

Book REVIEWS

Alpha Boys School: Cradle of Jamaican Music

Heather Augustyn & Adam Reeves

Half Pint Press (297 pages)

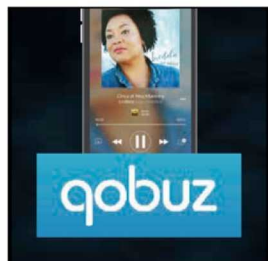
★★★★★

The story of the school that shaped Jamaican music



Existing in Kingston, Jamaica, for over a century as a school for wayward boys, the Alpha is run by Catholic nuns who have long encouraged their charges to participate in sports and to learn to play a musical instrument. The mix of discipline, solid musical education and religion has helped shape many of Jamaica's most famous musicians and this book, written by an American academic and an Australian record collector, aims to champion the foremost talents who came through Alpha. The authors do this commendably with individual profiles of dozens of musicians, many of whom, like Don Drummond, Joe Harriott and Rico Rodriguez, achieved considerable acclaim in their lifetimes. Others, such as Eddie Tan Tan, are still playing in London while the pioneering dancehall star Yellowman remains a popular entertainer.

Both of the authors love Jamaican music and approach their subjects with knowledge and enthusiasm: they have tried to interview as many surviving musicians as possible. The fact that there are two authors and their near-worship of The Skatalites – the brilliant ska band who featured four Alpha graduates and brought jazz chops to ska sessions – means there is a tendency to repeat certain information. A tighter edit and a little more emphasis on production and design would have made this a stronger tome. And investigating just how strict Alpha's discipline actually was would have made for less of a gloss. Still, in telling the stories of musicians who have gone on to play major roles in



making music in Jamaica, the UK, the US, Canada and the West Indies, this book stands as a welcome addition.

GARTH CARTWRIGHT

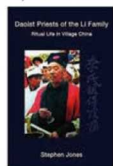
Daoist Priests of the Li Family: Ritual Life in Village China

Stephen Jones

Three Pines Press (410 pages)

★★★★★

Life and work in rural China



This is an immensely rich but readable book of many facets: a history of a family facing the vicissitudes of 20th-century China; a detailed record of local Daoist rituals, paintings, halls and texts; a vivid description of everyday rural life; and a witty account of the friendship between a London violinist and Li Manshan, an eighth-generation hereditary priest. The latter is a 'dour, chain-smoking North Chinese peasant' who 'embodies all the arcane ritual knowledge' accumulated over centuries.

One key aspect of this ritual knowledge is music: hymns and percussion interludes played on an array of gongs, drums and cymbals; and *shengguan* instrumental ensemble pieces, played on mouth organs, short *guanzi* (oboes), and bamboo flutes. Analyses of the rituals, texts and music are tucked away in separate chapters. Despite these having exotic titles such as 'Mantra to Smash the Hells' or 'Yellow Dragon Thrice Transforms its Body', Jones' book is not about sage mystics of yore or ancient rituals but about Li and his band's everyday working lives – as shopkeepers, migrant workers and as ritual disciples and masters appeasing gods, writing talismans, choosing auspicious dates and sites, and conducting funerals.

Jones has been visiting the poor county of Yanggao since 1991, when he first heard Li Manshan's father, Li Qing, a renowned priest and musician. Jones has returned repeatedly since then, staying with Li Manshan to study his music, and has accompanied Manshan's group on tours of Europe and the US. His account is peppered with gossip, anecdote and jokes from these trips.

There are tens of thousands of hereditary ritual families, like Li's, making music throughout China. Jones has recorded many, and his blog is a wonderful place to explore these and other Chinese musical traditions. You can find there his recordings of

Li's band and a documentary film, *Li Manshan: Portrait of a Folk Daoist*.

ROWAN PEARSE

The Fall of Athens

Gail Holst-Warhaft

Fomite pages (308 pages)

★★★★★

Cultural highs and political lows in modern Greece



Some readers may recognise Gail Holst-Warhaft's name: she is the author of *Road to Rembetika*, which introduced that music to an overseas audience. Like many foreigners who arrived during the 1960s and afterwards, this Australian was drawn into Greece by its people, language and music – especially the interaction of melody and lyrics, the word *melopiisi* meaning poetry set to music. She has ably translated various Greek poets, including the works of the notoriously difficult Nikos Kavadias, and has written extensively about composer Mikis Theodorakis, besides playing harpsichord with his touring band, which performed the first *melopiisi* of Aristophanes at ancient Epidavros.

The Fall of Athens chronicles those Athenian musicians and poets who opened doors to Holst-Warhaft. From 1959 onwards, Theodorakis successfully merged high and low culture: poetry by leftist Ritsos and Nobel laureates Seferis and Elytis with *bouzouki* music and the voices of Maria Farandouri, Petros Pandis, Manos Katrakis and Grigoris Bithikotsis, transcending Greek political divides. During a 1975 tour, enthusiastic audiences charged the stage, oblivious to cables; one later performance of playwright Iakovos Kambanelli's oratorio *Mauthausen* garnered more subdued acclamation. *Rebetika* guru Thanassis of Aegina, Kavadias' sister Jenia, and folk-music educator Mariza Koch also feature prominently. Exceptionally penetrating discussions dissect the function of dance, mermaids in folklore and village funerary laments.

And why the 'fall' in the title? Poems – by Gail Holst-Warhaft and others – compare ancient crises, especially the Peloponnesian War, to our times: homelessness and hunger on a scale unknown since the first winter of Axis occupation, political meltdown and Greece's perennial bullying by outsiders.

MARC DUBIN

Going for a Song: A Chronicle of the UK Record Shop

Garth Cartwright

Flood Gallery Publishing (282 pages)

★★★★★

Rise and fall of the record shop



The invention of the 78rpm record came around the start of the 20th century, which ended with the advent of the digital download. In

between, the record shop became the nation's most vital youth club, where information was exchanged, tribes were formed and the power of music to define our lives was celebrated. Noting that the role of record retailing as a cultural signifier has been surprisingly neglected in 'official' social history, Cartwright has set out to write the first comprehensive account of the birth and near-death of the high street record shop. There are interviews with many of the key players, but this is far more than an oral history and cogently seeks to place the record shop in its wider social, political, commercial and cultural context. In the course of his research, Cartwright has uncovered some extraordinary stories. How many readers knew that Levy's in Whitechapel was operating as the UK's first world music record store, selling Russian and Polish recordings to a multicultural East End almost a century ago?

Cartwright explores the history of specialist shops in every genre, the rise of the second-hand market and the cachet of imports and bootlegs. He evokes a lost world of WH Smith listening booths and then tells the story of how, circa 1970, Richard Branson and Virgin updated the concept with floor cushions and giant headphones. Along the way he recalls a litany of half-forgotten names from Dobell's and Transat to Beano's and Hip City. Some may criticise the focus as London-centric. Yet, with notable exceptions such as Brian Epstein's NEMS shop in Liverpool and Birmingham's reggae emporia in the 70s, the capital is where most of the UK's cutting-edge action took place.

The back-cover blurb bravely claims the book charts not only the rise and fall of the record shop but its 'rebirth'. Sadly, the latter is little more than wishful thinking. But that takes nothing away from a book that serves as a vital 'lost' history of a phenomenon that was once so central to our lives.

NIGEL WILLIAMSON