

Bandstands to Battlefields: Brass Bands in 19th Century America

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Review

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Smith, Brian *Bandstands to Battlefields: Brass Bands in 19th Century America*. Corner House Historical Publications, \$19.95, softcover ISBN 879281383

American brass

Changes in music echoed changes in American society

Thomas Jefferson lamented that Music is the favorite passion of my soul, and fortune has cast my lot in a country where it is in a state of deplorable barbarism. The bounds of an American fortune will not admit the indulgence of a domestic band of musicians, yet I have thought that a passion for music might be reconciled with that economy which we are obliged to observe. Mr. Jefferson would have settled for a band of two French horns, two clarinets, two hautboys, and a bassoon. But this was in the year 1778, and the scene would change dramatically by the third decade of the 19th century. Brian Smith's **Bandstands to Battlefields: Brass Bands in 19th Century America** tells the story of this change and documents how bands became a prominent feature in American life.

Smith's objective is to show, by using a representative example of the bands that existed throughout the century, how bands in America originated, grew in popularity, adapted to the ever changing tastes of the people, and became an integral part of major historical events, if not social occasions, adding to the leisure time enjoyment of its citizens, so much so that the band movement of the 19th century in America can be considered a social movement on its own. But why should a student of 19th century America or the American Civil War consider the history of brass bands to be a topic worthy of contemplation? The answer is stated brilliantly by Jari Villanueva in the book's introduction: Music in the Victorian world was the communication link between the human endeavor and the human soul, which facilitated the tactful expression of human emotions and sentiments. Imagine a state funeral without airs, a pass in review without martial music, a wedding without the wedding march, a church without hymns. It is the music that binds the moment to the soul, that fixes that special memory

in our minds, that soothes the pain of a loss, that fills the air with electricity you can feel, that turns doubt into determination, failure into success. It is because of all this and more that our society and our military have merged the sound of music with the triumphs and tribulations of life.

Smith begins by noting how 19th century Americans experienced a shift in music from the European styles that had predominated in the 18th century to a new musical style that was uniquely American. The brass band era of 1835 to 1875 occurred at a time when this new musical style was forming, and brass band music, as well as minstrel music, played a role in this transition.

As Jefferson's quote demonstrates, earlier American bands were composed mostly of woodwind instruments which were more flexible than the brass instruments of that day. But this began to change with the invention of the keyed bugle and a family of brass instruments called ophicleides. These keyed instruments had the flexibility to play melody lines similar to woodwinds but were louder than woodwinds making them more suitable for outdoor occasions. The subsequent invention of the saxhorn family of instruments accelerated the growth of brass bands.

Smith notes that by around 1840 most bands had eliminated woodwinds in favor of brass instruments, and that the introduction of these new instruments to America directly led to bands being the source of a whole social movement in this country. These instruments played a central role in the growth of town bands, in bands that supported local militia units and in circus bands. Town bands performed for militia drills and provided entertainment for social and civic occasions, like Independence Day celebrations, firemen parades and outings, serenades of dignitaries, picnics, excursions by fraternal organizations, political rallies, and public works openings. By the 1850's amateur bands existed all across America and were part of almost every social occasion. Bands also participated in many commercial functions, like advertising retail products. The bands were composed of working class men, and, surprisingly, new bands composed of neophyte musicians were able to perform tolerably well within a few months of their formation.

But in the decades following the Civil War, public taste began to shift toward band music with a more musical sound than a martial sound. Americans began to prefer a more complex musical phrase that required instrumentation that would lend itself to the new styles of music that composers of the latter half

of the 19th century were beginning to produce. The emergence of ragtime and jazz called for other combinations of instruments. By the early 20th century, commercial radio, the phonograph, automobiles and motion pictures contributed to the decline in Americans' desire to attend outdoor band concerts. America entered an era that had little room for firemen's parades, serenades, steamer excursions or even nightly band concerts on the old town bandstands. These modern trends signaled the decline of brass bands. Smith notes that while most American towns and cities had at least one band from the 1880's to the 1930's, these were more modern, mixed instrument bands.

Bandstands to Battlefields is more than a history of 19th century brass bands. It is a fascinating look at American life of that century. Through the story of bands and their music, Smith gives us a glimpse of 19th century American social life that we may have missed in other historical texts. For example, the author includes the names of many popular tunes played on specific occasions. This helps us see into the mind of our ancestors by telling us what they were feeling or what moved them on those occasions--band leaders knew the listeners' feelings and knew which tunes would match those feelings. When we understand the importance of music in the lives of 19th century Americans, we can better comprehend the functions that music performs in all cultures, including the highly diverse musical landscape we dwell in today.

Students of the American Civil War will find in this book a careful documentation of the role of brass bands during the War. In the three chapters devoted to Civil War bands, Smith gives many examples of how bands functioned to bolster the courage, morale and patriotism of soldiers on both sides, and to entertain them and strengthen their ties to their families and communities by playing music they had known at home. His carefully documented research helps the reader understand why Robert E. Lee said that without music there would be no army.

The author supports his narrative with many quotations from contemporary sources, and the reader can easily form a mental image of mid 19th century brass bands, instruments, and musicians from the many period photographs that accompany the text. The book also includes brief biographies of leading 19th century brass band leaders that will be of value to students and performers of 19th century music.

Smith clearly achieved his objective quoted above. However, it is not clear how the band phenomenon of the 19th century could be considered a social movement, a concept normally reserved for organized efforts to change, or resist change in, some aspect of society. A sociologist might be inclined to place the brass band phenomenon at some point along a broad continuum labeled collective behavior. But labels aside, a serious reader will gain from this book a firm understanding of how important brass bands were to 19th century Americans, the various functions these bands served, and how their music moved people at all levels of society. Brian Smith is to be commended for his painstaking research and an inclusiveness that makes his book a very valuable contribution to the study of music and to our understanding of 19th century American life.

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