

*Juke Box Britain: Americanisation and
Youth Culture 1945-60* by Adrian Horn.

Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2009.
(ISBN: 9780719079078). 217pp.

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The question of what is a teenager and what it has meant to be a teenager at various points in history has been tackled in numerous studies, two of the most recent being Bill Osgerby's *Youth in Britain Since 1945* and Jon Savage's *Teenage - Creation of Youth 1875 -1945*. Alongside these texts Adrian Horn examines the teenager and specifically the role that the juke box, a symbol synonymous with America, has in teenage life. Alongside this central concern his study takes into consideration youth culture as a whole in the post World War II period of 1945-1960. Horn himself was a teenager in the late 1950s and it is, as he himself notes, a significant period to study as there was an unusually large generation gap, due in part to the economic effects of World War II combined with many parents' residual Victorian values. Using the jukebox as a focal point Horn also questions the idea that Britain adopted American influences wholesale during this period. In 1945, Horn notes that there were probably a few hundred jukeboxes and by 1958 there were an estimated thirteen thousand. This study seeks to align this growth with the increased visibility of the teenager.

Interestingly Horn begins his study by arguing that there is no such thing as a British teenage experience and points to the importance of recognising regional variations alongside class and gender differences. Horn argues that many previous accounts focus on teenage experiences in London, which were often much more glamorous than other areas in Britain. Youth culture, it is argued, has never been an integrated whole:

Juke box Britain, however, unearths a more mundane reality and shows that with the exception of American rock'n'roll music young people were not overly influenced by American popular culture. (p1)

However Horn's book is far from mundane, instead it is a fascinating study which is well written and well researched and includes extensive primary sources and interviews as well as local newspapers and Mass Observation reports to illustrate the arguments.

Before detailing the role of the juke box in teenage life, Horn charts British attitudes towards America in the early twentieth century. Many cultural commentators were outspoken against what they saw as increasing Americanisation. For example FR Leavis, Bertrand Russell and Richard Hoggart all spoke against the American influence on British culture yet Horn contends that there was actually widespread acceptance as seen by the mass enthusiasm for American films and music. Indeed he argues there has been an overemphasis on American influences on British popular culture in Cultural Studies as most reactions to Americanisation (both good and bad) have been recorded by established and influential bodies such as the BBC, yet there has been far less written about the effects on everyday life which Horn seeks to rectify.

Horn begins to explore these arguments by examining juke boxes in the post war years, providing meticulous detail about the

history of the juke box and its gradual rise in popularity. Before 1938 there were hardly any juke box businesses in Britain and after 1938 there were a few companies set up to import jukeboxes mainly for seaside resorts whose prime audience were the working classes. From 1945 to 1955 American designs had no influence on the British juke boxes, due to the post war conditions – British companies had little money and the American designs were thought to be too flashy – yet from the mid 1950s American influences became more prominent. Yet Horn argues that there was never a wholly American looking British juke box, the influences always remained subtle.

Following on from examining the increasing popularity of juke boxes, Horn explores the ways in which popular music was heard by teenagers and details the domination of the BBC in the post war years which, according to reports from the period, was still acting as a moral guardian to the nation. Horn provides a fascinating account of the fear that was felt by the Establishment of the effects that mass broadcasting could potentially have on Britain's youth and how popular music, mostly American, was deemed to be a bad influence –

After the war the BBC still felt an obligation to uphold wartime and pre-war notions of 'respectability', or, at least, not to spread 'unrespectability'. Moreover, the BBC believed its role was to inform and educate the public in what it perceived as 'good music'. (p.67)

Horn draws interesting parallels between the ways in which the BBC regulated music, mostly with the working classes in mind, to the ways American stations of the 1920s and 30s moderated black musical forms. Juke boxes became one of the most important ways for teenagers to hear pop music, alongside pirate radio, and Horn

points out that music companies were quick to exploit this new phenomenon with new artists' records being given to juke box owners and if they proved popular this would guarantee an official release. During this period Horn argues that teenagers were vital to juke boxes' continuing popularity.

Running alongside the history of the jukebox, Horn tackles what defines a teenager and details the huge regional and class differences between teenagers. Horn argues that the concept of the teenager was not born in the 1950s, as some cultural commentators have speculated, and was not an American invention. Indeed while teenagers as a cultural subgroup appeared as early as the seventeenth century, according to Horn, it was not until the 1950s that they gained independent economic power. Horn uses Peter Laurie's definition as most suitable for his study,

All definitions are in the end tautologies; perhaps it is best to go straight there, and say that a teenager is someone of any age who behaves in a teenage way. The distinctive fact about teenagers' behaviour is economic: they spend a lot of money on clothes, records, concerts, make-up, magazines all things that give immediate pleasure and little lasting use. (Peter Laurie, *Teenage Revolution* (London: Anthony Blond, 1965) p9, in Horn p91.)

Widening out from this Horn explores the teenage styles of the late 1940s and 50s. Much has been written about the Teddy Boy style of the period and Horn offers a good summary and also puts the fashion into context –originally a London style, as it spread across Britain it became transformed and diluted. Horn goes on to explore the fashions of teenage girls but it is interesting that this is far slighter than the previous chapter on boys. Girls, according to Horn, were less of a threat in this period and so much less has been written about them. There were Teddy Girls but they did not have the same

dangerous connotations. Horn writes a little on the influence of Hollywood stars such as Audrey Hepburn, but as he himself notes, there is lots more research still to be done in this area.

Finally Horn draws all of these strands together and situates the juke box and teenagers in the newly developing ‘unorganised’ youth venues such as milk bars and cafes as opposed to adult run venues such as church groups and youth clubs. It is here that the juke box market really takes off and the teenager becomes a recognisable economic force.

Horn persuasively argues that American culture was an influence on British life between 1945 and 1960 but not a dominant one and what instead resulted was a fusion of American and British styles, which were region specific as can be seen in the parallel histories of the juke box and the teenager, both becoming more visible over the post war period. Horn’s text provides a compelling study of the awkward period between the end of World War II and the beginning of the 1960s when the generation gap seemed larger than ever. If there is to be any criticism of this study it is that the points raised in the book could all be developed and researched further. This text is an important study about the fear of change in the post war period as demonstrated by the fear of the teenager with their new economic independence and the increasing influences of America on clothes and music of the 40s and 50s.