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I’m convinced that histories are the hardest form of scholarship to produce. Not only does the historian have to aim at comprehensiveness, within whatever self-set sphere he (in this case) has, bearing in mind that readers will each have their own memories against which to compare the narrative, but he has to be so aware not only of his own prejudices, but also of the process of construction of that narrative. Even more so, perhaps, in a book aimed at students, where offhand comments are so likely to be taken as serious academic judgement. It is therefore refreshing to read a book whose authors make their positions so clear, and whose aim is always to seek a balanced perspective, but who nonetheless produce a convincing story and entertaining read. For that portion of my students’ studies which concerns music from the USA, this will certainly be a recommended text.

The subject matter will probably speak for itself. The bulk of the book consists of thirteen chapters, some of which are explicitly dated – we thus start with a periodisation: pre-1917; 1917–1935; 1935–1945; 1946–1954; 1954–1959. Note how the time periods get shorter. Subsequently, this neat scheme breaks down: the 1960s and 1970s each get two chapters, broadly centre and peripheries. However, this division does make sense and doesn’t lead to any crucial omissions, at least as viewed from the UK. The opening chapter lays out a series of themes around which the narrative is organised and, impressively, the themes do follow through – this is a well-crafted and carefully conceived book. So: the themes are listening; music and identity; music and technology; the music business; and centres and peripheries. There is sometimes a problem with their interaction: the chapter on rock ‘n’ roll, for instance, produces separate sections on history, the practice of producing covers, elements of music business, and a series of mini-biographies. However, I think it is possible to make the necessary links – there are sufficient cross-references to enable even a relatively unsophisticated reader to do this. The separation of listening throughout is virtuous in that it raises the level of debate of musical details within a historical narrative to a level rarely seen – the book comes with more than forty tracks on CD, and many other tracks are addressed in some detail. (The authors actually write of listening being ‘integrated’ into the narrative – listening sections are certainly judiciously placed, but are nonetheless framed within this narrative.) The level of discussion, though, is fairly basic. There is a strong emphasis on form, while some matters of melodic and textural detail are addressed discursively – the text is clearly aimed at the non-music major – usually to good effect. But even with this possible limitation, the authors are able to make some subtle points – the comparisons of North American singers Ruth Brown’s and Big Mama Thornton’s approaches to songs written by men are enlightening, and I was particularly struck by some of the detail in the discussions of The Beatles’ ‘Yesterday’ and ‘Eleanor Rigby’. This though brings me to a couple of more serious criticisms. The book is titled American Popular Music – its field seems more properly to be popular music in the USA – but in a number of places music by Britons (and very occasionally other Europeans) comes under the spotlight unproblematically – they are dealt with as if honorary North Americans. This is a perennial problem in reading North American authors writing for a North American readership, but it can be handled a little more sensitively than it is here. (To dismiss UK group The Spice Girls in two different places as ‘teenybopper idols’ fails to assess their cultural location in the UK, but it also fails also to acknowledge that to do so might be out of place).

The authors’ desire to produce an even-handed account is quite right, and quite remarkable. For instance, while acknowledging the criticism that has been levelled at US band leader and improviser Benny Goodman, they clearly differentiate Goodman’s approach from that of US band leader Paul Whiteman, and they present both positive and negative aspects of the racial integration of late swing bands. This makes all the more surprising their entirely positive discussion of Graceland, whose ultimate value they say lies in its widely collaborative genesis, entirely overlooking the wealth of criticism coming from many sources, and which the student audience the book addresses should be made aware of. This seems to me, though, a rare miscalculation, and this is a book I would recommend almost unreservedly (even if it is full of those annoying little extra-narrative boxes which are beginning to find their way into too many undergraduate essays!).