



Free and Easy? A Defining History of the American Film Musical Genre

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BOOK REVIEW

Free and Easy? A Defining History of the American Film Musical Genre

SEAN GRIFFIN, 2018

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The paradoxical aim of wanting to offer a ‘defining history’ of the film musical genre while challenging its limits by being ‘tauntingly inclusive’ sits at the centre of Sean Griffin’s *Free and Easy? A Defining History of the American Musical Genre*. Paying attention to each era’s conception of what counts as a musical, Griffin’s book surveys the genre from its prehistory in Native American rituals, African-American songs and minstrelsy, to its golden studio days, post-studio identity crisis, and includes today’s reality singing competitions, music videos, viral flash mobs and lip dubs, and even arcade dance games. By adopting such an expansive view of the genre, Griffin seeks to unsettle the common association of musicals with the integrated variety of its golden days, where on-screen singing and dancing are seamlessly integrated to serve narrative purposes.

The book is divided into twelve brisk chapters, well-suited for undergraduate classes. Particularly so is the first, which surveys the music and stage traditions before cinema. This chapter moves swiftly, packing a surprising amount of information while remaining light and readable. Already in this first chapter, Griffin sets out the book’s underlying argument, that ‘American music and dance ha[s] continually balanced between freedom and control because that dichotomy helped shape what it mean[s] to be American’ (p. 28).

The following chapters on proto-musicals and oft-neglected backstagers emphasize the early musicals’ inherent potential to promote diversity. Despite early musical’s focus on white characters, specialty numbers – which stood separate from the narrative – provided a space for African-Americans and other minorities to perform. The studio era’s increased integration of musical numbers into the film’s narrative structure resulted in the near complete erasure of non-white artists from film musicals, and severely constricted opportunities for women and queer performers.

Consequently, the heyday of film musicals is presented by Griffin as a rather bitter-sweet period where strong backing for the genre from studios, audiences – and government during the war years – resulted in technically accomplished yet

conformist films. As the genre reached its apex, integration culminated in the suppression of individuality, ultimately serving repressive values. The book's strength lies in its commitment to survey the genre's centrifugal, as well as its centripetal, forces. In addition to the well-documented Freed Unit productions and blockbusters, minor works such as B musicals (the singing cowboys, for instance), non-English language productions, race movies and exploitation musicals are given due attention.

As the book progresses, and as the genre explodes into experimentations and identity crisis, the book appears to lose some of its focus in an attempt to include all manifestations of filmed music and dance into an expansive definition. A chapter on the resurgence of non-integrated filmed music and dance performances includes *Saturday Night Fever* (John Badham, 1977) and *Flashdance* (Adrian Lyne, 1983), rock biopics such as *The Buddy Holly Story* (Fred Bauer, 1978), and concert films (*Stop Making Sense*, Jonathan Demme, 1984). These latter chapters include welcomed discussions of changes occurring within the recorded music industry, the effects of media industries synergy and the influence of music video aesthetics. Griffin even engages with 'anti-musicals', films that are overtly antagonistic to the genre's style and values (p. 267). The last chapter, however, feels rushed, reading at times like a shopping list in trying to pack in as many contemporary iterations as possible. Griffin provocatively suggests such inclusions as *Straight Outta Compton* (F. Gary Gray, 2015) and *8 Mile* (Curtis Hanson, 2002), without however weighing in one way or another and leaving the readers to do the theoretical work for themselves.

In this sense, *Free and Easy's* overall structure mimics that balance at play in film musicals, 'between the comfort of structure and the joy of liberation' (p. 4). Indeed, despite Griffin's entertaining writing style, the tension between studying the musical film as a genre and chafing at the very idea of providing a definition is palpable. Rather than resulting in joyous liberation, however, such non-closure may be unsettling, leaving the readers to feel they know less about the film musical as a genre than before reading the book. Then again, maybe this is for the best.

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