lobbied for municipal patronage of the arts as provided for by the 1948 Local Government Act. Phillips also took an active part in the founding congress of the International Federation of Musicians in 1948. By this time, he and fellow representative Hardie Ratcliffe could look back on a series of MU successes unparalleled even in the USA, particularly as regards limiting the use of recorded music in broadcasting and places of entertainment. ‘The legal protection for musicians ... in Great Britain,’ Ratcliffe proudly asserted, ‘surpassed the provisions existing in any other country in the world.’ The union had by now acquired a formidable reputation for militancy, such indeed that a threatened Yuletide strike in 1949 was widely reported as a red plot to wreck the kiddies’ pantomimes.

The dance players’ radicalism, therefore, despite its clear political inflexion, was fundamentally an assertion of producer interests in the churning out of music as a commodity. Like other craft workers, the leading practitioners took great pride in their professional standards, while some of the better bands, like Ambrose’s in the late 1930s, offered real if limited scope for creative musicianship. That was even more
abundantly demonstrated in West End haunts like the Bag O’Nails, to which musicians frustrated by their paying jobs repaired to let their hair down. ‘It would be typical of these Archer Street men,’ writes one historian, ‘to charge the rate for one second of overtime they worked at restaurant or hotel, fretting during this paid overtime, to hie themselves to a spot where they would blow all night for no financial reward whatsoever!’ That important caveat notwithstanding, the essential thrust of musicians’ unionism was to combat all such unregulated or unremunerative performances. Its eventual aim, as Hardie Ratcliffe saw it, was to achieve a standing for musicians analogous to those of the legal and medical professions.

One consequence of these aspirations was that the union remained on uneasy terms with mere musical enthusiasts such as characterised the new culture of jazz appreciation then emerging in Britain. Bohm’s view was admittedly an extreme one. ‘If they last long they are mental cases,’ he explained of jazz followers. ‘I was a fan for one or two years, 20–22, but I soon lost it when I learned economics and so on.’ The ‘revivalist movement’, for its part, was explicitly one of encroachment by ‘collectors and enthusiasts’ on to the exclusive territory of these professional musicians. The paradox was that in these circles too, communists and other leftists were prominent, passably familiar with economics, no doubt, but giving voice to values that were antithetical to Archer Street’s.

Although there were some adventurous precursors, the movement for jazz appreciation in Britain is best dated from the establishment in 1933 of the first local jazz club, proudly designated the ‘No 1 Rhythm Club’. Within two years, some hundred or so such clubs had been established and the first ‘hot’ magazines produced to cater for this burgeoning interest. While the pioneering ‘No 1’ was very much an upmarket affair, its men in lounge suits and its women ‘of the sophisticated type’, jazz for rather more of its devotees had an unmistakable flavour of rebellion. ‘If H.G. Wells had been in his teens in the early 1930s, he would have attended the first Rhythm Clubs,’ Hobsbawm notes, and the suggestion of stifling school rules or deadening office routines to be escaped from is exactly right. It was only during the war years, however, that this unfocused challenge to authority took on more overtly political forms that helped define or rationalise the visceral appeals of jazz. Central to this development were two tireless groups of young proselytisers: the Jazz Appreciation Society (JAS), based well beyond the bayou in Newark, and the more portentous-sounding Jazz Sociological Society (JSS), whose excellent publications bore the still unlikelier postmark of Neasden. Only the first of these had links with the communists, the latter leaning more towards a form of parlour anarchism, but between them the two bodies created a powerful identification between authentic jazz appreciation and the left.

It would be wrong to imply too hard and fast a line of division between the two groupings, for the 1940s jazz buffs read and contributed to each
other’s publications and issued no political anathemas save against their common enemies. Nevertheless, there was a very definite difference of tone between the JAS and JSS. Of the two, the JSS was the more ecumenical in its tastes, reaching beyond jazz itself to sundry other expressions of individual revolt against a mass society. In this somewhat eclectic repudiation of convention were clearly prefigured later moments of youth revolt. ‘Interested in modern poetry, literature, surrealism, classical music and Eastern philosophy,’ was how the society’s co-founder and co-editor Albert McCarthy presented himself, not in 1963 but 1943, ‘strongly opposed to haircuts and manual labour.’ McCarthy’s intellectual pretensions allowed some unfortunate poetry in amongst the society’s jazz criticism, none of it worse than that contributed, along with enthusiasms for Henry Miller, by Nicholas Moore. ‘Ping, bing, zing,’ wrote Moore (who as it happened came from Tring) in a memorable evocation of the Count Basie orchestra. ‘And in each line, each phrase, there is a theme, a theme of the world’s madness through which there gleams that real world we would have.’ McCarthy himself, to whom that poem was inscribed, described jazz as ‘a sort of musical “back to nature”’, appealing particularly ‘to the younger person, less corrupted by the false values of our capitalist civilisation ... because it expresses their inner revolt against the acceptance of their parents’ philosophy’. These were not, of course, views widely held in communist circles. Max Jones, McCarthy’s chief collaborator, had at one time contributed a jazz column to *Challenge*, but on his flirting with the anarchist journal *Freedom* was cast aside, he recalled, as a ‘Trotsky-deviationist’. Jones’s own recollection was that he had offended as much by musical as by political heterodoxy. ‘They felt that I wasn’t pressing the proletarian side,’ he recalled, ruefully instancing his weakness for big swing stars like Artie Shaw and Charlie Barnet. Such stories lose nothing in the telling, but it is certainly true that the jazz enthusiasts associated with the Communist Party had very far from catholic tastes.

The main vehicle for these communist musical purists, the Jazz Appreciation Society, was not by any means a politically exclusive body. While one of its co-founders and editors, James Asman, was a communist, the other, Bill Kinnell, leaned away from communism and towards anarchism ‘in a large-hearted way’. Contributors to JAS publications had no Party line imposed on them and its advisers even included the same Gray Clarke who so debunked musico-sociological politicians. Nevertheless, the overall tenor of the JAS was one that clearly reflected the cultural politics of the Communist Party. It worked, as it put it, ‘in full co-operation’ with the Workers’ Music Association, and when Asman and Kinnell sought co-signatories for their ‘farrago of nonsense’, at least five of the seven turned out to be communists. It was characteristic that three of the five, all associated with *Challenge*, were among the list of JAS forces contacts doing their bit for the British war effort: a contrasting image to that of Albert
McCarthy, sitting implausibly in his civil defence tin hat compiling a Jimmy Lunceford discography.

Also characteristic of the JAS was its boozy masculinity. Whatever the style or location, jazz audiences and practitioners alike were in this period overwhelmingly male and Bill Kinnell, who ‘look[ed] to sex as a large motivating factor in Jazz’, frankly described his great love as ‘a male music’. Among the communist element this preponderance of young men generated a virile camaraderie that apparently was inseparable from the taproom. Asman himself set the tone, jocularly expecting ‘to die young from alcoholic poisoning and foul pipe fumes’ and urging the same vices on visitors to his editorial offices. The leading foursome in the Challenge jazz club were likewise presented as ‘shady characters in many beery and pleasantly hectic episodes’. ‘Now busy chasing Fascists,’ the JAS’s Jazz Record described one of them, Pete Martin, ‘and, despite an extremely tough appearance ... a devil of a good fellow.’ George Duffield, another of the same circle and a frequent Challenge contributor, was similarly depicted as ‘a lengthy fellow of low habits and high principles ... Vitally interested in all forms of progressive culture while being eminently capable and ready to sink a beer with the next man.’ If real ale had needed defending in the 1940s, one feels certain that these were the people to do it, unlike the vegetarian Max Jones and non-smoking teetotaller Albert McCarthy, removed as they were from their indigenous plebeian culture. John Vyse, of Challenge and the RAMC, even detected in some jazz fans a ‘tendency to fairyness’ alien to a people’s music and wished the ‘precious pretty boys’ and their ‘abnormality’ some more appropriate outlet. Artistic preferences told the same story. Tony Short, an able blues pianist returned from the forces, ridiculed the association of jazz with Surrealism. ‘It is obviously objectionable to our modern pseudo-intelligentsia to rub shoulders with the ordinary sordid world,’ he wrote. ‘They prefer to dream vaguely of some obscure plane of their own, exclusive to shaggy hair and sandals, affected boredom and deliberate unconventionality.’ Short himself, evidently sharing communist conceptions of a people’s culture, carried Piers Plowman with him on his travels and loved Bach and the Elizabethan composers as much as he did jazz.32

It was the perception of jazz as a great people’s art form that had such political resonance for its young aficionados. A key text in this regard was Iain Lang’s avowedly ‘Marxian’ account, Background to the Blues, published during the war and shortly after it expanded to the book-length Jazz in Perspective. Personally Lang was more closely associated with the JSS, but his was nevertheless the definitive statement of the ‘class’ interpretation of jazz, acceptable enough to communists to be published under WMA auspices. Two of Lang’s arguments in particular exemplified his class-based approach. The first, ineffectively sustained, was to contest conventional derivations of jazz from its underworld setting and insist instead on its roots
in work as well as pleasure. In practice, it was not the world of labour that Lang depicted and he like others found irresistible the violent, exotic colours of that deep America where razor-fights were halted by hot trumpet solos and musicians hardly blinked to find their instruments ‘shot full of holes’.

More consistently argued, and far more controversial, was Lang’s categorical repudiation of ethnic or racial interpretations of jazz and its origins. Instead he insisted on the music’s cosmopolitan sources, the offspring, as he called it, of a mixed marriage that brought together both European and African musical forms. ‘Jazz is not the music of a race, black or white, but of a class – of a proletariat which includes black and white... only a people insulated by class and poverty from cultural orthodoxy and social convention could have created a new, independent and dynamic musical language.’

While obviously anathema to romantics like Hugues Panassié – ‘All-Black obsessionists’, Lang called them – this non-racial view of jazz was contentious even among Lang’s fellow Marxians, simply because the formative black contribution to the music was, except for the odd crank like R.G.V. Venables, simply unarguable.

Asman, for example, a discerning partisan of black jazz, had ‘reluctantly’ to be reasoned into recognising white musicians’ merits and had more than once given currency to the sort of casual racial generalisations that came all too easily to the music’s white devotees. The JSS, perhaps, evinced a more militant political commitment in its coverage of US race politics and even on one occasion a short contribution by George Padmore. But for the communists of the JAS, the ‘negrophile purist’ appeared, in the 1940s, a disturbing inversion of that grave threat of current perils, ‘the petty racialism which in the long run destroys culture and which stems purely from the Nazi-Fascist cultural mentality.’ It was thus ill-disposed to racial categories that the JAS conclusively rejected ‘all-black’ and ‘all-white’ theories of jazz alike.

What these communists and left-wingers cherished in jazz was an authentic people’s music uncontaminated by either state, commerce or the academy, a purity maintained by disregarding as jazz anything that was so contaminated. Thus, at several levels, was extolled a spontaneity that contrasted markedly with official communism’s cult of state patronage and the artistically respectable. Lang, for example, contrasted the ‘true democracy’ of New Orleans polyphony, sublimely reconciling individual and collective expression, with the ‘totalitarian’ order of the symphony. Links between audience and musician were likewise conceived as organic and reciprocal and Doug Whitton, co-founder of Collet’s jazz department, trumpeted the music’s independence of official patronage, ill conceiving ‘anything more stifling to the production of creative music than a nationalised jazz band!’ The defining aversion of the purists, however, was to the commercialism and ‘slick cleverness’ of industrialised
entertainment, not least the long-dominant strains of that ‘swing’ music that masqueraded as jazz.

Among the fiercest proponents of these views, best described perhaps as Jazz Against Jazz, were Lang himself and JAS leading light, Graham Boatfield. Brusquely dismissing Duke Ellington, let alone Geraldo, they identified two particular causes of musical degeneracy. One was the development of orchestration, ‘the usual constipated arrangements affected by these conglomerations’, in which Lang detected the influence of the sheet-music industry and conventionally trained musicians, anxious for their jobs. The other, blighting even more informal performances, was the decline into individualism, self-indulgence and mere virtuosity. ‘Solo variations become exhibitions in which difficult technique becomes an end in itself, and the screaming of hundreds of high notes is held up to glory,’ wrote Vyse and Duffield. ‘The best of all [music] comes from groups where there is a fairly strong discipline, where no individual is purely the star,’ agreed Boatfield. Their ideal was the collective improvisation of the classic New Orleans or Dixieland ensemble, to which Asman added an early, prescient appreciation of the country-blues artists who had yet to find either critics or historians.

There was something almost Rousseauian in this discovery of original virtues lost to those ‘denatured’, as Boatfield put it, by commercial swing and other such corruptions of taste and morals. A ‘fervent’ communist where Asman was a ‘vague’ one, Boatfield saw in the blues lyric an escape from literary mediocrity to the golden age of Chaucer and Langland, since surviving only in the subterranean traditions of the popular ballad. ‘The cold and hollow splendour of the Elizabethans, the involved and clever fancies of the 17th and 18th centuries, even the high flown nonsense of our romantic poets, so beloved of some woolly-minded left-wingers, contain very little that is of use to ordinary people,’ he wrote in 1942. ‘It is up to the poets of today to use the fairly simple blues idiom along with other popular forms to express truly the progressive spirit of the age.’

The values of a people’s music were, in more complex ways than their proponents perhaps realised, sharply opposed to those of Archer Street. A characteristic sketch of Asman’s set the true jazz creator in a garret-like nightspot, ‘happy I guess, even if he was starved looking and kinda threadbare,’ while bright lights and pay packets awaited the mercenary ‘palookas’ engaged in the ‘music racket’. That distaste for all box-office considerations was a constant motif in the jazz magazines and Britain’s dance-band palookas thus suffered the open derision of listeners indifferent to their material concerns. As for Asman’s ‘mugs in the dough [with] no kick except the dough’, that happy state was precisely the object of the musicians’ militancy.

The irony was that for all Asman’s organic metaphors, of a music which ‘naturally and logically had to come into being’, and for all McCarthy’s ‘repulsion to the prevailing machine “zeitgeist”’, British jazz
enthusiasts were acquainted with this music exclusively through the highly artificial, industrialised medium of imported recordings. Theirs was a people’s music produced not by people but by gramophone records, a commodification implicit in the enthusiasts’ generic classification as ‘collectors’ and the endless discographical details and tips ‘for your collection’ found in the aptly named Jazz Record. The shellac 78 was at the heart of this culture, identified, listened to (preferably socially), accumulated, listed, documented and even versified (‘The ping and zing of the beginning of one of the Count’s records ...’). Inevitably that culture of consumption implied a certain tension with unionised musicians whose principal concern was that music, even if not a people’s music, be produced by people, albeit not just any people.

At best there was a degree of mutual incomprehension. Owen Bryce, a rare case of both collector and performer, recalls how at wartime rhythm club sessions the collectors would sit rapt through the opening record recital and then disappear to the bar while home-grown musicians, themselves preferring a drink to the recital, now went through their paces. ‘Generally speaking,’ says Bryce, ‘the collectors disliked the musicians because the musicians were all dance-band musicians and the only things that they played in the jazz idiom were things that the big bands played.’ Far from supporting MU demands over needle time, the same collectors lobbied for ‘good intelligent recitals by experts and a welcome end to the miserable “live” broadcasts of a dozen London Swing outfits’.

For some that betrayed a taste for older and purer jazz forms, for ‘if the best jazz is not being produced at the moment,’ as Boatfield put it, ‘why put up with what is?’ Others, less dogmatic stylistically, were nevertheless adamant as to the superiority of American jazz over the domestic productions maintained by the MU in a veritable state of autarky. This not only reinforced the fans’ predilection for recordings but in due course brought them into direct conflict with the MU over the ban on visiting musicians, a protracted campaign that gave an impression of staid philistinism on the MU’s part. ‘Hardie Ratcliffe would say, “I thought you were one of us, mate, aren’t you a socialist?”’, Max Jones recalled, but the suggestion that Nat Gonella would do just as well as Louis Armstrong could not but dismay even the staunchest defender of union rights. It was noticeable that even in Lang’s Marxian account, ostensibly sensitive to labour issues, musicians’ unionism figured only as a baneful force of exclusion from music-making. No doubt for many left-wing fans the campaign against the ban posed a real conflict of loyalty, but only over the tactics of getting the ban lifted, not the principle itself. That dilemma remained until, after sustained pressure, the ban was finally lifted in the mid-1950s.39

If anything, the collectors’ promotion of indigenous British jazz served only to widen the breach with Archer Street. This revivalist awakening, a minor landmark in the history of British popular music, marked perhaps
the closest convergence yet of jazz with left-wing politics. Visiting London in October 1944, Asman had at first to be strong-armed into a Home Guard dance to listen to George Webb’s band, then causing something of a stir in the far south-eastern suburb of Barnehurst. "There’s no such thing as a jazz band in this country," grumbled Asman, but to his astonishment the sound he heard was like his treasured record collection suddenly made flesh and blood. The musicians showed more commitment than finesse, perhaps — ‘we couldn’t have got worse, it was impossible,’ Webb admitted of their earliest efforts — but then the very last thing Asman was looking for was slickness of execution. Moreover, these were no gutless professionals but ordinary young workers, several from the local Vickers-Armstrong factory, who were anything but antagonistic to the left. Here then was authentic jazz, arising from the English proletariat and offering a new vocabulary for its attenuated musical traditions.

The response of Asman and his fellow communists was immediate and positive. Through Ken Lindsay, the Webb band was booked for a series of sell-out concerts for the Challenge Jazz Club, the first of them under the frowning Methodist busts of the Memorial Hall, Farringdon Street. Asman, meanwhile, having failed initially to get Decca to promote the band, issued its first recordings at his own expense as Jazz 0001. Prohibitively priced compared with ordinary releases, the disc nevertheless met with such immediate acclaim that Decca quickly reconsidered its position and featured the Webb band in the first commercial recordings of the British jazz revival. Reviews and radio coverage alike were broadly favourable.

Less sympathetic were the established musicians, jealous perhaps of the attention being given these hamfisted part-timers whose amateurism was a matter not just of circumstance but of ideology and ethos. An apocryphal story has the Webb trombonist, Eddie Harvey, hauled before a kangaroo court for his dance-band proclivities; and the revivalists had particular scorn for the commercial travesty of ‘Archer Street dixie’, best represented by communist Harry Gold and his Pieces of Eight. ‘We never liked that group of people,’ recalled Bryce, arranger and co-inspirer of the Webb band, ‘and in many respects they not only didn’t like us but were very much opposed to what we were doing because we were amateurs.’ Webb himself, a veteran of Vickers-Armstrong canteen bands, did not even read music, nor had he any ambitions beyond playing for what Ratcliffe had scathingly described as ‘the fun of the thing’. Though by no means anti-union, Webb was happy enough playing ‘for tuppence in Vladivostock’, or at least some English provincial equivalent, never troubling too much about formal MU rates. ‘I was never a professional musician, I never earned any money out of jazz at all,’ he later recalled. ‘I feel that I’m happy to be there and I shouldn’t take a penny out of it.’ The unwitting threat of this new people’s music to musicians’ unionism could hardly have been more succinctly expressed.40
These tensions do not appear to have surfaced greatly within the Communist Party, although fuller records of its Musicians’ Group or National Cultural Committee might tell a different story. Nor did Soviet proscriptions of jazz have much effect on British Party policy, even during the Cold War heyday of Zhdanovism, whose bayings at Americanism and cosmopolitanism could have had no more obvious target. The health of British dance music was, implausibly, among the concerns expressed at the 1951 conference The American Threat to British Culture and the MU’s exclusionist policies fitted perfectly with the CP’s Cold War cultural politics. There was, too, a day school at which J.R. Campbell confronted what was evidently regarded as the ‘problem’ of jazz, while for months at a time the music disappeared from the pages of the Daily Worker and even Challenge. Nevertheless, it was a sign if nothing else of divided counsels that in September 1949, the very height of Zhdanovism, Collet’s International Bookshop opened up its jazz department. Two months later it was prominently advertising recordings made by Sidney Bechet during his legendary clandestine visit to Britain in defiance of the MU ban.

If official responses were relatively relaxed, there were, as so often in CP history, homespun zealotries and aversions which, while owing little to Moscow, nevertheless brought to the latter’s fixations their own intense moralism. In the case of jazz, this sense of outrage was provoked not so much by the music itself as by the introduction of jazz dancing. The occasion was the visit of Graeme Bell’s Australian Jazz Band direct from the 1947 Prague Youth Festival. On arrival in London Bell was immediately struck by the respectful cerebration of British jazz audiences, ‘chewing seriously on their pipes and sipping their beers with thoughtful expressions ... nod[ding] quietly to the beat of their “pure” jazz.’ Mystified by such old-worldly solemnity, Bell linked up with a Challenge contingent including Lindsay, Martin and Whitton to establish the Leicester Square Jazz Club with its proud motto Jazz For Dancing. That message was prominently carried in Challenge itself under the heading ‘Jazz Girls Wanted’.

Despite sceptical objections – that jazz fans preferred to listen and ‘girls’ preferred the treacly ‘Archer Street boys’ – the club soon attracted a substantial new audience including a noticeable and reputedly obnoxious art-school element. ‘Hand in hand, they prance, cavort, gesticulate, stamp, whirl, sweat and laugh with the most obvious enjoyment,’ the Daily Worker reported; ‘it is a real night out from a daily round of soul-crushing self-consciousness and respectability.’ One fan also chimed in: ‘If boys would not stand in the corners and poke fun at the girls, we female jazzers would really show them how to jazz! ... It certainly has some go in it, even though it comes from America.’

All this was too much for those censorious elements so often found on the left. ‘Dancing at its best is an emotional display and as such is to be deplored,’ one of them let himself go, ‘but jitterbugging is really the lowest to which anyone can sink. To turn oneself into a slobbering savage, a
drooling psychopathic horror, a jerking bundle of sensual emotions ...’ Another, no less priggish, saw dancing as ‘a rather poor way ... of consuming surplus energy’, quite irrational ‘from the point of view of personal efficiency’. Stung into defending herself, our beleaguered female jazzer could only object sniffily: ‘I am no spiv (I am in the YCL). I dislike, intensely, most of the boys I know ...’ The issue would not ultimately be resolved, for it represented but the earliest variant of an enduring conflict between orthodox conceptions of communist youth and prevalent forms of postwar youth culture. At the 1952 YCL congress dance these two forces literally came to blows when, attracted by ‘the lowest and most decadent form of Yankee Be-Bob’, some hundreds of ‘the St Pancras youth’, many of them working-class ‘tough boys’, provoked a brawl through their extreme animosity to the country dances thrown in to keep the Scottish and Lancashire YCLers happy.42

By this time we had entered a new era in which the jazz revival, succumbing to all the insidious temptations of jazz popular, ended in the awful apotheosis of the Trad Boom. From the ashes of the Webb band itself had arisen a new ensemble, its star the old Etonian Humphrey Lyttelton, personally sympathetic to left-wing causes, and its home territory the eponymous Lyttelton Club, later the 100 Club. Behind the scenes was leaseholder, band manager and sometime WMA lecturer Lyn Dutton, another communist but one with a sharp eye for the main chance. Assisting him financially was yet another CP member, the accountant Ted Morton. Within a few years Lyttelton had, through native gifts and careful management, become a national celebrity, while the formidable Lyn Dutton Agency had on its books most of the top British ‘trad’ bands, their talents thinly but astutely spread around a handful of ‘star’ personalities. Their club, with its heart-sinking boast ‘show me a banjo and I’ll show you a profit’, was unquestionably the leading ‘trad’ venue.

In 1951 jazz had even received official recognition with a Festival Hall concert under royal patronage, the music’s left-wing promoters reportedly showing an unseemly anxiety to brush shoulders with the present Queen. Even skiffle, a self-made music if ever there was one, proved immensely lucrative to Dutton in the shape of Lonnie Donegan. It was all a far cry from the ingenuous but engaging idealism of the Webb band and JAS. For jazz proper one now had to look to young modernists, their own counterculture far removed from communism, or to such keepers of the purist flame as Ken Colyer, a veritable fixture at 1950s protest marches. That Colyer had pioneered the skiffle sound that Dutton now so adroitly exploited only showed how apparently inexorable were the forces of private enterprise.

For some of the early jazz converts of the austerity years it was all a little disillusioning. Webb, a figure quite without malice, long resented the machinations of Dutton, remembered as a ‘shallow spiv’. Asman, meanwhile, penned his own poignant valediction as early as 1950. The
rhythm club he then evoked was a place of beer, banter and fellowship, a vibrant young fraternity brought together by the turntable. Now, however, there was ‘a smell around the place,’ the smell of crass and insatiable commercialism. ‘Bands, comperes, promoters, critics and guest artists ... fight unbecomingly for right of place,’ Asman noted gloomily, ‘and the real jazz lover stays at home with his collection.’ That was a plaintive epitaph, but not one that everybody endorsed. Humphrey Lyttelton, as comfortable with jazz as entertainment as he was with the rewards that it brought, remembered less fondly the ‘exclusive fug’ of those early jazz appreciation gatherings. ‘It was,’ he noted pointedly, ‘an audience of critics, experts, collectors, serious students – but no people.’

Ungrateful as that was, it did identify a central paradox: that, despite its rhetoric of the people, early British jazz appreciation shared with so many forms of left-wing culture an eschewal of the popular, a comradeship of the elect, which was the secret at once of its richness and its marginality. Its refuge from the cash nexus, idealised even in the case of classic jazz, could be maintained solely at the expense of numbers. Only once let the actual people in, at least in postwar Britain, and the spivs and philistines were sure to follow. In the new postwar order, admittedly, it was the classes who very often aped the masses, with Lyttelton’s band in great demand for debs’ balls; but this was very far from the sort of social revolution the communists had had in mind. When, with a new surge of radicalism, jazz players next identified themselves with the left, forming revolutionary ensembles and liberation music orchestras, it was in the stimulating but politically nugatory context of the artistic avant-garde. The ‘people’ and the popular remained as far apart as ever, and the music just as compelling.

Notes

2 G.F. Gray Clarke, Jazz Writing, Jazz Appreciation Society (JAS), n.d. but 1946, pp. 20–22.
4 Gray’s phrase: not, I take it, one of endearment.
8 Acland to Tom Harrisson, 7 February 1940, M-O TC 15/6/H.
11 Bohm, ‘MU officials ...’; Amstell and Hyde, interviews; Phillips, interview, August 1989, National Sound Archive (NSA).
15 Lewis, interview.
16 See letter to Clegg of 7 June 1939, M-O TC 15/4/C.
17 Harry Francis, ‘MU officials ...’
24 See Honor Blair’s file in the Phillips papers.
27 ‘Musicians Union’.
28 ‘MU officials’.
31 *Jazz Music*, no. 1/1942, October 1943, March–April 1944; Jones, interview.
32 *Jazz Record*, JAS, November 1943, pp. 6–7; *Jazz*, JAS, c. 1946, pp. 3–4, 9; *Jazz Writing*, JAS, 1; *Jazz Music*, JSS, June 1943 and October 1943; *Hot Notes*, JAS, c. 1944–5, pp. 17–18; *American Jazz No. 2*, JAS, 1946, pp. 20–21; Jones, interview.
34 See his contributions in *Jazz Record*, nos 2/43 , 3/43, 4/43, where he crosses swords with Venables, and November 1943. Reviews in *Jazz Record* were at this time grouped under the headings ‘Black Wax’, ‘White “Hot”’ and ‘Swingtime’.
35 Vyse, *American Jazz No. 1*, JAS, c. 1946, pp. 8–10; Jazz, p. 3.
36 Lang, *Jazz in Perspective*, p. 59; other fans like Asman, however, had a great love of classical music.
39 Asman, *Jazz Record*, November 1943, pp. 7–9. April 1944, p. 10, 4/43, p. 12; McCarthy, *Jazz Music*, 1/42, p. 2; Boatfield, *Jazz Music* 9/43; Bryce, interview, October 1996; Jones, interview. Godbolt’s volumes provide a lively account of the campaign against the ban totally out of sympathy with the MU.
40 Bryce, interview; Webb, interview, October 1986 (NSA); Godbolt, *History*, ch. 12.

42 Graham Bell, *Australian Jazzman*, (NSW: Child & Associates, 1988), p. 105; *Challenge*, 21 February, 20 March, 10 April, 1 and 22 May, 5 June 1948; *Daily Worker*, 10 December 1948; George Bridges to Dennis Goodwin, 10 November 1952, NMLH.