

## Eric James: *Making Music with Charlie Chaplin: An Autobiography*

Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, Inc., 2000 [xvii, 122 p. ISBN: 0-810-83741-2. \$28.95]

DAN BLIM

In the introduction to Eric James's slight but entertaining autobiography, Jeffrey Vance begins by pointing out that Charlie Chaplin, despite not being a formally trained musician or composer, received credit for the musical compositions that accompanied his films. What might in other hands be the impetus for a scholarly examination of Chaplin's compositional techniques and skills is here a historical footnote, and one that carves out the role Eric James has played in bringing these compositions to fruition. Chaplin was, we learn, adamant about receiving compositional credit for his works, and understandably so. For a director who came of age during the silent film era, music is of utmost importance in conveying the film's message. Even in his talking films, music remains a pivotal part. Vance's introduction sets a foreground of music's importance to Chaplin's art, establishing a parallel between Chaplin and James regarding their lifelong fascination with music. From both Vance's introduction and James's choice of title—*Making Music with Charlie Chaplin*—the reader views James in terms defined at least partially by Chaplin, a theme that looms large through the second half of the book.

James's autobiography is divided into two parts. The first half summarily deals with the time before he began working with Chaplin. Here, James chronicles the standard biographical milestones, but also recalls those moments he finds meaningful at the latter stages of his life, chiefly those that expose his early and continuous love of music. He conveys these scenes—his family buying a piano, his lessons, teachers, first paid gig—a little dryly, but his own conviction and enthusiasm ring through clearly, even if it doesn't always transfer to the reader. Much of this section feels like cursory exposition, a succession of scenes of growing up in London that flash past the reader. James's language is rough at times, with awkward lapses into the third person and a proclivity for superlatives, but it has a subtly warming earnestness underneath. There is not much depth or retrospection in these memories, but James brings them out with touches of wry humor and occasional pathos, which makes such events feel more intimately familiar than clichéd.

Toward the adult part of his early career, the familiar memoir territory is left behind in favor of a succession of tales and anecdotes. For the most part they are pleasantly amusing, and

several are the zany, uproariously bizarre tales found more often on National Public Radio's "This American Life" than in your average musician's autobiography. There is not a whole lot to be gleaned in terms of larger cultural context from these anecdotes until James embarks upon his brief military career (the tale of how he was drafted is one of the more amusing episodes). As a musician, he managed a baffling command of the army's resources to produce shows for stationed officers as well as for the BBC. There are numerous sidelines of interest here about wartime entertainment, its production, and its popularity buried beneath James's amusing array of anecdotal moments.

After the war, James continued to entertain the military, and shortly after moving into the publishing business he received the pivotal phone call that begins the second half of the book. The scrapbook format of anecdotes, asides, and big moments remains, but here the stories are more focused on the music-making. James began his work with Chaplin on the set of *A King in New York* (1957), filling in accompanimental piano music for a scene. He was asked to return a year later, beginning what would be a fruitful twenty-year collaboration that

included work for Chaplin's last two films, the aforementioned *A King in New York* and *A Countess from Hong Kong* (1967), as well as reissues of several earlier shorts and features, including Chaplin's classic *The Kid* (1921, reissued 1971).

James employs great detail when describing his work with Chaplin, laying out the daily routine with all its little rules and customs. There is enough here, certainly, about the creative process to satisfy the fascinations of readers curious about Chaplin's musical scores. There is no discussion or analysis of the music itself, but James is not a musicologist, nor is this book intended for such scholarly purposes. He offers instead, and in ample servings, those things that he knows intimately: the compositional procedures,

his role, and Chaplin's. James discusses his job with detail and frankness and does not shy away from conveying to the reader his frustration at several junctures (nor does he seem to have shied away from telling Chaplin). Despite such moments, the two shared a deep bond of respect and collegiality. James, in the course of his employment, was privy to the personal sphere of Chaplin's life, and he paints an affecting and affirming portrait of the great film icon.

Chaplin was a towering figure for James in his youth, and he looms just as large in James's adult life. Chaplin's presence is essential to James's autobiography, and a welcome addition, but at times it feels almost overpowering. Almost nothing of James's life away from Chaplin, after their collaboration began, exists in the book. James's

divorce and subsequent remarriage is cast off in a single sentence, and the reader is left with various questions about what he did between assignments, or after Chaplin's passing. Chaplin also remains idolized in James's book. This is not to say that James finds no faults with Chaplin, but he is rather quick to rationalize them and to defend Chaplin against other critics. This says less about Chaplin, though, and more about James, whose life and passion for music culminated in this twenty-year friendship, and evidences his gratitude and love for Chaplin. Accepting these slight prejudices of the author, Chaplin buffs will gain some new insights and a fresh perspective, while the rest of us can enjoy the wonderful, grandfatherly stories James presents, embellishments, bad jokes, and all.