MY DAYS AS A JAZZ CRITIC

by Eric Hobsbawm*

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I owe my years as a jazz reporter to John Osborne's *Look Back in Anger*, which made the British cultural establishment of the mid-1950s take notice of a music so evidently dear to the new and talented Angry Young Men. When, needing some money, I saw that Kingsley Amis wrote in the *Observer* on a subject about which he obviously knew no more and possibly less than I did, I called a friend at the *New Statesman*. He arranged a meeting with the editor, Kingsley Martin, then at the peak of his glory, who said 'Why not?', explained that he conceived his typical reader as a male civil servant in his forties, and passed me on to the commander of the (cultural) back half of the mag, the formidable Janet Adam Smith. Her interests ranged from mountaineering to poetry, but did not include jazz. As 'Francis Newton' (named after a Communist jazz trumpeter who played on Billie Holiday's 'Strange Fruit'), I wrote a column every month or so for the *New Statesman* for about ten years.

Eric Hobsbawm: he was given the chance to understand jazz musicians and their world: in short, 'the jazz scene'…PHOTO COURTESY THE NEW YORKER

**When, in the mid-1950s, the historian Eric Hobsbawm noticed that the novelist Kingsley Amis, who surely knew less about jazz than he did, was writing on the subject for a national newspaper, he asked Norman Mackenzie, who now wrote for the "New Statesman", to secure him the post of jazz critic for the magazine. Hobsbawm got the job, and became its regular jazz reporter under the pseudonym 'Francis Newton' (Frankie Newton, who played on Billie Holiday's recording of "Strange Fruit" was one of the very few American jazz musicians who was generally believed to have been a Communist).*

It was a good time to be writing about jazz. Not only did my column allow me an occasional respite from the personal and political convulsions of 1956, that year of Communist crisis, but it was the first time since 1935 that American jazz musicians could be heard live in Britain. Until then the typical British jazz fan, well informed by *Melody Maker* and tiny argumentative journals, had lived essentially on a diet of 78 rpm records, passionately analysed by young men in upstairs rooms or in the 'rhythm clubs' of the 1930s. A surprising number of these records had been made in the US for the British market, but hard-core aficionados, especially the small but missionary group of blues enthusiasts, also established their own networks for importing American discs. I had been on the fringes of this community of experts since the early 1930s, thanks to my cousin Denis Preston, who eventually became a pioneering figure on the recording scene; but, until the example of Kingsley Amis gave me courage, I had been too awed to join in their debates. Young and on the whole provincial, suburban and musically untaught, they were loving and propagandist critics rather than practitioners.

Melody Maker
MAY 5, 1956 EVERY FRIDAY 6d.

Mezzrow on Louis
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YES—LOUIS IS REALLY HERE!

The All-Stars open at Empress Hall

TONIGHT'S the night! After weeks of rumours, Louis Armstrong and his All-Stars are scheduled to kick off their British tour at the Empress Hall tonight (Friday) at 6.15 p.m.

The opening strains of Louis's signature tune "When It's Sleepy Time Down South" will mean that a British audience is hearing the great Satchmo in person for the first time in a generation.

Welcome party at airport

Louis and his party were due to arrive at London Airport on Thursday morning. With Louis and the All-Stars—Trummy Young (tmb.), Billy Kyle (pno.), Edmond Hall (clt.), Barrett Deems (drs.), Jack Lesberg (bass) and singer Velma Middleton—are Satchmo's wife, Lucille; his personal physician, Dr. Schiff; Miss Frances Church, representing manager Joe Glaser; and Louis's valet-companion Doc Pugh.

Planning to meet the plane were many British admirers, including Freddy Randall—whose band is going to America in exchange for the All-Stars—Humphrey Lyttelton and Lord and Lady Donegall.

On TV

Armstrong's first engagements were to be a Press reception at the Savoy Hotel followed by an appearance in the BBC-TV show, "Highlight."

From tonight for 10 days, the All-Stars are to play twice nightly at the Empress Hall for about 1 hour 40 minutes at each show.

The group will be called, one by one, to climb a ladder on to the stage.

Supporting the All-Stars will be singer Ella Logan and dancer Peg Leg Bates, with Britain's Vic Lewis Orchestra. To enable Lewis to take part in the show, Gerald Cohen, of Helena Presentations, has cancelled a concert scheduled for Sheffield City Hall tomorrow (Saturday).

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With that famous grin and fabulous horn, "King" Satchmo 'planed into London Airport from New York at 9 a.m. yesterday (Thursday) to start his British tour. After playing for 10 days at London's Empress Hall the Stars will play in seven provincial towns. Pictured left is the All-Stars front line with Trummy Young, Louis and clarinettist Edmond Hall.

SATCH SENDS A MESSAGE

ON the eve of his departure from New York on Wednesday, Louis Armstrong sent this personal message of greeting to the MELODY MAKER to relay to his thousands of British fans:

"Hello everybody and fans! I am dying to get to Britain. I feel like I am coming back home.

"Last time, Humphrey Lyttelton and MELODY MAKER staff had to come to Paris. This time I can come to London to thank them.

"I visited Carnegie Hall on Tuesday for the Ted Heath concert. My, what a band! Truly a living aspirin.

"I look forward to hearing more great music like that in Britain. All the best from Lucille, Velma, and the boys.

"Yours truly, LOUIS."

DONEGAN ILL ON EVE OF U.S TRIP

WITH his proposed trip to the States now awaiting the signing of final contracts, Lonnie Donegan was taken ill on Monday. He has bronchial trouble and was to be X-rayed this week.

Denis Preston, Nixa Records executive, has been in New York negotiating with Manny Greenfield and the William Morris Agency.

On Wednesday, London agent Lyn Dutton heard from Preston that Lonnie is due to appear on the Perry Como television show on May 19, the Woolworth Show on radio, the following day, and also cabaret dates.

If he is passed medically fit, Donegan will leave for the States on May 14.

David Whitfield for States TV

On May 14, David Whitfield leaves for a 16-day visit to the States, during which he will appear on two Ed Sullivan TV shows.

His M.D. Reg Warburton, will conduct Ray Bloch's Orchestra on each occasion.

SELMER SALES GRAPH PROVES BIG SWING BACK TO ORTHODOX MOUTHPIECE

THE BIG PAY PACKETS ARE EARNED ON SELMER

Here are facings used by some leading players....

Apologies to hundreds of others omitted by limitations of space.

Keith Bird Tenor E
Carl Barriteau C★★Metal
Doug Robinson C★
Roy East D.Lay
John Roadhouse C★★
Norman Hunt E.Lay
Doug Stimson HS★
Alan Nesbit E.
Harry Conn D.
Vic Ash C★
Pat Smuts D.
Eddie Mordue F.
Ted Thorne C★★
Jack Goddard D.
Allan Franks C★
Izzy Duman C.
Bill Apps E.
Chas. Chapman B★

The British magazine "Melody Maker", May 5, 1956...

By the time Francis Newton was born, these aficionados had created a uniquely original youthful British pop scene in 'trad jazz', which reproduced versions of New Orleans jazz and country blues, by then far better known in this country than in the US. In one of my earliest columns I observed the sudden profitability of trad jazz

‘and even that last refuge of bankruptcy, blues-singing’, as illustrated by profitable but unimpressive imitations of Bessie Smith’s *Reckless Blues* and a chart-topping version of Huddie Ledbetter’s jailhouse *Rock Island Line*, sung by a surprised and blameless British guitarist, Lonnie Donegan. What did it mean? I asked. We now know that it meant the rise of the British rock scene, the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, about to transform the American pop industry in the early 1960s. It never captured my generation, nor that of most jazz musicians, least of all the highly professional record studio session players who had to turn its illiterate amateur products into music.

The surprised and blameless British guitarist, Lonnie Donegan, who had a hit with Huddie Ledbetter’s “Rock Island Line”… PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

But what did being Francis Newton mean to me? The attraction was not so much the opportunity to review jazz performances and the records now flooding in, or even to fit this extraordinary music into 20th-century society. It was the chance to understand the musicians and their world: in short, ‘the jazz scene’. I lived on the edge of the West End, and teaching at Birkbeck left most of the day free, so it was possible to combine my profession with the nocturnal and late-rising habits of the scene. My main base was the Downbeat Club on Old Compton Street, a few minutes’ walk from home, a joint which, like so many of London’s modern musicians and their

hangers-on, I used as an off-duty reporting point. Though people might play there and it sometimes booked a pianist, the Downbeat was a social club, unlike Ronnie Scott's new enterprise, then starting up in a not yet orientalised Lisle Street, where one went not to drink and gossip but to listen. There were also some after-hours joints in Soho where one could do both. Clubs are what I remember more vividly than the concerts in which visiting musicians earned their keep, though it was only in the US that I was to discover the glory of a jazz scene based primarily on clubs. I must have been one of the last to hear the great Ellington band, visibly at ease in its natural environment, play a genuine club date, 'melting', as I reported, 'a hard assembly of middle-aged San Francisco lawyers, doctors, journalists and fixers like traditional brides'. I suppose this and meeting the tragic pianist Bud Powell in his Paris hotel room, catatonic except when at the keyboard, are the most vivid memories of my jazz years.

It soon became obvious that there was a notable gap both in taste and context between those of us – most jazz writers, but also successful players – who developed an enthusiasm for the music in the 1930s and 1940s, and the small corps of serious professional British musicians who played and formed the only real public for 'modern' jazz before Miles Davis began to make his impact. Writing about jazz in the 1950s meant, basically, trying to understand or at least come to terms with bebop (even the passionate jazz-conservative Philip Larkin eventually felt he had to make a gesture in this direction), but I don't know how far I succeeded, except for an admiration for Thelonious Monk and an immediate passion for the supremely talented and intelligent Dizzy Gillespie, the most dazzling trumpeter in the world, who lacked no gift except the willingness to reveal his soul, as Parker had done. My admiration for Miles Davis was based on his records, not on any live performance I heard.

Frasncis Newton admired Thelonious Monk (above left) and developed an immediate passion for the supremely talented and intelligent Dizzy Gillespie (right), pictured here together at the Monterey Jazz Festival in 1964… *PHOTO CREDIT PAUL RYAN*

I enjoyed the company of the players, and they accepted me as an oddity on the scene (no milieu is more tolerant than that of jazz musicians), sometimes as the sort of walking reference book who could answer (non-musical) queries. I remember one from a tenor player's girlfriend, about whether it was right to believe in God. But could any non-musician understand what creative musicians are really about, however much he socialised with them? After all, as one of them told me (I think it was the tenor saxophonist Sonny Stitt), 'words are not my instrument.' For a white non-musician to get close to black artists was even harder. Until the great exodus of American players in the 1960s, when the US jazz scene collapsed, few of them lived in Europe. True, there didn't seem to be any difference between white and black in the Downbeat Club, and the young Cleo Laine was perfectly at ease describing herself as 'a Cockney spade', but visiting African-American players were aware of race even in tolerant Europe, and so, almost certainly, were British West Indians like the gifted and adventurous alto player Joe Harriott, who was an important component of the modern scene. Still, on the road, which was their permanent way of life, the Americans were used to being asked questions by white admirers, and experienced performers who relied entirely on the white circuit, notably blues singers, had a genuinely informative narrative ready.

Saxophonist Sonny Stitt performing in Australia, with Sydney bassist Ed Gaston in the background: it was Stitt who told Newton 'words are not my instrument'…
PHOTO COURTESY VICTORIA GASTON

As the only academic writing on jazz, and under culturally high-class auspices, Francis Newton naturally found himself acting as tourist guide to swinging Soho for foreign intellectuals. He also found himself drawn into the avant-garde cultural bohème in Britain, which overlapped with the non-bop jazz scene; George Melly and 'Trog' (Wally Fawkes, the clarinettist of the Humphrey Lyttelton school) were already producing their satirical and socially perceptive comic strip *Flook* in, of all places, the *Daily Mail*. I still have the membership card for Muriel's Colony Club in Dean Street, which someone – most likely Colin MacInnes – pressed on me, but alcoholic camp was not my scene, nor jazz theirs, even though at one time they had decent

background music played by an agreeable West Indian pianist. I was commissioned almost immediately to write a book. More to the point, being Francis Newton reinforced my contacts with those on whom the musicians depended, the agents, bookers and the rest of the pop music business world of which jazz formed a small corner. Their private opinions of 'the talent' diverged widely from their public ones.

I also found myself a member of the global network of intellectual jazz lovers. Since outside Britain these still saw themselves as something of an underground, if no longer persecuted, musical faith, they – and especially the writers – formed a surprisingly effective international of mutual trust and help. In the US this did not go as far as in Japan, where, as I was to discover in those tiny bars, the most formal academics – and who can be more formal than a Japanese university dean? – talked with an inconceivable degree of emotional frankness, simply because a guest they had never met before was a fellow jazz lover. I soon discovered that jazz solidarity, which went with the championing of Kafka as a first stage of the Prague Spring, was equally intense in Czechoslovakia. As the Miles Davis and Modern Jazz Quartet scores for Nouvelle Vague movies showed in the 1950s, French intellectuals were expected to be unusually hip about modern jazz but, as usual, took little note of non-French jazz writers.

Stateside, jazz solidarity was of more practical help. Local jazz writers did everything they could to help an unknown from London, from booking a hotel in Greenwich Village to passing him from one critic to the next for guidance to the scene in some unfamiliar city. It helped that so many promoters of jazz and blues came out of the left-wing milieu of the 1930s and 1940s, notably the greatest of all jazz talent scouts, the crew-cut John Hammond Jr, whose judgments were largely to guide my own.

The crew-cut John Hammond Jr (on the right in this picture) with Count Basie. Hammond's judgments were largely those which guided Newton's own judgements... PHOTOGRAPHER UNKNOWN

It was only on my first trip to the US, where all surviving schools and artists could be heard at the same time, that I came to realise how lucky Francis Newton had been: this was a golden age for jazz, largely because even the ultra-boppers of the 1940s

had rejoined and renewed the music's mainstream. It was only on my second trip in 1963 that I realised how quickly the tsunami of rock music had swept it away. Birdland had put up the shutters. For the best part of the next 20 years, jazz hardly existed for the young, except in the university milieu as a part of adult high culture – like classical music, only smaller. What public did remain for live performance was antagonised by the emergence of a new, musically radical 'free form' jazz. Paradoxically, this isolated what was politically the most radical and racially militant movement in jazz from its natural African-American constituency.

By this time my life was changing. My wife, Marlene, claims that I proposed at a Bob Dylan concert. Marriage and babies inevitably put an end to Francis Newton's freewheeling nocturnal lifestyle, though not to reviewing concerts and records. It wasn't as much fun, except for the stunning and disturbing first visit to Britain of Ray Charles, whom I had first heard as one of a handful of whites in a corner of a vast

Ray Charles: his first visit to Britain described by Newton as "stunning and disturbing"... *PHOTO COURTESY A PICTORIAL HISTORY OF JAZZ*

rock-and-roll dance in Oakland, California, when he was still known only to the black public. They did not dance much while he sang. By now not quite a major pop star but already a hipster saint, fourth in line to Lester Young, Billie Holiday and Charlie Parker, and certainly already a *monstre sacré*, he worked the audience in the Finsbury Park Astoria with his 'sanctified' bluesy voice in a style combining showbiz effects and soul-baring emotion. I still shiver at the memory of hearing that hunched, thin, unhappy blind man milk the audience with 'once I was blind, but now I see.' Let that, as well as my spectacular failure to recognise the potential of the Beatles (I never had any time for the Stones), stand as the last memory of Francis Newton's years covering the scene for the readers of the *New Statesman*.

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*Eric Hobsbawm died on 1 October 2012 at the age of 95. He was one of the foremost historians of the 20th century. His many books include a three-part study of the 'long 19th century' ("The Age of Revolution", "The Age of Capital" and "The Age of Empire"); "Age of Extremes: The Short 20*th *Century"; and a memoir, "Interesting Times".*

In response to this article, the following letter appeared in the London Review of Books, Vol 32, No 11, 10 June 2010.

I was glad to see Eric Hobsbawm give the late folk/blues great Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly, credit as the inspiration for Lonnie Donegan's recording of 'Rock Island Line' (*LRB*, 27 May). Newly released from Louisiana State Penitentiary at Angola, he first learned the song from Kelly Pace, a convict at the Cummins Prison Farm in Gould, Arkansas, whom he encountered in 1934 while working as a driver for the musicologist John Lomax, then travelling through the South collecting songs for the Library of Congress. Lomax recorded Pace leading a group of seven men, one of them doing an imitation whistle. When they heard their

Huddie Ledbetter, better known as Lead Belly (right) here performing with trumpeter Bunk Johnson… *PHOTO COURTESY DEFINITIVE ILLUSTRATED ENCYCLOPEDIA OF JAZZ & BLUES*

song played back later, they threw down their hats and beamed with pride. Lead Belly liked the song as well, and before he quit work that day he had learned it. Years later he would add his own introduction, which Donegan copied: 'I got cows, I got sheep, I got goats, I got horses.' During the Second World War Lead Belly sometimes switched to the more topical, 'I got guns, I got tanks, I got bombs, I got Jeeps.' The Beatles acknowledged the Donegan recording as one of their main influences. George Harrison told his publisher, Brian Roylance, that since Donegan's repertoire consisted mostly of Lead Belly songs, there would have been no British rock scene had it not been for Lead Belly. 'No Lead Belly, no Beatles,' said George Harrison.

John Reynolds
New York

The following letter appeared in the* London Review of Books*, Vol 32, No 12, 24 June 2010.

So that's who Francis Newton, the author of *The Jazz Scene* (1959), is: the famous Marxist historian Eric Hobsbawm (*LRB*, 27 May). Two things he gets wrong in his Diary: the original Ronnie Scott club was in a basement not in Lisle Street but in Gerrard Street. I heard Ben Webster there in, I think, 1959. Second, I, too, was a habitué of the Downbeat, dropping in generally at lunchtime but on the occasional evening when I didn't have a gig, or wasn't in the Establishment Club enjoying the Dudley Moore Trio. It was in the Downbeat that I persuaded the drummer Allan Ganley – to his immense amusement – to dep for me in a gig for the *Billy Cotton Band Show* in 1961. There was certainly music in the Downbeat in the evenings – was it Brian Lemon at the piano? I also heard Annie Ross sing there.

Brian Innes
Montgaillard, France

Ben Webster, pictured in 1965: Brian Innes heard him at Ronnie Scott's in Gerrard Street, maybe in 1959…

For those who are old enough to remember but whose memory is failing, Brian Innes was the leader of the Temperance Seven from 1955 to 1965.

Editor, 'London Review'