



[Sit Down! Listen to This!](#)

The Roger Eagle story by Bill Sykes, published by [Empire](#)
Reviewed by [Charlotte Starkey](#) August 2012

Sit Down! Listen to This! by Bill Sykes is a fascinating book for many reasons. It is mesmeric for those born during the Second World War or thereabouts and who remember

The Twisted Whee

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in both its venues in Manchester and/or

Eric's

in Liverpool and for those who know 'Northern Soul' and its origins. It is a compilation of interviews, reminiscences with some of the friends and acquaintances of Roger Eagle, and with Roger Eagle's own account in interview. It tells a story of the music clubs of Manchester and Liverpool for well-nigh thirty years until Roger Eagle's death in 1999 at the age of fifty six.

Specifically it is a story about Roger Eagle himself, placing him at the centre of the key musical developments in Manchester and Liverpool from the 60s to the late 80s: his amazing record

collection, his influential contacts with musicians from Britain and America, the clubs in which he worked, which he came to run.

Some will still say that they have never heard of Roger Eagle but many have heard of ***The Stone Roses***

and the Hacienda. The Stone Roses were at The International (1988) when Roger Eagle had been brought in as part of the club. Tony Wilson missed out by not signing them; and Tony Wilson himself, when interviewed, admitted the Hacienda quite possibly would not have happened without his meeting with Roger Eagle in Liverpool. This account counterbalances two distortions to the story of music in the region: the significance given to the Beatles and what many consider to be the myth of Anthony H. Wilson (Tony Wilson).

For those unfamiliar with the name, Roger Eagle was born in Oxford in 1942. His formative musical years would have been, as for so many of us, to the sound of skiffle and Rock and Roll in the 50s from America and, of course, the blues. His mother worked for Oxford University Press. He remained in touch with her throughout until her death. He moved to Manchester in 1962 and decided to remain in the North West. He had a passion for what he obviously saw as 'serious' music, the music with its roots in Afro-Caribbean and Afro-American traditions, ska, reggae, the blues. He began work as a DJ amassing an amazing record collection and seeking out the new, unusual, unheard sounds of American blues. He was not a musician in the conventional sense: he loved music and, first as a DJ and then as the powerhouse in various clubs, behind major bands, inspiring them, organising, supporting bands, he introduced young white audiences at ***The Twisted Wheel*** in Brazenose Street in Manchester (1963) to live performances by musicians such as Howlin' Wolf and Sonny Boy Williamson. He opened numerous clubs, possibly the most famous his two

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(1976) in Liverpool. He knew most of the key rock and roll, rhythm and blues, reggae and punk musicians of the time. He came to be perceived by many Afro-American musicians as a route through which black musicians could find a voice across the Atlantic for white audiences when, in America itself, their music and their lives were often contained and constrained within the rules of white supremacy.

It is relevant to note that, in parallel with this drive in Manchester, and not the subject of this book but already in exhibition at the People's History Museum in Manchester, there was the music of the African, Afro-Caribbean clubs in Manchester from the 1940s onwards (cf. Endnote 1). It was a vibrant, rich and complex vein of black music in the clubs dotted around Brooks' Bar, Alexandra Park and Hulme. From the 1940s onwards these clubs catered first for the African seamen that arrived by ship from Liverpool to Salford Docks, ex-service personnel who had served in the war, and then the immigrants of the 1950s and 1960s who came with government support to find work as the post-war demolition and new developments began: the PSV Club in Hulme variously owned and known as The Public Services Vehicle Club and then The Caribbean Club, The Reno Club in Moss Side, The Russell Club (to be leased by Tony Wilson in the 70s), The Nile Club on Princess Road. Intermarriage also meant that some English-born people had already heard the music of the Caribbean and Africa and the music was known through some vinyls brought over from America by servicemen stationed in the surrounding region.



None of this community figured in the growth of the music specifically encouraged by Roger Eagle; nor does it figure in this book about him. Certainly racism and segregation led to a ghetto atmosphere where clubs like Reno's and The Nile Club provided a 'safe' environment for a targeted immigrant clientele. Equally many 'white' clubbers chose to visit the mainly 'white' clubs for many years and the initial clientele for Eagle's clubs, as the book demonstrates, identified themselves as the 'Mods' of the 60s. In the Leicester Highfield area in the 1960s, immigrant Caribbean groups would gather on a warm weekend afternoon with the percussion,

saxophones, clarinets and bass and make the most amazing music, only for the police sirens to send everyone indoors till the coast was clear again.

It is a strange twist to the whole story that, whilst black American musicians were visiting the white clubs of the North West, the Afro-Caribbean community settling in Britain with powerful and direct links to the roots of reggae and blues [Harlem Spirit – *Dem a Sus (In the Moss)*, for instance, 1979 - a call against 'stop and search' tactics; the Mighty Diamonds at the PSV Club, 1988] did not find a voice or a venue for some years in the club world that Eagle's followers inhabited. Factory Records signed up only one reggae band – X-O-DUS (1979) through Tony Wilson. Their English Black Boys recording has a wonderful sense of tempo and rhythm with a title indicating the central preoccupation with living in a kind of exile. The Factory flyer changed the spelling to

[EXODUS](#)

A book such as this inevitably requires re-reading to appreciate fully the enormous amount of detail it contains. It is divided into sections which chart, through interviews around common topics in different chapters, the chronology of Eagle's work in the music scenes of Manchester and Liverpool from his early days notably at the original *Twisted Wheel* in Brazenose Street, Manchester, close to *The Oasis Club* on Lloyd Street. The reader is left to piece together the various narratives, memories and impressions to form a complete picture; and this makes the book all the more intriguing.

To appreciate what Eagle was attempting it is important to remember that this was a Manchester far removed from the slick developments of the Hacienda in later years. When Roger Eagle came to Manchester premises could be leased or obtained, ventures set up, relatively easily with the 'right' contacts. As late as the 1950s, when skiffle was king, Piccadilly

was a mudbath and the frontage of the northern end of Deansgate opposite the Cathedral was a shell behind which bombed craters still menaced. The coffee house or bar with its jukebox was the magnet for rock and roll. As a young teenager one was warned not to venture to the back of Market Street (one did, of course). The coffee house was the stop-off point if one had the cash, near to the original *Twisted Wheel* in Brazenose Street, close to *Oasis*. In the evening *The Twisted Wheel*

, when it opened in 1963, became a mecca. Soon after, Eagle's

R&B Scene

magazine/fanzine appeared – a nugget of musical history of those years.

Bill Sykes's book was launched on 17th July this year from the second *Twisted Wheel* reborn in July 2000 and now under threat of demolition (cf. Endnote 2 for update). Bill Sykes and old hands of

The Twisted Wheel

gave valuable accounts of their memories at the book launch. The place still has that unique chill dark cellar atmospherics when you enter, which gradually steam into sweaty beat as the evening wears on to the sound of vinyl. Still in operation with original vinyl pressings the club continues that tradition of R&B which formed the basis for Eagle when he opened it in Whitworth Street in 1965 after the closure of the Brazenose site.

The book captures well how drugs such as LSD and music fuelled one another during this epoch of the 60s both among musicians and the clubbers who enjoyed the music. It was a complex mix and the two created a sense of spontaneity, creativity and rebellion which so confused the procession of pundits in the media, particularly the BBC with assumed outraged interviewers by turns challenging musicians and giving voice to the eager-to-be-heard representatives of the churches, the police and the suburbs of middle England. These voices of a kind of moral rectitude were always going to founder on the wider corruption of politics itself. Yet, meanwhile, Roger Eagle's initiatives, separate and uninvolved with all this, drove forward a revolution in musical taste that will forever be his legacy in Britain to the music of the blues always outside the equally platitudinous sounds of commercialised pop.



<http://www.soul-source.co.uk/articles/soul-news/the-twisted-wheel-campaign-r2533>