Jazz meets Pop in the UK

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Jazz is *not* pop music, that’s all. (Wynton Marsalis in Walser 1999, 342)

Is jazz popular music? Yes! End of discussion. (Frith 2007, 7)

Jazz is not popular music, but it has had a significant impact on popular music. (Gridley 1994, 9)

Even in its more sophisticated forms jazz is popular music … (Adorno 1962, 33)

Jazz is … no longer a *popular* music, in the best sense of the word. (Deveaux 1991, 553)

Is jazz ‘popular music’? Is some of it ‘popular music’ and some not? Will some of the participants in this [first International Conference on Popular Music Research in 1989] assume that jazz is ‘popular music’ and others assume that it is not? (Hamm 1995, 117)

The subject of whether and to what extent jazz is popular music continues to occupy jazz academics, musicians and educators who bring particular ‘insider’ perspectives to their evaluations. These often rest on upholding specific genre definitions in order to accord value in a particular way. While denial of jazz’s popular origins can be used, on the one hand, to contribute to its status as art (‘America’s classical music’); on the other, focussing on jazz’s popular credentials can bolster its cultural relevance. Both viewpoints contribute to the importance of the genre within music education, as an area for funding, and as a subject of academic study. It is perhaps hardly surprising then that there is disagreement on jazz as popular music within the multidisciplinary space in which the academic discipline of jazz studies has been situated. Negativity or reluctance to engage with the idea that jazz can be popular evidences the continuing character of jazz studies as an advocacy movement which emphasises the music’s differences from other genres together with its artistic credentials in an attempt to secure status: ‘The narratives we have inherited to describe the history of jazz retain the patterns of outmoded forms of thought, especially the assumption that the progress of jazz as art necessitates increased distance from the popular.’ (Deveaux 1991, 553). This has not been particularly helpful either to developing the relevance of the study of jazz within the broader field of musicology or to gaining a deeper understanding the role of jazz in twentieth century popular culture. The popularity of jazz remains an ‘unpopular problem’ for jazz academics, as I identified in my 2004 essay on Robbie Williams’ album *Swing When You’re Winning* (Parsonage-Tackley 2004). The role of jazz within contemporary popular culture remains ripe for consideration.

In a seminal essay on this topic, Simon Frith suggests that the obvious answer to the question ‘Is jazz popular music?’ (‘Yes!’) is complicated by the existence of distinct scholarly communities around ‘popular music studies’ and ‘jazz studies’. Ultimately Frith argues that popular music studies should take account of jazz precisely because it problematizes popularity (2007, 22). Alongside audiences with a particular interest in historical and/or contemporary forms of the music, Frith identifies a mainstream market for jazz which is ‘contemporary easy-on-the-ear versions of … classic jazz, what Stuart Nicholson calls Nu-Crooners and American radio describes as ‘smooth jazz’’ (2007, 15). Certainly, ‘smooth jazz’ has received recent scholarly attention (McGee 2013; Barber 2010) and the style’s chief protagonist, saxophonist Kenny G, has been subject to academic scrutiny (Washburne 2004; Whyton 2010). Nu-Crooners and smooth jazz, although (and because) they are culturally mainstream, stretch and challenge the establishment’s definition of jazz to the extent that they may not be accepted at all. Scholarly arguments turn on the way in which smooth jazz has been critically received by the jazz establishment against a broad (and largely unexamined) swathe of popularity outside it. As such, McGee argues for Candy Dulfer’s autonomy and artistry as she ‘participated in and disrupted the feminized and sexualized associations of smooth jazz to artfully side-step the bonds of anxiety over legitimacy that might otherwise have confined her’ (2013, 255). Washburne rehabilitates Kenny G within the jazz tradition: ‘Regardless of Gorelick’s bad jazz, jazz-lite, or whatever you want to call it, distaste for his music does not justify his exclusion from the historical narrative’ (2004, 143). Whyton focusses on jazz guitarist Pat Metheny’s online outburst against Kenny G to analyse the value judgements made within the so-called ‘jazz community’, observing that ‘When understood boundaries are challenged or called into question, subjects are instilled with an intense sense of community and personal identification.’ (2010, 81). Evaluations of ‘What Jazz Is and Isn’t’ (Marsalis, 1988) or the boundaries of *Jazz/Not Jazz* (Ake, Garrett, Goldmark 2012) tend to be made by, and contextualised with reference to, communities of musicians or educators with vested interests in upholding the status of the genre in a particular way. Frith, however, makes a broader important point that transcends this insider/outsider division: ‘such passionate debate about what counts as jazz seems to be a defining characteristic of jazz as a genre: something certainly isn’t jazz if no one cares if it is or not’ (2007, 18) to which the corollary is ‘something is jazz if someone cares to define it as such’. In the popular sphere, opinion has more potential for impact as it gains critical mass as distinct from the ability of one voice (such as Metheny’s) to have weight within a defined community.

The key point emerging from Frith’s perceptive discussion and the focus of the previous work on smooth jazz is that academic debates about jazz as popular music, despite straddling well-established disciplinary limits, don’t appear to be bringing us any closer to understanding the continuation of jazz within popular *culture and society* (which is not always the focus of popular music studies, confusingly). Frith advocates adopting a dialectic between an ‘ever-changing mainstream and avant-garde’ rather than a conventional progression from folk to commercial to art as a basis for jazz history (2007, 18-19). Adherence to the latter, I suggest, has had implications beyond misunderstanding the development of the music, and points towards a persistent neglect of the role of jazz in mainstream popular culture, and a fundamental misconception of its history. Indeed, for Guthrie Ramsey, Gridley’s defence of his position (‘jazz is not popular music’) suggests that ‘a history of ‘the’ jazz audience has yet to be written’ (2013, 35). Similarly, Washburne comments: ‘To me, the disjuncture between the jazz tradition and popular culture deserves close scholarly scrutiny. We need to find out about our own cultural context, a context which enables Kenny G to be so popular, and we need to scrutinize why his accessibility comes at the expense of the exclusion of others.’ (Washburne, 136-7). Extrapolating from this, and moving beyond the specific area of smooth jazz, ‘(how and why) is jazz popular?’ would seem to be an important question to address.

Although often considered separately in scholarly discourses, in practice the interchange between jazz and popular music was and is vibrant and ongoing. Today, these historically-rooted connections can be understood to fall into three categories: singers with acknowledged and/or audible jazz roots (e.g. Amy Winehouse, Gregory Porter, Jamie Cullum); the incorporation of pop material (e.g. Beatles, Radiohead) into jazz performances; and finally, the adoption of jazz material by mainstream pop stars (e.g. Westlife, Paul McCartney, Rod Stewart). Nicholson’s aforementioned exploration of ‘Nu-Crooners’ in his book *Is Jazz Dead?* focusses on singers from the first category who are in the main still considered to be ‘jazz musicians’, by both the music industry and audiences (although the musicians themselves often contest this). Although exploration of this category is important in understanding the contemporary popularity of jazz, the incorporation of jazz into contexts where it is encountered by a mainstream audience, whose interest is perhaps more often in the performer than the nature of the musical material, is fundamental in considerations of (how and why) jazz is popular. Indeed, Nicholson’s dismissive attitude to examples of this latter category belies its position on the outer limits of conventional jazz studies, and therefore indicates that this should be studied as an area which bridges not only genre divisions but scholarly ones too:

Far hipper than Robbie Williams’s calculated, one-dimensional Sinatra “tribute”, Cullum’s youthful energy, optimism and confidence had attracted star-in-the-making whispers following his 2002 debut album …’ (2005, 84)

In this essay I will use the lens of transnationality, a particular focus in recent work in jazz studies, with reference to the UK, to explore how the processes of the adoption of jazz into the mainstream, focussing on recent albums by Robbie Williams and Annie Lennox, are historically grounded. This opens up a rich seam of interaction that has been overlooked due to the inadequacies of academic disciplinarily and a selective approach to historicisation of jazz and popular music. Contrary to familiar assertions that ‘British jazz’ only began around the mid-1960s, which Tim Wall (2009) has explored with particular reference to the use of Stan Tracy’s album *Under Milk Wood* as a pivotal point in the BBC’s *Jazz Britannia* documentary[[1]](#endnote-1), looking at the role of jazz in the cultural mainstream in the first part of the century exposes a rich vein of British-specific musical responses to the music from the outset. These provided the foundations, in practical and conceptual terms, for the ongoing interaction between jazz and popular culture.

It is only a small extrapolation from current academic debates around jazz as art/popular music to consider the reception of jazz in Britain when it appeared, as an idea and then a music, in the latter stages of the First World War. R.W.S. Mendl, author of the first British book on jazz, expressed regret that ‘modern syncopated dance music has not yet been taken up by any composer of the front rank’ (1927, 12). Similarly, composer and critic Constant Lambert wrote: ‘The next move in the development of jazz will come, almost inevitably, from the sophisticated or highbrow composers’ (Lambert, 1934/R1966, 198). This aspiration for the future of jazz as art was matched by the vigorous opposition of those who, like Canon Drummond, who ‘had no personal experience of the art of Jazz dancing’, but yet strongly condemned it as ‘mean, low entertainment’ (*The Times* 15 March 1919, 7). Similarly, Sir Dyce Duckworth saw jazz dancing as a sign that ‘the morals of Old England had become degraded’ (*The Times,* 18 March 1919, 7).

On the one hand, the music represented a way forward for a society that had been challenged to the point of destruction by the War, and on the other, was symbolic of a continuous slide into a cultural abyss. Beyond recognising that these reactions represent the furthest extremes of the reception of jazz, perhaps what is most important is that these opinions were contingent upon encounters with jazz mediated by and through popular culture. It was a distinct minority of the British population that heard visiting Americans and aspiring British jazz musicians jamming together underground Soho clubs, but the underworld of London was reported, often salaciously, by newspapers, establishing the degenerate reputation of jazz by association to which Drummond and Duckworth objected. Conversely, advocates for the music cited the importance of composers to develop the music, imposing the values of art music – it wasn’t until later that the importance of individual performers and particularly their improvisations, and indeed the African American roots of the music, became more fully recognised due to the greater availability and understanding of recorded jazz. Already these popular/artistic extremes indicate a certain inevitability about jazz’s eventual mainstream positioning.

If not the first, then certainly a defining group for jazz in Britain, the Original Dixieland Jazz Band, appeared initially in at the London Hippodrome in a revue, a structured form of variety show, entitled ‘Joy Bells’. The band was the latest in a long line of imported American acts, and jazz provided the latest novelty as part of a variety show bill which also included comedians and performing dogs. The group was undoubtedly much more successful as a dance band, most notably, through their residency at Britain’s first palais-de-danse, in Hammersmith, West London, for six months from its opening night. As James Nott points out: ‘Before the First World War, the public dancing facilities available to the working class were restricted’ and principally the domain of the upper and middle class (2002, 149-150). Palais de Danse were rapidly established in cities and towns throughout the UK, and represented a new type of venue for social dance which was large, accessible and affordable. There are several key points to note with reference to the relationship between jazz and popular culture. Firstly, one reason the ODJB were successful is that their music and presentation served to confirm ideas about jazz that had been circulating for at least two years prior to their arrival – through songs and newspaper reports, for example. Secondly, the music could only be appreciated as anything more than the latest novelty when the audience were given the opportunity to interact with it and embody it through dance, rather than merely observe it from a conventional audience position. Thirdly, the music was introduced and took root through prime mainstream locations of the variety theatre and the palais-de-danse. Quotidian, mass-market encounters with jazz took place within popular entertainment formats that developed more or less in parallel with the presence of the music on British shores, and, importantly, were present across the country, not just in London.

Although the musical style and somewhat comedic and anarchic presentation of the ODJB was initially much imitated, Dixieland jazz had quite limited appeal and was relatively short-lived as dance music in Britain. The ODJB was undoubtedly influential on the understanding of jazz, but ultimately the cultural establishment in the form of the leading hotels and restaurants and, from 1923, the BBC, had a strong influence on the way in which jazz was absorbed into the mainstream. The established traditions of the ballroom, associated ensembles and musical styles remained popular between the First and Second World Wars (and beyond), but there was a sense that jazz, as the most significant trend in popular music, could not be completely ignored by groups that played for mainstream dancing. It was the dance band, and the associated genre of ‘dance music’, that solved the problem of the adoption of jazz into mainstream popular entertainment in Britain by providing a musical accompaniment to social dance which was both accessible and up-to-date. This often meant incorporating elements of jazz into the repertoire and performance style, but still retaining a breadth of repertoire to cater for the ongoing popularity of dances such as the waltz. On the most basic level, this balance was achieved through the introduction of the saxophone into pre-existing dance bands that played in hotels, dance venues and even on transatlantic liners. In this way, jazz was integrated within the accompaniment to participatory popular culture. Indeed, the implications of the extremes of the discourse around the emergence of jazz – on one hand lowbrow music with undesirable associations with moral degeneracy, and on the other, music which deserved to be venerated as art, actually position the majority of encounters with the music into an emerging mainstream, or middlebrow, culture within which the dance bands were key.

Although indebted to American bandleader Paul Whiteman’s ‘symphonic syncopation’, the way in which jazz was adopted within British popular culture through dance bands had undeniable influence on the ways in which the genre was disseminated and absorbed in European countries and beyond in the first half of the twentieth century. Even within the UK, the dance band format had a role beyond the provision of music for dancing and influenced the soundtrack for popular entertainment more generally, as typified by the variety show. Evolving from the nineteenth century music hall, variety flourished in newly constructed theatres in the first decades of the twentieth century. Unlike American vaudeville, British variety theatres withstood the competition of cinema, running for some time in parallel with variety on radio and later, television (Double 2012, 55). Jazz formed part of the accompaniment played by a pit band for the plethora of acts which made up the bills of variety shows. Oliver Double describes the ‘ritual’ of the Monday morning band call, where each act booked for that week would have the opportunity to rehearse the music for their act, using parts which they provided, with the resident pit band (2012, 32-33). From the 1920s, dance bands were also presented as ‘acts’ on the stage. This was an obvious extension from their role as radio entertainment, where they were classified by the BBC as part of Variety, rather Music, programming.

A successful ‘band act’ would undoubtedly foreground elements of what Double (2012) has identified as the key characteristics of variety theatre: personality, participation, skill and novelty. As such, bands were required not only to present high-quality musical performances, often exhibiting skill to the level of virtuosity, but also offer something novel or distinctive, not only through musical style but also visual elements such as staging, dress and movement, the incorporation of comedy to communicate personality, and perhaps also provide opportunities for audience participation. Leading British bandleader Jack Hylton advised:

Scenic backgrounds and artistic effects are useful to a stage band, but easy good humour and a fair leavening of comedy is a necessity, because no music-hall audience can be kept serious for a long time without signs of restiveness. They pay to be entertained. (*Radio Times*, 8 February 1929:319)

Expectations and success criteria for bands on the variety stage were certainly well-established as reference points by the time Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington appeared at the London Palladium in 1932 and 1933 respectively. Indeed, the positive reception accorded to Ellington was largely due to the way in which he met and even exceeded the expectations of a ‘band act’ – good quality musical performances; visual interest (via staging, dress and additional dancers) and novelty, achieved through race and nationality, but without the extremes which many audience members detected in Armstrong’s performances. Although Armstrong’s act exhibited personality, his skill was questioned by those who were unused to an uninhibited solo jazz artist as an act, and his performance was so novel as to appear threatening to some British audience members. This is a clear demonstration of the need to keep a balance of key elements, and within acceptable norms, in the variety theatre context. (Parsonage-Tackley 2005, 235-238).

By the mid-1920s jazz was firmly established within mainstream popular culture both as an accompaniment for participative dancing and on the stage to be observed. Today, jazz continues to be encountered in contemporary versions of these situations and thus their aesthetic – to encourage participation and to provide entertainment - plays an important part in the way in which jazz is presented in popular culture. Some examples include the talent show and karaoke, extending to TV formats such as *X-Factor*, which often includes a ‘big band week’ almost as a rite of passage for aspiring pop artists, and social dance; writ large on our screens in the form of *Come Dancing* and latterly *Strictly Come Dancing*. Two relatively recent forays into jazz repertoire and performance style by British pop singers Annie Lennox and Robbie Williams can be understood in terms of continuing this lineage of jazz in popular culture. Both albums were launched with live shows situated specifically within variety environments: Robbie Williams’ *Swings Both Ways* (2013) was accompanied by a concert staged at the London Palladium, established as the country’s leading variety theatre in the 1920s under the directorship of George Black. Following the release of her album *Nostalgia* in 2014. Lennox presented ‘An Evening of Nostalgia’ recorded at the Orpheum Theater, Los Angeles – constructed in the 1920s as part of the Orpheum vaudeville circuit. Beyond this obvious physical positioning, the variety aesthetic permeates the approach of both artists to jazz.

The repertoire of Williams’ album moves away from the Sinatra-dominated track list of his previous swing album, but, not unlike Sinatra’s later career, branches out into other types of song and includes many duets with arguably more ‘hip’ artists such as Lily Allen, Olly Murs and Rufus Wainwright as a way of continuing to address a young pop music audience in an attempt to secure universal appeal, key to any mainstream entertainment product. The novelty, entertainment aspects of jazz are referenced through songs which are already well-established in popular culture, and as such invite audience participation, including ‘I Wanna Be Like You’ from Disney’s *The Jungle Book* and ‘If I Only Had a Brain’ from *The Wizard of Oz* and in particular, Cab Calloway’s ‘Minnie the Moocher’ which involves call-and-response. The production and orchestration of the album are lavish, adhering to the high production values of pop. Jazz credentials are foregrounded in the presentation, although balanced across the album by self-referential original songs such as ‘No one likes a fat pop star’ which appear to offer an insight into Williams’s personality. Particularly interesting is a swing version of Williams’ hit ‘Supreme’ from his 2000 album *Sing When You’re Winning*. Whereas the original was positioned firmly in the pop canon, especially by the interpolation of the string countermelody line from Glora Gaynor’s ‘I will survive’ and a retro-styled music video; ‘Swing Supreme’, follows the model of Paul Anka’s 2005 *Rock Swings* album, in which pop-rock classics from the 1980s and 1990s are reinterpreted in a swing-jazz style. ‘Supreme’ is repositioned perhaps rather crudely but unequivocally as a jazz standard mostly via the sonic reference points in the accompaniment (William’s vocal delivery on ‘Swing Supreme’ is actually very similar to the original). These include the sounds of ‘cool’ modal jazz, Hammond organ, big band, and strings – the addition of which has often signified attempts to position jazz in the mainstream (see Howland 2012). These sounds reference a history of jazz which together with the reinterpretation of his own song, within an overall context of variety entertainment, imbue the track with nostalgia.

Annie Lennox approaches the genre in a rather different way, stripping back key standards from the Great American Songbook. Many of the songs – ‘Memphis in June’, ‘Georgia on my Mind’, and ‘Summertime’ - reference the American South and the African America experience, implying famous recorded versions by African American singers. A particular example of this is Lennox’s version of ‘Strange Fruit’, a protest song against racism and lynching, most famously recorded by Billie Holiday. The song required special treatment when Holiday sang it in her shows in New York’s Café Society in the 1930s – an important integrated venue that sought to spotlight African American talent. Owner Barney Josephson insisted on stillness and quiet as the song as Holiday performed the song as her final number, leaving the stage without any encores (Margolick 2000). Lennox’s version is positioned more reassuringly in the centre of her album, which closes with an oddly upbeat, cabaret-style version of Duke Ellington’s ‘Mood Indigo’. Her version of ‘Strange Fruit’ is framed by warm flutes and piano, and then strings which underplay the raw bluesiness of the original in the interests of the nostalgia concept. In this context, the idea of nostalgia sits somewhat uneasily with the racial implications of this appropriation, a theme which Washburne explores in relation to Kenny G’s mainstream success with ‘smooth jazz’ in which, Washburne argues, he appropriates not only the African American musical material but the audience too, giving rise to claims that he is not only inauthentic but highly problematic as an artist (2004, 135). This is not, of course, to imply that those listening to Lennox’s ‘Strange Fruit’ would necessarily be aware of the recorded history of the song, but as evidence of the ways in which jazz material is shaped in order to enter the mainstream.

Lennox’s album foregrounds a general sense of cultural nostalgia whereas Williams is more obviously self-referential (as with his previous swing album)[[2]](#endnote-2), but both effectively utilise jazz within a historically-rooted, but still relevant, variety context as a way of positioning and historicising themselves within a lineage of mainstream popular music. Like dance bands, manifestations of jazz in the shape of these albums by Williams and Lennox are rather easily dismissed by scholars and critics alike because of their mainstream appeal and success. And like dance bands, I argue for their fundamental importance in creating and reinforcing public ideas of jazz. These interpretations give some idea about the continuation of an image of jazz in the public eye which certainly involves novelty, comedy and entertainment but also, something more serious and, through nostalgia, profoundly historical. This blend offers a stark contrast with the way in which the genre is often understood within the jazz establishment as an ever-changing music at the cutting edge of musical development.

Long established popular entertainment structures were instrumental to the importation of jazz to Britain around the end of the First World War, but also to the way in which it became established as a part of the popular entertainment of the day. Although in time alternative structures – venues, Rhythm Clubs, record labels, magazines, critics and fans – provided a backdrop for jazz to be presented, received and critiqued as ‘art’ music, the parallel continuation and development of the original popular entertainment modes, particularly variety, allowed jazz to continue to play a part in the popular culture of this country until the present day.

This chapter has shown that by moving away from definitions of jazz imposed by those with vested interests and inherent bias towards a greater recognition of the nature of public encounters with the music can expose its continued relevance within popular culture. In particular, by focussing on popular entertainment formats such as the variety show, the approaches to jazz by popular musicians and the public understanding of the genre can be understood. Just as Frith argued for popular music studies to take account of jazz, so must scholars and ‘insiders’ take account of the wider impact and role of jazz within popular culture, as much as an idea as a musical form, in order to develop a real understanding of its relevance historically and today.

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1. Wall identifies *Under Milk Wood* as ideal for this purpose due to ‘a synthesis of absorbed American influences and elements of British culture in English pianist Tracy’s composition; inspired by a BBC radio play written by ‘the nation’s best known poet’, Welshman Dylan Thomas; and executed by the established partnership of Tracy and saxophonist Bobby Wellins, who draws on the romantic influences of his Scottish music heritage.’ (2009, 151) [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. The title ‘Swings Both Ways’ alludes to ongoing speculation about Williams’s sexuality which the star has both fuelled and refuted. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)