

Eric Hobsbawm and all that jazz

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The latest annual collection of *Biographical Memoirs of Fellows of the British Academy*, published in December 2015, includes an extended obituary of Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012), written by Professor Sir Richard Evans FBA. Hobsbawm was one of the UK's most renowned modern historians and left-wing public intellectuals. His influential three-volume history of the 19th and 20th centuries, published between 1962 and 1987, put a new concept on the historiographical map: 'the long 19th century'. The full obituary may be found via www.britishacademy.ac.uk/memoirs/14/

This extract from the obituary reveals Eric Hobsbawm's less well-known interest in jazz.

There seemed to be no problem in Eric's combining his post at Birkbeck College [University of London] with his Fellowship at King's College Cambridge, but when the latter came to an end in 1954 he moved permanently to London, occupying a large flat in Torrington Place, in Bloomsbury, close to Birkbeck, which he shared over time with a variety of Communist or ex-Communist friends. Gradually, as he emerged from the depression that followed the break-up of his marriage, he began a new lifestyle, in which the close comradeship and sense of identity he had found in the Communist movement was, above all from 1956 onwards, replaced by an increasingly intense involvement with the world of jazz. Already before the war his cousin Denis Preston had played records by Louis Armstrong, Bessie Smith and other musicians to him on a wind-up gramophone in Preston's mother's house in Sydenham. The two of them went to hear Duke Ellington play at a dance-hall in Streatham, from which Eric left 'captured for ever'. In the Soho jazz scene of the Fifties, he found a close-knit group of people, 'a sort of quasi-underground international freemasonry', a 'small and usually embattled group even among the cultural minority tastes'; the musical equivalent of the Communist Party, combining a sense of intimacy and belonging with a feeling of being out of



Eric Hobsbawm (1917-2012) was elected a Fellow of the British Academy in 1976.

the mainstream, far from the centre of society.

Financial considerations also played a role in his growing involvement in the world of jazz. Having to pay the rent on a Bloomsbury flat instead of living in free lodgings in a Cambridge college, Eric needed some money on top of his modest academic salary, and when he noticed that the novelist Kingsley Amis, who surely

knew less about jazz than he did, was writing on the subject for a national newspaper, he asked Norman Mackenzie, whom he had known at the LSE, and now wrote for the *New Statesman*, to secure him the post of jazz critic for the magazine. He got the job, and began work on the paper as its regular jazz reporter under the pseudonym 'Francis Newton' (Frankie Newton was one of the very few American jazz musicians who was generally believed to have been a Communist), assumed because he thought, quite rightly, that it would not do his academic career much good if he wrote under his own name. It was also, perhaps, no coincidence that he took up his new activity just as the Soviet Union, which had long condemned jazz as a form of bourgeois decadence, was undergoing a post-Stalinist cultural thaw, releasing jazz musicians from the Gulag and allowing jazz bands to start up again. By this time, too, the cultural dictators of Communist regimes all across Eastern Europe had found another species of capitalist decadence to ban—rock-and-roll, in comparison to which jazz, along with the blues, appeared in a positive light as the music of the oppressed black working class in capitalist America.

Since, as the *New Statesman's* editor Kingsley Martin told him, the readers of the magazine were mostly male civil servants in their forties and therefore unlikely to go to jazz clubs, Eric was required to write his monthly column as a cultural reporter rather than a music critic, a slant that eminently suited his 'man-about-town' lifestyle of the late 1950s. Rather than frequenting Ronnie Scott's, where jazz fans went to listen, he preferred the Downbeat Club in Old Compton Street, which might occasionally feature a pianist but mainly served as a place where off-duty jazz musicians could drink and gossip. The players, he reported later, 'accepted me as an oddity on the scene', as a 'sort of walking reference book who could answer (non-musical) queries'. Drawn into 'the avant-garde cultural bohème', he became a participant observer of Soho life in the 1950s, teaching at Birkbeck between 6 and 9 in the evening, then spending night after night in the clubs and bars of Soho in 'the places where the day people got rid of their inhibitions after dark', mingling with rebels and nonconformists such as the singer George Melly, the Old Etonian trumpeter Humphrey Lyttelton, the theatre critic Kenneth Tynan, the painter Francis Bacon, the cartoonist Wally Fawkes ('Trog') and the writer Colin MacInnes. 'The affair between the solid citizen and the low life or the asocial', he remarked in 1962, was no longer 'furtive' but was 'now out in the open', a trend demonstrated by new movies such as *A Taste of Honey*: he might have noted that his remark also applied to himself. During his late-night sessions in the clubs, Eric got to know their habitués – drug addicts, prostitutes, musicians, poets, journalists and artists – well enough to write down some of their accounts of themselves, their lives and his relationships with them, characteristically prefacing one of them with a lengthy glossary of the drug addict's slang. The clubs, he noted, were also places where black and white people mixed on easy terms, and this at a time when racist white hostility to a decade of West Indian immigration and its consequences was increasing, culminating in the Notting Hill race riots of 1958 (Eric's articles for the *New*

Statesman indeed included an admiring account of the efforts of the jazz community in London to combat the racism that erupted in the riots).

Many of the brief articles that 'Francis Newton' contributed to the *New Statesman* were routine surveys of jazz festivals, 'records of the year', jazz movies and the like. More often than not they were clogged with names and titles, to cater for record-buying readers (Miles Davis was recommended, Dave Brubeck not). But there were more considered pieces on trends in jazz, on tradition versus modern, on the emergence of 'cool nightclubs' for the affluent, on the business aspects of the increasing number of American bands visiting the UK, on the virtual absence of female singers from the new wave of pop and many other similar topics. One of his articles attempted to explain why so many jazz musicians died young, a phenomenon Eric attributed to the long hours they worked, the instability of their lifestyle on the road, their lack of a steady income, their exploitation by agents, promoters and club owners, and the unhygienic conditions of the joints they played in ('The average bar or club in which the working life of many musicians is passed', he claimed, 'would not have got by a factory inspector in 1847'). Some of the articles moved beyond the jazz clubs into other parts of Soho. In one, published in March 1961, 'Francis Newton' explored the spread of strip clubs across the West End following the easing of legal restrictions in 1957. They ranged, he noted, 'from fairly elaborate set-ups to sleazy rooms with a few cinema seats occupied by single men who watch a succession of girls (interspersed by strip films) taking off their clothes contemptuously to the accompaniment of one and a half records'. Characteristically, he interviewed some of the strippers and their managers about the economic aspects of their employment, discovering that the girls got as little as £1 for a five-minute strip, though in more luxurious joints they could earn as much as £25 and even more for 'special acts', about which he did not go into any more detail; he ended, somewhat unrealistically, by urging the involvement of Equity, the actors' union, in organising them and campaigning for improvements in their pay and conditions of work.

Through his cousin Denis, now a leading record producer, Eric secured a commission from a publishing house, MacGibbon & Kee, founded in 1949 by Robert Kee, a journalist and historian, and James MacGibbon, a lifelong Communist who confessed on his deathbed in the year 2000 that he had leaked official secrets to the Soviet Union during the latter part of the war. MacGibbon and Kee had already produced books by Lyttelton and MacInnes, but the firm was not very successful commercially and was being bailed out of financial difficulties by Howard Samuel, a wealthy supporter of the Labour Party. They persuaded Eric to write a book about jazz, which was published in 1959 as *The Jazz Scene*, under his *New Statesman* pseudonym. This was not a collection of his articles, but a freshly written work in its own right. Aspects of the book reflect the introductory survey the publisher intended it to be, notably the chapters on 'how to recognize jazz', on style, on instruments and on the relationship of jazz to the other arts, but mainly the book is a work of

contemporary social history, and as such it showed all the hallmarks of Eric's other studies on more academic subjects. Like Eric's doctoral dissertation, it contained a statistical appendix providing a social breakdown of its subject, in this case based on the card-index files for the 820 members of the National Jazz Federation – only sixty were female, and the rest were an eclectic mix of young white-collar workers and skilled artisans, 'cultural self-made men', often of proletarian origins, revolting against the respectability of their parents' generation and the world of bourgeois high culture.

The meat of the book is in its account of the origins and rise of jazz, starting in New Orleans at the end of the 19th century. Although it expressed the discontent of the black and the poor, the marginal and the deviant, Eric saw the cultural revolt of jazz musicians and their public not as the prelude to organised resistance to exploitation, but as a diversion from political action. Eric wrote the book at a time when jazz was going through something of a golden age, with trad jazz (a very British style) being augmented by the more experimental bebop, and the big bands such as Duke Ellington's at the height of their fame. Already, however, there were signs that jazz was being overtaken by the rise of modern pop music, rhythm and blues and then the Beatles, all of which aroused his personal distaste as well as the hostility of the Communist movement. For nearly twenty years jazz musicians were to be eclipsed by what Eric in one of his *New Statesman* pieces called 'bawling juveniles', and when they finally re-emerged, it was to cater for a

minority taste in a musical niche, no longer a vehicle of moral and social rebellion against convention and propriety: the 'Swinging Sixties' put paid to all that, and the pop music of the day, he thought, reflected the shallow rebelliousness of the affluent young, not the righteous anger of the dispossessed. Thus, he predicted in a *New Statesman* piece, it would not last: the Beatles would be as quickly forgotten as calypso. Nevertheless, *The Jazz Scene* was reprinted several times, and quickly established itself as essential reading for jazz aficionados even in the 21st century.

Professor Sir Richard Evans FBA is President of Wolfson College, Cambridge. In 2015, the British Academy awarded him the Leverhulme Prize and Medal in recognition of his significant contribution to the field of Modern German History.

