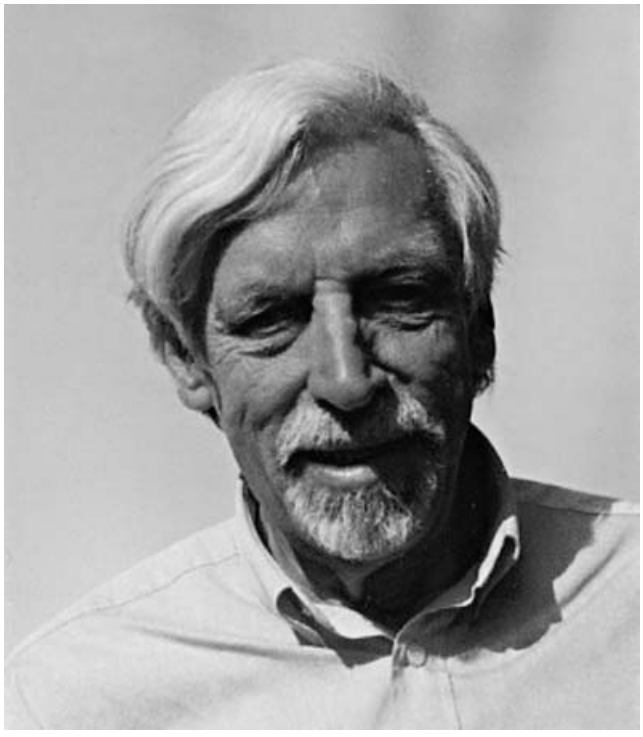
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Introduction

This issue of *Popular Music* is produced in honour of Paul Oliver, in recognition of his outstanding contribution to popular music scholarship.

Paul was a member of the original Editorial Board for *Popular Music* when it was set up in 1980 and continued to serve as a member of that body, and subsequently of the Editorial Group, until 1990. He was also a founding member of the International Association for the Study of Popular Music and has maintained a keen interest in the organisation, continuing to attend, and speak at, its international conferences. His vision of both the potential and the needs of the Association as a global network lay behind his proposal in 1985 that a project be undertaken to compile a worldwide encyclopedia of popular music, an idea which subsequently bore fruit in EPMOW (*The Encyclopedia of Popular Music of the World*). All these achievements are worth celebrating in themselves, but it is Paul's outstanding contribution to scholarship in the area of vernacular – particularly African-American vernacular – music that we wish to honour with this issue.

Paul will be eighty in May 2007. As someone who dislikes anniversaries he will, I feel sure, not greatly welcome my drawing attention to this one, but I mention it because anyone who is familiar with his schedule of work and travel has ample cause to be lost in admiration (and envy!) for his physical and mental energy, his



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high level of productivity and his never-failing drive and enthusiasm to discover and learn. That all of those characteristics have been his lifelong companion is apparent from the merest glance at the Bibliography included in this issue; and that listing, of course, only represents half the story, for Paul's contribution to the literature on architecture, especially vernacular architecture, has been equally ground-breaking and influential.

His first published article on African-American music, in *Jazz Journal* 1952, was followed by over sixty more before the decade was out. Many of these were written for regular columns in *Music Mirror* and *Jazz Monthly*, and through this regular exposure a British audience began not only to learn more about the subject but also to think about it in new ways and to start to share his profound fascination with the music and the musicians, and his equally profound respect for them. With his books, the first published in 1959, his influence became an international one. The authorship of the articles in this special issue, representing five different countries, suggests this continues to be the case.

Paul was not alone in the endeavour to bring the study of the blues out from under the shadow of jazz, but it is clear in retrospect that as his work continued it represented the most wide-ranging and comprehensive appraisal of the genre in its own right. It was writing characterised from the beginning by close attention to individual songs and the links between them and social and cultural circumstance, and by a wonderfully detailed knowledge of that circumstance in all its richness and diversity – and all its pain and joy. The primary point was not – was never – the testing of a theory; it was greater understanding and appreciation of the music and the people who made it. That involved, as Paul himself said, and John Baily reminds us in his article in this issue, 'entering the world' of African-Americans and seeking to understand their own view of their culture.

The tireless spirit of enquiry, the great attention to detail, the ability to connect individual songs to a wider picture and the command of a wide range of relevant historical sources, all of these characteristics of Paul's writing have left a clear legacy in blues scholarship, and this is manifest in several of the articles in this issue, among them those by Chris Smith and David Evans. Those articles, and several others (by Alona Sagee and Eric Rothenbuhler, for example) also illustrate another feature of Paul's writing that has continued to be fundamental in blues scholarship: a belief in the importance of commercial recordings as a primary source. The turn to recordings was something that distinguished the school of blues scholarship in which Paul was a leading figure from earlier scholars such as Newman I. White, John W. Work and, indeed (as Paul hints at in the interview with him which we publish) Alan Lomax, whose initial attitude to commercial recordings as a primary source for scholarship was negative. Another aspect of the importance of recordings, the influence of the record industry on the music and musicians, forms the basis of Robert Springer's study of issues of blues and copyright.

That commercial recordings were so central to the development of blues study outside the USA was not surprising, given the physical distance between the musicians still performing the music and the emerging European school of blues scholars. But from a very early point Paul also recognised the need to include fieldwork – and hence also field recording – in his methodology. The major result of his 1960 field trip was the book *Conversation with the Blues* (1965), but the trip continued to inspire him beyond the confines of one study. Although our articles do not include any which draw on personal fieldwork of that kind, the importance placed on the results of fieldwork is

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reflected in resources used by, for example, Luigi Monge, who draws on field recordings in the collections of the Library of Congress. Paul's mid-1960s visit to West Africa was probably not fieldwork, technically speaking, but it was an experience that exposed him to significant challenges in the collecting and interpreting of information. As John Baily's piece makes clear, Paul's response was to be of importance not only in terms of his own thinking but also for future scholarship in the historical origins of the blues.

Another factor characterising Paul's work has been a reluctance to canonise, and an accompanying concern for what, in the interview, he calls the blues 'star system'. We publish pieces centred on individuals who could be said to have been canonised: Bessie Smith and Robert Johnson. In neither case, however, is the focus on any idea of their superiority as artists, but rather on specific aspects of their approach that may help to explain their particular appeal: in the case of Bessie Smith (about whom Paul was one of the first to write in detail), David Evans examines the case for her powerful account of a major flood being based on personal observation, while Alona Sagee undertakes a musicological analysis of two of her vocal performances. In the case of Robert Johnson, Eric Rothenbuhler focuses on his understanding of the potential offered by the three-minute record for a different approach to blues song.

Paul's concern with the consequences of a star system operating in blues literature has its basis in a desire for a much more holistic approach to African-American music. A particular regret – again, the interview makes this clear – is the failure of scholars to follow up his work on religious recordings, especially sermons. We have been unable to remedy this (why scholars are so backward in coming forward in this area is an interesting question in itself), but we do include an article, by Luigi Monge, which examines the lyrics of several 'obscure' religious recordings on the subject of floods.

Paul's interests have always extended beyond African-American music, as Tony Russell reminds us, and Tony's own piece provides an example of how Paul's influence extended into scholarship in other areas, such as hillbilly music. Tony also acknowledges the encouragement Paul gave him to write his study of the complex relationships between black and white Americans that are an essential part of blues history. The persistent importance – and persistent complexity – of this theme is illustrated in Richard Middleton's exploration of loss and nostalgia in the blues in the context of inter-racial transaction.

Paul's career-long endeavour to understand what African-American vernacular music meant to African-American society was largely carried forward from Europe. As a European scholar working in an American cultural field he is not alone in having exerted influence on scholarship in that field, but of few, if any, others can it be said that they played such a crucial role in defining it. At the same time, he has always taken a great interest in vernacular culture from around the world, including that of his own country, an interest manifest in his editorship of the 1990 essay collection, *Black Music in Britain*. In an earlier piece, 'Blue-eyed blues', published in 1976, Paul explored the influence of the blues on European popular culture. This theme is picked up in our issue by Dave Allen, with a focus on Britain.

No single issue of the journal could hope to reflect Paul's range of scholarship or the scale of his influence, but we hope that this tribute to him will give some indication both of the ongoing debt that scholars owe him, and of the vibrancy of the scholarly field which he has done so much to establish. We also hope that Paul himself will read it with enjoyment! In honouring him in this way we would also like to dedicate the

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issue to the memory of Paul's wife Val. Val was his constant companion and his unfailing source of support. She was well known to a great many popular music scholars, and her presence is greatly missed.

David Horn

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