

SEPTEMBER 27, 2003

His popular songs captured carefree Hoosier days of old

BOOK REVIEW

Roger W. Smith

On the Banks of the Wabash: The Life and Music of Paul Dresser

Author: Clayton W. Henderson
Publisher: Indiana Historical Society Press
Price: \$29.95

In his heyday, the tunes and lyrics of songwriter Paul Dresser (1858-1906) seemed to be on everyone's lips. Their sentimental and now quaint nature can be inferred from the titles of some of the most popular songs:

"I Believe It for My Mother Told Me So" (1887), "Just Tell Them That You Saw Me" (1895), "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away" (1897), "The Blue and the Gray" ("A Mother's Gift to Her Country") (1900) and "My Gal Sal" ("They Called Her Frivolous Sal") (1905). In 1913, the Indiana legislature designated "On the Banks of the Wabash" as the state song.

Sadly, the songs of Dresser, a brother of novelist Theodore Dreiser, are rarely performed or recorded today.

As Clayton W. Henderson points out in this exhaustively researched and long overdue biography, Dresser's "On the Banks of the Wabash" is not even performed during the preliminaries of the Indianapolis 500-Mile Race. Instead, we hear "Back Home Again in Indiana," a knockoff of Dresser's "Wabash" that, Henderson notes, "borrows ... shamelessly" from the original.

Henderson, a music historian and professor at Saint Mary's College in Notre Dame, is well qualified for the daunting task of telling Dresser's rags-to-riches story. There are few existing Dresser letters for the biographer to consult, and the record of his career is scant and fragmentary.

Dresser (he was born Johann Paul Dreiser Jr. and changed the spelling of his last name to Dresser when he became an actor) was a big-hearted, exceedingly generous and imposing man (he weighed about 300 pounds at the height of his career) with a lust for life and voracious sexual appetite. He was born in Terre Haute, spent his formative years in Sullivan and

Evansville, and got his start as a performer with a traveling minstrel-medicine show, which, as the foundation of its business (for which skits and music provided a lure), sold nostrums from a wagon.

This led to his becoming an actor and singer with traveling theatrical companies that put on farcical shows in which Dresser generally played the buffoon and would perform songs of his own composition.

Dresser eventually gave up acting to concentrate on music. He became partner and frontman in a Tin Pan Alley music publishing firm, enabling

Dresser to control the flow of royalties from his songs and to make huge profits on songs of which he was, in effect, composer, author and publisher. Dresser's musical training was minimal (as he readily and cheerfully conceded), consisting of six months of piano lessons with a young Terre Haute woman, Fannie Hartung.

Musical tastes began to change decisively at the turn of the century with the emergence of new, more catchy styles (notably ragtime), and the Dresserian type of sentimental song began to fall out of favor. Dresser, who was unable to continue producing what had seemed to be an endless stream of hits, experienced a rapid, steep and irreversible decline.

His health eventually failed him, and he died in New York City (of pernicious anemia) at the age of 47, virtually penniless and forgotten by many Broadway friends of just a few years before. He died too soon to see one of his last songs, "My Gal Sal," become a hit.

Among the mysteries Henderson tries to shed light on (without being able to solve them) are the question of who was the real-life prototype of Sal in Dresser's hit (she was, by all accounts, an Evansville madam with whom Dresser had had an affair) and whether Dresser's brother Theodore had a role (as the latter claimed) in writing the lyrics of "On the Banks of the Wabash."

"Through his songs," Henderson writes, "Dresser succeeded in capturing an American past of carefree days, small-town pleasures and idealized motherhood, all images that served Americans well, whether they chose to remain in rural villages or to move to the larger cities."

They still do — for anyone who cares to listen.

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