

discussion of how the fashion of the Art Ensemble fit within cultural dress practices of the trickster or dandy figure in the Black diaspora.⁶

Message to Our Folks is an important volume that expands our understanding of the musical practices and history of one of the leading experimental music groups of the last half of the twentieth century. A major highlight of this book is Steinbeck's musical analyses and the ways he connects the music to the book's wider themes of the Art Ensemble's social practices. Steinbeck bolsters his with the use of primary sources drawn from the personal archives of the Art Ensemble alongside interviews with and personal insights from the Art Ensemble. Steinbeck's integration of these sources into his book supply an additional layer of nuance and can be viewed as part of the recent turn toward the archive in jazz studies.⁷ Steinbeck's work also demonstrates the value of a single-subject monograph, especially on artists whose polyvalent musical and social practices cannot be contained within specific critical theories or methodologies. Overall, *Message to Our Folks* will be of interest to general music audiences and interdisciplinary scholars of music, sound, performance, improvisation, and composition.

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Vaudeville Melodies: Popular Musicians and Mass Entertainment in American Culture, 1870–1929. By Nicholas Gebhardt. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017.

Nicholas Gebhardt's monograph seeks to chart the changes undergone by popular entertainment in the United States between 1870 and 1929 in order to find the moment in which performers shifted the way they thought about themselves and their self-presentation through performance and developed a new relationship with the people who comprised their audience—he theorizes vaudeville as the form that was instrumental in driving this process. Gebhardt's introduction notes the increasingly corporate nature of entertainment in this period and the shifts this brought about in the ways that performers viewed themselves and their position in the entertainment industry. Vaudeville was, he argues, a new kind of entertainment that drove new relationships between managers and performers, and between performers and their audience. Gebhardt quotes the editor of *Harper's Monthly*,

⁶ For more on black cultural engagements with fashion and clothing see Monica Miller's, *Slaves to Fashion: Black Dandyism and the Styling of Black Diasporic Identity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press).

⁷ For examples of the archival turn in jazz studies see Michael Heller, *Loft Jazz: Improvising New York in the 1970s* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2017); Brent Hayes Edwards, *Epistrophies: Jazz and the Literary Imagination* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2017); and this reviewer's dissertation "Saturn's Ark: The Improvised Archives, Politics, and Performances of Sun Ra," Ph.D. diss., University of Guelph, 2018.

William Dean Howells, who advised that, to succeed in the long term, vaudeville needed to move beyond fleeting moments of novelty and aim for deeper and more enduring passions. He ends his introduction posing the question of whether Howells was correct in his assessment.

In the course of ten chapters, Gebhardt charts the changes to show business and the ways that musical performers were affected by those changes, and the ways they responded creatively to them. Chapters 1, 3, and 4 are devoted to exploring the relationship between people in vaudeville, and the forces that shapes the performer's sense of self. In chapter 1, Gebhardt focuses on the themes he sees as central to vaudeville—escapism and transformation. He asserts that vaudeville introduced new relationships between the performers, managers, and audience, and he explores these ideas through a discussion and analysis of two films, *Singin' in the Rain* (1952) and *Band Wagon* (1953). Chapter 3 concentrates on “the ritual passages that performers took from being a nobody in the audience to becoming somebody on the stage” (37). In this chapter, Gebhardt relies heavily on Sophie Tucker's autobiography, but also cites biographies of Lillian Russell and Bert Williams in discussing the ways that performers created on-stage personas and moved from relative anonymity of off-stage life to the life of the stage.¹ Gebhardt's failure to consider the class and ethnic differences between Lillian Russell and Sophie Tucker, or to discuss issues of race relating to Bert Williams, make this chapter somewhat problematic, although the point about performers needing to move between on- and off-stage personas is well made. Chapter 4 examines the relationship between performers, as well as issues of kinship, friendship, intimate, and familial relationships. Using examples drawn from George M. Cohan's biography, Gebhardt considers the ways that performers came to be taken seriously as performers. He notes that “the ritual structure of vaudeville intensified the shared sense of the social interaction and mutual dependency among performers, even as the uniqueness of each performer's individual talent was the basis on which he or she appealed to the audience” (58). Gebhardt sees performers sharing elements of their personal life from the stage to create a sense of intimacy with their audience, blurring boundaries between art and life (60). He also calls for kinship and other relationships between performers to be considered as central in the study of musical performance beyond the context of vaudeville.

Chapters 2, 5, and 6 focus on different aspects of theatrical management and the business of vaudeville. In chapter 2, Gebhardt considers the formation of circuits that facilitated the movement of performers around the country. He sees this development in vaudeville as a sign of the industrialization of the entertainment industry and depicts performers as being analogous to traveling salesmen who sold products associated with industrialized and corporate America to small town dwellers. While I agree with Gebhardt's assertions about industrialization, he appears to assume that circuits were fundamental to vaudeville as a form and had been part of vaudeville

¹ Sophie Tucker, *Some of These Days: The Autobiography of Sophie Tucker* (New York: Doubleday and Company, 1945); Lillian Russell, “Reminiscences,” in *American Vaudeville as Seen by Its Contemporaries*, edited by Charles Stein, 21–33 (New York: Alfred Knopf, 1984); Ann Charters, *The Story of Bert Williams* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1983).

from its inception. On one hand, circuits pre-date vaudeville inasmuch as managers in remote regions or regions easily bypassed by transportation routes, such as the upper Midwest or the South, had worked cooperatively to create guaranteed weeks of bookings by forming regional circuits from the late 1860s or early 1870s. On the other, national-scale circuits such as that associated with the Keith-Albee organization developed slowly from smaller regional circuits and did not reach national scale until well after the beginning of vaudeville. The fundamental problem in this chapter is that it assumes a linear trajectory of constant improvement and refinement for vaudeville, which is the impression given by publicity produced by the Keith-Albee organization in the early twentieth century, which forms the basis for vaudeville history as it currently stands. But the historical record found in primary documents reveals a much messier and more complex situation.

In chapter 5, Gebhardt focuses on the reform instituted by managers, noting that these men embraced a form of progressivism that was associated with American business of the period, which saw “reform” as both positive and necessary. Gebhardt relies heavily on Robert Grau’s memoir in this chapter, and Grau embraced a similar worldview as Keith, Albee, Proctor and other vaudeville managers, who viewed the changes they instituted as necessarily improving the performing conditions for the acts they booked at their theaters.² While some reforms improved performing conditions, other changes such as the move to continuous performance and the censorship of the content of acts constrained performers. Performers rarely commented on these changes, in part because they understood that there were always other acts waiting for a spot on the bill—complaint and protest were not part of the culture of vaudeville performers.

Chapter 6 considers the ways that shifting management practices and the consolidation of vaudeville into larger and larger circuits affected performance in the context of vaudeville. Gebhardt stresses the importance of personality in vaudeville and notes that while critics found vaudeville confounding because of its lack of coherence, audiences loved the continual novelty of vaudeville and the connections they could make to the performers on the stage. While managers sought to keep the show moving in an orderly fashion, performers did what they could to push the boundaries in order to connect with their audiences, a connection that was inevitably rewarded by future bookings. Gebhardt sees vaudeville as a form in which performers needed to push against the restrictions of the management, but they also knew the limits of how far they could go. This chapter introduces questions about popularity, performance, and music that are pursued in the last three chapters of the book. Chapter 7 discusses the strategies employed by performers to find the right act for an audience. Chapter 8 focuses on musical practices in vaudeville and the ways that anticipation of audience reaction was instrumental in determining the content and even structure of vaudeville music. Chapter 9 concentrates on the question of popular success and the ways in which it could be measured by performers, managers and others. The final chapter provides a kind of summary in which

² Robert Grau, *The Business Man in the Amusement World* (New York: Broadway Publishing Company, 1910).

Gebhardt expands his discussion to include the established history of jazz. It is clear that he has engaged with this study of vaudeville in order to better understand the kinds of forces that also shaped jazz performance in the early twentieth century and to complicate what he sees as a linear narrative that ignores or minimizes the contributions of musicians who do not easily fit into that narrative.

Gebhardt's goal is both admirable and worthwhile. It is important to challenge the overly simple, apparently linear historical narratives that we have inherited from the vaudeville histories written in the mid- to late-twentieth century. Gebhardt's instincts are also correct in looking to vaudeville and other entertainment from the turn of the twentieth century that provided the performance context for so much of the popular music of the period. But in making this connection, he relies on an historical narrative that is just as reductive and problematic, and because his work relies entirely on secondary sources rather than archival research, he cannot see the problem with vaudeville history as it currently stands. Had Gebhardt consulted primary source materials in which the surviving evidence of vaudeville and other popular entertainments can be found, he would have found ample material to support some of the conclusions he draws in this work, but he would have also seen the ways in which the same evidence undercuts the historical narrative on which he builds his argument.

The biggest problem in this project is Gebhardt's conflation of singing and music in the context of variety and vaudeville. He does not appear to recognize the degree to which singing was comedic performance and not music at all. It is true that skilled singers and instrumental musicians appeared on the variety and vaudeville stage, and when they did so, their musical skills were the focus. But most of the male vocal performers in this context were comedians, and singing ability was only a minor part of their act. Their ability to use the lyrics of the song—and the archetypal character they represented—as a jumping off point for comic banter was much more important than the quality of their singing voice. While vocal skills mattered more for women, if a woman was billed as a comedian she was also expected to possess similar skills to male comedians. In a comic act, the song was merely the vehicle via which a performer could forge a connection with their audience, and audience reaction was central in determining how a performance proceeded—the best performers were well practiced at shaping their banter to play to audience sympathies and biases. While Gebhardt is correct in noting the importance of personality, a winning personality was only one small part of capturing the audience's attention. And, while vaudeville song might have become the foundation on which later jazz was built, the connection lies more with the musicians in the theater orchestra who needed to know this material, than with the singers on the stage who used songs as a vehicle for their comedy.

This book reinforces the need for a thorough rethinking of the way we approach vaudeville history. If we continue to build our work on the history as it exists and to write linear and overly-simple narratives, we will continue to produce work with fundamental flaws. The current history reflects materials produced by the Keith-Albee publicity department that was placed in magazines produced for middle-class consumption. Many of the reviewers from this period had begun as reviewers of "legitimate" theater and applauded the reform efforts instituted by

Keith and Albee, especially those that encouraged an orderly auditorium and a more predictable structure to the show. But, even though their theaters represented the Big Time, by the 1910s, there were many other smaller theaters and circuits where a more flexible and improvisatory performance style persisted. Despite the blanket denials of any connection between vaudeville and modern burlesque, which was consolidating in parallel, there were numerous places in which these worlds intersected, particularly in small time and less respectable theaters and circuits. Until we can understand this incredibly complex world that spanned from low-class sexualized performance sometimes in connection to prostitution to musical comedy and even operetta, it is difficult if not impossible to convincingly posit theories that explain the appeal of any single portion of it.

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Lou Harrison: American Musical Maverick. By Bill Alves and Brett Campbell. Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 2017.

Bill Alves and Brett Campbell's new Lou Harrison book doesn't supersede the 1998 biography by Leta E. Miller and Fredric Lieberman, as updated in 2004 after the composer's death, which features an unsurpassed cross-referenced works list and detailed bibliography of Harrison's own writings.¹ But it delivers far more than another rehearsal of the facile "east meets west" discourse that often characterizes Harrison criticism. The authors are at their best in their clear, concise descriptions of the various composition techniques that Harrison employed over the years. Their brief introduction to just intonation and its problems (215–16), for example, is nuanced yet accessible to a general audience. These explanations are often illustrated with notated examples, which, unfortunately, are not called out by number in the text, making it sometimes difficult to map the examples to the descriptions they are meant to illustrate. The authors extend their gift for vivid description to insightful analyses—sometimes quite detailed—of many Harrison compositions, which often compelled me to seek out recordings of works I had never heard (e.g., *Solstice* [149–51], and *Suite for Symphonic Strings* [242–46]), as well as to revisit works I know (e.g., *Pacifika Rondo* [1963, 266–71], and others).

Unlike Miller and Lieberman, who separate accounts of Harrison's life from his works, Alves and Campbell weave the events of Harrison's life, his inner thoughts and feelings, and musical analysis into a single, cohesive narrative. This approach provides many new insights about Harrison's life, philosophy, and music, and often makes for entertaining reading. Harrison emerges as a sort of "Forrest

¹ Leta E. Miller and Fredric Lieberman, *Composing a World: Lou Harrison, Musical Wayfarer* (Bloomington, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2004).