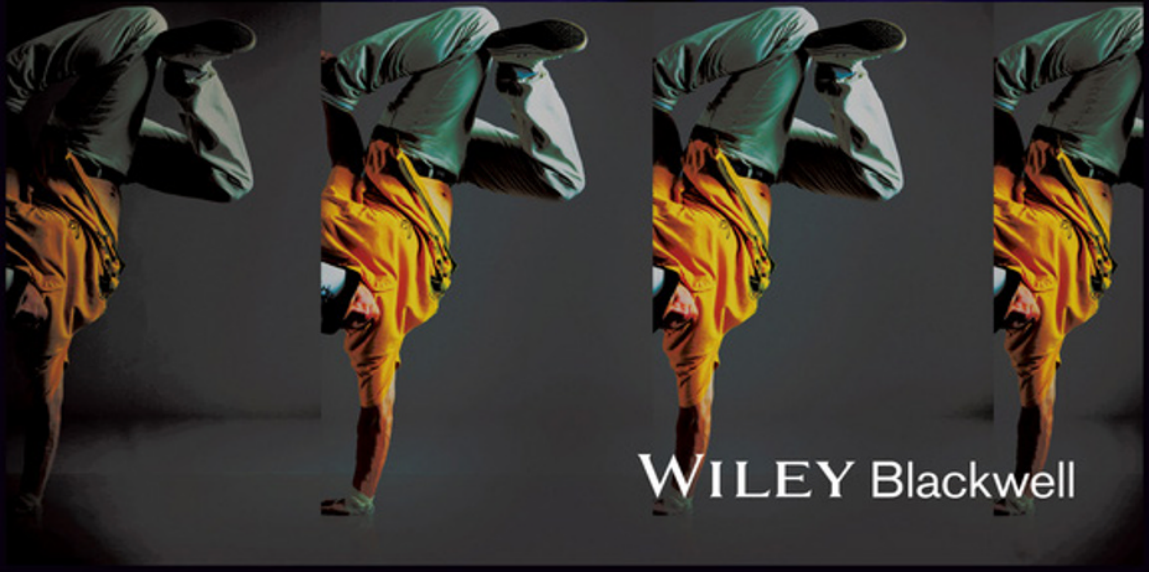
FREE AND EASY?

A DEFINING HISTORY OF THE AMERICAN FILM MUSICAL GENRE

SEAN GRIFFIN



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Introduction

"Today, there is no single definition even of what constitutes a musical, period."

—Ethan Mordden[1]

What is a musical? When I teach a course on the musical film genre, the first thing I do the first day is ask students this question. I do not bring lecture notes to this first class session, because the entire class time is spent trying to agree on a definition—and the question is left open and looms over the rest of the semester. Over the course of writing this book, I have often asked friends and acquaintances over cocktails or dinner what they think a film musical is. Although there are common concepts that carry across people's reactions, I am constantly intrigued by the range of opinions. I do not judge who is right and who is wrong, but I often like to play devil's advocate—either coming up with an example of a movie that I know they will not think fits the definition they just voiced but that they will agree *is* a musical; or, conversely, coming up with an example of a film that *does* fit their parameters, but I am pretty certain they will *not* think is a musical. The conversations often get pretty heated, but in a fun and friendly way, leaving people mulling over the boundaries of the category "musical" more than they thought was possible.

Such a question has nipped at the heels of those writing about the musical film for ages, leading to the quote by musical theatre historian Ethan Mordden that opens this introduction. Barry Keith Grant, in *The Hollywood Film Musical*, admits in *his* Introduction that "the definition of the film musical is a matter of some debate."[2] Clive Hirschorn's *The Hollywood Musical* attempts to be encyclopedic in its overview, aiming "to be as complete a record of the genre as possible, but it clearly was essential, very early on, to establish workable guidelines as to what constitutes a 'musical' … I remain painfully aware that there will always be room for disagreement."[3] Ethan Mordden's own history of *The Hollywood Musical* includes an entire chapter called "What's a Musical?," and Richard Barrios's *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film* also contains a chapter entitled "Is It a Musical?"[4] A number of articles foreground

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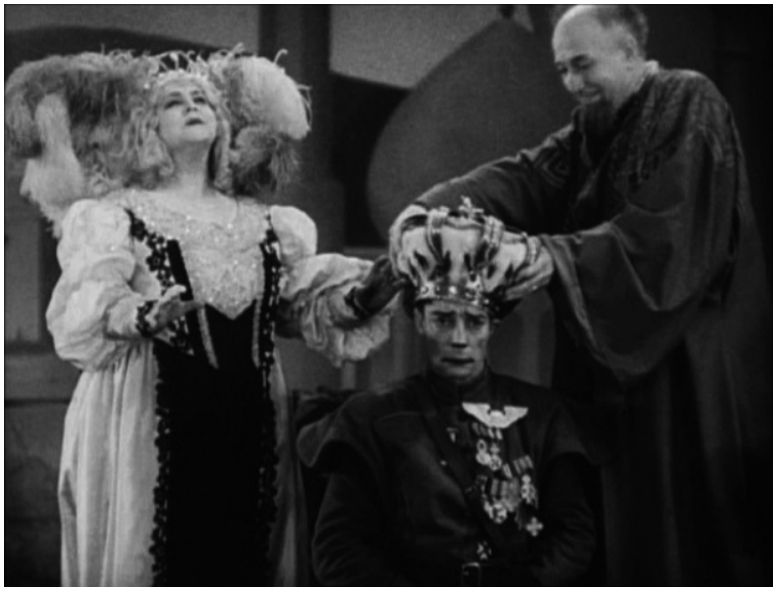

Figure 1 Is this a musical? Trixie Friganza looks on as Buster Keaton gets crowned in the comic operetta being filmed by the characters in *Free and Easy* (1930). Snapshot taken from: Free and Easy (1930).

this conundrum, such as Richard Dyer's "Is *Car Wash* a Musical?," Andrew Caine's "Can Rock Movies Be Musicals? The Case of *This Is Spinal Tap*," and Jane Feuer eventually asking "Is *Dirty Dancing* a Musical, and Why Should It Matter?"[5] The title of this volume is taken from a 1930 MGM movie that also begs this question (Figure 1). The film contains three songs and one reprise—and the first song is not introduced until a half hour into the picture. Many would consider the picture to be a comedy, particularly due to its star, Buster Keaton.

A central tenet of this book is to explore those limits, and I am purposefully, almost tauntingly, inclusive. It is quite possible that some readers will start to get downright argumentative at certain points, such as one student who said, "If you are going to try to tell me that *8 Mile* (2002) is a musical, we are going to have to take this out into the hall." If the following chapters elicit that reaction, then I have accomplished my mission. Why? I feel that the musical genre has been hampered for generations with a limited and limiting definition, one that has led to what I feel is an erroneous conclusion: that the film musical genre is dying or dead already. Jane Feuer recognizes the prevalence of "speaking of 'the musical' as if it were a static structure, a hygienically sealed system free from the lint of changing audience tastes and of those historical transformations other forms seem to endure."[6]

On an elemental level, musical films center around and focus predominantly on the performance of music and/or dance.[7] To leave it at this seems far too broad to many, and my expansive list of possible candidates for the genre emerges from the reliance on this clear-cut condition. Rick Altman, in his landmark work *The American Film Musical*, certainly felt so, writing that "critical work on the film musical continues to depend on a definition provided largely by the film industry itself … a film with music, that is, with music that emanates from what I will call the diegesis, the fictional world created by the film."[8] He then argues that this is an unwieldy definition, "that every conceivable film with diegetic music [must then be] accepted and treated as a musical, from *Gilda* to *Singin' in the Rain*, from *Hallelujah* to *The Lady and the Tramp* [sic], from *Paramount on Parade* to *Woodstock*, from the films of Shirley Temple to those of Elvis Presley."[9] The seeming intention of this list is to incite incredulity in the reader that all of these movies could be considered musicals, and Altman moves on to establish criteria to limit the corpus of films. Yet, if Altman rejects the self-proclaimed authority of the film industry over matters of genre, then the self-proclaimed authority of the critic must come under scrutiny as well. If someone regards any or all of the above movies as musicals, who is Altman (or myself) to tell that person she or he is wrong?

I do agree that it is possible to parse this basic statement a bit further. In centering or focusing on the performance of music, there is the expectation that the viewer will be entertained or take pleasure from that performance. Many have suggested that such pleasure comes from the sense of music and dance as a form of heightened expression—that song lifts beyond ordinary speech, that dance expands movement of the body past the everyday motions. A common canard in discussing musical theatre is that "when the emotion becomes too strong for speech, you sing; when it becomes too strong for song, you dance."[10] In a certain way, song and dance present a sense of liberation from the normal constraints of existence. We enjoy watching performers accomplish those feats of liberation (remarkable singers, gifted dancers), vicariously experiencing that liberation ourselves.

Yet, while song and dance entice as moments of emotional and/or physical release, music and choreography are highly structured art forms. Music is written to a certain rhythm and organized according to a set of particular patterns. For example, the common rhythm of an American popular song in the first half of the twentieth century was a cycle of four beats, or four beats per measure, and songs were typically set at thirty-two measures: eight measures for the first verse, eight measures for the second verse (which was very like but just slightly different than the first verse in melody), eight measures for the bridge (a new melody), and eight measures for the concluding verse (a return to original melody, but often with a unique flourish to indicate the end of the tune). Similarly, lyrics had to match the structure of the melody, usually setting up a pattern of rhyming in the first eight bars that would carry through the rest of

the piece (abab followed by cdcd, for example, or aaab followed by cccb). Dancers also needed to learn how to perform certain steps, to put them into particular combinations—and to have the dance match the music being played. Such established formats give artists a foundation to build upon, and give audiences a sense of comfort in recognizing (however unconsciously) how the structure works rather than feeling confused and alienated by something strange and unknown.

Thus, the entertainment or pleasure of experiencing music and dance performance is a delicate, ongoing balance between the comfort of structure and the joy of liberation. A number of songs, dance routines, and plotlines of musical theatre and cinema hew so closely to the established patterns that they become tedious. On occasion, some do the polar opposite, trying so hard to do something new and different that it creates a sense of bewilderment in audiences. (At times, audiences find what was new and strange has become less threatening because time has helped them grow accustomed to these new structural ideas.) The largest percentage of songs, dance routines, musical theatre productions, and musical films work within the accepted parameters, but with specific planned moments that push or go beyond the usual boundaries: a singer hits an unexpected high note, a lyric piles on multiple internal rhymes at a key point in the song, the dancer accomplishes a breathtakingly new move. They bend and expand the possibilities of the format, but without breaking it—or, to put it another way, using music terminology: theme and variations. Amy Herzog, in *Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film*, focuses on "this contradiction, between the sameness of the identical repetition and a movement toward transformation, difference, and excess."[11] Intriguingly (for my purposes), she asserts at the outset that she is "not interested in establishing film distinctions between musical and nonmusical films" and that "the majority of the films [she] reference[s] … push the boundaries of the musical canon."[12]

The need to negotiate between freedom and order runs parallel with a common issue in discussing the musical genre: the relationship between the musical number and the narrative. The requirements of the plot and the ecstasy of the musical performance need to be merged somehow seamlessly in order for the whole piece to work. Sometimes the narrative is about the struggle to successfully perform the numbers—thus the numbers are the goal of the narrative. Another strategy is to have the characters feel so deeply moved that they shift from speech to song, from walking to dancing. Another strategy pushes this last idea to its farthest point: where there is no distinction between narrative and number and the entire story is sung and danced without any spoken dialogue and/or non-choreographed movement.

Many have used the narrative/number dichotomy as an entry point for a more specific definition of the genre, with the narrative providing structure and the number providing liberation. The narrative functions as the "real world,"

and many musicals follow a very tried-and-true set of plot clichés (boy meets girl, the show must go on, etc.). In counterpoint, the numbers are usually outside normal logic, presenting the audience with a sense of utopia (as Richard Dyer has famously put it), liberated from constraint and want.[13] Taking from Dyer, Barry Keith Grant asserts that "film musicals typically present their song—and/or—dance numbers in an imaginary space, even if this space is ostensibly a real location, and contained within a narrative framework," and Martin Rubin defines a musical as "a film containing a significant proportion of musical numbers that are impossible—i.e., persistently contradictory in relation to the realistic discourse of the narrative."[14] Yet, exactly who gets to determine when a "real location … contained within a narrative framework" crosses over into an "imaginary space," or how many "impossible" numbers constitutes "a significant proportion" is left unspecified.[15] Perhaps the best example of an imaginary space or an impossible number happens in what Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell call the "musical moment": "an isolated musical presence in a non-musical film." Yet, in order "to recognise the breadth and diversity of music's role in cinema," they do not give a particular definition of where the dividing line is between a musical and a "non-musical."[16]

Rick Altman considers the "dual-focus narrative" to be a foundational element to the musical film.[17] Whatever the environment or plotline, musicals almost without exception strongly revolve around a romance (almost exclusively heterosexual even today). Altman argues that unlike the usual Hollywood film, which focuses on a central protagonist, musicals alternate between the two characters as they gradually become one couple. As such, the two usually represent diametrically opposed backgrounds or belief systems, and it is only when those larger philosophical differences are resolved that the couple can come together (in a similar vein, it is not until the couple resolves differences that the show they are putting on can become a success). One is royalty, the other is a commoner; one is intellectual, the other is a hedonist; one is a Yankee, the other hails from the deep South. By introducing the courting pair with different outlooks and goals, the dual-focus narrative pits the dreams of liberation of one character in seeming opposition to the other's. One person would find their joy and freedom at the expense of the other. So, the desire to come together (the comfort of a shared structured relationship) comes into conflict with the desire for individual freedom. Just like the basic aspect of the musical (the entertainment in how musical performance somehow expresses liberation within a structured context), the plot must figure out how each individual (and his or her supporters) must fulfill their individual dreams *and* successfully bring people together. The farmer's happiness (raising crops) comes at the cowman's expense (no room for herding cattle)—and vice versa … but, as *Oklahoma!* asserts, "The farmer and the cowman should be friends …"

Revolving around this dichotomy of liberation versus structure, the rights of the individual versus the needs of the community, the musical genre has

similarities with the themes many have analyzed in relation to the Western genre.[18] Writers have pointed out a central negotiation between the lure of the frontier and the value of civilization. The frontier is open with possibility, unshackled by laws or social demands, but it is also dangerous, primitive, and untamed. The coming of civilization is thus welcomed, but with a certain sense of melancholy in a loss of freedom. The key figure in most Westerns is a loner figure—someone who rides in to defend the town and ensure civilization is established, but who is not considered a member of the community and usually rides off into the sunset (i.e., the frontier) once order is restored. Thus, somehow both sides are revered and respected. Both the Western and the musical balance between championing the freedom of the individual and endorsing the comfort of community ritual.

The rights of the individual and the needs of the community are also foundational tenets in the founding of the United States of America—fighting for the rights of "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness," but recognizing the value in bonding together as a nation to win that fight. The Western genre has been long regarded as a genre tied to American national identity. Similarly, Rick Altman's "Coda" at the conclusion to the anthology *The International Film Musical* points out "the importance of American films for both the widespread popularity and the widely accepted definition of the musical."[19] Of course, American musical theatre was, and continues to be, influenced by the cultures of other nations. Furthermore, many other countries have longstanding traditions of music-oriented filmmaking and theatre. As such, the same questions over genre crop up in Altman's "Coda." Under a subsection titled "Just What Is a Musical?," he asks, "Do fans of the Brazilian *chanchada* think of musicals in the same terms as viewers of the Mexican *comedia ranchera*? Do habitués of French realist singers or the films of René Clair employ the same definition of the musical as lovers of the films of Herbert Wilcox or 1930s stage stars? Is the Portugese *fado* defined in the same way as the Japanese *salaryman* film?"[20] These films, reflecting their own cultural concerns, might not feel as focused on the balance between freedom and structure, between the individual and the community. Yet, the global reach of American popular music and Hollywood cinema has resulted in an international familiarity with how the United States has developed a form of musical theatre and musical film—so much so that a number of films made in other countries adopt the patterns and themes of the American musical.

The balance between the individual and the group is a major issue not only on stage or on screen, but also in the making of musicals. Collaboration is key in creating a musical. Composers and lyricists must establish a compatible working relationship. The two of them work in conjunction with the author of the libretto (or book), as well as the choreographer, the director, and the producer. Performers need to meet the requirements of the production—often having to learn how to blend voices, or dance as a unit. A number of Hollywood

musicals, commonly referred to as backstagers, depict the need to form a strong-knit community in order to put on a show. The obstacle to such bonding is often the ego of a particular individual. The history of the musical itself can be told as the story of people in different creative positions jockeying for dominant artistic control, asserting that they should have the freedom to express their individual creative vision, and everyone else should follow. Producers such as Florenz Ziegfeld or Walt Disney asserted that they were the leaders. Stars such as Al Jolson or Barbra Streisand claimed the spotlight around which everything else was built. Songwriters, particularly Rodgers and Hammerstein and their progeny, gained an upper hand by claiming that their scores unified projects into cohesive wholes (an argument that gained momentum when many of them became producers as well). After World War II, a number of choreographers began taking on the role of director, such as Jerome Robbins and Bob Fosse, and made arguments similar to songwriters: that *they* were the glue that pulled all of the elements together into a tightly organized piece.

The musical film represents the resolution of these two basic but seemingly contradictory tenets of the American psyche as a form of utopia. Yet, like the struggles between artists collaborating on a production, conflicts over who and what was considered American have been ongoing. The population of the country is a combination of different cultural heritages and community identities. Over the centuries, various groups were demeaned and excluded from being considered American—along with aspects of their culture (including their forms of music and dance). The dominant culture (white, European, male) worked consistently to promote its customs and artistic taste as authentically American, and those from minority communities were considered either inferior subcultures or alien. A strong counter-argument began developing during the 1800s that a uniquely American culture formed out of the blending of these various cultures. A further counter-argument developed to the celebration of the American "melting pot": that assimilation into the dominant culture only exploited and diluted the cultures of the disempowered, and oppressed communities should maintain their individual traditions. Jane Feuer has famously pointed out that "the Hollywood musical becomes a mass art which aspires to the condition of folk art," in order to mask the process of exploitation and commodification in the production of musical films.[21]

American musical entertainment has been involved in these discussions from the very beginning, coming up with different formulas in response to shifts in the population and the effects of various historical events. Musical entertainment could reinforce established patterns of belief towards racial minorities, women, and individuals who would eventually be categorized as homosexual. Yet, these same marginalized people were able to use musical entertainment for their own benefit—providing a unique opportunity to break free (however limited in time and scope) from the usual restrictions placed

upon them in daily life. Their performance of new and unique types of music and dance gave them a great amount of attention from and influence on the dominant culture, thus helping shift attitudes and challenge stereotypes. In celebrating individual freedom and championing the value of a community, minoritized artists and audience found a genre that supported the concept of a community united in diversity.

As social, economic, and even technological circumstances changed, the musical genre evolved in how it defined America, defined utopia, and defined how best to combine the ecstasy of liberation with the pleasure of structural familiarity. American music and dance changed across the generations: from the folk song to ragtime to jazz to rock to rap, from the quadrille to the time-step to the Charleston to the Twist to the moonwalk. The recognized structure of live musical theatre also shifted over the decades: vaudeville to loosely structured book shows to integrated musicals to concept musicals. Yet, somehow, at a certain point, the evolution of how people defined the film musical genre stopped. Currently, historians and the average moviegoer employ a structure that became dominant right after World War II, and that definition has not been able to shift since: the integrated musical where dialogue alternates with song and dance that arises within the context of the storyline (i.e., singing when individuals should be talking, dancing when they should be walking), revealing aspects of the characters and/or advancing the plotline. I am not attempting to argue that films that fit this pattern are *not* musicals—but there are so many other ways of celebrating and focusing on musical performance that do not match this description. Many histories of the film musical describe the late 1920s and the 1930s as a sort of infancy for the genre, exploring various ways of presenting musical performance *before* the genre finally matured into its proper correct format in the mid-1940s. These histories thus report that the rejection of the integrated film musical by most audiences at the end of the 1960s resulted in the collapse of the genre as a whole. Such an assessment may explain why there has not been a new historical survey of the genre in many years: why bother writing anything if there is nothing new to report?

A central aim of this volume is to argue that there has been far too much emphasis on the comfort of the familiar structure of the integrated musical, and not enough celebration of liberation from that definition. For, whether or not critics or general audiences care to admit it, the film musical has survived ably, by evolving into new patterns and structures regardless of attempts to keep it locked in place. This book asks the reader to open him- or herself up to the potential excitement of a new regard for the film musical, to enjoy the variety of forms the genre can take rather than keeping myopically attached to one specific formula. Musicals can be integrated narratives, but they might also be concert films. Or filmed opera. Or animated cartoons. Or biographies of musicians. *The Jazz Singer* (1927) has more in common with *8 Mile* than you might imagine! *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) and *Woodstock* (1970) are kindred spirits.

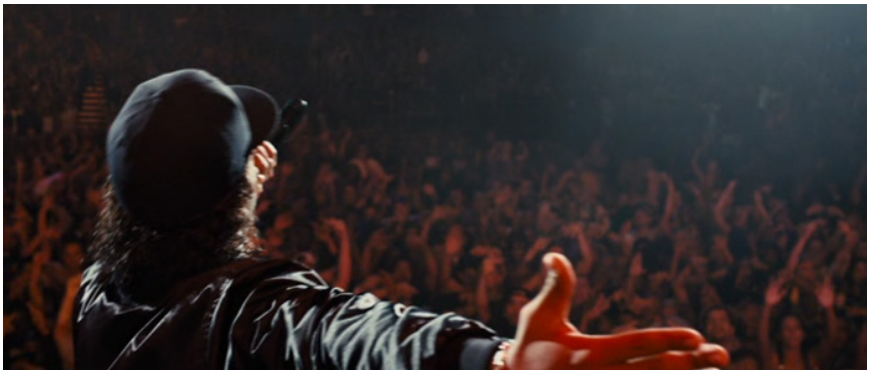

Figure 2 Is this a musical? Ice Cube (O'Shea Jackson, Jr) certainly seems to be "putting on a show" in *Straight Outta Compton* (2015), a biography of the rap group N.W.A. Snapshot taken from: Straight Outta Compton (2015).

On the Town (1949) and *Straight Outta Compton* (2015) are arguably just points on a continuum rather than utterly estranged from each other (Figure 2). The farmer and the cowman should be friends, I'm just sayin'…

Notes

1 Ethan Mordden, *On Sondheim: An Opinionated Guide* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 29.
2 Barry Keith Grant, *The Hollywood Film Musical* (Malden: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 1.
3 Clive Hirschorn, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. (New York: Portland House, 1991), 9.
4 Ethan Mordden, *The Hollywood Musical* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1981), 17–23; Richard Barrios, *A Song in the Dark: The Birth of the Musical Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 309–322.
5 Richard Dyer, "Is *Car Wash a Musical?*," *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film* (New York: Routledge, 2012), 145–155; Andrew Caine, "Can Rock Movies Be Musicals? The Case of *This Is Spinal Tap*," *The Shifting Definitions of Genre: Essays on Labeling Films, Television Shows and Media*, ed. Lincoln Geraghty and Mark Jancovich (Jefferson: McFarland & Co., 2008), 124–141; and Jane Feuer, "Is *Dirty Dancing* a Musical, and Why Should It Matter?," *The Time of Our Lives: "Dirty Dancing" and Popular Culture*, ed. Yannis Tzioumakis and Sian Lincoln (Detroit: Wayne University Press, 2013), 59–72.
6 Jane Feuer, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 87.

7 Grant, 1, uses a similar starting definition: "films that involve the performance of song and/or dance by the main characters and also include singing and/or dancing as an important element."
8 Rick Altman, *The American Film Musical* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 12.
9 Altman, *American Film Musical*, 13.
10 For example, see comments by Ben Wattenberg in a discussion with a variety of musical theatre artists for his PBS program *Think Tank* (transcript can be found at http://www.pbs.org/thinktank/transcript1261.html).
11 Amy Herzog, *Dreams of Difference, Songs of the Same: The Musical Moment in Film* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 2.
12 Herzog, 2–3.
13 Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," *Movie* 24 (Spring 1977).
14 Martin Rubin, "Busby Berkeley and the Backstage Musical," *Hollywood Musicals, The Film Reader*, ed. Steve Cohan (London: Routledge, 2002), 57; *Grant*, 1.
15 Rubin, 57.
16 Ian Conrich and Estella Tincknell, *Film's Musical Moments* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), 2.
17 Rick Altman, *American Film Musical*, 16–58.
18 See Robert Warshow, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner" (1954) in *Film Theory and Criticism: Introductory Readings*, 6th ed., ed. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 703–716; Will Wright, *Six Guns and Society: A Structural Study of the Western* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1975).
19 Rick Altman, "Coda—The Musical as International Genre: Reading Notes," *The International Film Musical*, ed. Corey Creekmur and Linda Y. Mokdad (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2012), 258.
20 Altman, "Coda," 258.
21 Jane Feuer, *Hollywood Musical*, 3.

1

Overture: Musical Traditions before Cinema

Although the film musical celebrates a sense of liberation, the genre is itself beholden to a long heritage of music composition and performance. Thus, to start a history of the musical film with the making of *The Jazz Singer* (1927)—or even the earliest sound experiments—would be incomplete. Many writers on the film genre have examined the influence of live American theatrical entertainment.[1] Like those works, this opening chapter will survey the stage traditions that shaped what would be done on celluloid. Yet, the film musical's history requires more than acquaintance with musical theatre's history; it also necessitates some basic awareness of the history of American music at large, going back to before the United States had formed as an independent nation.

The musical film would inherit centuries of material and mindsets, laying out a number of well-established aesthetic as well as industrial and social patterns. In addition to showing how much the past would bear upon what the musical film would or could do, the history of American music is itself rife with examples of battles between freedom and control, oscillating between music as an example of individual expression and music as a type of communal bond. Various religious and political forces attempted to stifle certain forms of music and/or dance, usually over their perceived ability to liberate sexual desires. As a nation of multiple communities, various cultures mingled and sometimes clashed over each other's musical tastes. Achieving individual freedom of musical expression often came at the expense of others, most obviously in regard to racial or ethnic minority groups. As an industry formed around music, composers, performers, and publishers often struggled with each other over who was in control of the music. The musical film would not only take on many of the idioms established from earlier eras, it would also inherit these cultural negotiations and battles. Central to these interactions is the quest to define a national identity—what exactly did it mean to "be an American," and how did its music reflect this new nationality? Primary to an emergent American identity was the importance of individual liberty—but how could people come together as a national community by championing one's independence?

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Music and Dance in Early America

Rhythm, melody, and movement have been intimately tied to a sense of community and shared outlook on the world since the first instances of human civilization, and thus it is no surprise that they figured strongly within North America long before the United States declared its independence from Great Britain. Song and dance were fundamental elements to the wide variety of indigenous cultures. As with numerous other groups, music holds special importance in Native American rituals and ceremonies, vital practices that bind individuals together. Since most of these cultures relied almost exclusively on oral communication, song was also used to maintain historical memory, as well as to share tribal myths and legends. The importance of the oral tradition has remained through the centuries—and, if anything, increased as various communities were threatened (and many extinguished) with the advent of the white man. Along with the spoken word, song became a vital method literally to keep culture alive. Thus, there has grown enormous responsibility to preserve these songs and stories.

The absence of written evidence obviously requires a lot of conjecture in analyzing native cultures prior to contact with European explorers and settlers. Yet, studies tend to agree on certain patterns.[2] For example, certain figures within communities took on special roles as the keepers of the stories and of the songs. While there was pressure from within the groups to remember and repeat the tales and the structure of the songs, it was inevitable that singers and storytellers would (either intentionally or not) vary the words, the organization, and the melodies across time, and from generation to generation. Without written notation, music was thus controlled primarily by the singer. Most surviving instances of native North American music also strongly emphasize rhythm rather than melody, which allows the singer greater freedom to vary the notes from performance to performance. Lastly, when used in ceremonies or rituals, such music often went on for hours. The emphasis on rhythm over melody was tied to such uses—but also led to long and repetitive pieces. Such repetition could etch melodic patterns into community memory, but could also allow for variation as the repetitions continued.

When Europeans began settling on the east coast of North America, many regarded native tribes as primitive and animalistic, and branded their music as "heathen." Influenced by the Reformation, many early settlers attempted to forsake "sins of the flesh"—and thus as a rule regarded secular music as morally corrupt. Sacred music, on the other hand, was considered a unique method of speaking to God—and in this way, hymns paralleled music used in native rituals that helped individuals feel their interconnectedness to the rest of their community and to all of nature. Illiteracy was still incredibly common, particularly among those not of noble birth or part of the emerging bourgeoisie. Thus, as with the oral tradition in native cultures, most hymns were

learned by ear. These early settlers either failed to recognize or purposefully ignored the similarities between native use of music and their own investment in music.[3]

Religious communities were not the only ones arriving on North American shores from Europe, and those settlers brought with them varied traditions of music making and dance from their homelands. The sense of rhythm, harmony, and melody structure differed from that in Native American cultures, and a history of "serious" music had also instituted a method of written notation to ensure a composition would remain the same each time it was performed. The rise of notated "classical" music increased the authority (and reputation) of the composer over the musician or vocalist, giving rise to renowned figures such as Bach, Handel, and Mozart.[4] Such attitudes would cross the Atlantic as musicians performed these works, or as composers used the same methods in creating their own works. Even churches started printing up collections of hymns for use at services. Further, the development of written notation—sheet music—would create a method to sell music, forming what would eventually become a major entertainment industry by the start of the twentieth century. Yet, the oral tradition still existed. In contrast to classical music, often commissioned and performed for nobility, folk songs among the working-class or peasant communities were shared at gatherings or at taverns, and still privileged the singer over the songwriter (so much so that the authors of these tunes are largely unknown).[5]

Another important source of musical heritage came with the arrival of Africans to the continent, most of them as slaves. The music of the African nations held much in common with that of Native American communities: rhythm-based and passed from generation to generation orally rather than in written form. Of course, captured and taken against their will, Africans transplanted to American shores were able to bring precious little but themselves and what they were able to hold in their memories. Hence, the oral tradition was practically the only option available to them in maintaining a connection to their heritage. Responding to the situation, slaves of African descendancy learned how to use music not only to hold onto their sense of self but also to survive in a hostile environment. The form of "call and response," in which a song acts as a dialogue between people, became a key method for slaves to bond with each other *and* to communicate with each other in ways their white European owners did not recognize. Call and response then was used as a method of resistance, including at times helping organize means of escape. Also, while creating a cultural bond, call and response emphasizes the talent and creativity of the individual performer involved, that each particular instance is unique and will never be sung in the exact same fashion again. It must be noted that singing among the slaves had its benefits for slave owners too. Not only did such singing provide entertainment for them, it also let owners know where slaves were even when they were out of sight.[6]

As the settlements became colonies and then states, these various forms of music encountered and interacted with each other, creating a variety of blends and influences. European styles of music dominated, since white Europeans and their progeny sat at the top of the power structure within the United States. Yet, the various cultures (and the people themselves) were bound to intermingle, no matter how hard some may have attempted to keep them separate. The Louisiana port of New Orleans serves as an apt example.[7] The mixing of European, African, and Native American blood resulted in a new identity termed Creole (although attempts to distinguish a racial hierarchy within that term still happened). Growing into a major city, New Orleans also began developing a vibrant and unique type of music, drawing from a variety of sources: French opera (since it began as a French settlement), other European popular songs courtesy of traveling sailors, plus Native American music and slave music. This type of mélange would result in styles of music unique to the United States.

Dance evolved along similar patterns. If music was potentially devil's work for religious settlers, dance definitely was too sensual and of the flesh. Hence, dancing was routinely forbidden, and one of the ways Native Americans were demonized as sinful heathens by these Christian fundamentalists was the way natives danced for hours in tribal gatherings. While European settlers tended to regard Native American dancing with curiosity and reprobation, their form of dance functioned largely the same way as did their music, as a way of maintaining and passing on ritual beliefs, myths, and history. Dance was as much a form of communication as music and, as such, did contain at least a basic structure (even if it was incomprehensible to the white explorers who witnessed it).

Of course, not all Europeans shunned dancing, and as others came to America they brought not only their music but also their styles of dance. Just as serious European music was put down on paper in order to maintain control over any performance of it, respectable social dance in Europe was highly structured, with specific steps to learn and repeat: gavottes, rounds, and so forth. Such structure helped a roomful of people dance fluidly as a group, but also helped quell the potential liberating qualities of dance that churchgoers feared. Such free joyous exhilaration could be found in many of the folk dances popular across Europe, used in village celebrations or at the local tavern. Jigs, clog dances, and the like brought people together as much as did the strict rules of a cotillion, but with less structure and more energy.[8]

Slaves from Africa attempted to preserve the style and meaning of dance in their home cultures, but often faced resistance from their masters for doing so. While owners found value in the performance of call and response among slaves, native African dancing seemed too akin to the way Native Americans danced, which was regarded as sinful, anarchic, and potentially violent. Choreographer Leni Sloan, in the documentary *Ethnic Notions* (1986), describes how African American slaves reacted to a prohibition on dancing by

shuffling their feet in a manner that cunningly skirted the law's definition of dance. White viewers found amusement in such movements, seeing this shuffling as evidence of the primitive nature of people of African descent. Eventually white performers began to copy and exaggerate those movements, creating perhaps the first national dance craze, "Jump Jim Crow," in the late 1820s.[9] Thus, just as with the music, the intersection of the various forms was beginning to create a style of dance unique to the new nation, and one developed out of the power dynamic between freedom and control.

The Development of American Theatre

Various forms of presentation of song and dance to an audience had also developed in various cultures, going back at least to the days of ancient Greek theatre, with the inclusion of a chorus that commented in musical chant on the characters and action. The state of European theatre held sway over the United States as it gained independence, from high-class concerts and operas to the more bawdy entertainments aimed at the groundlings. Opera focused on epic narratives, structured around "arias" (the more lyrical melodic set pieces for the main singers) and "recitative" (sung portions that were not as memorable melodically, often involving dialogue between characters). Theatres for opera and other "legitimate" productions could be found in most major cities across the States, but more common were troupes of performers who traveled from community to community across the vast expanse of states and territories. Such companies would set up a tent or outdoor venue and put on a production for a few days before heading elsewhere.[10] The level of talent and even the type of entertainment varied wildly, and customers often could get both a Shakespearean soliloquy and a rousing off-color sing-along in the same show. Striving for cultural legitimacy, American actors, musicians, and writers followed the example of Europe—but many also strove to carve out a uniquely American style of theatre, as the entire country grappled with defining exactly what "being American" meant.

Arguably, the first particularly American form of theatrical musical entertainment came to prominence by the 1840s: minstrelsy.[11] The term derived from medieval Europe, referring to those who sang as a profession, either for the amusement of nobility or for other groups as they wandered from village to village. American minstrel shows likewise traveled from place to place, with the explicit idea of the lowly hoping to entertain their betters, for minstrel shows presented white performers doing a version of black song and dance for the delight of white customers (Figure 1.1). The popularity of white performers made up to look like black slaves singing and dancing "Jump Jim Crow" led to an entire form of theatrical entertainment. Little to no attempt was done to provide authentic representation of black culture in minstrel shows, though.

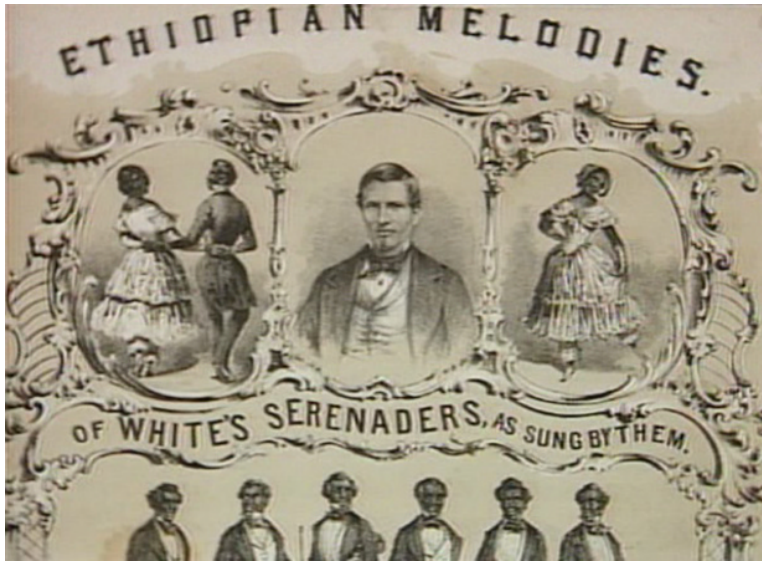

Figure 1.1 An advertisement for a minstrel show (ca. 1840), arguably the first particularly American form of theatrical musical entertainment, with white performers in blackface singing "Ethiopian melodies" or "coon songs." Snapshot taken from: Ethnic Notions (1986).

Rather, black people were impersonated as grotesque buffoons for the amusement of white audiences. The makeup style, known as blackface, was one of clownish exaggeration—as were the typical mannerisms and dialect employed by the performers. Stephen Foster and other composers developed an entire genre called "coon songs," versions of what Anglo Americans thought African Americans sang, and such songs gained popularity beyond the minstrel shows. By the 1840s, such entertainment was popular all over the country, not just the slave-holding states, and minstrel troupes traveled westward to all of the new territories being formed.

Such music was often accompanied by dance, again with white performers in blackface doing versions of what they saw being done within black communities. African Americans took the rhythmic possibilities in European clog dancing and slowly evolved it into a new form, creating more complex rhythms than before and employing more full body dexterity (traditional clog dancing tends to emphasize the feet stomping, with the upper body remaining rigid). Imitations of this new type of dance were often included in minstrel shows. Eventually, towards the end of the century, shoes replaced clogs with lighter-weight metal taps on the soles, making a cleaner sound with less effort. Tap dancing, by African Americans and others, would become one of the top forms of musical dance performance in the United States by the end of the century, long after minstrel shows had lost their audience.[12]

The format of minstrel shows exhibits a balance between control and freedom. For example, the songs, dances, and jokes were not tethered to an overarching story, but an organizational framework *did* exist. Each production began with a semicircle of male performers in rows (depending on how large the company was), all in blackface except for the man in the center, the interlocutor, who oversaw and introduced the various songs and dances done by the rest. The most prominent blackface performers were seated at either end of the stage, referred to as Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones (after the instruments they played). Jokes arose when the interlocutor would converse with either of these two. The next act moved into various skits (called "olio"), usually farcical views of Southern plantation life, often ending with a parody (or "burlesque") of a popular play, opera, or other cultural event.

The inherent racism of minstrelsy cannot be denied, presenting incredibly stereotypical, ignorant blacks trying to act hifalutin', but still under the supervision of a white leader. The prevalence of sexual humor also reinforced common white opinion that black people were oversexualized and uncivilized, closer to animals than human beings. Further, minstrelsy also supported a notion that African Americans are naturally musical. Yet, the widespread popularity of minstrelsy also indicates the amount of fascination black culture exerted over white America. Also, one of the sources of humor in minstrel shows came from the blackface performers breaking cultural taboos or making fun of societal norms. White performers thus were able to use blackface to break free from the restrictions of what could be said or done in regular life, and white audiences could take delight in seeing someone break those rules as well. Thus, while maintaining an expected structure of performance and exerting cultural dominance over the African American community, a large aspect of the popularity of minstrel shows was their carnivalesque nature: debunking those in power, upending social propriety, and offering comedic anarchy—if only for a few hours.[13]

A sizeable percentage of minstrel performers were Irish and then Jewish immigrants who felt ostracized from WASP society. Cultural historians have described how these artists used blackface in strategic ways.[14] Firstly, donning blackface helped them argue for acceptance into white American society by demonstrating their need to "darken up" to play African American characters. At the same time, though, these ethnic groups had their own experiences with prejudice and oppression, and blackface minstrelsy gave them an outlet to express their frustrations and to rebel against the establishment in a sanctioned manner. The burlesques of high culture that occurred in the final act (such as Shakespeare or an Italian opera) lambasted the pretensions of the elite, and the lack of any narrative in the opening semicircle promoted an atmosphere of chaotic hilarity that the white interlocutor could barely contain.[15] The carnivalesque environment also encompassed issues of sexuality and gender, for these all-male troupes regularly did lowbrow female impersonations as well

(also in blackface). Just as minstrel shows could employ racist caricature to challenge the powers that be, men in drag often portrayed women in incredibly sexist and misogynist ways but also made fun of and complicated gender roles and sexual desires to the delight of the audience.

Minstrel shows continued to tour throughout the rest of the nineteenth century, but lost dominance in the wake of the Civil War and the post-slavery Restoration Era. By the late 1800s, the olio structure featured within minstrelsy had become its own type of theatrical entertainment, and was eventually rechristened as "vaudeville" ("music hall" in Britain, or "variety" in the rest of Europe). Vaudeville consisted of a series of unrelated acts presented on one bill. Singers or dancers in blackface did continue to take the stage in vaudeville, but that was only one of many forms of entertainment to be found. Vaudeville emphasized its diversity, presenting comedians, singers, dancers, dog acts, jugglers, magicians, performing seals, contortionists, and more. Performers would travel all over the country from theatre to theatre, doing two or three shows a day, with the bill changing every week. As with minstrel shows, vaudeville's emphasis on spectacle and a wide range of entertainment seemed to have a liberating sense of randomness, but some form of structure did exist. Similar types of performers were not placed next to each other (so a singer was not followed by another singer), in order to accentuate the variety of talent. Also, the first on the bill was usually the lowest rung (the least popular performer), and the last was the star headliner. Lastly, because vaudeville theatres aimed at middle-class customers (offering hours of entertainment at a lower cost than serious theatre, opera, or ballet), theatre owners made certain not to hire acts that engaged in the more crude sexual humor that ran rampant during the heyday of minstrelsy.[16]

The burlesque portion of minstrelsy also became popular as its own form (and without the blackface) at end of the 1800s. Burlesque theatres initially emphasized the presentation of parodies of popular high-class entertainment or of important historical events. In tearing down the importance of these historical or cultural institutions, these burlesques often relied on sexual puns and other risqué humor, thus holding onto the ribaldry that vaudeville consciously eschewed. While minstrel shows were traditionally all male, stand-alone burlesque began including female performers rather than actors in drag. Thus, actual women became involved in the verbal and physical forms of sexual humor in burlesque. Eventually, the sexual nature of burlesque became the main attraction, with the parodies gradually replaced by comics doing brief routines or skits with a troupe of female performers who then dominated the rest of the program with their striptease routines, baring as much as they could without getting arrested (and sometimes failing in that effort).[17]

As the twentieth century began, burlesque was largely considered trash and on the margins of American culture. While the dominant reason for this attitude was the emphasis on sexual titillation, burlesque was also demeaned

because it had become one of the last vestiges of what had once been a prevalent form of engagement between the performers and the audience. For centuries, in Europe long before the United States became an independent nation, theatregoing was a participatory activity. Attendees not only laughed at or cried to whatever was being performed, they also regularly voiced their reactions openly, and interacted with those on stage both negatively (heckling, booing, or throwing things) or positively (demanding an encore of a well-performed speech or song). Conversations between those on stage and audience members during a performance were also common. This type of behavior was just as common at the opera or a performance of Shakespeare as it was at a minstrel show. In the late 1800s, though, attempts grew to bring the audience under control, instructing them to remain quiet, polite, and attentive to the artists on stage. The lower the aesthetic regard, the more rowdy the audience was allowed to be. Thus, since vaudeville was lower than legitimate theatre, it still had its share of hecklers, as well as the opportunity for audience sing-alongs. Burlesque, as the lowest rung, had strippers and cheap comics continuously interacting with its customers.[18]

The burlesque queen was considered to be little more than a prostitute by mainstream society, an attitude that carried across to women in the theatrical profession by and large during the 1800s and early 1900s. Burlesque, vaudeville, and the emerging form of musical theatre regularly employed lines of "chorus girls"—skimpily clad dancers, specifically on stage to be on display, without any character names or lines of dialogue. Nonetheless, the sheer existence of women on stage challenged previous cultural gender norms, offering female customers a vision of a life outside the home.[19] By the late 1800s, all forms of theatre had become a space for women to carve out careers. As such, actresses, singers, and dancers could potentially gain a level of financial independence and security unavailable to most other women in the United States at the time. Some women gained such popularity that they were able to run their own theatrical companies, such as Eleanora Duse and Laura Keene.[20] Ironically, the roles for these powerful women were often limited to characters that upheld the value of marriage and motherhood—and characters that attempted to break free of such strictures inevitably suffered the consequences of such actions.

Women performing in legitimate theatre were more sheltered from scorn because of the association with "high art" and the continued influence of Europe, including its music. Divas such as Jenny Lind sang with a polished, trained voice that connoted respectability. While star performers mattered greatly within opera or ballet, the composers held prominence as well—unlike the composers of music for minstrel shows, vaudeville, and burlesque. In those forms, songs were taken from a variety of writers rather than one artist, and the performer was what drew audiences. Operas, on the other hand, relied on a central composer to shape a stylistically coherent, sung-through narrative. In the 1800s, a new style, dubbed "light opera" or "*opera bouffe*," emerged in

Europe, eventually evolving into a form with the name "operetta." Such theatre employed trained voices and the lush soaring melodies found in operatic arias, but contained dialogue between such songs (replacing the recitative used in conventional opera) and tended to tell more escapist storylines. The work done by Jacques Offenbach in France and Franz Lehar in Austria also brought dance more centrally into the story than traditional opera tended to do.[21] Perhaps even more influential were the operettas written by the British team of Gilbert and Sullivan. Their light operas regularly satirize modern society, and contain not only typical operatic melodies, but also "patter songs" that are more rhythmic than melodic, in order to splay out various jokes in rapid fire, such as "I Am the Very Model of a Modern Major-General" from their 1879 production, *The Pirates of Penzance*. The dry humor of their librettos and the inclusion of patter songs began to turn operetta further away from traditional opera and into a potentially new form of musical entertainment. Many of these works were brought over from Europe and performed in the States.[22]

Where light opera turns into what we now call musical theatre is in the eye of the beholder. Many have retroactively listed *The Black Crook* as the first American musical, which premiered in New York in 1866, and toured extensively across the country through the 1870s.[23] Although theatre historians cannot definitively verify the particulars, supposedly a ballet troupe from Paris was left stranded during an American tour when the theatre where they were hired to perform burned to the ground. A theatre company agreed to wedge them into the melodramatic spectacular they were about to premiere, turning the production into something less than a light opera, but definitely more narrative-based than a minstrel show or vaudeville. Others soon attempted to copy its success, but an official recognition of a new type of entertainment called "musical theatre" would still be decades away.

Imported European operettas continued to dominate through the end of the century, leading a number of American composers to try their own hand at it. Victor Herbert began to rival his European contemporaries in popularity, writing the scores for operettas such as *Babes in Toyland* (first produced in 1903), *Naughty Marietta* (1910), and *Sweethearts* (1913). Other American composers writing for the theatre started working in a less operatic vein, bringing something of the style of music found in vaudeville and trying to input it into the narrative structure traditional to opera and operetta. Writing at the same time as Herbert was George M. Cohan, who had begun his career in vaudeville. The songs Cohan composed were jauntier than those found in operetta, and more easily sung by the average person. He also became well known for writing explicitly patriotic tunes, such as "The Yankee Doodle Boy" and "It's a Grand Old Flag," as if announcing that a uniquely American songwriter was breaking away from European influence.[24] As the 1900s began, a new sound was emerging within American culture, and its rise would be employed to create a unique form of American musical theatre as well.