

**"Saying it with Songs: popular music and the coming of sound to Hollywood cinema" by Katherine Spring (Oxford, 2013, 229 pages); and "After the Silents: Hollywood film music in the early sound era, 1926-1934" by Michael Slowik (Columbia UP, 2014, 384 pages)**

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Review

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3 Katherine Spring, *Saying it with Songs: Popular Music and the Coming of Sound to*  
4 *Hollywood Cinema*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013, 229 pp; Michael Slowik,  
5 *After the Silents: Hollywood Film Music in the Early Sound Era, 1926-1934*. New  
6 York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2014, 384 pp.  
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15 The publication within a single year of two books concerned with Hollywood's  
16 early deployment of recorded music may not have occurred entirely by chance  
17 inasmuch as both writers acknowledge receipt from the American Musicological  
18 Society of an endowment supporting publication. Whether or not their  
19 Publications Committee was influenced by the fact, the volumes complement  
20 each other to mutual advantage since between them they analyse the various  
21 ways that Hollywood attempted to integrate pre-recorded songs and  
22 instrumental music into films.  
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30 Both authors reveal how the studios discovered that integrating recorded music  
31 was an altogether trickier thing to do than might have been expected. Today's  
32 cinemagoers take it for granted that music will almost always be restrained from  
33 disrupting narrative's right of way, but that was by no means obvious to  
34 producers of sound films in 1926. A variety of factors kept studios working out  
35 fresh ways of combining music and image. The first of these was the sheer  
36 novelty for audiences of experiencing pre-recorded music synchronised with  
37 pictures. Initially the music was, therefore, the main centre of audience attention.  
38 Studios understood that and marketed early sound films accordingly. Spring  
39 (concentrating mainly on songs) and Slowik (dividing his attention between  
40 orchestral music and song) describe the broad range of musical genres they  
41 drew on.  
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52 Referring to Robert Allen's observation that the history of American cinema  
53 cannot be isolated from that of media and entertainment, Spring details the  
54 extent to which cinema drew on the music industries of the twentieth century's  
55 first quarter. She demonstrates the cinema's links (initiated during the silent film  
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3 era) firstly to Tin Pan Alley; secondly to the recording and sale of gramophone  
4 discs; and thirdly to the output from the nascent radio network. Guides for  
5 would-be songwriters reveal the wide range of material thought to be  
6 commercially viable in the 1910s and 1920s. These manuals included genres and  
7 sub-genres such as ballads (sentimental, Irish, mother, child, etc.) as well as  
8 marching, patriotic, comic and topical songs. Slowik refers to several of these  
9 sources and traces other roots in late nineteenth-century music from high  
10 culture (opera and classical orchestral lollipops chosen for their prestige) to  
11 popular tunes borrowed from stage musicals and Tin Pan Alley selected for their  
12 appeal to a large audience. In 1926-27 early sound cinema also exploited the  
13 legacy of its immediate predecessor, usually in cases where records were  
14 preserved in sheet music. However, the silent film helped shape its successor in  
15 the early months through more than the choice of compositions but also in  
16 matters relating to form and structure. Given that pit orchestras had played  
17 throughout the films they accompanied, it seemed obvious that pre-recorded  
18 sound should do the same. Production companies were to discover themselves  
19 mistaken in this assumption.  
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33 One factor in the mix (inevitably, given the swiftly evolving engineering  
34 innovations on which recording and reproducing sound depended) was the  
35 technology of sound systems. Slowik cites Rick Altman's concept of crisis  
36 historiography to make the case that it is necessary, if the complete account of a  
37 major transition is to be given, to trace the historical trajectory not only of those  
38 technological practices that emerged as dominant, but also those that did not  
39 survive (6-7). In fact, Slowik offers only the sketchiest account of the specific  
40 technologies involved. Crisis historiography as he interprets it draws attention  
41 less to the technologies than to production and exhibition practices – a use  
42 appropriate to his principal theme. However, in the brief passage where this (his  
43 only explicit reference to methodology) is raised, Slowik seems more intent on  
44 underlining his book's authority than describing a principal way of working with  
45 the material he uncovers. It's an impression reinforced when he draws attention  
46 to errors and omissions in earlier scholars' work, a needlessly self-aggrandising  
47 tactic. The book's authority needs no buttressing, thoroughly deserved as it is  
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3 thanks to the quality and detail of its research and arguments. For her part,  
4 Spring's methodology is transparent in the reports of her findings. She doesn't go  
5 in for chest thumping, her lighter touch leaving the focus mainly on her primary  
6 sources.  
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11 When filmmakers became aware that they faced a number of problems in the  
12 way they deployed pre-recorded sound, these included questions concerning the  
13 extent, level and apparent source of music. How (since it could now, by means of  
14 increasingly precise synchronisation, be represented as arising from on-screen  
15 action such as a dance hall or jazz club) should it shape a narrative's spatial  
16 dimensions? How was the relationship between diegetic & non-diegetic music to  
17 be managed comprehensibly? When speech was added to the soundtrack, should  
18 the audio level of instruments be adjusted? Should theme songs be exploited as  
19 often as possible in order to maximise market impact? As both writers show, a  
20 period of experimentation began in 1928 and only the last of these questions  
21 was readily resolved.  
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32 Before the Wall Street Crash began to take its toll in 1929-30, the usages of pre-  
33 recorded sound had become more diverse in style, structure and impact. While  
34 the industry was indeed developing some practices that were to be consolidated  
35 in the so-called golden age of film music (1935-50), other methods of deploying  
36 music were tried that did not endure for long (we're back with crisis  
37 historiography). Change undoubtedly occurred thanks to the inventive  
38 imagination of lyricists, composers, arrangers, producers and technicians.  
39 However, these people did not exercise their talents in a vacuum but, on the  
40 contrary, responded to a number of pressures. These included audience  
41 reactions to recent releases (both positive and negative) in whatever form they  
42 were communicated. Sometimes unmistakable shifts upward or downward in  
43 box-office returns could be interpreted as favourable (or damning) verdicts on  
44 certain genres of music. Sales of sheet music and gramophone records linked to a  
45 score or a tune highlighted by a particular film also proved useful indices. Trade  
46 papers' previewers were intentionally sensitive to evolving popular tastes, and  
47 conversely just as brutal in their *ex cathedra* judgements. Their columns advised  
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3 exhibitors not only on the inherent quality of a release but also its prospects with  
4 audiences (be the latter mainstream or specialised). Reviews in the popular  
5 press, not to mention fan magazines, could be no less pointed. Most of these  
6 indicators showed that audiences soon became bored by music running with  
7 scarcely an interruption from the opening titles to the end of a film. Firstly, the  
8 quality of recorded and amplified music heard in an auditorium built without its  
9 acoustic properties in mind by no means always compared well in 1926-28 with  
10 the sound of a good live orchestra – a common complaint. Secondly, as Slowik  
11 says, the last remaining human element in the cinema was lost to audiences  
12 when music became subsumed into the general technology of cinema (85-6).

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21 Although, taken as an entity, the American motion picture industry was cutting  
22 costs by dismissing house orchestras, the savings that accrued to independent  
23 exhibitors were offset (to the shock of many among the latter) by the increased  
24 cost of renting both the films and the equipment to reproduce and amplify  
25 sound. In the scathing argot of sacked pit musicians, the squawkies were not  
26 cheap. For their part, studios had to pay for rights to record music as an integral  
27 element in their releases. The larger corporations quickly saw commercial  
28 advantage in bringing such costs in-house and bought the music companies. As  
29 Spring shows (53-60, 158), between summer 1928 and autumn 1929,  
30 Paramount, Fox, Warner Bros., MGM and RCA all identified opportunities that  
31 went far beyond the purchase of libraries of sheet music and built on the  
32 synergistic capability of sound film, radio, gramophone records and sheet music  
33 to market a product sellable to audiences and shoppers on a cross-media basis.  
34 There are many examples of films (and Spring refers to some) that, with oft-  
35 repeated songs, acted in effect as barkers for tunes that could be heard on the  
36 radio or phonograph. In turn those outlets reciprocated by drawing attention to  
37 the cinema attraction, highlighting, for instance, the names of the songsters and  
38 composers or publishing pictures of a film's stars. Before long, cinemagoers,  
39 critics and trade papers were to protest against the overloading which occurred  
40 when films' theme tunes not only accompanied the opening and closing titles but  
41 intruded repeatedly on plot episodes to which they were irrelevant.

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3 In respect of the major studios' capitalisation, the coming of sound vastly  
4 increased the industry's investment in buildings and plant (both for production  
5 and exhibition). Seen from this angle, cross-media investment in music  
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7 businesses amounted to a significant step in the consolidation of studio power  
8 through vertical organisation. However, the voracious entrepreneurial appetite  
9 of several Hollywood studios entailed the concomitant massive extension of their  
10 indebtedness that was to bring them to the edge of bankruptcy in 1930-31 when  
11 the US markets collapsed in the Great Depression. One of the ironic  
12 consequences was that the majors cut back their music departments, recognising  
13 that they were over-staffed at a time when their services were being used more  
14 selectively than before.  
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23 The relatively sparse use of music had come about less because of the need to  
24 economise than in response to the requirement that films arrange music with  
25 greater subtlety and in more satisfactory co-ordination with their narratives. For  
26 example, a device evolved whereby music could both affect the perceived spatial  
27 dimensions of the image and enrich the thematic content of a scene. Slowik calls  
28 it 'diegetic withdrawal', in reference to diegetic drift led by music(112-13). The  
29 phrase tags what was in 1929 an innovative practice occurring when music  
30 starts apparently sourced in the story world and then becomes non-diegetic as  
31 the shot moves unobtrusively away from its prior location. In the process the  
32 continuous musical theme develops into something more, namely the key to a  
33 character's emotions. Slowik cites Clara Bow's first talkie *The Wild Party*  
34 (released in March of that year) as one of the first to use such a technique  
35 whereby action in the on-screen world metamorphoses to indicate the state of  
36 someone's inner being (*Ibid.*).  
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49 Another way in which music could enhance the sense of both time and place was  
50 when arranged so as to reinforce a sense of genre. In the case of the Western, this  
51 was not a complete innovation since from 1883 Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show  
52 had mythologised certain elements linking music and action – the buffalo hunt  
53 and the Indian attack. In his analysis of *The Big Trail* (1930) and *Cimarron*  
54 (1931) Slowik deals with the way they featured non-diegetic music but familiar  
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3 tunes that celebrated and enriched the founding myth of America. They did this  
4 by using readily identifiable stylistic devices and recurrent motifs such as tom-  
5 toms (for Indian attacks), expansive orchestral music led by the string sections  
6 to emphasise majesty of the new land, and marches associated with heroism  
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8 (125-33). In these two films are found orchestral elements that, as Mark  
9 Brownrigg demonstrated in 'Film Genre and Film Music', coalesced within the  
10 coming decade into a comprehensive musical paradigm. Thus *Stagecoach* (1939)  
11 summoned and deepened that seminal, but endlessly embattled myth of America  
12 by introducing additional history-charged sources to the elements that Slowik  
13 finds coming together in *The Big Trail* and *Cimarron*. John Ford and his music  
14 director Gerard Carbonara added folk music, hymns, cavalry charges, patriotic  
15 music and Mexican themes, many of them contributing to a masterly audio-  
16 montage behind the title sequence that does everything but tell the story before  
17 the action begins.<sup>1</sup>  
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28 The research undertaken by Spring and Slowik has made it possible to identify  
29 the trials, errors and successes that occurred in those fascinating years when  
30 Hollywood production made the difficult transition from a time when live music  
31 had accompanied its output to the new era where recorded sound fitted feature  
32 films so well that it appeared almost as though it had always been that way.  
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56 <sup>1</sup> Mark Brownrigg, 'Film Genre and Film Music' (Dissertation: University of  
57 Stirling, 2003) 62-94. <http://hdl.handle.net/1893/439> [accessed 17 February  
58 2016].  
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