

Novara, Vincent J. "Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock 'N' Roll," Monograph. *Notes*, Music Library Association, September 2014, Volume 71, No. 1. Book review.

Before Elvis: The Prehistory of Rock 'n' Roll. By Larry Birnbaum. Lanham, MD: The Scarecrow Press, 2013. [x, 463 p. ISBN 9780810886285. \$40.]

There is no facet of rock music – musical, cultural, or linguistic – that is too small for contemplation by Larry Birnbaum in his impressive, if not exhaustive, *Before Elvis: The Pre-History of Rock 'N' Roll*. He sets out to prove the actual roots of rock occur not in the commonly propagated postwar rhythm and blues, or even the Delta blues tradition, but rather originating in an amalgamation of “Jazz, hokum, boogie-woogie, mambo, calypso... everything from Mexican folk music to grand opera” (pg. 380), as well as minstrelsy and western swing. As such, his argument further rallies against the notion that Elvis Presley was the first white musician to adopt African American musical practices authentically, instead contending the assimilation “by whites is virtually the story of American popular music, from the eighteenth century onward” (p. 23). By wandering through the history of American popular music (and European, to a much smaller degree), he traces back farther into prewar music history than most rock surveys, gathering a wider array of the elements informing rock’s evolution, while concurrently examining the biographical history of artists and their key songs – no matter how obscure. The result is a thorough study of the details and underreported stories coalescing to make rock what it is, even today, presented topically with only fleeting attention to chronology.

Birnbaum, perhaps best known as a longtime *Down Beat* contributor, delivers his argument in the “Introduction,” where he discards notions that rock was a “bolt from the blue, an overnight revolution provoked by the bland pop that preceded it and the white appropriation of music that had previously been played only by and for blacks” (p. vii). He further asserts the “first wave of rock ‘n’ roll had all but ended by the time young whites discovered the music and claimed it as their own” (p. ix). He offers the story of Little Richard’s classic hit “Keep on Knockin’” (1957) to illustrate his thesis, conjointly previewing his method of choice. Here he sprints backwards through rock’s entire evolution contemplating seven versions of the song, arriving at its earliest incarnation just after 1900.

Chapters are cleverly named for a song embodying the idiom or musical element under consideration. The first, “That’s All Right,” begins in 1953 with Presley’s career, and Sun Records’ attempt to offer the “Negro sound” with a white performer. This exemplifies an early rock artist finding inspiration outside of postwar R&B, claiming Presley’s ambition was more likely as a “country-pop crooner” with “a penchant for the syrupy and maudlin” (p. 2). Indeed, he asserts Presley was actually guided towards rock by Sam Phillips (Sun Records’ owner), although Birnbaum believes rock “would probably have run a similar course without [Presley]” (p. 28). The chapter proceeds with Bill Haley, who Birnbaum believes was the originator in 1952 of the first true white rock sound with “Sundown Boogie.” He follows by dispelling the myth that “rocking” is a sexual euphemism, instead tracking the term to the 1920s as a reference to dancing.

While setting readers straight, Birnbaum also disputes the notion of rock's ascension in the 1950s signified any sort of teen revolution.

Abruptly, Birnbaum jumps to England for the second chapter, "The Train Kept A-Rollin'," with The Yardbirds' connection to the blues through this song. Many versions, and the history of the attendant artists, are evaluated, and gradually Birnbaum traces the song to its 1940s origins as "Cow Cow Boogie." He spends considerable time evaluating guitar-driven blues rockers, including "Johnnie B. Goode," but tying them back to "Cow Cow Boogie," which Birnbaum declares the "conceptual core" for "everything that follows," demonstrating "the absorption of black blues and boogie-woogie, with a country-western tinge, into the white popular mainstream" (p. 57). He returns to this song in nearly every chapter.

The earlier history of blues is the primary focus for the third chapter, "One o' Them Things!" Birnbaum begins with Big Bill Broonzy, W.C. Handy, and Jelly Roll Morton, before formally investigating the birth of blues and its lineage from many sources, including vaudeville. This discussion features a rare instance where Birnbaum employs any degree of technical explanation for musical elements – in this case the difference in scales for indigenous African music compared to Delta blues scales pre- 1920. He concludes by surmising the blues' place in rock was just as likely provided by white country music as R&B, and more importantly: "the blues does not appear to have been created by any single person or at any one place or time, nor did it emerge merely as the commercial appropriation of a folkloric idiom" (p. 92).

The fourth chapter, “The Rocks,” dives into boogie music and its characteristic walking bass line, taking it back to Ragtime music through big band jazz and hokum song. It warrants mentioning that while hokum is an understood concept, as a musical idiom it is not defined in most standard reference works; and, as hokum is essential to Birnbaum’s argument, a clearly stated definition of the term for its application here would assist readers. By the end of *Before Elvis*, however, you will know a hokum song has a twelve-bar verse-refrain form, and the lyrics are not merely hokey, but frequently ribald, racist, or sexist.

For the fifth chapter, “The Jumpin’ Jive,” Birnbaum explores jump jazz, scat, hokum jazz (including jug bands), and harmony singing groups. His analysis of hipster lingo and jive provide considerable early context for linguistic practices later adopted by rock musicians. He also elucidates the obvious rhythmic connection between jazz and rock through backbeats and shuffle rhythms. An important section of this chapter is the “Jazz-Blues Nexus,” where Birnbaum examines many obscure, yet influential, artists “overlooked by both jazz and blues historians—too coarse for jazz lovers, too commercial for blues fans”(p. 153). These are the 1930s performers that left their mark “on rhythm-and-blues and western swing, brought country blues to a more mainstream audience, and paved the way for the electrified blues of the postwar years” (p.153). That is not to say major figures from this era are ignored, with the likes of Cab Calloway, Lionel Hampton, Louis Prima, and Fats Waller receiving appropriate concentration.

Country music and western swing are scrutinized in “Get With It,” the sixth chapter. Minstrelsy, banjo music, and nineteenth century British folk song lead off before Birnbaum turns to the earliest recorded documentation of country. Again, he finds hokum song in this American music idiom, as well as the influence of early blues. Similar to his aforementioned analysis of blues, Birnbaum shows greater clarity when discussing country and western swing. His approach is more chronological, and he reviews topics so they unfurl into the next. This is best demonstrated as he works from western swing into its connection to boogie, which he brings to rockabilly, and then rock.

“Good Rockin’ Tonight,” the seventh and largest chapter, is named for a Wynonie Harris hit from 1948. With a strong backbeat and boogie bass line, it is an ideal illustration of a late 1940s popular song bridging R&B to rock. A song born in New Orleans, Birnbaum gives the city extensive consideration here, claiming R&B “may have first emerged in Los Angeles, but New Orleans R&B played a crucial part in the development of rock ‘n’ roll” (p. 319). “Honking” style saxophonists obtain premium attention – even more than guitarists – and their disparate histories are described at length. R&B women receive nearly equal coverage, primarily as singers, but also as instrumentalists. Birnbaum makes his most thorough argument about the pre-history of rock by analyzing all elements of R&B and their origins in jazz, hokum, as well as blues, further stating R&B’s early history occurred in the 1930s and blossomed in the 1940s, a decade ahead of rock.

The final chapter, "Rock Love," continues to explore R&B through a survey of singers and the white vocal groups that ushered in a new sound after Doo Wop. Finally, we reach possibly the only facet of rock Birnbaum is yet to probe: the adaptation of Caribbean musical elements. His writing on 1950s mambo exhibits both the strengths and limitations of *Before Elvis*. Page 375 alone flashes through twenty-five years of history covering eighteen artists and their Afro-Cuban-infused songs. Yet, this section features some of Birnbaum's better writing on musical characteristics originating in an influencing culture (i.e. habanera bass lines, son clave). A brief "Epilogue" follows summing up his entire case and concluding with the opinion that the "definitive study of rock 'n' roll origins has yet to be written" (p. 380).

Birnbaum utilizes all manner of primary and secondary sources: oral histories, monographs, liner notes, articles, unpublished research, etc. At times, he confesses to relying heavily on certain sources due to scarcity. An example is Arnold Shaw's *Honkers and Shouters: The Golden Years of Rhythm and Blues* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), which greatly supports Birnbaum's history of early R&B saxophonists. He is resourceful with available sources and still pieces together the story outlining his argument. However, there are odd stretches of biographical writing where sources are inconsistently identified. When presenting the history of the Delmore Brothers (page 222) their story is relayed absent any citations. Contrast this with the later discussion of Cecil Gant (page 238) where there are three citations in one paragraph. As these histories do not constitute general knowledge, this inconsistency is curious for such a detailed study.

Birnbaum is due thanks for his straightforward and clear writing style. For a work of this scope, forgoing academic prose is a benefit, even when the perpetual string of simpler sentences can make for tedious reading – especially for his lengthy lists of performers and songs. Furthermore, while the multitude of artists Birnbaum considers within each chapter is impressive, it reaches a point of diminishing returns. These two nitpicky criticisms are abetted by his enthusiastic and convincing tone.

A discography would enhance this work, or even an accompanying recording for the representative songs displaying elements that informed rock's development. For a free and useful option, consult the Internet Archive's project collecting 78s and cylinder recordings (<https://archive.org/details/78rpm>, last accessed 20 February 2014). The *American Song* database by Alexander Street Press (<http://alexanderstreet.com/products/american-song>, last accessed 20 February 2014) is also a reliable source for many of these artists. Another option for the earlier blues and jazz recordings is the recently released box set *Paramount: The Rise and Fall, Vol. I, 1917-1927* (Nashville, TN: Third Man Records, 2013). Despite this omission, *Before Elvis* will function sufficiently as a reference source with the abundant coverage of topics and deep history for all levels of artists equal to encyclopedia entries. As a text for the earliest history of rock, it will take some patience to absorb Birnbaum's evidence, or to recall the myriad of performers and songs. *Before Elvis* certainly belongs in academic music libraries, and will prove popular in public libraries with robust music holdings. Any serious scholar of popular music – American or otherwise – should read this book.

Vincent J. Novara, University of Maryland