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## Ethel Merman had life, and music

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BRASS DIVA: The Life and Legends of

Ethel Merman, by Caryl Flinn. University of California Press, 556 pp., \$34.95.

"There won't be another Merman because there is no need for a voice like hers," Kenneth Tynan wrote after watching the booming phenomenon perform at the Palladium in 1974.

"There are stars you admire," the critic went on to reflect, "and stars you identify with. Merman is one of the former, who are rapidly becoming extinct." Caryl Flinn's biography is as much an admiration of a voice as it is a story of a life. The author is quick to describe the "mesmerizing force" with "its homegrown Astoria accent" filling up auditoriums before amplifiers and microphones could do the job. Under a section subtitled "Belting," Flinn calls on voice specialists, singers and critics to discuss the practice at length. It's an apt approach, because Merman is her sound - brassy, clear and blaring. Flinn's emphasis on its characteristics has the curious effect of turning the voice as well as the woman into an object to be studied, something that we can only ever be outside of, admiring but not identifying with.

Merman might not have minded. There was something about her that resisted subjectivity. "Ethel," Flinn declares, "was not the introspective type." Maybe it was simply her well-known pragmatism. She never had stage fright. When asked if she was nervous before a show, the singer reportedly replied, "What the hell should I be nervous about, for Chrissake? They came to see me. I didn't come to see them." In "Brass Diva," there are no breakdowns, no stints in rehab, no pills. Merman could be a bad drunk, but that didn't undermine her famous discipline and gusto. She hated watching the daily rushes of her film work, a medium she would never command. She didn't make eye contact with other actors, preferring to address only the audience or the camera. Her favorite co-stars were the Muppets.

Her inability to interact, as we say, is fascinating given her obsession with documenting her career. Merman saved and annotated any press mention, sending the clippings to her father who dutifully pasted them into her scrapbooks, 50 total by the end of her life. Among the ephemera: pictures with celebrity friends, dinner

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menus and the floor plan for one of the Republican National Conventions.

In addition to drawing extensively on this formidable trove, Flinn, a professor at the University of Arizona who has written about film and gender, has combed archives, quoted other biographies and interviewed myriad sources to get the Broadway legend's story on paper. Born in Queens sometime between 1906 and 1912, Merman was singing by age 3, first around the house, then for her father's Masonic Lodge as well as troops stationed on Long Island. Stenographer by day, the singer traveled the local vaudeville circuit by night until she became an instantaneous sensation in 1930, wowing the audience of "Girl Crazy" when she cut loose with "I Got Rhythm." George Gershwin famously advised her to never take a singing lesson.

Merman would reign over Broadway for most of the 20th century, from the spunky, uncouth Annie Oakley in Irving Berlin's "Annie Get Your Gun" to starring roles in Cole Porter musicals, including "Anything Goes," and as the bullying, maddening, heartbreaking Mama Rose in "Gypsy." In her later years, Merman continued to welcome show business, appearing as Gopher's mother on "The Love Boat," releasing a disco album and playing a shell-shocked Lt. Hurwitz in "Airplane!"

Flinn's impressive excavation, a boon to Merman fans and theater buffs, can be, however, daunting to the lay reader. The detailed exegeses of lesser-known plays and one-reel shorts slows the pace considerably. While the author's liberal inclusion of memories and opinions from family and friends introduces an anecdotal quality, it also results in passages jammed with endnotes to the point of pastiche.

Throughout the book, Flinn frequently extols the singer's "vitality," a good word for Merman. ("Childlike" is the other term that crops up a lot.) The performer didn't exude the vulnerability of Judy Garland, nor the subversive carnality of Mae West. For all the intimate testimonies, there's very little tension in Merman's personal makeup. Not much evolution, not much growth - maybe she applied Gershwin's advice too broadly - and ultimately not enough complexity to grip the reader. Flinn even attempts to counter this with a chapter titled "A More Complex Image." Still, the singer remains more object than subject.

The Queen of Broadway died of a brain tumor in 1984, 10 years after Tynan saw her in London, and it seems the critic's prophecy has since come true. Now, we expect identification with subjects of biography, illuminated with "Behind the Music" insights. Flinn dutifully attempts the form, but Merman does not allow it.

The woman at the center of this book offers little to identify with and possibly less to admire - among other faults, she was a bad tipper. She is compelling the way a hurricane or steam engine might be; neither are especially engaging for a reader but riveting for a spectator. A quick search of online videos, and you find La Merm, caftaned and endearing, cavorting with Muppets, commanding a happy rapport with Kermit, mock rivalry with Miss Piggy and easy badinage with the rest of her fuzzy co-stars, even if she doesn't always look them in the plastic eye.

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