

*Blue Smoke: The Lost Dawn of New Zealand Popular Music 1918–1964*. By Chris Bourke. Auckland University Press, Auckland, 2010. 392pp. NZ price: \$55.99. ISBN 978-1-86940-455-0.

'MUSIC FOR MORONS' is how A.R.D. Fairburn described 'swing', the musical genre so popular with New Zealanders in the 1930s and 1940s. He deplored this kind of music as 'evidence of the decay of sensibility, and the spread of barbarism'.<sup>1</sup> Since that time, historians have implicitly endorsed Fairburn's dismissal of popular music as a topic worthy of scholarly investigation. Thus W.H. Oliver's study of postwar cultural history assumed that 'culture' was 'high' culture, the preserve of privileged elites. Literature meant Curnow, not Crump; music meant symphonies, not soul.<sup>2</sup> And as late as 2009 *The New Oxford History of New Zealand* neglected the central role that performing, dancing and listening to popular music played in personal, family and community life in twentieth-century New Zealand. It has taken almost seven decades after Fairburn's acerbic judgment for a comprehensive and meticulously researched history of popular music to be published.

This regrettable lacuna in New Zealand's historiography has been filled by the publication of Chris Bourke's *Blue Smoke*. As its author makes clear, this is primarily a music history rather than a social or cultural history. 'It concentrates on the people who made music and their connections, the changes to the way the music sounds, how it was created and enjoyed.' Consequently, his examination of the social and cultural contexts of popular music and their significance is comparatively understated, although these contexts' outlines are subtly delineated.

Bourke's history can be read as a counterpoint to another fine study of New Zealand music, Allan Thomas's *Music is Where You Find It*, which investigated the state of music and music-making in Hawera in 1946.<sup>3</sup> Although one investigates a half-century and a nation, and the other one year and a Taranaki town, both books are equally valuable in their depictions of the New Zealand music scene and its societal and cultural significance. *Blue Smoke* also acts as a more detailed, extended supplement to two other studies of the nation's popular music. In *Counting the Beat* Gordon Spittle used his knowledge of New Zealand's popular musicians and musical genres to investigate the origins and composition of popular New Zealand songs.<sup>4</sup> John Dix's exuberant *Stranded in Paradise: New Zealand Rock 'n' Roll, 1955–1988* threw an erratic but revealing light on New Zealanders' appropriation of that particular American genre.<sup>5</sup>

*Blue Smoke* differs from these three histories in that its sweepingly panoramic scope is underwritten by a detailed examination of a comprehensive range of archival resources. The impressive tensile strength of the narrative rests on solid evidentiary foundations. Bourke provides the reader with a cornucopia of visual, aural and textual archival discourses. The section on big band music during World War II, for example, contains photos from several private collections, the Alexander Turnbull Library and the Radio New Zealand Sound Archives. He provides further insights into that music by using a dance ticket, a record label, interviews, reminiscences, and newspaper and magazine excerpts, as well as a Cabinet memo, to support his arguments. Here, as throughout this history, the author's encyclopedic knowledge and technical expertise reside unobtrusively in the background.

A crucial factor in *Blue Smoke*'s readability is Bourke's success in ensuring that neither the book's narrative thrust nor its careful elucidation of key themes is overwhelmed by a mass of detail. This is partly the result of the author's decision to structure his book into six chapters, arranged chronologically around key themes. These include jazz in the 1920s, the dance era of the 1930s, the postwar local recording industry, and the rock and pop scene of the 1950s. The value of the final section is slightly diminished by a rather perfunctory treatment of the impact of soul, boogie-woogie and rhythm-and-blues

during the seminal years of 1955–1957. Various genres such as folk music, Hawaiian and country, along with cabarets and dance-halls, are discussed within these chapters. Bourke also enhances the reader's understanding by including vignettes which exemplify the musical trends under discussion. Thus he employs the fascinating musical career of the Maori–Lebanese musician Epi Shalfoon to explain the role of interwar radio in disseminating musical styles and techniques, the wide appeal of dance band music to Auckland sophisticates and Opotiki swing enthusiasts alike, and the entrepreneurial skills required to run a dance band from the 1920s to the 1950s.

Certain *leitmotifs* dominate Bourke's history. He shows that America, not Britain, provided the chief sources of New Zealand's popular music during the period. He constantly demonstrates the centrality of the Māori and Pasifika contribution to New Zealand popular music, especially in performance, recording and composition. Most importantly, Bourke shows that popular music provided New Zealanders with an inclusive social and cultural concourse. Here men and women of all races, ages and social status could listen, sing, dance, and make music and romance. Popular music was a source of communal and inter-racial cohesion that gave people pleasure and enjoyment during years of war and social and economic turmoil.

The wider implications of these themes are significant. According to James Belich, New Zealand in this period was at the zenith of a process of recolonisation. London was 'the cultural capital of New Zealand'.<sup>6</sup> Yet Bourke's research establishes that in terms of popular music, New Zealand was undergoing cultural *decolonisation* from Britain. *Blue Smoke*'s evidence also undermines the longstanding stereotype of interwar and mid-century New Zealanders as a dull, puritanical and somnolent lot, whose desiccated social and cultural persona reflected an essential bleakness and bitterness of spirit. It is impossible to reconcile this construction with the people who inhabit Bourke's history. His sources reveal an energetic, resourceful and cheerful public, diverse in its social and racial composition, possessing variegated and inclusive musical (and social) tastes, quick to admire those perceived as possessing special musical talents. There is a fundamental divergence between them and the mythical public fabricated by an embittered cultural clerisy who projected their own cultural and political ideologies and personal insecurities on the wider population.

*Blue Smoke* casts new light on some key historiographical issues and provides a useful model for future scholars. More importantly, it reveals the significance of a neglected feature of our shared cultural history, while celebrating the men and women whose musicianship provided so much pleasure for their wider publics.

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#### NOTES

- 1 A.R.D. Fairburn, 'Music For Morons', *Music Ho!* June–July 1945, pp.2–3.
- 2 W.H. Oliver, 'The Awakening Imagination', in W.H. Oliver, ed., *The Oxford History of New Zealand*, Auckland, 1981, ch.16.
- 3 Allan Thomas, *Music is Where You Find It: Music in the Town of Hawera, 1946: An Historical Ethnography*, Wellington, 2004.
- 4 Gordon Spittle, *Counting the Beat*, Wellington, 1997.
- 5 John Dix, *Stranded in Paradise: New Zealand Rock 'n' Roll, 1955–1988*, 2nd edn., Auckland, 2005.
- 6 James Belich, *Paradise Reforged: A History of the New Zealanders From the 1880s to the Year 2000*, Auckland, 2001, p.30.