

JUKE BOX BRITAIN.
AMERICANISATION AND YOUTH CULTURE,
1945–60

ADRIAN HORN

Reviewed by Christoph Hilgert

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John Lennon's prominent saying that "before Elvis, there was nothing" could lead to the mistaken assumption that Great Britain owes its post-war popular culture predominantly to some kind of 'pop-cultural development aid' from the United States of America; especially because this statement seems to confirm the prevalent criticism of 'Americanisation' in the post-war period. By exploring the dissemination of the juke box and of teenage culture in Great Britain between 1945 and 1960, Adrian Horn's „Juke box Britain“, however, clarifies that British society was influenced, but not fully shaped, by American popular culture.

The study defies the simplistic notion of 'Americanisation' as a kind of unilateral cultural imperialism and instead identifies a comprehensive process of cultural transition characterized by an amalgamation of American and British cultural practices. There was, for example, an independent juke box industry in Great Britain coming up with unique industrial designs. Furthermore, the study rejects stereotypes of a homogeneous British post-war teenage culture and reveals significant regional and social differences in and modifications of youthful dress styles and leisure activities.

Horn's carefully argued and well-written study is based on a wide range of primary sources, including articles and advertisement in trade papers, local and national newspapers, magazines and periodicals, Mass-Observation reports, survey data, oral testimonies, contemporary photographs of Manchester street life, memoirs and fiction. Although Horn, a Honorary Research Associate at the Department of History at Lancaster University, and Associate Lecturer in Social Sciences with the Open University, does not "aspire primarily to take forward theoretical debates on culture" (p.6) his interpretation is inspired by the theoretical thoughts of the leading authorities in the field of popular culture. In particular, he questions the work of Raymond Williams and the Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) and enriches it with Gramsci's model of cultural hegemony and Pierre Bourdieu's theory of 'public taste' and 'fine-grained distinctions'. This theoretical framework helps Horn to analyse his manifold material and to challenge prevalent stereotypes of 'Americanized' cultural life in the post-war period.

The first part of the book deals with the parameters of "British acceptance and resistance to American popular culture" in the first half of the twentieth century and is particularly concerned with the genesis of 'modern' dance music and juke box business. Although there was vociferous criticism of America's influence from conservatives as well as leftist intellectuals like Frank Raymond Leavis, Richard Hoggart or Colin McInnes, Horn highlights "a massive popular acceptance" (p. 3) of American popular music. In fact, the intellectual rejection of the USA is a sign of a struggle between low-brow and high-brow culture.

Horn is foremost interested in the dissemination of the juke box in Great Britain in the post-war era. There were less than 100 juke boxes in 1945, albeit more than 13,000 could be found in 1958. Spreading from fairgrounds and seaside resorts to milk bars and cafés in cities and towns all over Britain, the development of the 'coin-operated phonograph' serves Horn as symbol and signifier of the comprehensive social and cultural transformation that altered British society in the period between 1945 and 1960. The juke box offered access to light dance music and helped to bypass the BBC's ignorance towards American music and thus played an important role in the diffusion of jazz and rock'n'roll and the emergence of a distinctive teenage culture – in the USA as well as in Great Britain (or other European countries).

Tracing the parameters Britain's indigenous juke box industry and the manifold economic and legal restrictions during its development during the 1950s, Horn clarifies in a rich illustrated chapter that there was in fact very little of the alleged American influence on technical features and design until the late 1950s.

The second part of Horn's book is dedicated to a more general investigation of the developments in British youth culture in the 1950s. "Juke box Britain" offers here a convincing synopsis and review of the current research. In accordance with John Springhall, Bill Osgerby, David Fowler – and more recently backed by Jon Savage's "Teenage" – Horn emphasizes that distinctive teenage cultures had clearly been emerging before rock'n'roll started to spread around the world. Analysing the youthful dress styles and leisure time activities of teenage boys and girls Horn demonstrates furthermore that "with the exception of American rock'n'roll music young people were not overly influenced by American popular culture" (p. 1). Also, the study detects "strong regional variations" (p. 4) and pinpoints a Southeast England or London bias in previous research on British youth culture by Dick Hebdige and the CCCS. Even though new sub-cultural styles had been spreading rapidly across the country and social classes, the 'dandified' Teddy Boy or Girl strolling along London's streets differed significantly from their respective counterparts in England's north.

Especially instructive are the likewise richly illustrated chapters about teenage girls, who have been hitherto largely overlooked, and about the development of venues for the 'unorganised' youth. Amusement arcades, milk and coffee bars – places where usually a juke box could be found in those days – "were ideal meeting places and areas for courtship and male display" (p. 176) especially because "young people were distanced from the parental gaze" (p. 177) and subsequently became epicentres of teenage culture.

Horn repeatedly reminds readers of film, press and radio as powerful vehicles of youthful styles and practices besides music and juke boxes, but these thoughts should have been made more systematic. Horn mentions in passing that "[b]efore

World War II youth cultures like the Teds would have remained local", yet "with an increase in media coverage and subsequent public interest and concern" youthful sub-cultures could spread to other regions (p. 131). Indeed, the increasing cultural effects of mass media are crucial for the widespread dissemination of distinctive youth cultures and need further attention in future research. Especially because the post-war transformation of youth culture, the rejection of 'Americanisation' and the moral panic about the 'Teddy boy problem' was not limited to Great Britain, these issues need to be explored in a broader, transnational context. Overall, "Juke box Britain" offers outstanding contributions to cultural and design history as well as Cultural Studies, and to the (pre-)history of the teenage culture in the 1950s and 1960s.