Dance Bands in Chester & North Wales, 1930 – 1970: Revealing a Hidden History

Helen Southall

Agenda

- Introduction

- The Hidden Dance Bands

- The Local Dance Band Environment
  - Social & Political Aspects
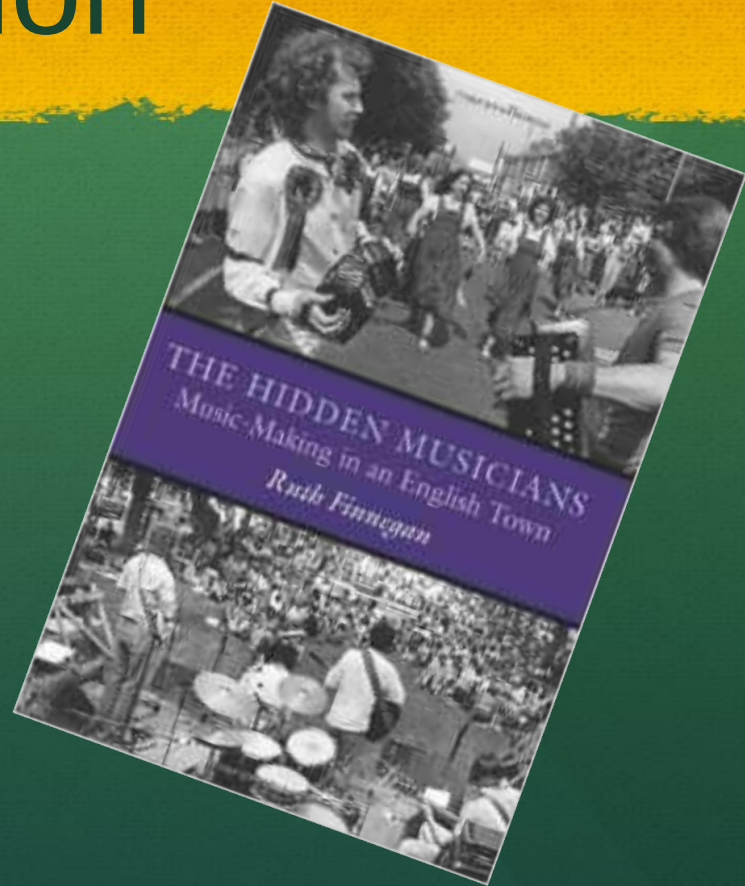 - Infrastructure

- Conclusions, & Next Steps

Introduction

Background:

- *The Hidden Musicians* (Finnegan, 2007)

- *Jazz Places* (Becker, 2004)

- *Rock Culture in Liverpool* (Cohen, 1991)

- *Other Voices* (Brocken, 2010)

- *Victory Through Harmony* (Baade, 2013)

Research Questions

Finnegan (2007) refers to the 'invisible but organised' underlying structure of local music-making

- My study was based on a detailed investigation of a specific local scene, in this case, dance bands in Chester & North Wales

- Goal: to contribute to a better understanding of amateur and semi-professional music-making in a regional landscape

- Questions:
  - How did this local dance band scene operate?
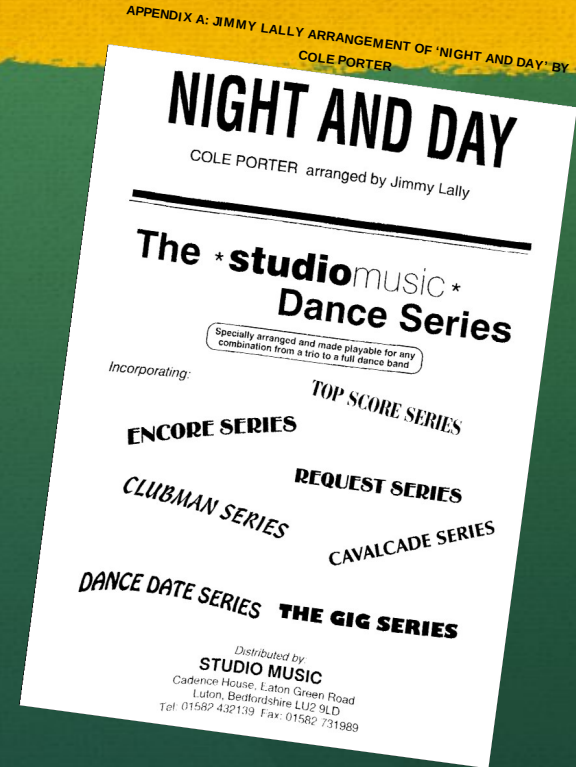 - Why there? Why then?

The Local Dance Band Scene

- Oral history project
  - Based on Chester
    - Also taking in Cheshire, North Wales, Wirral, Liverpool, plus other places in UK & overseas
  - 30 interviews
  - 200+ photographs and images
  - Most of this information was not available in public archives

- 3 minute video
  - A flavour of what my interviewees were talking about..

The Hidden Dance Bands

Why a *hidden* history?

- Hit parades & histories of popularity
  - 'moment of exchange … not use' (Nott, 2002)
    - e.g., an arrangement might be bought once, but played 100s of times

- A regional scene
  - Most musicians not full-time professionals
  - Derivative & imitative rather than innovative

- So why worry?
  - Infrastructure
    - Physical, organisational, human

NIGHT AND DAY

COLE PORTER arranged by Jimmy Lally

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There's another Ph.D in who Jimmy Lally <u>really</u> was….

Social & Political Environment

- 1920s: The Jazz Age (in the US); UK dance bands
- 1930s: BBC suspicion of jazz; MU ban on US visitors
- World War II
  - AFN (locally, late in the war)
  - *Some* loosening of restrictions regarding US jazz, 'sentimental' songs & crooning on the BBC
  - Fuel rationing, call-up of musicians, directed employment
  - Large local market (e.g. war factories) which had to be catered for by local, part-time musicians
- 50s Austerity; 60s Prosperity
  - Despite changes in society, 60s and 70s music scenes were rooted in 50s (& pre-50s) infrastructure
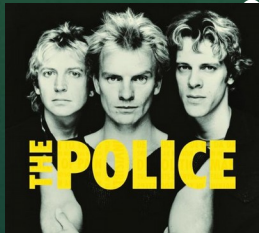
People and Organisations

- A complex network
  - Strong and weak ties (Granovetter, 1973)
  - Visualisation

- Bands, musicians, bandleaders & promoters

- Teachers & suppliers
  - Garrison town: military band instruments (sharp pitch)
  - Youth & community organisations
  - Employers
  - Families
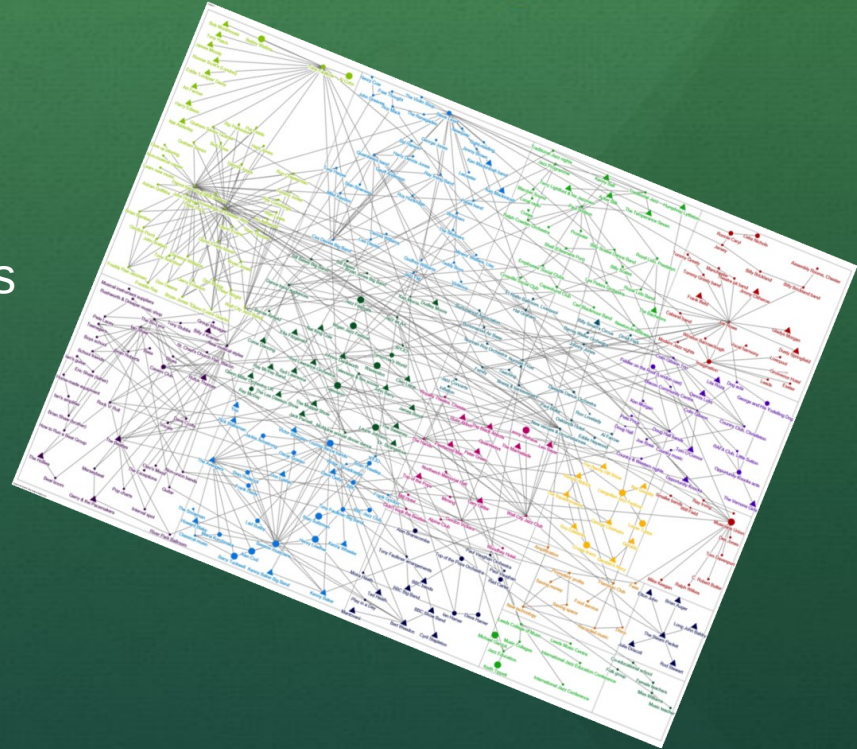
Location Matters: Dance Bands in a Built Environment

- Styles & musical generations overlapped in same venues
  - Quaintways (now Rosies)
  - Clemences Restaurant
  - Chester Jazz Club
  - River Park Ballroom, Majestic Ballroom
  - Royalty Theatre
  - Village halls / employee social clubs
  - Military bases
    - Delamere Forest camp
    - Burtonwood Air Base
   - Hawarden aircraft factory (now Airbus)
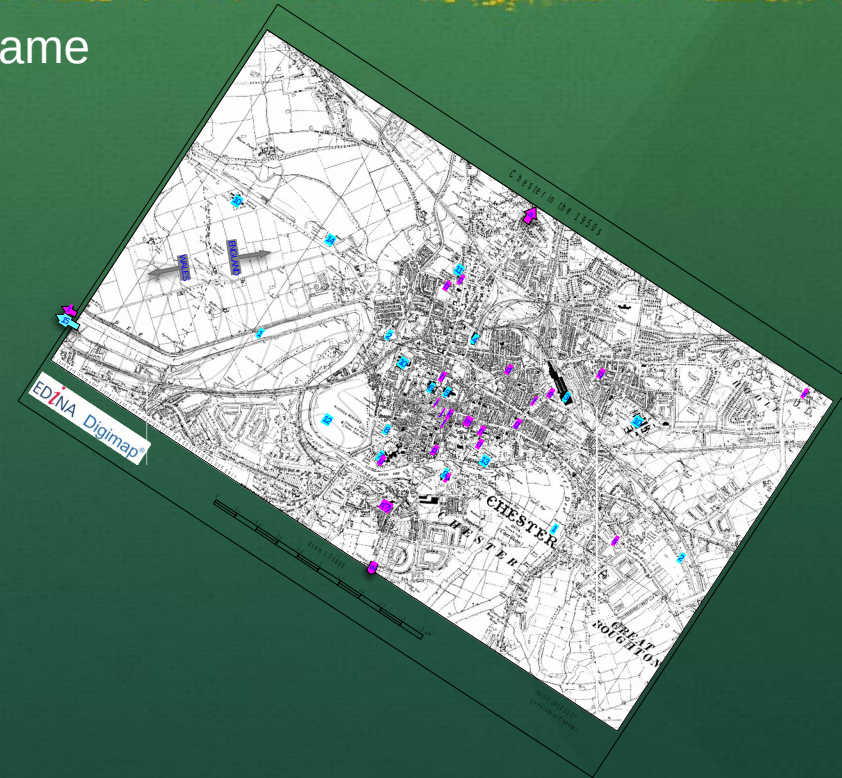
Conclusions

"… the remarkable mixture of music that could be heard live in British towns and cities from the mid-1950s call into question one of the more common record-based assertions, made, for example, in Dave Harker's 'One for the Money':

'The period 1959-62 was the deadest phase of British and American recorded song since at least 1956 … For adolescents it was a *desert*. Unless you lived in a major city or coast, or had access to amusement arcade or fairground or made your own music, musically it was a *bloody desert*. (Harker 1980: 73) (Emphasis in original)

Switch attention from 'recorded song' to live performance and 1959-62 **becomes less a desert than a landscape covered with a mass of foliage, from gnarled old trees to newly planted seedlings**. Not only were a significant number of adolescents making their own music in this period (including early versions of the Beatles and the Rolling Stones), but they also had a variety

What Next?

- Information Visualisation
  - Visualising networks and pathways from dance band (and other) data

- Digital Humanities Research Centre
  - Text and image analysis
  - Data-mining of historical source material

VIS15 preview: Interactive Visual Profiling of Musicians
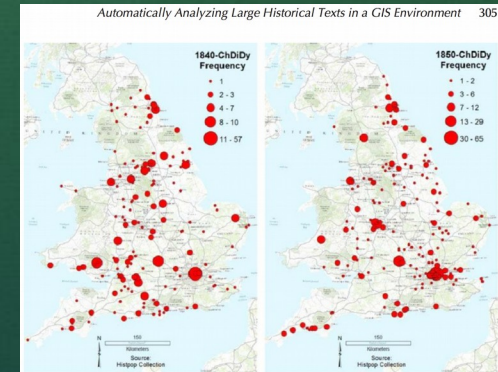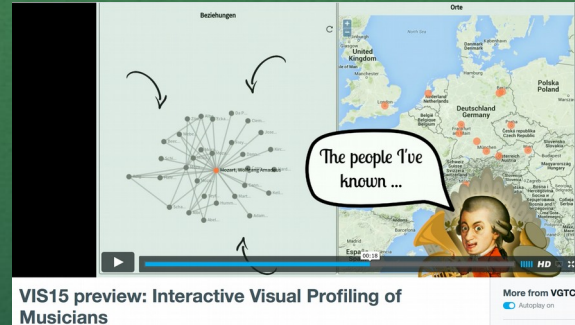
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