2004

Book Review: Showman: The Life and Music of Perry George Lowery

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In recent years a number of books have recognized the contributions of African American musicians to the popular musical landscape and returned to the historical narrative figures of seminal importance. Such a figure is trumpeter Perry George Lowery (1869-1942), nicknamed the “Angel Gabriel’s Right Hand Man” by his compatriot, W. C. Handy.

Showman traces Lowery’s life and career in great detail, from drummer of his family’s Star of the West brass band to nationally recognized band leader and impresario. Lowery, raised on a farm in Eureka, Kansas, was regarded as one of the finest black musical protégés in the country. By 1897 he was the leader of his own Famous Concert band, which toured with the Forepaugh and Sells Brothers Circus as a sideshow attraction. Although he later ran a music school in Cleveland, wrote educational articles, and started bands throughout the country, Lowery was best known for his excellent circus bands, and he attracted crowds until his death in 1942. Moreover, P. G. Lowery’s Progressive Musical Enterprise, started in 1900 to develop and produce acts for sideshows, created the branch of black show business known as “circus minstrels and vaudeville.” Lowery also arguably contributed to the integration of circus companies; his was the first black band to play under a big top, in 1920.

Clifford Edward Watkins does an admirable job of chronicling Lowery’s multiple professional activities—his motto was “Good things cometh to He Who Waiteth So Long as He Hustleth while He Waiteth”—and manages, for most of the book, to create an engrossing story of a life on the road and the triumph of the entrepreneurial spirit. Showman is so richly detailed, however, that names, dates, and supporting information at some points overwhelm the narrative. This is particularly so in the book’s second half.

Showman is also a portrait of a forgotten part of America’s musical past. While local brass or wind bands were common, people in the rural Midwest and Plains territories heard more diverse musical literature only from traveling companies. Circus side shows, in particular, brought the minstrel show, early black musicals, vaudeville acts, and selections of concert music and light opera to those who would ordinarily have been denied exposure to music by African American artists. Ultimately, this is Showman’s greatest strength: acknowledging the vibrant black culture that
flourished on the Great Plains, outside the major urban areas, in the early part of this century.

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