Review

Michael Lasser, *City Songs and American Life, 1900–1950*. Woodbridge, UK: Boydell & Brewer, 2019. 350 pp. ISBN 978-1-58046-952-4 (hbk).

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Keywords: Great American Songbook; popular music; urban sensibility; music history

Cities are central to the development of popular music. Musicians take inspiration from their environment and they tend to cluster in urban spaces. The density of cities provides the right conditions to meet other creative people and to perform in different venues. Researchers have long been interested in the connections between cities and sounds (see, for example, Connell and Gibson 2003). This includes studies of how music-making is used in urban planning to support or enhance the quality of urban spaces (Adhitya 2018; Holt and Wergin 2013). Furthermore, museums and archives are paying increasing attention to the music heritage of cities, although this is often limited to post-war popular music (Van der Hoeven and Brandellero 2015).

With his book *City Songs and American Life, 1900–1950*, Michael Lasser contributes to the documenting of urban music heritage by focusing on the urban sensibility in the songs of the Great American Songbook. The latter is the canon of American popular songs and jazz standards from the early twentieth century, associated with the work of, for example, Dorothy Fields, George and Ira Gershwin and Irving Berlin. Particularly, songwriters and music publishers from New York were highly successful with Tin Pan Alley, which is reflected in the geographical focus of Lasser's book. 'The songwriters of the Great American Songbook had New York city in their DNA', he writes (p. 12).

The eight richly illustrated chapters discuss music from different time periods (such as the Great Depression and World War II) and include a general introduction to the connections between cities and the music of the Great American Songbook. Furthermore, a separate chapter is dedicated to the role of radio and recorded music in the spread of music from urban centres to the rest of the coun-

try. For Lasser, both the music and the technologies of recording and distribution need to be understood in connection to urban life, as cities were home to the most important music companies.

The passion of the author for his subject matter is apparent on every page. Lasser is a former teacher and theatre critic, author of two other books on the stories behind American songs, and host of the public-radio show *Fascinatin' Rhythm*. In the first pages, he admits to being particularly attracted to the language of the songs of the Great American Songbook and their inventiveness within the strict conventions of the genre. With lyrics totalling just under eighty words, the songs had to appeal to a broad public, he explains. According to Lasser, this made the songs conservative rather than challenging. Each song had to combine familiar elements with something new—just like living in cities, Lasser notes, where each day brings changes to the familiar environment.

In the first chapter of the book, Lasser argues that music from this period has a sensibility that is shaped by living in a city. For him, songs such as 'I Got Rhythm' (George Gershwin and Ira Gershwin, 1930) and 'Crazy Rhythm' (Irving Caesar, Joseph Meyer and Roger Wolfe Kahn, 1928) evoke the dynamic tempo of urban spaces. American musicians from cities were heavily influenced by their environment, which is reflected in their songs: 'Sometimes they're explicitly about the city, but it's more a matter of sensibility than subject matter, more outlook than location. The songwriters did their work when America was becoming—had become—an urban place' (p. 2). Cities changed through flows of migration within America and of people from, for example, Europe. For Lasser, the songs of the Great American Songbook are a reflection of attitudes in a changing society. It is not so much that the songs influenced listeners, he argues, but that the culture at large had an impact on the songs that were written. The book gives a rich overview of the many societal changes in that period, such as changing views on sex, romance and marriage. According to Lasser, these developments are inseparable from the transformation to an urban America:

People who moved to the city in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century felt freer to behave in ways they would not have dared back home, partly because they had movie stars to guide them and, eventually, subways and taxis to take them where they wanted to go (p. 132).

Although the songs follow the changing sentiments in society, it is the urban sensibility that persist in the songs, Lasser notes. The songs conjured up the dynamic life of cities that had become increasingly common for Americans.

However, the book also addresses how the tensions between city and country found a place in the lyrics of songs such as 'Down by the Ohio' (Abe Olman and Jack Yellen, 1940) and 'Georgia on My Mind' (Hoagy Carmichael and Stuart Gor-

rell, 1930). Songwriters often expressed a nostalgic longing for the quieter life of the small towns. The tension was resolved in songs about the suburbs, because these offered the best of both worlds: 'The city offered opportunity and excitement, but the suburb proved natural beauty and the allure of emotional fulfillment just beyond the skyscraper's shadows' (p. 185). Similarly, some songs reflect on people leaving the city for vacation when leisure time and affluence were increasing in the 1920s. To this end, New York's 'master planner' Robert Moses built parkways and recreational facilities. However, Lasser laments the ethnically segregated nature of these facilities and the fact that many neighbourhoods were destroyed for their creation. The vacation songs themselves made way for less joyful themes during the Great Depression.

In the epigraph, Moses's rival, activist and journalist Jane Jacobs, is appositely cited as follows: 'What will remain of us is cities and songs'. The book by Lasser makes a great contribution to documenting the collective music and urban memory of America. It is a fascinating overview of a historical period that is too often neglected in research on music and cities. However, readers who are particularly interested in the urban setting of the songs might find that the book sometimes loses focus. For example, the chapter on World War II strays from the main topic of the book, primarily because the urban sensibility is less prominent in the songs written during the war. Nevertheless, the broad historical context discussed by the author is also a strength of this work. Lasser's book is an essential work for anyone interested in how the changing America of the early twentieth century is recorded through music.

References

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