

The Beatles and the Historians: an Analysis of Writing about the Fab Four.

By Erin Torlkelson Weber. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2016. 258 pp. ISBN: 978-1-4766-6266-4

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Reviewing *The Cambridge Companion to the Beatles* in this journal (Frith 2012), and armed with 'the prejudices of a sociologist' (p. 314), Simon Frith found most of its essays 'in essence, opinion pieces based on an impressive (if received) knowledge of the Beatles' lives and works but not really presenting original research' (p. 313). 'The academic strategy', no less, 'should be to treat the Beatles like any other cultural phenomenon, as an effect of historical forces – social, technological and musical' (p. 313). The first 'scholarly consequence' of this strategy would be 'to rethink the Beatles historically', for 'no act following them would have the same disjunctions between live and studio activity, between being musical mercenaries and original artists, between localised and global fame, between rock and pop stardom' (p. 313). Four distinct disjunctions, count them.

Erin Torlkelson Weber's book is assuredly an effort of historical rethinking, but now as historiography rather than history *per se*. This is not the familiar story, from St Peter's garden fête to the rooftop of Apple Studios, but a detailed account and critical interpretation of how the story has been told. Four 'narratives' are found which engender chapters: 'the Fab Four', which is the version presented while the band existed, and including Hunter Davies's 'authorized biography' of 1968; '*Lennon Remembers*', which emanates from the 1970 Jann Wenner interview with John Lennon and Yoko Ono; '*Shout!*', emanating from Philip Norman's 1981 'true story'; and finally 'Lewisohn', which arises from Mark Lewisohn's work published from 1986 to 2013 and *Tune In*. Far from attending to these books alone, however, the author digests swathes of Beatles bibliography. They're all here: Maureen Cleave, Ray Connolly, Wilfrid Mellers, Albert Goldman, *Revolution in the Head*, the *Anthology*, memoirs galore. You name it, she's read it.

Reflecting the historian's stance, character and circumstance is Weber's prime concern. Analogies with historical events are sometimes made, with World War I regularly, the American Civil War and, for Yoko Ono, Cleopatra. The Beatles' works are rarely the point and purpose, although we are soon assured that 'Lady Madonna' prompted differing interpretations (pp. 10–11). However, Weber does at one point insist on the importance of musical knowledge, with a calm certainty that even in a Music Department I should be wary of parading: 'we can conclude that biographers who have trained in music or who have received musical educations provide more informed and therefore credible interpretations of the band's catalogue than those without such training' (p. 124). Giddy with such approbation, however, Walter Everett might have expected more than his one fleeting reference (at p. 126) for his 888 pages and two volumes of hard labour in *The Beatles*' mine. I noted two margins where the book's textual absence peeks through. One is the discussion of Lennon's coruscating 'How do you sleep?' on *Imagine*, which is evaluated hardly as a musical work effective or otherwise, but partly for its 'accuracy' (p. 92): that is, whether Lennon was correct or incorrect in the song's depiction of McCartney. It's interesting too that the *Beatles Anthology* of 2000 is examined as book and film documentary, but not as a series of carefully constructed sound recordings issued on CD: I distinctly remember first hearing 'Eleanor Rigby' as strings alone on the second collection as a revelation in the head, and enjoy its reappearance on the *Love* remix

album of 2006. Finally on this point about textual emphasis (and see Frith p. 312), and again somewhat peripherally to the book's chief concerns, the Beatles' words as words are rarely mentioned.

A meticulous examination of Beatles literature, then, the book is also a kind of introductory course in the study of historiography, and I can well imagine it being usefully employed just so. Historians stand behind the book, like craggy Cumbrian mountains towering over authors persevering away, down below, like solitary rambblers and farmers. Indeed it takes all of 166 pages for the award to be made of 'the first Beatles biography that qualifies as a work of history' (and the winner is ... Mark Herstgaard for *A Day in the Life!*). Weber sometimes rounds off her patient accounts with a historian's proverbial wisdom. Here's John Lewis Gaddis – 'It is part of growing up to learn that there are competing versions of the truth, and that you yourself must choose which to embrace' (p. 50); Richard Marius – 'an honest essay takes contradictory evidence into account' (p. 185); a hero of the book, Marc Bloch – 'There are no witnesses whose statements are equally reliable on all subjects and under all circumstances' (p. 73); and Lewis Gaddis once more – 'History is filled with examples of people making irrational rather than rational choices based on inaccurate rather than accurate information' (p. 61).

Holding these truths to be self-evident, and objectivity the aim, Beatles scholarship becomes a long and winding road to the condition or necessity of Mark Lewisohn. Lewisohn's work triumphs, among other reasons, by being merely late in itself, by undertaking heroic labours in archives, by being musically informed (as suggested by his earlier book on recording sessions), by being even-handed in the allocation of praise and blame among the protagonists and, being late, by taking other authors' work into account. This is surely a salutary lesson. Type away as much as you like, it says to the budding biographer or chronicler, but one day you'll have to measure up to the standards of historical inquiry. Ending at pp. 212–3 with two paragraphs that sound like weighty gongs at the end of a four-movement symphony, Weber's book should be a set text for a course in popular music studies, lucidly demonstrating an approach transferable to the reception history of any number of artist studies.

Yet even so, a fifth disjunction that Simon Frith could have suggested of The Beatles is an old favourite of his, that they were caught between the ordinary and the extraordinary and, in *The Beatles and the Historians*, as early as p. 10, the word 'genius' puts in its typically hard shift as one of two 'great debates in Beatles historiography' (the other is the group's dissolution). As ever, we're never too sure what genius means, let alone what's meant when it's ascribed, by George Martin for example, at p. 100: in one consistent path of the book it means an openness to wacky sounds, the 1960s *avant-garde*. In the case of Lennon especially, an extraordinary fellow no doubt, historical method results in the gradual recognition and challenge of characteristics like vanity, venality, competitiveness, saying one thing and doing another, dreamy nonsense and sheer bitchiness (especially towards You Know Who). 'Are we not men?', the new-wavers used to say, 'We are Devo!' Yet aren't all of those elements part of the pop deal and its extraordinary nature, and where the extraordinary can have dangerous ties to the irrational? Aesthetic agendas knock around that are deep and important and formative parts of what makes a pop act, or indeed any art work, attractive in the first place, so that historians realise something is important only because people stick their necks out early on in an act's life: see for example Weber's typically careful attention to Michael Braun's

1964 *Love Me Do* (pp. 33–4). The message to young or keen writers remains: never mind what might be established in 50 years, turn up on a wet Monday to see a new band where, if one of the band looks and sounds great, and talks bollocks, even better. Keep writing, and writing as well as you can: Gilbert Garraghan may well have thought that ‘literary quality, however desirable in itself, belongs to the accidentals, not to the essentials of history’ (p. 209), but don’t worry about that. Leave it to the historians.

Dai Griffiths

Oxford Brookes University
dmgriffiths@brookes.ac.uk

Reference

Frith, S. 2012. ‘Review of Kenneth Womack (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to the Beatles* (2011)’, *Popular Music*, 31/2, pp. 312–4

Editors’ note

Opinions aired in the reviews section belong to the reviewers, who are also responsible for the accuracy of their reviews. We regret that we are unable to enter into correspondence about reviews.