

Andrew Kellett. *The British Blues Network: Adoption, Emulation, and Creativity*. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2017. Pp. 263. £22.17 (cloth).

Andrew Kellett's *British Blues Network: Adoption, Emulation, and Creativity* examines the impact of American Black bluesmen on white (male) British teenagers in 1950s and early 1960s England. Carefully researched and well-supported by case studies, this cultural history complements other work in the growing body of study of English identity and social studies through popular music. The mutual interest in and fascination with each other's culture between Britain and America goes back centuries, a phenomenon accelerated especially in the years after WWII. Having lost its prominent political and economic place on the world stage, Britain regained its influence culturally, especially in America, from the so-called era of the 'British invasion' from 1964 onwards. Britain exported music, fashion, and European cultural sophistication that the USA readily embraced, returning the favour as American film and popular music had been influential on British popular culture in the 1950s. Key behind the former phenomenon were Britain's indigenous rock and roll musicians – not the American rock and roll imitators of, for example, Larry Parnes' venerable stable of the late 1950s who were fashioned to imitate Elvis *et al*, but rather those musicians who were fascinated with and inspired by the generations of American Black bluesmen – *rara avia* usually accessible only haphazardly via film, precious records acquired from US servicemen or relatives travelling abroad, or through simple determination (i.e. mail order). The influence of the likes of Robert Johnson, BB King, and Big Bill Broonzy on Eric Clapton, The Rolling Stones, Ray Davies and others appear throughout (auto)biographies of these artists. Kellett investigates how and why working and lower middle class white British teens and men, at that particular place and time in Britain claimed to identify with these Black bluesmen –

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when there was nothing socially, culturally or economically ostensibly in common with the experiences of either.

Kellett first explains how white, mostly middle class, British men managed to acquire Black American blues music to begin with. It was a haphazard process in the time before instant communication and systematic information overload of the twenty-first century, but this random appropriation of the music and culture was beneficial as it allowed the English to fill in gaps with their own bricolage of musical and cultural influences. Kellett sets up the context for this cultural assimilation first by introducing the social and economic setting in which the white British blues enthusiasts came of age in the 1950s; he explains how Black Americans blues music was physically acquired and learnt about. Next Kellett considers the effects of Blues music and performers on issues of masculinity and social mobility in 1950s Britain; he argues that part of the appeal of the idealised bluesman was his absolute masculinity – in manner, performance and musical theme – and the sociological importance of father-figures in post-war Britain. It's not because these young men lacked fathers, but rather admiration for the bluesman character was a result of frustration with their parents' generation and a reaction against the greyness and austerity of post-war Britain. In the next chapter, Kellett considers the keen sense of competition amongst English popular musicians in the '60s and early '70s which resulted in musical creativity that led to British domination of the music charts between 1966 and 1972. Living on a small, closed populated island, these English artists tended to cluster and end up in competition with each other; this physical proximity led to rivalry and competition that stimulated the creative process differently than the development of genres in the much larger and more geographically spread music industry in the United States. Finally Kellett considers authenticity and the 'processes' Kellett calls

'experimentation, refiliation, and augmentation' (142). Mere emulation of the blues wasn't enough to satisfy; by 1966 through to 1970, the marriage between British middle class white

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men and Black American bluesmen musically became a fusion of two cultural strands – here is where ‘Englishness was most instrumental in transforming American blues into distinctively English forms. These English musicians lacked the cultural baggage of racism and civil rights, and instead folded together their experience with social mobility, class consciousness, and frustration with the generation gap. In this period, Kellett argues, blues music in the UK became, in particular, ‘British... full of British characters speaking in specifically British voices’ (142) which was then ‘supercharged with volume’ and themes of ‘sex, violence, and power’ (142).

This last chapter is subtitled ‘I Just Can’t be satisfied’ – but Kellett’s work here is eminently satisfying as he examines the complexities of this cultural musical fusion. He discusses the effects of the ‘other’ in British blues – and his here own perception of this process as an outsider and an ‘other’ (Kellett is American) enhances the argument. Britain, he notes, was in a unique position with regards to the USA – same language, shared history, shared cultural background – but there was at the same time enough distance in time and space for both Britain and America to be fascinated with each other’s cultural exports and ‘coolness’. These British men who took to American blues, emulated it, enhanced it, gave it back to American illustrates the vibrant creativity amongst a small and closely packed population of artists (177). It is Britain’s small size that fostered the ‘explosion of musical creativity (177)’ as Britain urban centred in the 1960s; the results allowed Britain to return to the world scene not as political or economic movers and shakers, but rather cultural leaders: ‘the epicentre of a veritable revolution in first musical then cultural taste’ (178) and ‘arbiters of international “cool”’ (ibid).

The *British Blues Network* is a solid piece of cultural and musical history, well recommended not only to scholars and students of twentieth-century British cultural history, but also the general reader. Well-organised and written, supported by its case studies and an extensive set of endnotes.

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