

REVIEWS

THE SOUND OF THE CITY

Charlie Gillett

Souvenir £6.95 516pp pbk
ISBN 285 62619 1

SOUND EFFECTS

Simon Frith

Constable £4.95 294pp pbk
ISBN 009 464 9502

Both these books are considerably revised second editions; the original *The Sound of the City* appeared in 1971, while *Sound Effects* revises *The Sociology of Rock* (1978). Gillett and Frith aren't the only ones who have felt the need to adjust their books; from Greil Marcus (*Mystery Train*) to Fernando Gonzalez (the minutely detailed *Disco-File*) the urge to rewrite is nearly pandemic.

There are two main reasons for the revisions: firstly, more detailed researches have altered the very composition of the musical past, and this has been closely linked to an unprecedented number of record company re-issues. When, for example, Gillett wrote the original *The Sound of the City*, there wasn't a single Louis Jordan LP available to back up, or refute, his assessment of Jordan. Now there are at least a dozen, and a recent issue of *Blues Unlimited* published a complete Jordan discography. This information explosion and the consequent changes in taste and perspective are the main reasons for Gillett's re-write (although he hasn't changed his mind about Louis Jordan . . .).

The second major change can be summed up in one word: punk. When the Sex Pistols and the Clash went public in 1976, they seemed to offer new hope, new possibilities for the whole music industry, and not least for their audiences, from dispossessed dole queue youth to worn-out hippies and jaded music journalists. No other music has ever had such grand socio-political claims made for it. When *The Sociology of Rock* appeared in 1978, it was very much caught up in punk euphoria — although by no means unquestioning of simple hopes for a punk revolu-

tion. Now the euphoria has largely dispersed, and much of *Sound Effects* is taken up with assessing punk's losses and gains.

The Sound of the City sets out to be a more or less orthodox history of popular music from 1945 to 1971, although the complexity of the subject makes that history anything but straightforward. Beginning with Bill Haley's 'Crazy Man Crazy' in 1953, Gillett takes us through the emergence of rock 'n' roll, identifying five separate but related styles. He traces their development, and, he suggests, inevitable dilution into 'rock and roll', a safer but still attractive confection which evolved from the industry's attempts to regularise and regulate the unruly music and its wildly enthusiastic audiences. Taking us back to rhythm and blues and Tin Pan Alley in 1945, and forward through soul, country, Motown and surf music to 70s rock, Gillett's sure understanding of his subject offers fresh insights on the familiar, digging up the unfamiliar along the way. To begin with, most of the music is American, but eventually Britain gets a look in, and there's passing mention of reggae too.

From the very start, Gillett divides American record companies into 'majors' (RCA, Columbia, Capitol *et al*) and 'independents' (Atlantic, Specialty, Sun, the labels of a record collector's dreams) — the latter responsible for spotting and recording most of the liveliest music, the former eager to pick up the trends and make the most of them. This useful division is situated at the heart of Gillett's history, which sees four factions battling to make sense of the music: the performers, both innovators and copyists; the independents, quick to spot a gap and fill it; the majors, desperate to hold on to their market; and finally, the audience, not at all a passive receptacle for whatever is handed to it. Occasionally the audience's role is idealised, exaggerated: at one point Gillett says that at the time of the Beatles' first LP 'the British audience despised the lush contrivances of contemporary American records' — but a look at the charts for 1963 suggests otherwise; 'lush contrivances' have always sold well, both here and in America.

Where Gillett concentrates on the musical events which constituted this four-way struggle, Frith chooses to analyse the struggle itself, leaving music history to other writers. The book's sub-title is 'Youth, Leisure and the Politics of Rock 'n' Roll'; Frith looks at the interaction of music, the audience and those who purvey the music: record companies, music

publishers, radio stations. As he says, 'musical texts are volatile'; and their forms and meanings are at least negotiable. This fact is precisely what renders redundant any Frankfurt School pooh-poohing of pop as inevitably harmful. Despite existing at the heart of capitalism, rock can't simply be contained and manipulated — the very complexity of Gillett's history suggests as much. Frith contends that 'music is still . . . the source of a power and joy that are disturbing as well as relaxing'; the struggle to make sense of and enjoy rock music is, finally, 'the struggle for fun'. Along with other recent analysts, Frith sees pleasure as conspicuously absent from left thinking, and wants to correct that omission.

Despite relying on a rather monolithic conception of the music's audience (ie, white and youthful), both books are careful and thought-provoking in ways that no other books have approached. They may not be definitive, exhaustive, but no book on the history of rock and its audience could ever hope to be. To a certain extent, both fill in some of the gaps with long, annotated bibliographies which set the reader off in all sorts of other directions.

Looking around, I can't see anybody liable to come up with anything better in the near future.

Nick Kimberley

