

Erenberg, Lewis A. *Steppin' Out: New York Nightlife and the Transformation of American Culture*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984. Pp. xix, 291. Photos, notes, bibliographical essay, subject and name indexes. \$9.95 (paper).

Sport history has become such a specialized field that we often forget to look at it from the perspective of the history of work and leisure. Sport historians need to be familiar with the several recent studies of such neglected leisure institutions as the movies, amusement parks, saloons, public parks, and night clubs. One of the finest of these monographs is Lewis Erenberg's *Steppin' Out* originally published in 1981, which analyzes the development of night life in New York City between 1890 and 1930. This book is particularly relevant to readers of this journal because of the prominence of the fast living "sporting crowd" in public late night diversions.

Erenberg argues that the elements of New York night life fit together to help create a new popular culture with norms that were acceptable to a large and diversified audience. The creation of public dining and the rise of the cabaret from its vile origins into a respectable leisure institution symbolized and catalyzed the decline of Victorianism. The cabaret in particular provided a milieu for the evolution of a middle class culture that enjoyed new styles of consumption and behavior and emphasized new values like having fun, enjoying one's sexuality, and achieving self-realization, while eliminating old social, sexual, and class barriers. Night life created a respectable outlet for such desires as the achievement of success, power, social mobility, love, and sex, and helped reshape the bourgeoisie from a class characterized by self-restraint, hard-work, refined morals, and a separation of private from public life to a more exuberant class concerned with personal development, experimentation, and consumerism. Nowhere was this as evident as in the rise of the "new woman."

Erenberg's narrative begins with the rise of elegant Fifth Avenue public

dining facilities for the elite, followed by the emergence of Broadway lobster palaces which catered to a broader clientele who included the sporting set and star thespians out for a fast evening of naughtiness and material comfort. However, the core of *Steppin' Out* focuses on the cabaret. The night club emphasized an informal, vital and spontaneous evening of pleasure where there was considerable interplay between the patrons and the performers who often sat with the audience and interacted as if they were entertaining at home with their guests. Before the 1910s, cabaret style entertainment was mainly limited to vice districts and rathskellers, emphasizing risqué lower class music with sensual overtones. But by 1911 such amusements were being brought to Broadway night clubs with their more threatening features modified into an environment that was safe for respectable couples. In the cabaret, audiences dined well, enjoyed elegant floor shows, and danced to the new faddish music. It was a place where men and women could enjoy an informal and public social life together on equal terms.

The preeminent entertainers in the cabaret were ethnic entertainers like Sophie Tucker and professional ballroom dancers like Irene and Vernon Castle. Tucker brought an exuberant ethnic style into a WASPish night club, emphasizing physicality and sensuality, albeit in an unthreatening fashion because she herself was so unattractive. The Castles helped make social dancing acceptable and broadened its public appeal by providing a role model for couples. They carried themselves with an aristocratic bearing and taught the popular new dance steps that were modified from black and foreign styles. Dances like the turkey trot, the fox trot, and the tango were all more expressive and less patterned than the waltz had been, and encouraged intimacy between couples who were increasingly concerned with mutual attraction and companionship marriages.

Erenberg does an excellent job of demonstrating the symbolic significance of the cabaret, but often goes beyond his evidence in arguing for the catalytic influence of the institution in the decline of Victorianism. Arguing that the 1920s were a culmination of social trends long underway, Erenberg gives surprisingly little attention to night life in the colorful 1920s, when, he asserts prosperous people attended them in search of liberation and personal adjustment. Despite these caveats, *Steppin' Out* provides us with a fascinating first look at the night club and would be an excellent book to assign students in classes in popular culture or Leisure History. It should also encourage further scholarship into the social backgrounds of audiences and performers, the aesthetics of the artists, and the relationships that existed between cabaret owners, local politicians, and the underworld in New York and other major metropolitan areas.