A Fine Romance: Jewish Songwriters, American Songs (Jewish Encounters) by David Lehman

An acclaimed poet, editor, and cultural critic, David Lehman hears America singing—with a Yiddish accent. He guides us through America in the golden age of song, when “Embraceable You,” “White Christmas,” “Easter Parade,” “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered,” “Can’t Help Lovin’ Dat Man,” “My Romance,” “Cheek to Cheek,” “Stormy Weather,” and countless others became nothing less than the American sound track. The stories behind these songs, the shows from which many of them came, and the composers and lyricists who wrote them give voice to a specifically American saga of love, longing, assimilation, and transformation.

Lehman’s analytical skills, wit, and exuberance infuse this book with an energy and a tone like no other: at once sharply observant, personally searching, and attuned to the songs that all of us love. He helps us understand how natural it should be that Wizard of Oz composer Harold Arlen was the son of a cantor who incorporated “Over the Rainbow” into his Sabbath liturgy, and why Cole Porter—the rare non-Jew in this pantheon of musicians who wrote these classic songs shaped America even as America was shaping them.
My Personal Review:
This book is not an academic or scholarly analysis of the Jewish contribution to American popular song. Rather, it is American poet David Lehman's personal 'riff' on the subject. From Irving Berlin's 'Alexander's Rag-Time Band' in 1911 to Lenny Bernstein's 'West Side Story' he tells the story of the Jewish contribution to American song in his own way, anecdotally and personally. Having grown up in a shul in which two of the greats, Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg were members, he regales us with story after story about the whole panoply of Jewish-American composers, not simply Berlin and Bernstein but also Jerome Kern, George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rogers and Larry Hart, Oscar Hammerstein, Dorothy Fields, Vernon Duke, Ted Koehler, Frank Loesser, Arthur Schwartz, Betty Comden and Adolph Green, Sammy Cahn, Julie Styne, Howard Dietz, Steven Sondheim, even getting to those with a distinctively different sound, Carole King and Bob Dylan. He in the course of this tells us about their lives and characters, their relations with each other, the general family and social background. He argues that they by and large created an image and dream of America, a largely optimistic dream of America as a land of tremendous hope and energy, one in which love was always just around the corner and in which you could always in one way or another cross over to the sunny side of the street. But he sees them too reflecting other sides of the American reality, as for instance Harburg's producing the great Depression anthem 'Brother Can You Spare a Dime?' Lehman often skats along, combining lines from the songs and making that kind of composition a central part of his text. It is as if he wants to make a kind of song-like text in the spirit of that music which perhaps more than any other, people loved to sing and hum along with.
Thanks to my beloved mother Edith (Itkie) Freedman of blessed memory who so loved this music I grew up with these songs as background to our everyday family life. So reading about so many of the songs I also know line by line was for me an especially great pleasure.
However great my pleasure in reading the book there are things I would take exception to. It would have been better in my opinion for Cole Porter and Johnny Mercer and Hoagy Carmichael not to have been made into kind of honorary Jews. I do believe he rightly sees in the irony and idiom, the minor key darker register of many of these songs a certain Jewish quality. But he too acknowledges that just as with American Jewish Literature which is far more American than Jewish, so too with the songs created by American Jews. They are 'God Bless America' and 'The House We Live In' and 'The Wizard of Oz' and even when secularized 'White Christmas' and 'Easter Parade' far more American than Jewish.
I too would have preferred something perhaps impossible in a work of this scope more detailed 'readings' of individual songs.
But on the whole this book is filled with treasures of lyric and story. Often just the mention of a certain line gets me to hearing the song once again in
my head. Lehman who is such an avid devotee of these songs succeeds in enhancing both the reader’s enthusiasm for the music and the world in which they were created.
A wonderful book.

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