

Lives in Music

The Tastemaker. My Life with the Legends and Geniuses of Rock Music. By Tony King. London: Faber & Faber, 2023. 259 pp. ISBN 978-0-571-37193-8

Toy Fights. A Boyhood. By Don Paterson. London: Faber & Faber, 2023. 369 pp. ISBN 978-0-571-24027-2
doi:10.1017/S0261143024000138

Dance Your Way Home. A Journey through the Dancefloor. By Emma Warren. London: Faber & Faber, 2023. 400pp. ISBN 978-0-571-36603-3

Listen. On Music, Sound and Us. By Michel Faber. Edinburgh: Canongate, 2023. 353 pp. ISBN 978-1-83885-840-7

One of the more annoying aspects of the life of a popular music academic is that we study music that is primarily made and used by people who seem to have no interest at all in what we have to say. Popular musicians and fans are engaged with *what* we're talking about but not with *how* we talk about it. When the first volume of our history of live music came out, covering 1950–67 (Frith *et al.* 2013), I did some non-academic promotional work for it – presenting our book at a literary festival, library events and pensioners' clubs (these were the people who had lived through what we were describing). Audiences were, like my non-academic friends, sufficiently interested in live music history to discuss our findings with enthusiasm but, at the same time, found the book unreadable. They couldn't be doing with academic research conventions, with the references constantly interrupting the narrative flow, with the painstaking collection and assessment of evidence, the stolid back and forth between the particular (the facts) and the general (the concepts).

Lay readers may be systematically turned off by the conventions (and price) of academic books but they are still interested in reading serious and thoughtful non-academic popular music titles (as is obvious in the music section of, say, Waterstones). For academics this raises a number of questions. What is the value of such non-academic books? Should they be on our reading lists? How should we use them? Is it possible to write popular music history without drawing extensively on memoirs, biographies and autobiographies *which have not been peer-reviewed*? Is the academic use of interviews really any different – more methodologically sound – than the journalist use of interviews?¹ What is the relationship of academic and non-

¹ The current convention for non-academic popular music histories is to shape the narrative as an arrangement of extracts from interviews with participants; for a recent example see *Hungry Beat: The*

academic analyses of artists, songs, recordings and audiences? One thing is clear: if they don't read our books, we do read theirs.

While academic publishers have, for the most part, given up on attempts to attract lay interest, many trade publishers have taken the opportunity to sell popular music titles to non-academic pop fans who take their tastes seriously. Bloomsbury's 33 1/3 series of short books on albums is probably the most successful such venture (it was launched in 2003 by an academic publisher, Continuum, which was taken over by Bloomsbury in 2011). Its success led to the suggestion from Bloomsbury of a more adventurous book series, 'Alternative Takes', short monographs designed to challenge popular music critical orthodoxy in a way that could appeal to both the academic and the general public. I was launching editor for this series (with Matt Brennan) and while I think the books on the list met the publisher's aims I don't get the sense that they have had, in practice, much impact (or sales) outside the academy.

In Britain the most interesting popular music list from a trade publisher is Faber & Faber's. Over many years now Faber has signed up the best music journalists (from Jon Savage to Kate Molleson), musicians (from Brian Eno to Viv Albertine) and music biz figures (such as Mick Houghton and the Secret DJ).² In this review I want to consider from an academic perspective three recent Faber books before reflecting on a new, semi-academic title from the Edinburgh trade publisher Canongate.

Tony King's *The Tastemaker* follows a familiar format: it is the ghost-written memoir of a music biz insider. The co-writer, Tom Bromley, is according to his website 'the internationally bestselling and prize-winning ghost writer of fifteen titles, including books and celebrity memoirs on subjects from sport to music, business to politics'.³ He knows his market and its requirements. While Tony King's personal story – his complicated family circumstances, his experience as a gay man from illegality to AIDS – is told sensitively, in his own voice, what sells a book like this are the insider anecdotes rather than any sense of King's working routines.

What is certainly true is that he had a remarkable career. Born in the London borough of Hillingdon in 1942, King grew up in the south coast resort of Eastbourne. As a young teenager he hung out in record shops, getting a Saturday job in the Golden Record Salon, impressing his boss, Bill Sapsford, with his pop knowledge and tastes. Sapsford also did work for Decca and through his contacts got King a job in Decca too. He left school in 1958 on his 16th birthday and began work as an 'assistant progress chaser' in the sleeves department. He was then taken on, in succession, by Geoff Milne (UK boss of London American Records) as assistant label manager (King's job was compiling EPs by American stars such as Fats Domino, some of which I've still got!) and by Tony Hall (a senior figure in Decca's promotions department).⁴ King's job with Hall was to plug records to radio and TV shows and to look after visiting American acts such as Roy Orbison,

Scottish Underground Pop Movement (1977–1984) (MacIntyre et al. 2023). From an academic perspective such books raise boring questions of sampling, fact checking and narrative naivety.

² Faber also curates *Music Matters: Short Books about The Artists we Love*, which has so far covered Karen Carpenter, Marianne Faithfull and Solange.

³ He has written books on one-hit wonders and 1980s pop, and run courses on how to be ghost writer.

⁴ Tony Hall was a significant figure in British pop history. In the words of his obituarist, Peter Robinson (2019) in *The Guardian*, 'In a career spanning more than 65 years he was a compere, DJ, music journalist, TV presenter, record promoter, record producer, music publisher and artist manager'. I remember him

Brenda Lee and the Ronettes. I found the early chapters of *The Tastemaker* the most interesting, giving readers a good sense of how the British pop industry worked in the lead-up to the rock era.

In 1965 King left Decca to work for Rolling Stones' manager, Andrew Loog Oldham, whom King had first met as a publicist for Mark Wynter.⁵ At this point the narrative dynamic of *Tastemaker* shifts from an account of people and jobs that have to be explained, to a kind of compulsive name-dropping of people we've heard of. King seems to have known *everyone*. He moves from his job with the Rolling Stones to manage promotion for George Martin's new venture, AIR Music, then, via a brief stay at Pye Records, to work with the Beatles' record company, Apple, by now run by Allen Klein. In this capacity he works on solo albums and their promotion for both Ringo Starr and John Lennon. He joins Rocket, Elton John's record company, and is set the task, among others, of breaking Cliff Richard in the USA. In 1978 he becomes head of disco for RCA in New York and joins the world of dance clubs and record pools. In 1984 he is employed by Mick Jagger to work on *She's the Boss* and *Primitive Cool*, on Jagger's subsequent solo world tours and, thereafter, on the Rolling Stones' tours, beginning with *Steel Wheels*. 'My role on the tour was to work with Mick, in particular to act as a liaison between the record company and different PR outfits and manage the schedules and media requests' (p. 187). King filled time between Stones' tours (he did six over 20 years) managing Lulu and re-joining Rocket. He was creative director for Elton John's Las Vegas shows and various farewell tours; he was part of Rocket's management team when it took on the young Ed Sheeran.

What's missing from this star-studded story (King was a close friend of such different people as John Lennon, Freddie Mercury and Charlie Watts) is the detail of what his various jobs actually involved, in terms of tasks and teams and payment. We do, though, get a sense of the qualifications for a long backstage career in showbiz: enthusiasm, optimism, loyalty, a love of show-time. In the end King's job, one way or another, was to be a chaperone and a friend, the trustworthy link between the needs of music and money-making. The most striking thing about King's memoir is how nice he is about everyone, even Allen Klein.

Toy Fights is a different sort of memoir (although the opening of its back-cover copy – 'This is a book about family, money and music' – could also be applied to *Tastemaker*). Don Paterson is best known for his career in the poetry world, as a writer of rather good poems, a teacher (Professor of Poetry at St Andrews) and editor (for Faber's poetry list). This book is about his early life in Dundee, from his birth (in 1963) to the moment when, aged 20, he moves to London. Paterson began writing *Toy Fights* as 'a way of reminding me how crucial music is to any coherent sense of myself' (p. 12). The book tells the story of how and why music became part of Paterson's life.

By the time he left Dundee, Paterson was just about making a living from playing live (mostly on guitar, mostly at folk and country gigs) and writing music (mostly jazz) but realised that to become a musical name he needed to be in London, so seized an opportunity to join Ken Hyder's jazz band, Talisker.

as a presenter on the 1958–9 TV show *Oh Boy* and as a DJ on Radio Luxembourg: 'That's it and that's all, from yours sincerely, Tony Hall'.

⁵ The Stones were still signed to Decca.

In London, Paterson worked as a jazz guitarist, composer and teacher until 2012, when he 'took an idiotic twelve years off, had an unnecessary operation on [his] left hand and had to relearn the rudiments of [his] instrument' (p. 12).

His memoir finishes before his jazz life begins. It has various elements. Most obviously it zips through funny, startling stories about growing up on a Scottish working-class council estate in the 1960s and 1970s. Paterson describes himself as an 'old school versifier' (p. 5) but he has a keen sense of writing as performance. *Toy Fights* often reads like the script of the kind of stand-up routine pioneered by Billy Connolly: rueful proletarian truths and tall tales aimed at middle class readers/audiences happy to accept the authenticity of the most outrageous set-pieces. And Paterson is an excellent comic writer. Take this story of his father's first out-of-town trip with his Dundee-based folk duo to the Dykehead Hotel:

My dad and Willie called ahead to check they could sleep in the lounge rather than face the long haul back home immediately after the gig. They packed their gear, sleeping bags and toiletries into the car, pumped the tyres, bought a full tank and set off, arriving in Dykehead about half an hour later. (p. 124)

As a comic persona Don Paterson is genial but on occasion oddly sour. His anti-woke asides are tetchy, like a middle-aged stand-up who fears that his once collusive audience is slipping away. This may reflect the second strand of Paterson's memoir, its moving, matter-of-fact account, by way of a series of remembered obsessions (from origami to God), of going mad. This version of Don Paterson is a boy who grew up not knowing – or liking – who he was.

Which is why music is central to his story. In writing *Toy Fights*, Paterson discovered that 'the line music paid out into the past was unbroken, and it allowed me to remember everything else; and then remember why I'd forgotten it' (p. 12). It might seem odd that such a singular book should be of interest to an academic student of popular music history, but the combination of Paterson's idiosyncratic recollections of fandom and varied experiences of music-making as paid work is a compelling illustration of how popular music works as at once an individual and a collective project.

Paterson's youthful pop tastes are both familiar and strange. His account of seeing Johnny Rotten on *Top of the Pops* is commonplace: 'he was as strange, baleful and spell-binding as a comet' (p. 186), but he also remembers (without shame) equally admiring Donny Osmond (or, at least, 'Crazy Horses') (pp. 116–18). Aged 12 Paterson and his friend Alasdair formed a band, Powerplant (the English translation of Kraftwerk):

We were me on acoustic guitar, doubling on Jew's harp, Alasdair on piano (upright; non-movable; front-room) and three more Jew's harps ... It wouldn't be quite true to say we modelled ourselves on the German man-machines; for one thing, we were hamstrung by our lack of synthesisers. (p. 165)

And over the course of book, Paterson celebrates John Abercrombie, free jazz, country and folk music clubs, the Dundee cabaret scene, transit vans, various members of Fairport Convention, Robert Wyatt, Alfreda Bengé and John Martin.⁶ *Toy Fights* also

⁶ For Paterson, John Martyn exemplifies 'the adult necessity of considering the life and work separately ... What can I tell you: the man was appalling. And I sang my kids to sleep with his songs, and they'll do the same with their own' (p. 258).

provides a rich description of how popular musicians become popular musicians, describing the role of friends and family, playing opportunities and genre-leaping. Paterson's father, who was for 40 years employed by the Dundee publisher DC Thomson (colouring in the stories in the great flow of Thomson comics), was also a guitarist, 'a bluegrass flatpicker in the style of Doc Watson, but utterly rock solid' (p. 43).

He was one of the best accompanists I've ever heard, and had an ear like Jodrell Bank. There was no wedding drunk, no obscure Barry Manilow B-side, no unannounced key change that my dad didn't seem instantly to have covered, and he could make anyone sound great. It was a wholly thankless craftsmanship, always unappreciated by those he accompanied. (p. 43)

The final strand of *Toy Fight* follows Don Paterson's halting journey toward being (unlike his father) a jazz guitarist. He describes watching a *South Bank Show* special on John McLaughlin's band Shakti:

McLaughlin and L. Shankar, the young violin prodigy, sat cross-legged facing each other, stared into one another's eyes, and started up the ballad, 'Two Sisters'. Having had no previous inkling that such music existed in the universe, I burst into tears on the spot ... When I came round, I realised it was all in the feeling, the timing, the phrasing, the articulation, the nuance ... 'Two Sisters' wasn't about the notes, or technique, or intellectual sophistication, or musical rivalry, or any of the other things music was quickly becoming about. It was about what it *said* it was, two sisters, and the music was in service utterly to its theme and to itself. I started to wonder if I'd ever actually *heard* music before.⁷ (p. 216)

In his introduction to *Toy Fights* Paterson seems undecided as to whether there are further memoirs to come. I hope so. I'm not much interested in how he became a figure in the poetry establishment, but a book as good as this about life as a working jazz musician in London in the 1980s and 1990s would be a major contribution to popular music history.

In *Toy Fights*, Don Paterson traces the ways in which music gives shape to memory. In *Dance Your Way Home*, Emma Warren describes how she became herself through dancing. Some of her themes echo Paterson's: family, place, anxiety, trauma; and Warren's words on dance echo Paterson's on music:

Dancing can unlock memories and aspects of your personality that you had forgotten, and once a feeling has been danced into your body it's there for life, ready to be reawakened. (p. 339)

Yet Warren is a journalist not a poet, she's a less performative writer than Paterson and less self-obsessed. Methodologically, her 'journey through the dance floor' is an exercise in participant observation in which she is only one of a variety of informants. She describes her childhood, school and teenage days in 'the far suburbs of south-east London' (p. 25): ballet lessons, dancing to Toni Basil's 'Mickey' in the playground, learning Scottish dance steps in the classroom, doing the slow dance in the school hall and disco dancing on holiday. She remembers going to the last of Danny Rampling's acid house nights, Shoom, in Kensington at the beginning of the 1990s and we follow her through the emergence of house and techno on the dance floors of Manchester, where she was a student at the Poly.⁸

⁷ Clips from this *South Bank Show* can still be found on YouTube.

⁸ Warren notes that 'there were plenty of women and girls in Manchester clubs in the nineties ... I was one of a number of dancefloor-regulars-turned-journalists in the city who happened to be female. There

Yet while Warren looks back on her own bodily experiences – describing the seizures she experienced in her twenties and the realisation that she was dyspraxic after enrolling in a contemporary dance class in her forties; reflecting on her experience of dancing when pregnant and as a new mother – such personal recollection is only one strand of her book. If, as she suggests, the only way of understanding dance is through ‘lived experience’, that experience doesn’t have to be hers, but can be revealed through other people’s memories.

It is typical of her approach, then, that she follows up her description of dancing to ‘Mickey’ as an 8-year-old with an interview with Toni Basil and that her fascinating account of the Irish church/state establishment war on dance halls in Ireland in the 1930s is brought to life by conversations with her Irish relatives. In pursuit of what’s meant by ‘national dance’ she goes to a *Stepping On* conference at Cecil Sharp House which brought together

practitioners, researchers and ‘all who are interested in the diversity of traditional dance’ to share ideas and information on the rich, interconnected histories of percussive step dancing. (p. 35)

For her chapter on ‘scuffling and skanking in the reggae dancehall’, she takes a ‘reggae walk’ through Lewisham with Goldsmiths Professors Les Back and Lez Henry. For the transition from youth clubs to dance clubs she talks to Winston Hazel, whose breakdance crew SMAC 19 ‘came into existence in two Sheffield youth clubs, Rowlinson and Hurlfield’ (p. 123), and who went on to form the techno band Forgemasters and deejay Jive Turkey nights. To document the different ways of moving to jungle and drum ‘n’ bass she talks to Rebecca Haslam, then a young mother in Manchester, now a youth worker:

Mancs have got our own style of dancing, like Scousers or Londoners. People would only need to look over and they’d go, ‘Oh, they’re Mancs.’ Because of the way we danced. Like in the Hacienda, the Salford [gang] would rock backwards and forwards, like they were pulling a steering wheel. You’d go ‘That’s Salford’. It was an unspoken language that was conveyed in dance. (p. 219)

Much of Warren’s oral history is familiar (and that’s without mentioning the chapters on the much written-about dance scenes in Detroit, New York and Chicago) and, inevitably, the chapters that most interested me were on dance spaces that I hadn’t previously read about: Spats, the hip hop club that opened on Oxford Street in 1982; Steam Down, the weekly event founded in 2017 in Deptford that became important for contemporary British jazz. Warren’s approach to dance history is, then, conventional, it reads like most such work: a celebratory oral history, a series of snapshots of key clubs, dancers, deejays, records and genres, as defined by music journalists.

was Sarah Champion, *City Life’s* Nayaba Aghedo, my *Jockey Slut* co-writer Joanne Winn [*Jockey Slut* was launched by two Manchester Poly students] and Rachel Newsome, who went on to edit *Dazed and Confused* (p. 203). Another woman on the scene, DJ Paulette (Paulette Constable) has just published her own take on her life on the dance floor, *Welcome to the Club*. Interestingly, this is published by Manchester University Press, which seems to be developing a popular music list aimed at both academic and non-academic readers (see DJ Paulette 2024).

This, it seems, is how dance history is now written. Sociologically speaking this seems somewhat limited. On the one hand, it excludes much popular dancing – ballroom (strictly or not); ceilidh culture; salsa; *kathak*, Bollywood and all the other British Asian dances. To read, say, the information boards in British small-town libraries and community centres is to realise the remarkable range of dancing done by people who don't go clubbing. On the other hand, not everything about the commercial dance scene is wonderful. Warren makes reference to what we might call the 'blue meanies', the police forces, politicians and councillors who want to stop people having fun, but skates over the downside of dance club culture itself, the problems of money, misogyny and power, the plague of drugs and violence that are obvious in the history of, say, the Hacienda.⁹

Dance Your Way Home is, though, different from other popular dance books in one respect: Warren's interest in big questions about the meaning and value of dancing for people and societies. Interestingly, it is this strand of the book, in which Warren quotes academics and their published work in a great variety of disciplines, that is most unsatisfactory for an academic reader (well, for me anyway). One problem is the randomness of this scholarly selection and the lack of any sense of disciplinary context. Another is her obsessive use of academic titles and qualifications, as if these are enough to validate what these academics say. I found myself coming to a paradoxical conclusion: it is when she draws on academic writers that Emma Warren's book is least convincing to an academic reader. Which brings me to Michel Faber.

Michel Faber's *Listen* is not a memoir, although he has plenty to say about his family, his childhood and his education, his neurodivergent brain, his partners and his friends, and the effects of the life he's lived on his tastes and listening practice, on his 'lifetime habit of keeping my ears open' (p. 94).¹⁰

Later he remarks that 'conversing with music lovers about music is one of the main things I do' (p. 310), and *Listen* is written (appropriately given its title) in an aggressively conversational style (Faber is a versatile novelist, skilled at creating arresting characters – himself in this book). He tells his readers that the aim of his book is 'to help you perceive your stuff differently' (p. 37) and to 'pull you out of your comfort zone' (p. 106).

If you come on this journey with me, you'll learn a lot, but it won't be the sort of information you usually learn when you read music books. Instead you may get closer to understanding why you love what you love and despise what you despise. (p. 3)

Like the loudest voice in a pub gathering of music buffs, Faber's conversation is entertaining and irritating in equal measure (much like the music he likes).

One can certainly admire the range of topics Faber covers: taste, ear plugs, tribes, nostalgia, race, the avant-garde, the brain, Chris de Burgh, acoustic science, singing, crying, Anglo-centrism, rock critics, fakery, airport music, ethics, Parkinson's disease, charity shops, *Schlager* and vinyl. And his provocations are always thought-provoking. Here he is discussing the critical response to Morrissey's 2019 album of covers, *California Sun*. Faber notes that one of the key

⁹ For a more nuanced—academic—discussion of the dance floor, see Gadir (2023).

¹⁰ For Faber, in contrast to Emma Warren, dancing to music does not seem to have been something he did.

players on the album is the synthesiser player, Roger Joseph Manning Jr, who on the album's version of Joni Mitchell's 'Don't Interrupt the Sorrow' 'executes a skirl that is uncannily similar to Mitchell's own Moog on "The Jungle Line" [from *The Hissing of Summer Lawns*]' (p. 287).

But you know what? No journalist is ever going to ask Roger Joseph Manning Jr whether that Moog part was meant as a homage. No journalist will ask Morrissey about the arrangement of 'Don't Interrupt the Sorrow' or indeed about any of the hundred decisions that were made in the making and playing of *California Sun*. They will ask Morrissey what the hell he was thinking on the 13th May 2019, when he wore a badge promoting a fringe political party on a late-night talk show. (p. 287)

And here is Faber reflecting the use of music for therapeutic reasons and how it usually seems to be the therapist who chooses the music:

I imagine myself trapped in a body ruined by some neurological horror show like motor neurone disease or Huntington's chorea. I imagine myself in a home that is not my home, being cared for by nurses. I imagine them playing Spandau Ballet or, if they've taken the trouble to research the music that was in the charts when I was a teenager, Thin Lizzy or KC and the Sunshine Band. Would I ever hear Moebius and Plank's *Rastakraut Pasta* again? How likely is it that the staff would pipe Coil's *Astral Disaster* into the communal sitting room after lunch? (p. 125)

On the other hand, having an opinion on everything can lead to silliness (Faber's description of the early music movement on page 192, for example); and his drive to distinguish himself from a variety of music snobs can lead to some rather unconvincing arguments. Is Rolf Harris's 'Two Little Boys' really 'a highly successful work of art'? (p. 280).

Yet my real problem with *Listen* is, surprise surprise, its ignorance of popular music studies! To be full-on academically pompous, *Listen* falls short in both its methodology and its knowledge of the literature. Faber's basic analytic method is self-reflection and this can be revealing. In addressing the question 'why does music makes us cry?', for example, he considers why June Tabor's version of Maggie Holland's song 'A Proper Sort of Gardener' is the only one that makes him cry.

Partly it's down to Tabor being a singer rather than a songwriter – in classical terms an instrumentalist rather than a composer.

In performing the song, Tabor's keenest concern may be to make the most of those E flats. And yet, although the song demonstrably does not come straight from her heart, Tabor has the musical authority – an almost surgical skill – to find my heart and cut straight into it. (p. 324)

It is such clarity about his own listening that makes this book so readable, but Faber is well aware that if readers are to get closer to understanding why they love what they love, they need more than to be told why Faber loves what he loves. *Listen* is therefore studded with interviews and email chats with friends and acquaintances, content analyses of the comments underneath the clips on YouTube, surveys of Wikipedia entries, and references to Faber's serendipitous reading-list.

What isn't evident is any sense that academics have long been researching and arguing about many of the issues in which Faber is interested, addressing, for example, his suggestion that 'music comes with sociological strings attached' (p.186). In the end, much as I enjoyed listening to Faber's chatter, I found this

book rather depressing. Have all our efforts to get popular music studies taken seriously as an academic subject had so little effect on music-lovers' conversations about music?

Simon Frith 

University of Edinburgh
simon.frith@ed.ac.uk

References

- DJ Paulette. 2024. *Welcome to the Club. The Life and Lessons of a Black Woman DJ* (Manchester: Manchester University Press)
- Frith, S., Brennan, M., Cloonan, M. and Webster, E. 2013. *The History of Live Music in Britain Since 1950. Volume 1: From Dance Hall to the 100 Club* (Farnham: Ashgate)
- Gadir, T. 2023. *Dance Music. A Feminist Account of an Ordinary Culture* (New York: Bloomsbury)
- MacIntyre, D., McPhee, G. and Cooper, N. 2023. *Hungry Beat: The Scottish Underground Pop Movement (1977–1984)* (London: Orion)
- Robinson, P. 2019. 'Tony Hall Obituary', *The Guardian*, 4 July: <https://www.theguardian.com/music/2019/jul/04/tony-hall-obituary>