

THE GODFATHER OF BRITISH JAZZ: THE LIFE AND MUSIC OF STAN TRACEY by Clark Tracey. Published by Equinox, Sheffield, 2017. ISBN: 13-9781781793534 (hbk), 331 pp.

Reviewed by Ted Nettelbeck*

This book is a recent publication in the excellent Popular Music History series edited by the British jazz bassist, critic and academic Alyn Shipton. Written by Clark Tracey, Stan's oldest son, a leading British jazz drummer, bandleader and composer, who began his professional career working in his teens with his father, it documents the pianist's long and distinguished career from the early 1940s to his death in 2013.



Stan Tracey: a lively and colourful account of his life... PHOTO CREDIT GERRY WALDEN

The account is lively and colourful, beginning with Stan Tracey teaching himself piano accordion, developing his skills by early touring with a London-based entertainment band, introduction to jazz from cinema and others' gramophone records, an early determination to master boogie woogie piano, a stint during



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National Service in a concert party, and later touring post-war British military bases in Germany. The next stage included short visits to New York as pianist aboard passenger liners sailing the UK-US route, where he heard bebop founders like Bud Powell and Charlie Parker at Birdland and was directly exposed to his long-time primary influences Thelonious Monk and Duke Ellington.

Touring with the Ivor and Basil Kirchin band followed, then longer-term employment as pianist in Ted Heath's big band. However, before the age of 30, his wide acceptance by the cream of contemporary British jazz figures like Kenny Baker, Phil Seaman, Tony Crombie, Ronny Scott and the prodigiously talented Tubby Hayes convinced him that his future lay in jazz. Beyond 1959 when Ronnie Scott and Pete



Unsurprisingly Ronnie Scott (left) booked lots of tenor players. Here he is with Sonny Rollins... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

King first opened their Soho-based jazz club (now in its 59th year), Tracey was the second house pianist (1960-1968 with interludes elsewhere after 1966) and accompanist to a very long list of the most famous American jazz figures at the time, booked into the club generally for a month, including Paul Gonsalves, Stan Getz, Zoot Sims, Al Cohn, Dexter Gordon, Roland Kirk, Ben Webster, Johnny Griffin, Sonny Rollins, Yusef Lateef and Benny Golson (unsurprisingly, Ronnie Scott booked lots of tenor players). Tracey's comments about these experiences suggest useful lessons for today's students of jazz.

Stan Tracey performed in many formats, including solo piano, duo with pianist Keith Tippett and with a wide range of other instrumentalists, piano trio, quartet, octet, sundry small groups and larger jazz ensembles. Perhaps the most successful of his many compositions has been his *Jazz Suite – Under Milk Wood*, inspired by the Dylan Thomas 1953 radio play and first recorded in 1965 by Tracey's quartet (with Bobby Wellins, tenor; Jeff Clyne, bass; Jackie Dougan, drums). He also performed

Duke Ellington's *Sacred Music* on many occasions. Although he worked mainly within the UK, he toured extensively, especially during his later career, throughout Europe, to Ireland and world-wide, including North Africa, India, US, Canada, South America, Hong Kong and mainland China, Israel and the Middle East, and Australia.



The author's style is much enlivened by access to diaries, which Tracey began keeping from about age 16 and to interviews with the pianist, recorded at various times from around his early 40s and into his old age (all detailed in the excellent notes accompanying every chapter). Tracey cannot be described as an eloquent interviewee but his remarks about improvising and arranging and about adapting to the quality of the pianos encountered are articulate and well worth digesting.

One notes also the ridiculous prejudice still encountered in some concert venues against allowing jazz pianists access to a better instrument. These excerpts from interviews do flesh out the impression of an unpretentious, laconic, shy, laid-back character who nevertheless was resolutely committed to his artistic vision as a British jazz musician, despite struggles with finding wider public acceptance beyond the jazz community. There were many periods of financial insecurity and other difficulties that he had to confront during the course of a long career, although thankfully with the unreserved support of Jackie Tracey, Tracey's third wife and the mother of Clark.

However, there is no real consideration of how Stan Tracey emerged as the major jazz original that he became. It is clear from anecdotes that he was self-taught, was influenced by some aspects of the highly idiosyncratic style of Monk, listened to jazz recordings for hours daily, and learned essential professional skills like reading music to an acceptable level and music transcription "on the bandstand". All of this was, of course, a typical "learning by exposure" experience, consistent with that of most jazz musicians prior to the now widespread availability of tertiary-level formal jazz tuition.

But, despite the self-deprecation that some of the interviews with Tracey suggest – “my lack of knowledge and (keyboard) technique” (p 192) -- the fact is that, although he lacked formal training, he was an exceptionally creative, innovative jazz improviser. Although highly distinctive, his technique was very strong and appropriate to his style; and his widely acknowledged success as a composer and arranger attests to considerable relevant knowledge.



Stan Tracey's son the drummer Clark Tracey, author of the book...

I assume that he must have spent countless practice hours developing his improvisational skills. (In fact, anecdotes about his time in prison for a drug offence and his final days in community housing suggest that practice would always have been a high priority). Even though he was undoubtedly blessed with a high degree of natural musical talent and he worked more or less continually, year in year out, at playing the piano, I doubt that this can have been the whole story. The unwritten history of jazz is littered with fine players who remain almost completely unknown.

Was Stan Tracey simply in the right place at the right time, immersed nightly in the best of British and visiting American jazz during the swinging 60s? I doubt that this is a sufficient explanation for his success; among the many excellent British jazz musicians from the 1960s on, Tracey was remarkable for his originality. His long-term commitment and dedication suggests a creative personality dimension that I'd have been interested in learning more about. But perhaps this characteristic is something that jazz artists like the author, who is now a major figure in his own right, just tend to take for granted.

I do wonder whether the title of the book claims too much, although the author did not himself coin this term. It has been taken from the title of a 2003 BBC documentary about Tracey's long-term contribution to British jazz and also headlined John Fordham's obituary to Tracey in *The Guardian*, following his death aged 86. Nonetheless, I understand a “Godfather” to be someone responsible for an important new direction or movement and, in this sense, I doubt if Tracey warrants this distinction any more than, say, John Dankworth, Ronnie Scott or even the more commercially focused Ted Heath, in whose band Tracey played during his early career.



Tracey: an immensely important figure, with an instantly recognisable individual improvisational style...

Tracey was, however, certainly an immensely important figure, with an instantly recognisable individual improvisational style, central to British jazz for some 60 years, as recognised by his OBE and CBE, many British music industry awards including the Ivors Jazz Award for song writing and composition (2012), an honorary doctorate from the University of Herefordshire (1997) and continuing success throughout his long career in *Melody Maker* readers' poll rankings.

He was also absolutely my favourite British jazz pianist during my time in London during the early 1960s when he was the house pianist at Ronny Scott's and I have listened – and continue to listen -- to his music on countless occasions . I was introduced to him once, finding him quietly disinclined to deal with my enthusiasm; and, convinced that I could learn much from him given an opportunity, I was disappointed not to succeed in making contact when, during the 1980s, he visited occasionally his daughter Sarah in Adelaide.

The book includes a well organised Index and a discography compiled by Stephen Didymus which, although it excludes radio and television broadcasts, film soundtracks and private tapes, runs for 115 pages and appears to be comprehensive. It stands as a remarkable testament to the extensive experience and productivity of this exceptional jazz pianist and composer.

Tracey is quoted as claiming that his life in jazz gave him “a lot of fun” (p 1) but this description reveals more about Tracey's dry sense of humour than about his commitment to his music. Clark Tracey has provided an honest, interesting, warts-and-all account of his father's life and career, including his struggle during the late 60s with heroin addiction, eventually overcome in 1968.

As this very personal account confirms, Tracey was an extraordinarily dedicated jazz musician who has earned a place in a wider jazz pantheon than the British scene within which he predominantly worked. As John McLaughlin later remarked about *Under Milk Wood*, “This was not ‘British Jazz’ – this was world-class music” (p 68). Tracey not only spent a lifetime doing what he loved; he did it exceptionally well, creating an enduring body of work that deserves serious consideration. This book is a valuable addition to jazz literature.