

Don't Stop the Carnival by Kevin Le Gendre – sound and visionaries

A meticulous, sweeping and vivid history of black British music



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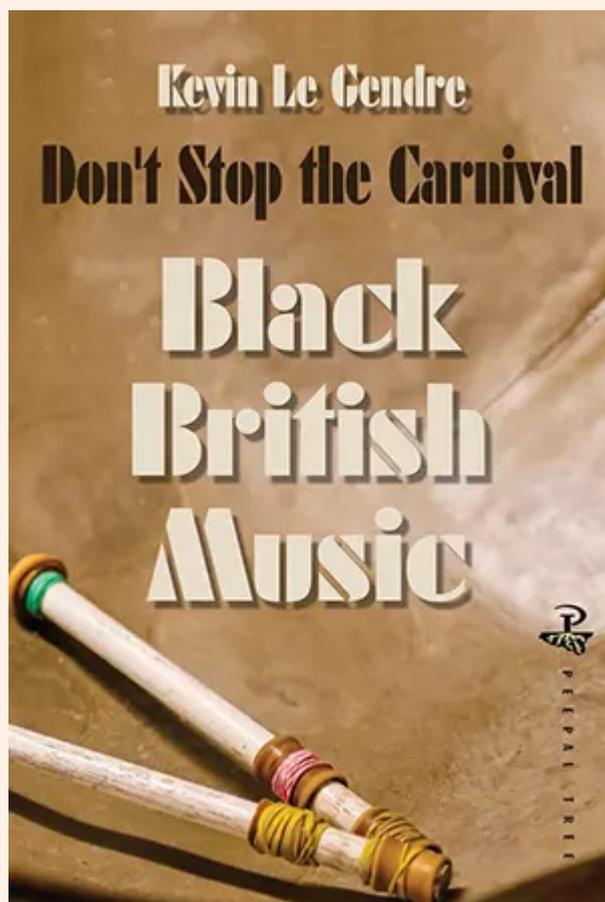
Diana Evans MAY 25, 2018

Given the accidental deportations of British citizens and the black OAPs being held in exile on Caribbean islands and the lost-then-found landing cards that are the latest disgrace of our current government, it's a good time to be reminded of the massive contribution that the [Windrush generation](#), and indeed black people as a whole, across centuries, have made to Britain. In this case, in the sphere of music. Kevin Le Gendre, long-time music journalist, jazz expert, radio broadcaster and deputy editor of *Echoes*, has produced a meticulously researched, compassionate and sweeping opus of the history of black British music. It is also an extensive political, sociological and philosophical study of the story of racism that is hugely pertinent to our time.

This is the first in a two-volume work beginning with the Middle Ages, and taking us up to the 1960s. It comprises the emergence of jazz, calypso and ska and the genesis of soul and everything in between. We visit the Westminster festivities of Henry VIII and Catherine of Aragón in 1511, where black trumpeter John Blanke blasted his horn on horseback while dressed in royal livery. We witness, through Le Gendre's vivid, almost audible writing, the musical accomplishments of ex-slave and abolition icon Ignatius Sancho, who composed scores in the vocabulary of European classical music. And meet Billy Waters, an African-American "peg-leg fiddler", or violinist, who played in Covent Garden in the 1800s and was celebrated among audiences in Cornwall.

The line-up of artists here is rigorous and seemingly infinite: "blackface" minstrel troupe the Ethiopian Serenaders, who hailed from New Orleans; Samuel Coleridge-Taylor, who became the first internationally renowned black British composer; Paul Robeson; Joe Harriott; Ambrose Campbell; Lord Kitchener; South African artist Dudu Pukwana; and the pianist Winifred Atwell, one of the few female jazz musicians to achieve mainstream success in the 1950s.

With each musical biography and genre that is explored, Le Gendre gives substantial insight into the societal contexts in which they occurred, and what emerges again and again is how black music is inextricably linked to protest. Coleridge-Taylor's father had left Britain to return to Africa after grappling with racism in his work as a doctor, and similarly his son faced blatant prejudice — the conductor Hans Richter repudiated his scores on the basis that they were produced by a “n****r”.



Much attention is paid to black soldiers, such as those who took up arms in defence of Britain during the great war, yet were not allowed to participate in victory parades when it ended. “A black man in uniform carrying a rifle, a pistol or a bayonet,” writes Le Gendre, “is an essential part of the military history of the United Kingdom, and it should be prominent in the national psyche.” In the face of such brazen and consistent insult, black musicians thrived, revelled and retaliated with music, an unforgettable example of this being Lord Kitchener's carnival road march at the West Indian cricket team victory over England at Lord's in 1950.

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association, the Notting Hill Carnival.

When the SS Empire Windrush docked at Tilbury in June 1948, a survey showed that 42 per cent of Britons wanted to emigrate. Yet the disdain shown towards immigrants on home turf stretched beyond the demarcations of colour; Portuguese, Irish, Russian and Polish families were also affected. In London's Notting Hill the colour bar in local pubs contributed to the proliferation of shebeens and, by

One West Indian from Nevis who'd settled in Leeds remarked in an interview with Le Gendre, “Even the churches were racist.” The sheer beauty and precision with which Le Gendre writes about music is the balm that makes all this easier to digest. On Duke Ellington: his “music has the

primal power of the blues, the ability to get everybody rockin' in rhythm, on the other [hand] it reaches poetic grandeur, through its evocation of humanity in a state of grace". On High Life: "The real genius of High Life is that it evokes movement yet paradoxically suggests a kind of floating or gently hovering sensation." And he also knows nerdy things like "shellac", a kind of "bioadhesive polymer", being the precursor to vinyl.

Like all good history books, *Don't Stop the Carnival* evokes a sensation of old-fashioned wonder and the feeling of having learnt something — in this case many things — of substance and profundity (did you know that Rhythm & Blues, the 1950s term for black popular music, was initially known as "Race Music"?). It is a hugely important bible of sound that left me raiding my vinyl, with new awareness and respect.

Diana Evans's new novel '[Ordinary People](#)' is out now

[Don't Stop the Carnival: Black British Music](#), by Kevin Le Gendre, *Peepal Tree Press*, RRP£19.99, 320 pages

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