

Book Review

When Colleges Sang: The Story of Singing in American College Life

J. Lloyd Winstead

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The history of song in American colleges is a compelling focal point toward illuminating how student lives were influenced through this particular form of performance. In *When Colleges Sang: The Story of Singing in American College Life*, J. Lloyd Winstead offers the reader a chronology of singing traditions that originated in the 17th-century Puritan culture of the United States. He suggests that singing in campus life had a broad impact on the collegiate traditions that developed right from institutional inception. The book contains rich resources from original documents that include published college songbooks, cultural and musical histories, newspaper accounts of performances, and texts from books and journals among other historical forms of document research. There is a wealth of information, such as song text excerpts and photographs, extensive notes, a note on sources, a bibliography, and an index that creates an impressive compendium. However, it seems there was a deliberate choice not to delve into a deeper and critical analysis of the presence of singing on campus. I found myself wishing for more stories in this history to enhance the encyclopaedic collection.

Winstead introduces his thesis with the argument that because singing was a part of both sacred and secular Puritan life, it became a significant aspect of college life. Harvard University, in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and Yale University, in New Haven, Connecticut, become the threads on which the book hangs its history. The extracurricular and sacred singing, from the 17th century well into the late 19th century, emerges as a white, male, and middle-class tradition that later spreads to women students and the nascent African American colleges, but the author does not go beyond the surface documentation of what songs were created, by whom, and when. The introduction and first two chapters focus on how casual singing and the playing of musical instruments steadily gained popularity in a society that considered music as wasting “valuable time for more serious pursuits” (p. 7). Winstead makes the sociological connection between the rise of popular music in colleges and the rise of the same in American culture. He recounts the advent of the publishing broadsides of song texts and the emergence of singing schools for church and college as improved singing was considered vital for reviving religious rituals and creating more accomplished commencement ceremonies. Winstead introduces significant historical authors or historical moments, recounting in detail their importance to the singing tradition and gives the reader various perspectives of previous historical work. The detail was meticulous but I began to wish for more cultural analysis from the author.

Besides the periodization of chapters, Winstead also divides each chapter with subheadings

such as *College Singing and Patriotism*, *Singing and Academics*, and *Singing and Extracurricular*. The subheadings allow a reader to scan and find a particular subject of interest within. He would then briefly summarize each chapter in its concluding paragraphs. These summaries, along with the introduction and epilogue, do not offer anything new but coupled with the subheadings make the book accessible for historical information. After the second chapter, the establishment of the singing rituals within the academic curriculum and the extracurricular societies would have been a good place for a deeper discussion of how singing affected the social fellowship and community of the colleges.

Chapter 3 brings the reader into the middle of the 19th century and the beginnings of commercial culture and technological progress affecting campus life. Winstead suggests that the divergence of “cultivated versus vernacular” traditions in music were a result of the romantic influence of music in England and Germany (p. 51). He also suggests there was a community desire for beauty and the ideal in more cultivated music over the popular songs that accommodated local vernacular. Commencements were beginning to resemble country fairs as they became more excessive in the holiday and celebratory nature of the singing. The presence of pianos and reed organs in homes coincided with the development of literary societies that provided the extracurricular social life of students. These were students exposed to popular song and music at home who then became willing participants in the same at college. The singing was still to be found at church and college but the songs created by students that bonded them in campus social life were the compelling focus. Winstead recounts the chamber choirs that would produce performances along the lines of George Frideric Handel, Joseph Haydn, and Felix Mendelssohn but it was the glee clubs and quartets (usually organized by the Greek fraternities) that created the drinking songs and glees (entertainment music) that told the story of student life. Winstead links the various stories together under the subheadings and simply sums up their sociological effects by stating that “[c]ollege presidents and administrations reinforced and perpetuated singing in college ceremonies and religious services” (p. 80), but the reader misses out on what Winstead thinks the reasons were for singing on campus. Winstead suggests the increase in singing mirrored the increase in popular song literature but there is no further critical discussion.

Chapter 4 includes images from songbook covers as Winstead documents the effect of the growing publishing industry and the ubiquity of popular sheet music. The students would often change lyrics to suit the stories of their own campuses and then produce their own songbooks for public sale. Winstead reveals how competitive sport added a new dimension to campus singing, not just for the students but the public. The successful publishing of the *College Song Book* (1860) attests to the public interest in college life, specifically the life of a college man. As well, another book from this time period, *A Collection of College Words and Customs* (1851), is notable for the connections between singing and college life. The vernacular of students became lyrics, which then entered the public lexicon. Again, Winstead stops his narrative here without further exploration into how singing as a social and student-led community enterprise affected the wider American life.

At the end of Chapter 4, Winstead brings in the singing traditions of women’s colleges, which created their own music histories and the emergent Fisk University Jubilee Singers. As I am not familiar with the emergence of colleges for African American students after the Emancipation Act (1834), I was surprised at the short treatment this world-renowned choir received in this chapter. Fisk University, in Nashville, Tennessee, relied on the performance and publishing success of its Jubilee Singers to financially ensure the institution’s future. Winstead recounts,

While their extensive repertoire included ballads, operas, choruses, and hymns, the plantation and spiritual songs brought them the most fame and captivated the general public. As a writer noted in the *New York Evangelist*, ‘everything becomes new under the charm of their un-English voices.’ (p. 113)

Winstead further details the Jubilee Singers’ song set but does not engage with the obvious opportunity for colonial and anthropological reflection. I was disappointed not to encounter further social and cultural context of African American students of this time period. However, I was very interested in the photograph of the Jubilee Singers showing both men and women students together. I was so surprised by the photograph of this co-ed choir that I did some online research to find out more about Fisk University. Readers without knowledge of the rise of African American colleges lose an opportunity for further discussion here.

For the subsequent chapters, Winstead details the larger and older institutions first, with a focus on Harvard and Yale, then the women’s colleges and the African American students’ song histories. It may have been an editing choice but it would have added to critical historical thought to delve into notions about a tradition originally rooted in Puritan culture that bridged a cultural gap across white and African American colleges with the abolition of slavery 200 years later. By the beginning of the 20th century, vaudeville, melodrama, and minstrelsy permeated the college singing traditions, illustrating the effects of European and slave culture on what had been middle-class, white, and male American institutions. The burgeoning consumer attraction to youth culture in the form of college students reinforced the students’ position as cultural trendsetters. Winstead is meticulous in documenting examples of stories and song texts that began to attract an audience outside the colleges with the argument that “singing perpetuated a mystique that held the attention of a general public fascinated with American college life” (p. 180).

The largest effect on the singing tradition, Winstead argues, came in the form of athletics on campus. He suggests that American college football in the early 20th century was “simple, visceral, physical and emotional” (p. 126) and inspired new songs that bonded the college and wider public community. These *fight songs* were a popular form that resonated with radio and film audiences. Again, Winstead stops at the historical narrative. He recounts the football songs without noting their explicit masculine purview and then recounts the origins of singing competitions on the chapel steps of female colleges like Wellesley College, in Wellesley, Massachusetts, and the continuing success of African American college singers using the audiences’ desire for plantation and old slave spirituals in their public performances without any critical exploration of how these different forms of campus singing existed. Questions that I would have liked Winstead to explore in this book were: Did the singing groups of the colleges acknowledge each other, either in song or in critique? or Could different colleges borrow from each other as they had previously borrowed from sacred and popular music? Winstead suggests that African American college singers’ repertoire was broad and professional enough to have a wide appeal. I read that to mean they were successful because they could attract white audiences, although they were denied participation in some all-white performance venues. The segregation present in American social life had to have been a factor in the public performances of singers from Fisk University, Howard University (Washington, D.C.), and other African American colleges; however, there is no discussion.

Throughout the rest of the book, Winstead documents the continuing desire for singing in different forms. Patriotic war songs, athletic cheers, and movies of college youth and football

contributed to the decline of casual singing on campus. Winstead suggests singing became institutionalized in the music departments and athletic and fraternity organizations as the original and extracurricular form began to vanish. Winstead documents the influence of college singing on popular music entertainers and offers some detail on how singing in female and black colleges still thrived, but again, there is a lack of critical discussion. The subheadings may be part of the reason for the disconnected feel between the anecdotes of singing stories across the different gender and ethnic groups but Winstead appears to leave it to the reader to make comparisons.

The epilogue is a concise summary of the book. Reading this first will give the reader an accurate notion of what the rest of the book contains. In consideration of how contemporary technology has created a student populace more isolated than its predecessors, it would have created a more compelling story to read a critical analysis of singing through a performance or anthropological framework. There are multiple examples throughout the book where Marvin Carlson's (2001) notion of *haunted* performances could have deepened the historiography of American student life outside the classroom. How did the singing traditions from the female and black colleges resemble or haunt their white and male predecessors? How did 18th-century Romanticism really influence singing? Can we weave a discussion thread from sacred Puritan singing to a smartphone playlist? From *When Colleges Sang* we know that from the earliest beginnings of academic institutions students have gathered socially to bond through performance and this book is a compelling first look at this tradition.

Reference

- Carlson, M. (2001). *The haunted stage: Theatre as memory machine*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.

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