

**Review: Stephen Catterall and Keith Gildart, Keeping the Faith: A History of Northern Soul**

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**Stephen Catterall and Keith Gildart, *Keeping the Faith: A History of Northern Soul* (Manchester University Press, 2021). 307 pp. ISBN 978-0-7190-9710-2, £80.00, hardback**

In the opening decades of the twentieth century, the concept of ‘heritage’ music has grown significant appeal, while radio stations playing ‘gold’ music retain a significant listenership and champion the enjoyment of ‘classic’ music. Clearly, music produced in earlier decades continues to be consumed and experienced in the present, as many a nightclub DJ setlist evidences. However, historicised understanding how musical trends and scenes, which can be such an influential shaper of collective experience and youth cultures, were created, consumed, and curated by fans remains lacking.<sup>1</sup> This innovative and fascinating history of the ‘Northern Soul’ scene, so popular in the northern England of the 1970s and 1980s, makes a welcome addition to the growing literature of post-war youth subcultures.

The authors commitment to chronicling the significance and scale of Northern Soul is impressive, as is their varied, voluminous source base. Structurally, what can be delineated as ‘part one’ of *Keeping the Faith* is broadly chronological, while later chapters explore particular themes. The first chapter locates Northern Soul’s emergence within the context of 1960s Mod culture, before the second explores the key earlier locales that were central to the scene’s development. Chapter three is perhaps the books most ambitious contribution. Here, it seeks to reinterpret the role of the Wigan Casino, not by underplaying its importance, but rather by placing it within a more complicated historical context of a much wider scene. Afterwards, chapter four consider the decline and fragmentation of Northern Soul. As the movement reached its greatest extent, the variety of tastes and perspectives led to splits, acrimony, and disagreements. The book’s second part considers important aspects of the scene and explains its legacy and continuing influence. A fifth chapter examines how Northern Soul was practiced and experienced by its participants, while the sixth aims to locate the scene in terms of place, class, and identity. While an ambitious agenda, Catterall and Gildart succeed in explaining the northern particularity of the scene while avoiding the stereotypes of an explicitly ‘northern’ agenda. A penultimate chapter considers the significance of race, gender, and sexuality, giving more focused treatment of themes (especially race) which are intrinsic to the scenes identity and are further explored throughout. Meanwhile, the final chapter explores the legacy and myths of Northern Soul, with literary, cinematic, and wider, cultural interpretations being explored, together with the reaction of participants.

Reading the book, it is possible to orientate yourself with the complex and seemingly disorganised growth and fluctuations of the scene, with its changing foci and dynamic stretch. While the scene was centred on urban areas in the wider north west of England, clearly centred at different times on Manchester, Blackpool, and Wigan, it clearly stretched beyond their peripheries. Furthermore, the significance of towns like Cleethorpes, Wolverhampton, and even towns along the north Wales coast are located within this wider interpretation of this ‘northern’ scene. Catterall and Gildart convincingly argue that the Wigan-centric narrative beloved of more popular interpretations is problematic. While not underplaying the significance of the towns legendary ‘Casino’ nightspot, they clearly demonstrate the importance of other venues, such as Manchester’s ‘Twisted Wheel’, Wolverhampton’s ‘Catacombs’, and Blackpool’s ‘Mecca’. The volume considers how issues of race, class, and popular culture were interpreted and negotiated by young participants and consumers who primarily resided in these locales affected by the complicated process of deindustrialisation. How the end of the Victorian form of industrialised Britain, with its coal mines, textiles mills, and vacationing at seaside resorts, faced and experienced the difficult and existential nature of post-war industrial change is considered

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<sup>1</sup> This has led to the creation of the ‘Interdisciplinary Network for the Study of Subcultures, Popular Music and Social Change’, <https://www.reading.ac.uk/history/research/Subcultures/subcultures.aspx>

here.<sup>2</sup> Catterall and Gildart subtly explore how collective expressions of social togetherness, and a commitment to ‘keeping the faith’ in their unique, purist subculture of ‘Northern Soul’ makes for fascinating reading.

Fundamentally, scenes and subcultures like Northern Soul are more complex subjects for historical interpretation than they first appear. That so many of Britain’s working-class youth found an outlet and expression through a passion for the unusual and niche sounds of 1960s American soul music and participated in a fully-fledged music ‘scene’ active across northern Britain might confuse some or even perplex others. However, in this clearly articulated reinterpretation, the authors explain how the scene developed and help the reader understand why. Intentionally defined as ‘a’ rather than ‘the’ history of Northern Soul, the authors are clearly informed and influenced by current trends for ‘co-production’ of history.<sup>3</sup> In many ways, the way that *Keeping the Faith* manages to include so many voices while maintaining a clear focus underpins the significance of its contribution. If anything, the reader is left to know wanting more. More about the culture of travel and mobility of young working-class soul fans, more perhaps about the peripheral venues of the scene, and perhaps greater exploration of the significance and readership of the scene-specific magazines and fanzines themselves. To be fair to the authors however, such work can perhaps be left to those who follow them. With this pathbreaking contribution, they have shown the significance of Northern Soul, and will hopefully inspire a new generation of historians to explore the many aspects of this, and other comparable scenes and subcultures.

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<sup>2</sup> Much has been written about deindustrialisation. For an introduction, see Jim Tomlinson, ‘De-industrialization: strengths and weaknesses as a key concept for understanding post-war British history’, *Urban History* 47, no. 2 (2020), 199-219.

<sup>3</sup> Elizabeth Pente, Paul Ward, Milton Brown, and Hardeep Sahota, ‘The co-production of historical knowledge: implications for the history of identities’, *Identity Papers: A Journal of British and Irish Studies* 1 (2015), 32-53.