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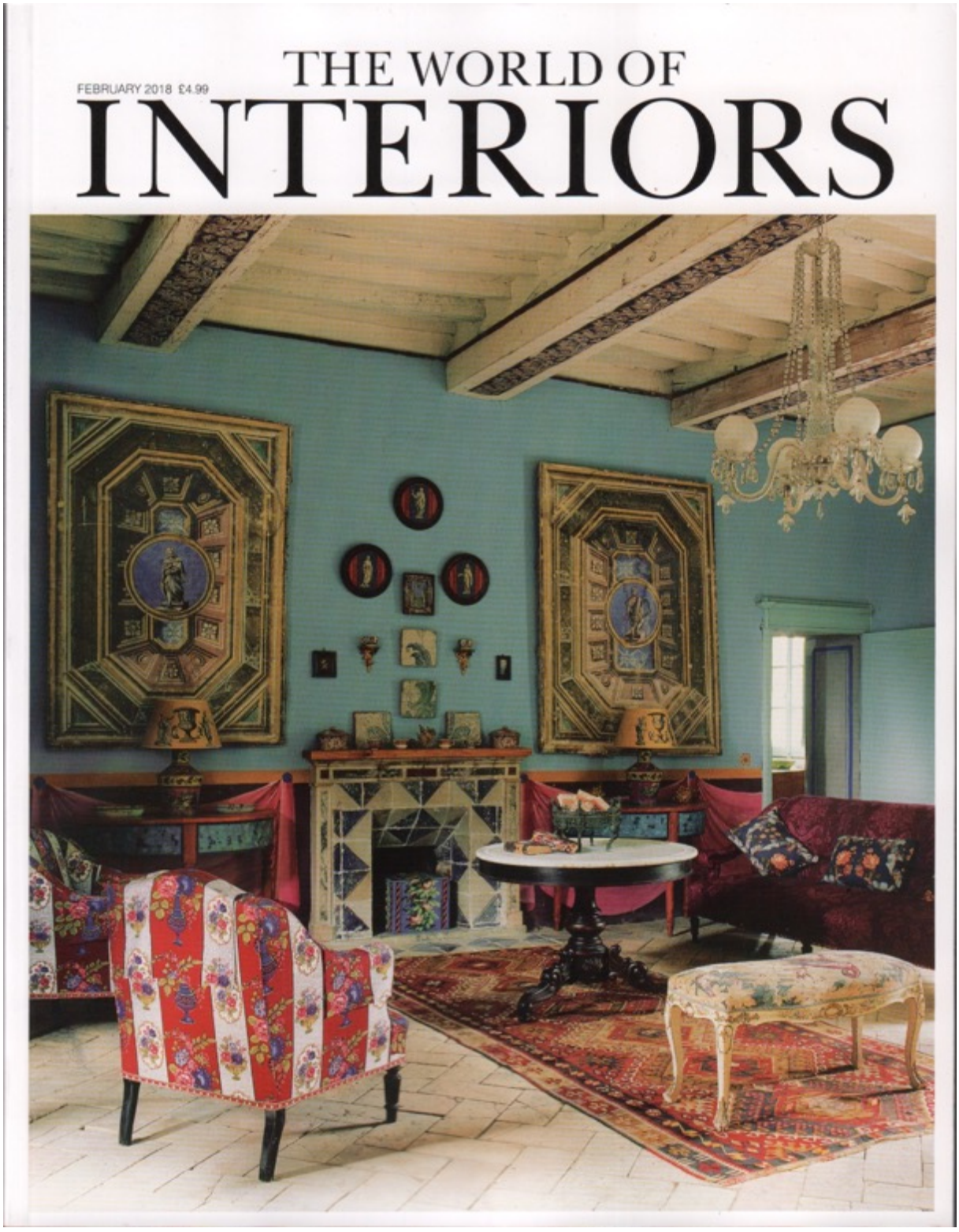

EXHIBITION diary

Rhythm and Reaction **TWO TEMPLE PLACE** Temple Place, London WC2

The decades bracketed by the two world wars – and, arguably, much of the hedonism of that time derived from a grim perception that it was an *interwar* rather than a postwar era – saw what was surely the greatest social and cultural upheaval of the entire 20th century. Women cast off their hobble skirts, bobbed their hair and climbed into fringed frocks that exposed parts of the body that had been hidden away for centuries. The world became faster, louder and more mechanised: motor cars and aeroplanes, gramophones and talkies, factories roaring with what actor Jack Buchanan termed a 'boom-a-lacka, zoom-a-lacka, wee'. And the savage rhythm that ran through it all was the sound of jazz.

It might be an uncomfortable thought for a 21st-century mindset, but it seems highly likely that the Bright Young Things' taste for ragtime was a variant strain of the contemporary vogue for primitivism, which led artists from Picasso to Modigliani to incorporate aspects of African tribal art into their paintings. In the Britain of Wodehouse, Coward and Waugh, the music of Louisiana flophouses and Harlem juke joints became the soundtrack for high society – an enthusiasm for black American culture was something exotic, subversive, even dangerous, with which to shock staid maiden aunts and censorious clergymen. Unlike its anthropological counterparts, however, jazz was defiantly modern, an urban art form in which trumpets blared like motor horns and clarinets soared like skyscrapers.

This show examines how this wild noise became somehow tamed during its transatlantic crossing. The syncopations of American jazz were fused with the British traditions of music hall and the café orchestra; a form founded on the principle of improvisation was transcribed on to sheet music and arranged for tea dances. Its heroes were pasty-faced dance-band figures such as the limpid pianist Lew Stone, the peppy trumpeter Nat Gonella and the mournful crooner Al Bowlly. The uniquely refined sound they created is attributable in part to the fact that they were attempting to recreate a version of jazz based entirely on scratchy recordings played on primitive equipment. Many of them had not experienced American jazz as it was intended – raw and live.

That's not true of every artist featured in *Rhythm and Reaction*. The Sussex painter Edward Burra, for instance, tracked the music to its source – it is said that he told his mother he was going for a walk in the garden only to vanish to the USA for six months, where he chronicled clubland as a kind of Otto Dix of the Harlem Renaissance. Other visual artists interpreted the essence of jazz in more abstract fashion, as seen in the gaudy ornamental vases of Enoch Boulton – although, in truth, their kaleidoscopic palettes and jagged diagonals owe more to Vorticism than the music of Bechet and Armstrong. But that's a quibble – it is, above all, the curious fusion of sources that makes the interwar period so compelling. **RHYTHM AND REACTION: THE AGE OF JAZZ IN BRITAIN** runs 27 Jan-22 April, Mon, Thurs-Sat 10-4.30, Wed 10-9, Sun 11-4.30 ■ STEPHEN PATIENCE *is a freelance writer*

Top: Edward Burra, *The Band*, 1934, watercolour, 55.5 x 76cm. Above: Co-operative Wholesale Society shoes, 1920-25