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☐ Schrum, Kelly:

Some Worre Bobby Sox: The Emergencde of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945

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A Review by Matt Delmont

In the traditional view of the post-WWII United States, rock 'n' roll, television, and an expanding consumer culture reshaped American society with "teenagers" as the demographic and metaphoric focal point. As Kelly Schrum's *Some Wore Bobby Sox: The Emergence of Teenage Girls' Culture, 1920-1945* makes clear however, this neat historical narrative overemphasizes teenage boys and the discourse on juvenile delinquency, while obscuring teenage girls' culture in the decades before 1945. Navigating the complicated circuit of production and consumption, Schrum examines how market formation and peer group identity formation occurred simultaneously. These developments were not linear though, and Schrum traces the growth of girls' interest in fashion, beauty products, music, and movies, against the uneven (and often slow) response of manufacturers and marketers to these consumers. In addition to disrupting the traditional view of a postwar "birth" of teenage culture, Schrum also makes interesting use of a range of sources, including: photographs and ads from high school yearbooks; longitudinal surveys; women's magazines and advice literature; as well as the "voices" of teenage girls found in diaries, letters, poems, and short stories published in *Scholastic* magazine. With this diverse base of evidence, Schrum recognizes teenage girls as active participants in prewar consumer culture, while also noting how marketers manipulated and limited these consumption choices.

Similar to Paula Fass' *The Damned and the Beautiful: American Youth in the 1920s*, which examines the peer culture that developed on college campuses, Schrum's periodization is based on the increase in U.S. high school enrollment which "grew from 10.6 percent in 1900 to 51.1 percent in 1930 and to 71.3 percent in 1940" (12). Reading national magazines and catalogues against the fashions depicted and discussed in high school yearbooks, Schrum details how teenage girls sought appropriate styles for school, casual wear, and dates, well before national marketers took notice. Schrum suggests that teenage fashion fads, while fostering anxieties about beauty and popularity, also marked separation from adults, and "bound teenage girls together, visually marking their participating in and loyalty to various peer groups" (45). For example, Schrum finds confirmation of this fashion-based peer identification

in the mid-1930s popularity of saddle shoes and ankle socks (dubbed “bobby sox” by magazines), which girls wore “in bold or muted colors; folded, pulled up, or pushed down; decorated with gadgets and charms; over stockings; or held up with boys’ garters” (62). Throughout this analysis, Schrum takes these styles seriously as evidence of teenage girls’ efforts to distinguish themselves from children and adults, without obscuring the fact that marketers noticed these trends and profited from the agency of these teens. Moreover, Schrum use of these local sources compliments Roland Marchand’s thorough analysis of national magazine advertising in this same period in *Advertising the American Dream: Making Way for Modernity, 1920-1940*.

If teenage girls’ use of fashion marked their separation from adults, their participation in commercial beauty culture expressed a desire for sophistication through the use of adult products. Yet like fashion, teenage girls used beauty products before advertisers identified them as a market demographic. As Schrum notes, “[n]ot until the 1940s and 1950s did companies begin to manufacture and market products *for* teenage girls on a large scale, with special colors, prices, and slogans” (69). Rather than viewing cosmetics as superfluous products or tools of women’s oppression, Schrum builds on Kathy Peiss’ *Hope in a Jar: The Making of America’s Beauty Culture*, by emphasizing beauty culture as a web of rituals and relationships,. However, through her analysis of diaries, stories, and letters, Schrum is also careful to consider how teenage girls incorporated beauty ideals from women’s magazines into their everyday discussions of beauty, clothing, and shopping. Schrum argues that while teenage girls “were conscious of the commercial and constructed nature of the beauty culture in which they participated, […] they reflected the anxiety and insecurity promoted through advice literature and cosmetics advertising, judging themselves and each other with a critical eye” (88). As with fashion, the peer ties built in this beauty culture fostered anxieties about appearance and eventually garnered significant industry interest.

While fashion and cosmetics were mass produced items that teenage girls modified in different ways, Schrum’s case studies of music and movies consider how girls incorporated these “fixed entities” into teenage culture. In the case of music, Schrum focuses on “debates over favorite singers, bands, or songs” that played an important role in the everyday culture of girls, and dances that allowed “teenagers to express joy, frustration, or desire, to enjoy songs actively as well as explore romance and sexuality” (98, 116). Although the importance of dance as an expressive activity may be an obvious point, in examining how teenage girls engaged with jazz and swing, Schrum usefully provides insight into teen music culture before rock ‘n’ roll.

As with music, Schrum notes that before Hollywood studios produced “teenpics” in the 1950s, teenage girls used movies intended for multigenerational audiences to form a

shared fan culture. In contrast to the social scientists, educators, politicians, and parents who expressed concern about the impact of "adult" themes on teen audiences, Schrum moves beyond the emphasis on content to consider how movies fit into the culture of teenage girls. Defining the "movie experience" broadly—reading movie reviews, getting to the theater, sitting with friends in the theater, and sharing recommendations and post-movie analysis—Schrum argues that teenage girls "started with the building blocks of movie fan culture, often provided by studios and magazines, and transformed them into personalized memories through scrapbooks, diaries, and fan letters" (160). Here again, while studios paid little attention to teenagers as a distinct audience, teenage girls attended movies with their peers and created a "teen-centered movie experience within a shared theater" (148).

Given the important role high schools play as a setting for this book, Schrum could do more to examine the different experiences of teenage girls as students as well as consumers. For example, in discussing a 1945 documentary that proclaimed "that the high school girl had emerged 'as an American institution,'" Schrum argues that, "[t]he film unequivocally equated 'teenager,' in the context of social gatherings and consumer behavior, with female—teenagers lingered between childhood and 'womanhood,' not childhood and adulthood" (19). In order to explicate the significance of this womanhood/adulthood (or consumer/citizen) distinction, Schrum might go into more detail regarding the educational and social opportunities available and encourage for teenage girls in this era. Useful companion texts in this regard are John Rury's *Education and Women's Work: Female Schooling and the Division of Labor in Urban America, 1870-1930*, and Karen Graves' *Girls' Schooling During the Progressive Era: From Female Scholar to Domesticated Citizen*. This suggestion aside, throughout this interesting study Schrum makes use of a diverse array of sources to balance the emergence of teenage girl culture with the formation of "teenagers" as a marketing category.

References

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