

Warren Gill

“...”
the nature of the blues as an emotion, a musical and lyrical structure, a technique and a "way of life". Dr. Tracy presents an excellent, accessible introduction to the twelve bar root, fourth, fifth musical form and the repetitive lyrical patterns that are the foundation of most blues songs.

The first three chapters proper are part history and part detective story, where through the limited recordings, documents and personal reminiscences available, Tracy deconstructs the work of early folk artists such as Stovepipe No. 1 and Kid Cole. Making extensive use of lyrical comparisons of the often sexually-implicit texts, he attempts to reveal the common threads among the street musicians and jug band artists whose work was not well documented and identities obscured by the variety of nicknames under which they recorded. These chapters will be of interest largely to students of the evolution of the blues, but also reveal the urban and social context of the West End: the red light district on George Street which provided employment for black musicians in "sporting house" orchestras; Court and Sixth Streets where the street musicians performed. A fuller picture of the life of early blues artists is developed in ethnographic-style studies of piano players Pigmeat Jarrett and Big Joe Duskin and harmonica player James Mays. Through these stories a powerful sense of the locality is developed; coloured by youthful rebellion in playing the "devil's music" in the face of parental and religious admonition. Tracy's love of the blues and dedication to its history serves him well, as from his teenage years he had the good fortune to make connections with artists of earlier eras, hearing their stories and music and giving many of them the opportunity to play the blues once again. In the concluding chapters Tracy turns again to the ethnography, profiling more contemporary artists H-Bomb Ferguson and Albert Washington and others, as well as his own work with the Crawling Kingsnakes to demonstrate that the blues lives in Cincinnati.

It is the story of King Records that is the heart of the book, however. In founding King in 1944, Sydney Nathan and his relatives began an enterprise that not only ensured the success of many performers, such as Roy Brown, Wynonie Harris, Bull Moose Jackson, Bill Doggett ("Honky Tonk"), Lonnie Johnson, The Dominoes ("Sixty Minute Man"), Ivory Joe Hunter, John Lee Hooker, Hank Ballard and the Midnighters, Little Willie John ("Fever") and Freddy King ("Hideaway"), but was notable for being integrated both on the shop floor and in musical and management direction, when this was not considered possible in a "border city" so close to the south. Henry Glover - producer, arranger, songwriter - was only the second black executive hired by a major US label and contributed much to the overall development of blues and R&B. As well as recording blues performers, King had a stable of country artists and interchange between them was encouraged. Like Sam Phillips of Sun Records in Memphis, Syd Nathan had country artists perform R&B tunes, but also, very successfully, had black artists record country tunes. This cross fertilization of black and white helped produce some remarkable records, although to Nathan it was simply smart business practice to cover both markets with good songs. King Records helped develop a pool of professional sidemen in Cincinnati who both played on the sessions and contributed to a lively blues scene at venues such as the Cotton, Ebony and 333 Clubs. Without King Records, the development of blues in Cincinnati would have been far less dynamic, but the label and its subsidiaries were influential far beyond the urban boundary. Dr. Tracy should be encouraged to take up this larger story.

Taken together, Barrio Rhythm and Going to Cincinnati offer the urban historian a wealth of individual experience to help comprehend the state of minority cultures in two 20th century American cities. On the larger scale, both are limited in the scope of their analysis. While replete with commentary on conditions for individuals in their respective cities, neither really makes the larger connections to place, society and agency that would elevate the analysis, although here Loza is the more successful (although his use of quotes from himself to begin chapters is a bit off putting). Tracy's is the livelier read, although he could have been more considerate of his northern neighbours by spelling Winnipeg correctly. Given the focus on individual cities and the ethnographic techniques employed in both studies, they are necessarily biased by the availability of subjects: other approaches could enable stronger statements on the culture of urban music.

Warren Gill  
Department of Geography  
Simon Fraser University at Harbour Centre


This is, without question, the most ambitious study of American industrial archaeology in print and the most sophisticated ever produced in any country. Given that interest in this relatively new, eclectic field of history has already leveled off in most countries, this book may stand as a final monument. Produced by a formidable partnership of experienced, highly interdisciplinary researchers, it provides a