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reviews:

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POP MUSIC AND THE BLUES by Richard Middleton.

Gollancz, 1972. £4.00

There are very few fields of human endeavour which escape the academic study machine, particularly that in America, so it is surprising how few books have been available which deal seriously with the various forms of popular music, especially when so much has developed in the U.S.A. But the industry is starting up. Most of the books cited in Richard Middleton's useful bibliography have been written in the 60s, and it is the emergence of pop music (from Rock 'n' Roll on) at this very time which is the subject of his book. Possibly it will prove to be one of the first outcomes of a much needed closer study in both musical and sociological terms of blues, jazz, and pop in the U.S.A. and the rest of the world; it will certainly be a useful reference book and starting-point.

Obviously the result of a lot of work and much synthesis on the author's part, the book is inclined to read like that. In five chapters, Dr. Middleton has to cover all aspects of the blues from origins in Africa through its beginnings amongst the American slaves to its three main historical styles as he sees them: the earliest form, country blues; city blues (from the first move to the towns up to modern exponents); and the sophisticated tradition (such as the work of B.B. King, Kansas City blues, and soul). Dr. Middleton's summary of this complicated subject is by the far the best I have read - it is provocative but compelling in argument on the sociological aspects, and information to the layman on the technical and musical sides. But so often a series of brief points, conclusions and summaries makes one cry out for more detail, more musical examples, more evidence of his conclusions. Certainly he points to the available records of the music - writing blues down evaporates its essence - and one is driven to them to hear just what he is talking about - but this section could really have made a book on its own. I am not being quite fair to a serious study of the blues when I add that it is strange to read a book about such people as Robert Johnson, Lightnin' Hopkins, Bessie Smith, Big Bill Broonzy, and Muddy Waters, and to feel that somehow they have been finally laid to rest - they usually come across so live!

The second half of the book deals with pop: Rock 'n' Roll, "two attempts at synthesis" (Merseyside and Dylan), Rhythm 'n' Blues, Soul, and some later manifestations (up to the time of Sergeant Pepper only). Dr. Middleton is of course concerned with the aspects of pop music which have come through from the blues. But once again, one feels that he has to have rather a lot to one side, including much mention of the other, considerable, influences on pop music. He discusses sensibly, however, the relationships between the essentially negro blues and the white teenager, and his reasons for the emergence of modern pop at all. It is pleasing to see him put the effects of commercialism firmly in their place, a subject which over-colours much discussion of pop music. As in the blues section much of the musical discussion is a bit of a Cook's Tour through the 'standards' of well-known groups, and expects an intimate knowledge of their work.

Dr. Middleton's conclusion is that in embracing the blues, with its roots in the non-Western world, pop music has learnt a contact with both Western and non-Western cultural tradition. He sees the more recent developments which include elements of many styles - Indian and modern African music, electronic, classical and folk music, reggae etc. - as possibly "a prelude to the appearance of a world-wide popular musical culture". This sounds rather a horrifying idea in musical terms - a kind of muzak - and I wonder if the present rather stereotyped pop music styles represent a marking-time before some new synthesis does arrive with a similar explosion to that of Elvis or the Beatles: but on the other hand Dr. Middleton has shown me just how derivative both these "white" styles are of a far more primeval tradition.

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