



Saying It with Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to Hollywood Cinema. By Katherine Spring. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 2013. 256 pp. ISBN 9780199842223.

Saying It with Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to Hollywood Cinema is a detailed history of the integration of music within film during the 1920s and early 1930s. Dr. Katherine Spring takes a unique approach, examining both the economic implications of including music in film and the impact of the use of songs on the narrative in 'non-musical' films. *Saying It with Songs* details the pursuits and changes of the film industry from 1927 to 1931, which Spring notes is rarely studied. Citing the lack of research that combines the economic drive for including music in film and the use of songs as storytelling tools, Spring takes a scholarly approach to focus on an admittedly narrow time period to explore the intersection between economic and narrative pressures. Spring's well-written work is accessible and enlightening to audiences from film buffs to neophytes alike and is strengthened by the thoroughness of her research.

The text is separated into two parts; each section follows a logical process by focusing on a specific aspect of film, commerce or storytelling, and describing the history chronologically. Part 1 discusses the economic functions and convergence of film and music, while Part 2 highlights changes in the use of song within film as a function of storytelling. The first portion of the book details shifts in the operation of both the film and music industries. In the 1920s, to reduce the costs of including music in film, film companies began purchasing music production companies and employing songwriters directly. In addition, filmmakers increased their profits by focusing on cross-promotion of both the songs produced for films and the films themselves. Advertising specific songs on the radio as part of a film, as records, and as purchasable sheet music, allowed companies to make more money because consumers purchased both the music and tickets to see the film. The cyclic nature of movie ticket and music sales increased the popularity of a song through radio promotion and led to increases in movie ticket sales, which in turn increased the popularity of the song, and so on. Moreover, costs for theatre owners decreased as they no longer had to pay for live accompaniment. This shift also made music in film more accessible to the masses who could see films with prerecorded sound, thereby eliminating the need to travel to large theatres that could incorporate orchestral accompaniment. Songs were also promoted by emphasizing the connections between celebrities and the songs they sang in movies. Consumers liked the stars and then purchased the records and/or sheet music, which increased the profits for movie studios. Following her explanation of the general trends and changes to the economic drive behind music in film, Spring includes numerous detailed accounts of specific films and examples that support her argument regarding the impact of the pursuit of capitalism in the integration of recorded sound in film.

The second part of the book details the changes in the narrative functions in film music. Prior to the stock market crash of 1929, songs were often used as a repeated theme within a movie that recurred with slight variations throughout the film and were often shoehorned into a film in such a way that it was implausible to maintain the suspension of disbelief necessary for watching films. Songs were used to reveal information both to the characters within the film and to the audience as a way to advance the plot. Consistent with the first half of the text, Spring provides plenty of evidence to demonstrate the use of music in film. After 1929, the theme song began to fall out of style, film studios made drastic cuts to songwriting staff, and songs were no longer incorporated into film as narrative devices.

Spring acknowledges that it would be easy to blame the 1929 stock market crash for the changes in the integration of music in film that occurred in the early 1930s. She argues instead that this divergence was the result of changing consumer tastes, in addition to the expense of the creation and production of music. This change marked the shift from “media convergence” to “media divergence” (p. 120). Songs were no longer inextricably tied to a film and its narrative; instead, they were used to help develop mood and atmosphere. Because songs were no longer integral narrative functions of film the cross-promotion of songs/films decreased in prevalence and importance.

Saying It with Songs consistently refers to the overarching goal of explaining the impact of songs on early sound films while providing ample evidence through the integration of specific film examples. The book concludes with a renewed emphasis on the author’s goals to answer the question, “what were early American sound films ‘saying with songs?’” (p. 152). Spring successfully and persuasively answers this question in three parts. The first part reflects her focus on the use of song as part of the cross-promotion for increasing sales of movie tickets, records, and sheet music. The second part highlights the economic commitments by film studios to include song in film that led to variations in how songs were included in film to increase profits. The third part states that the “transition to sound bears witness to the argument that the defining principles of the classical Hollywood cinema were rooted in causal, coherent storytelling, and not in the formal rupture of their coherence” (p. 153).

Spring’s *Saying It with Songs* provides a thorough presentation of the changes that the introduction of prerecorded songs had in the film industry from an economic and narrative standpoint. As one of the only sources that refers to the impact of music in film including both commerce *and* storytelling, Spring provides a wonderful contribution to the understanding of the inextricable nature of the integration of music in film.

Rebecca Foley, York University