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John Mundy: Popular Music on Screen. From Hollywood Musical to Music Video

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**John Mundy: Popular Music on Screen.
From Hollywood Musical to Music Video**

Manchester 1999: Manchester University Press 1999, 272 p.,

ISBN 0-7190-4029-9, \$ 12.99

Four things can be said about the development of the screen media (film, television and their electronic offspring) and popular music over the course of the twentieth century: their evolution has been characterized more than with any other art form

by their commercialisation; the evolution of each respective art form has been in parallel; technical developments in one of these media have always been of significance for the other; and they have become natural partners, a fact which has effected the birth of an as yet unnamed new medium (the term „music video“ sounds as primitive a definition for the combination of image and music in a single medium as Edison's „kinescope“ and „kinetophone“, which once defined what we refer to today simply as film, cinema, the movies). John Mundy's book, *Popular Music on Screen*, attempts an analysis of the commercial, ideological and aesthetic implications of this intimate relationship from the early days of sound cinema in the twenties through to the music video phenomenon in the nineties.

The book's second and third chapters (the chapters on early sound film and on the classical Hollywood musical) are extremely well researched from the legal, commercial and historic point of view. Mundy gives detailed accounts of the initial legal battles for dominance between those seeking to capitalize on film's new audio capability, won by Warner Bros., with their 1927 release *The Jazz Singer* and their taking the initiative in establishing a network of sound-capable cinemas. Additionally, the implications of improvements in sound-recording technology for the music industry are also well covered as a topic of its own in the second chapter.

The chapter on classical Hollywood musicals begins with a structural and aesthetic analysis of several films (in particular *Footlight Parade* [Warner Bros., 1933], *Top Hat* [RKO, 1935] and *Meet me in St. Louis* [MGM, 1944]) which seem rather out of place amidst the continued focus on the economic forces at play in Hollywood film production during the thirties, forties and fifties.

The fourth chapter examines how, in the shape of black music and rock and roll, and with a boom in independent record production, popular music began to appeal to a younger, more affluent audience, whose leisure activities reflected these developments in the 1950s and 1960s. Again, Hollywood reacted to keep its share of the leisure market, first by criticising youth rebellion as delinquency, later by exploiting the dominance of the new music in its films. This includes short but concise analyses of the Elvis Presley films *Jailhouse Rock* and *Loving You* (1957).

Chapter five - by far the longest chapter - switches the focus onto British musical traditions and cinema, and the themes largely mirror the discussion on the US industry in the previous chapters in a very condensed form. This makes it one of the book's least detailed and therefore weakest chapters although, like the book as a whole, it is well and concisely written and very informative in the areas selected for special attention: early British cinema, the BBC and popular music in the 1920s and 1930s, British musical comedies and popular music, the British record industry, George Formby, Cliff Richards and The Beatles.

The sixth chapter discusses the phenomenon of television shows in the USA and UK dedicated solely to pop music, which again represented a reaction to the increasingly young market for music and entertainment activities after the 1950s.

and how these contributed to a change in the visuality and appreciation of music as well as of the musicians.

As the bibliography testifies, Mundy's book is a very thoroughly researched work with heavy emphasis on the commercial history of the special relationship between popular music and the screen media. But the selected filmography reveals the biggest drawback of this book: its Anglo Americano-centrism. While Mundy states in the introduction that this book does not attempt to look at wider questions of film music or to provide a comprehensive history of popular music on screen (p.6), there is no obvious reason why such a work should be restricted to covering issues relating only to British and American musical and cinematic history. The concept of a „cinema of attractions“, for instance, is mentioned in connection with the British star George Formby (pp 150-154), whilst there is no mention of Sergei Eisenstein, who coined the phrase. The classical Hollywood musical may be the first thing we think of when the musical genre is mentioned, but the impact of the prolific Indian film industry on the „other half of the world“ which, like no other national cinema, has built its success on the coupling of image and popular music, is given no mention. And what about the great Soviet musical tradition? The musical comedies by directors such as Alexandrov and Piriev in the thirties, forties and fifties are of direct significance for the ideological discussion on music on screen and the visual economy of music. And why the focus on British musical comedies which, with only five or six key figures and comparatively small audiences, are relatively insignificant on the global scale? On the book's back cover, it is recommended as essential reading for students of film and media studies and those interested in the development of popular music in the twentieth century. The term „anglophone“ is missing from this text! Otherwise, this is indeed a highly recommendable and highly specialized work.

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