



[\*Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment, 1890-1925.\*](#) By David Monod. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2020. 288 pp. ISBN: 9781469660554.

Reviewed by Elsa Marshall

David Monod's study of vaudeville's role as "the United States' first modern mass entertainment" (2) is a fundamental reading in the study of popular music, theatre, and film. Monod, a history professor at Wilfrid Laurier University, deftly evokes the vitality of now archaic variety acts and elucidates the early decisions by theatre owners and entertainers who created the foundations for popular entertainment in America. He provides an overview of the performance and business practices of vaudeville informed by statistics and anecdotes compiled from a detailed survey

of 35,000 reviews (transcriptions available online at the author's website, "[Vaudeville America](#)"). In contrast to other recent studies of vaudeville, which, as Monod comments, tend to focus on understanding the intent of individual performers and interpreting their performances as transgressive (7), he focuses on the development of the modern cultural and business environments that influenced, and were influenced by, performers and performances.

Monod demonstrates how vaudeville both developed and reflected contemporary notions of modernity at the start of the twentieth century, and he explains how the performers, performances, and innovative business models of vaudeville laid the foundations of mass entertainment and mass consumption. As detailed in Chapters 1 and 5, a performance could be enjoyed by more people than ever before. Acts travelled from one theatre to another in quick succession in a "circuit," and theatre owners implemented audience policies, convenient showtimes, family-friendly performances, and lower ticket prices that prompted women and children of various social classes to attend variety shows, a form that previously entertained predominantly male audiences in saloons. Within this context, press releases curated ideas of celebrity and success to a larger scale than ever before. For example, biographical sketches that emphasized the humble beginnings of vaudeville stars suggested that anyone could attain talent and fame through hard work. In addition, advertisements reinforced the association of stars with wealth, a link that theatre owners would exploit to justify raising ticket prices. Monod identifies



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how the emergence of vaudeville and of mass entertainment intertwined with new modern considerations of authenticity, reality, publicity, and consumerism in a number of complicated and quickly changing ways.

The most compelling contribution of *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment* is the investigation of early influences in popular performance techniques and trends that are still contentious in today's entertainment industries. For example, in Chapter 2, Monod outlines the changing perceptions of ideal female bodies and their links to contemporary stylistic trends and ideas of women's empowerment. In Chapter 3, he highlights how newspaper reporters often blamed the fast pace of modernity for an increase in mental health issues and promoted entertainment as a calming antidote. These historic worries parallel today's discussions of burnout, stress, and distraction to an uncanny degree.

Monod also examines the racism embedded in vaudeville, a predominantly White field of entertainment that often excluded Black American performers and audiences. In Chapter 2, he analyses how White performers exploited Black performance innovations (vocal techniques, dance styles, and lyrical choices) in order to convey the modern aesthetic of natural and spontaneous performance. For example, Blackface and exaggerated Black performance practices were perceived as an acceptable way for White vaudeville singers to publicly communicate private emotions that were previously discouraged in popular song. These racial appropriations, Monod argues, created a perceived distance between the performer themselves and their use of stereotypical mannerisms and potentially inappropriate song content in their act, allowing singers the opportunity to convey risqué material while averting the social implications of doing so. Monod's careful analysis of the historically specific commercial and cultural pressures that led many performers to uphold and exaggerate racial stereotypes provides a framework for questioning similarly contentious entertainment today.

Monod writes with the detail and rigour of a scholar while offering accessible introductions to entertainment genres (e.g., roof garden shows, revues, and minstrel shows) and heavily theorized terms (e.g., "authenticity" and "modernity") that make his book accessible to all readers, no matter their previous level of familiarity with these topics. In addition, evocative individual case studies of performers—singers, dancers, comics, stunt artists, and magicians—and theatre owners (e.g., Marcus Loew, who later founded MGM) illustrate the rapid changeover in acts that found success in vaudeville. His combination of statistics with these comparative biographies convincingly and excitingly recalls the vitality of vaudeville.

Monod's book is a necessary read for scholars and students of popular music, theatre, and even film studies as it outlines the historically specific, and in some cases quite unorganized, fashion in which mass entertainment first developed in America. The decisions that impresarios, talent agencies, and performers made in competing for local and national attention, asserting financial and creative autonomy, and communicating with audiences laid the groundwork for the recording

and film industries and for the public's new relation to stars and consumerism. Readers will also appreciate Monod's explanations of the controversial interactions between White vaudeville performers and proprietors, on one hand, and Black musicians and musical styles (e.g., ragtime, jazz, and cakewalks) on the other. These difficult histories are essential to discussions of cultural appropriation in music and need to be handled responsibly in research, in the classroom, and in performance practice. *Vaudeville and the Making of Modern Entertainment* demonstrates the crucial historic influence of the whole complex medium, not just of a few performers and businessmen, on the industry and conceptions of popular entertainments we enjoy today.