

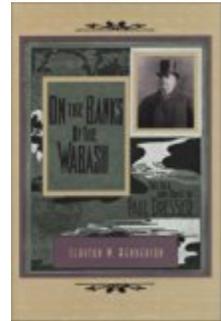
H-Net Reviews

in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Clayton W. Henderson. *On the Banks of the Wabash: The Life and Music of Paul Dresser*. Indianapolis: Indiana Historical Society Press, 2003. xxix + 481 pp. \$29.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-87195-166-3.

Reviewed by Jeffrey Magee (Department of Musicology, School of Music, Indiana University, Bloomington)

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From Terre Haute to Tin Pan Alley

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At the 1920 Democratic convention in San Francisco, reporter H. L. Mencken watched with amazement as the event “transformed into a carnival” and “politics was completely forgotten” as every delegate stood and raised his voice in “sentimental song.” As this “orgy of mush” continued for half an hour, Mencken realized that almost all the songs had been written by one composer, Paul Dresser, and he saw it as “dramatic proof” of Dresser’s “particular genius” (pp. 394-95).

It would be hard to find a less likely advocate for Paul Dresser’s work than the famously acerbic, unsentimental Mencken, but Clayton W. Henderson’s new life-and-works account, carefully documented but designed for a general reader, embraces many such contradictions in bringing this now obscure songwriter to life and recreating the rich three-dimensional world in which Dresser made his impact and created his legacy.

That legacy survives chiefly in 143 published compositions, mostly words and music crafted for sale as sheet music in the mass-production song-publishing industry called Tin Pan Alley. Like that of many Alley songwriters, Dresser’s reputation rested mainly on a handful of pieces, namely “Just Tell Them That You Saw Me” (1895), “My Gal Sal” (1905), and “On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away” (1897), which became the official song of Dresser’s home state, Indiana. The Dresser style, as known and loved by a vast public, comprised a sen-

sibility woven from feelings of urban alienation, loss, and heartbreak, heightened by nostalgic images of idyllic nature scenes, modest heartland homesteads, and, as Henderson puts it, “the all-forgiving, angelic mother” (p. 387). His music enhanced the poetic poignancy with gentle patter melodies flowing over an affective harmonic palette. Henderson’s discussion of the songs is strong on recurring themes in the lyrics, but less so on their musical setting. Of “My Gal Sal,” one of Dresser’s enduring standards, Henderson can only say that “the melody has a naturalness to it, a tune that flows, unimpeded, to its final destination” (p. 349).

Henderson is stronger as a narrative biographer, patiently revealing that Dresser amounted to much more than a simple sentimentalist, showing, in fact, that Dresser’s reputation became a trap in which he remained until his death in 1906 at the age of forty-seven. Growing up in and around Terre Haute in a household governed by a dogmatic German Catholic father and softened by the mother love that suffuses his later songs, the youth found in entertainment the ideal rebellion and an entry into the larger world. After a rough boyhood marked by scrapes with the law, Dresser gradually found his voice as a “singing comedian,” not as the writer of wistful songs. Press reports confused his name, so that the family name, Dreiser, seems to have transformed into “Dreisser” and finally “Dresser,” a change that Paul apparently accepted if not welcomed. Over two decades (ca. 1877-97), he toured in medicine shows, minstrel shows, and comedies that

featured “musical interruptions”—moments that allowed Dresser to try out musical material before appreciative audiences from Seattle to Boston. Only in summer did he find time to hone his emerging skills as a composer. Finally, in 1897, nearly forty, Dresser settled in New York to devote himself full time to songwriting. The turning point was “On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away.”

That song becomes the focus of another contradiction: his most famous song was the product of collaboration. Dresser was the first of two great Hoosier songwriters—Cole Porter was the other—to write both words and music to his songs. And he was one of very few songwriters in America—from Stephen Foster to Stephen Sondheim—to do so with notable success. But, as Henderson shows, the idea for “On the Banks of the Wabash,” and possibly its entire first verse and chorus, appear to have come from someone else: Dresser’s younger brother, the reporter-turned-novelist Theodore Dreiser. At first, Henderson concludes that the song’s “raw material” came from Dreiser, but that the lyrics (and music) are Dresser’s (pp. 205-6). Yet the prospect that Dreiser wrote the entire first verse and chorus continues to haunt the book and represents one of several unresolved issues that seem to cause a lot of verbal hand-wringing. (“Did Dreiser really contribute the words to the first verse and chorus...?” Henderson asks much later [p. 279]; he returns yet again, and more emphatically, to the issue without throwing further light on it [p. 323].)

Family becomes the focal point for another Dresser paradox. He seems to have been both the most self-centered and most devoted member of his family—both a centrifugal and a centripetal force. Again and again, Henderson shows how Dresser would stray far from his Hoosier homestead, only to return with gifts and money to family members who needed them. Theodore recalled one of Dresser’s returns as “like the sun, or a warm, cheering fire” (p. 69). Dresser, concluded his brother, “was generous to the point of self-destruction” (p. 57). Indeed, Theodore idolized his brother, envied his cosmopolitanism, his financial success, his wide circle of friends, and even—and especially—his sexual escapades. “I have never known a man more interested in women from the sex point of view (unless it might perchance be myself),” wrote Theodore Dreiser (p. 79). A man of strong appetites, Dresser became almost as famous for his girth as for his songs. In his late years, he grew to an enormous size of over three hundred pounds, and Henderson aptly

speculates that his weight began to neutralize his sex life, leading to starvation diets (one time, a milk-only regimen; another, seventeen days on orange juice and water [pp. 271-73]). As he grew larger, however, Dresser’s empathy also expanded. Henderson documents the emergence of Dresser’s little-known social conscience in the two years before his death. That finds expression in a newspaper interview (in which he predicted “a great social war” [p. 286]) and in songs written after he visited the teeming Lower East Side—where a teenaged Irving Berlin was about to launch a new generation of songwriters.

Henderson saw the social-conscience songs in manuscript: Dresser never published them. Feeling confined by popular taste, unable to adjust to changing song styles, Dresser faced a steady decline into obesity, alcoholism, and poverty. In yet one more paradox dramatized by Henderson’s account, Dresser became a full-time songwriter in the very year that tolled the death knell for his patented mother-and-home style: 1897 was also the year that saw the first published ragtime, which brought a bracing new rhythmic style and slangy language to Tin Pan Alley. Dresser’s songs thus form a fragile bridge between centuries: their nineteenth-century rural nostalgia (for “the banks of the Wabash”) grows acute in their twentieth-century urban landscapes (“far away”).

Henderson’s own writing itself resonates with that spirit, as he concludes with thoughts of how most songs of Dresser’s era have “fallen by the wayside” (p. 396). The whole book, in fact, invites the reader to settle in for a journey to a distant time and place. The book’s attractive dust jacket represents a savvy adaptation of a Tin Pan Alley-era sheet music cover. Not least, the book features some of the most attractive and deftly placed illustrations I have ever seen. No sooner does Henderson vividly evoke a place, a person, or an event, than one turns the page to find a photo or document to complement the prose.

As we approach the sesquicentennial of his birth and the centenary of his death, Dresser seems an unlikely candidate for commemorative events. In the last biographical chapter, Henderson describes efforts to build memorials that were never finished. One photograph, in fact, shows the pitiful remains of an unfinished memorial in Terre Haute. All the more reason, then, to welcome Henderson’s book. It may be the most solid memorial Dresser receives in the coming years.

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