

Go where the music takes you

As OUP prepares to publish the groundbreaking *Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, Liz Thomson meets editor Colin Larkin, who risked all for his dream project

Later this month, Oxford University Press will publish the fourth edition of what Tony Parsons, former “hip young gunslinger” at *NME*, has called “the longest love letter to music” and *The Times* “a work of almost frightening completeness” – *The Encyclopedia of Popular Music*. The 10-volume set contains 10,000 pages and 27,000 entries, and will retail at £555 until 31 January, £720 thereafter.

First published in 1992 as a four-volume reference under the Guinness imprimatur and then taken up by Virgin, which also published a number of spin-off titles, it remains the much-loved baby of Colin Larkin, a music obsessive since, as a little boy, he got hooked on the R&B he heard in the fairgrounds where his parents worked in the holidays to earn extra money. “I was six by the time Elvis came on the scene and I didn’t rate him because I’d heard Little Richard and Big Joe Turner and all the *real* R&B singers who were so much better than he was,” he recalls now. Such records came into the East End via the London docks (as it did in Liverpool, where it influenced the Beatles) and, until the coming of Radio Luxembourg, opened listeners’ ears to music that was never heard on the BBC, which practised a sort of unofficial musical apartheid in the 1950s. “So there was lots of Ann Shelton and Dennis Lotis, but not much Ruth Brown or Dinah Washington.” One artist led Larkin to explore another, so Bob Dylan took him back to Peter Seeger and then to the Weavers, The Rolling Stones to Robert Johnson and John Lee Hooker.

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Having studied graphic design and technology, Dagenham-born Larkin worked in commercial art before joining Longman as a designer. Meanwhile, he was writing for a number of music magazines that grew out of rock’s 1960s coming of age and, in 1976, launched his own specialist company, Scorpion Publishing. Several of the books he published are now collectors’ items and *Bob Dylan’s Unreleased Recordings* won the approval of its subject. A decade later he sold out Scorpion to launch Square One Books and begin work on his lifetime ambition – an encyclopedia of popular music, which became effectively a joint venture with Guinness. “We gave them the Quark Express copy and even did our own index on an SE30 Apple. We bought some geeky indexing program from a guy in California – it cost us \$50 but it saved our lives.”

As his ambitions grew, and to secure the long-term future of the project, he sold *EPM*, essentially Square One Books, to Muze Inc (provider of data and editorial content with



Colin Larkin: the 1960s will never be surpassed

cutting-edge technology that’s used by the likes of Amazon, AOL, the BBC and innumerable researchers), and the company became Muze UK Ltd. With the money, Larkin bought himself out of the Guinness set-up for £500,000 and went to Virgin for the second and third editions, each one bigger than the last. Grove Macmillan, US publisher of the esteemed *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, had taken on Stateside distribution, which Larkin rightly sees as a validation of the *EPM*, and so, when Macmillan UK sold *Grove* to Oxford in 2003, it was happily inevitable that OUP should take on the publishing. Larkin, who continues to package the *Encyclopedia*, admits that, as an old design and production hand, he misses “the feel of the paper. But I couldn’t be happier with OUP.” Anyway, that’s surely a small price to pay for a man who so believed in his dream that he twice mortgaged his house to fund it, in the process losing his wife to divorce and, tragically, one of his four children to leukaemia.

The project has been a mammoth undertaking and remains Larkin’s full-time job. He has two full-time colleagues, one editorial and one production, plus a small handful of contributors. But now, having spent years “cleaning up” the entries from past contributors whose “sloppy approach” has long hindered the serious study of popular music, he writes most of the *Encyclopedia* himself. “I’ve put my stamp on it,” he says, without seeming self-aggrandising, expressing the hope that his contribution is now accepted as valid and worthwhile. For, like anyone who sees popular music as more than simply an opiate of the masses – some sociologists argue that it is the purest example of market-place capitalism, a “pre-masticated” imposition from above – Larkin has long believed that it was a subject worthy of serious scrutiny. “I was irritated at the distinction between classical and popular music, and the fact that the latter wasn’t treated seriously,” he remembers, “and I resented the notion that those obsessed with popular music didn’t have

the brains for a project such as this... I wanted to break down the barriers.” After all, the history of rock ‘n’ roll – a term coined by American DJ Alan Freed – is now more than half a century old and popular music itself... well, Homer was a busker and David played the harp.

Larkin’s starting point for *EPM* is 1900, as New York’s so-called Tin Pan Alley was coming to life, and the book covers, for example, the golden age of songwriting (the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin) as well as the artists (Leiber and Stoller, Goffin and King, Neil Sedaka *et al*) who emerged from the legendary Brill Building in the 1950s and ‘60s. It includes Guy Mitchell, whose recording of “She wears red feathers” was the first song that caught young Colin’s attention (“I don’t listen to it much now”) and of course, Connie Francis (“the first record I bought was ‘Stupid Cupid/Carolina moon’ in 1958 – it cost me 6/8, a fortune then”), as well as everyone from A Band of Angels (short-lived Sixties act featuring Mike d’Abo) to heavy metalmen ZZ Top via folksinger Ewan MacColl and film composer Ennio Morricone. *EPM* rightly ranges widely, across folk, blues, country and jazz; punk; Latin, reggae and ska; rap and hip-hop; stage and screen. It covers record labels and festivals, styles and genres; lists songs, CDs and DVDs; and includes lengthy essays on important writers and artists. Inevitably, 75% of the entries are Anglo-American – 40% American, 35% British. Of the balance, 600 come from Australia, 240 from France, 200 from Japan.

With all today’s indie bands and increasing self-publishing, monitoring new trends is time-consuming. “I leave that side of things to a web nerd,” Larkin confesses, explaining that “you just sort of *know*” when an act merits an entry. He himself monitors some 40 music magazines a month, which add to a library of 10,000, stretching back to 1961, “when I first got serious about this”. His home in the Suffolk village of Lavenham (“an unlikely place for a music freak”) is now paid for, and lined with some 35,000 CDs and 3,000 LPs, a collection appreciated by his kids, one of whom is “a talented guitarist”.

As for the current scene, Larkin does still hear music that gets the adrenalin pumping, but he believes the 1960s will never be surpassed, the 1980s never rated. “Little Feat was the last *great* band.”

The Oxford Encyclopedia of Popular Music is published on 30 November. It will be available online from April and, that month, Omnibus Press will publish a concise edition.

