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The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950's Philadelphia (Book Review)

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Recommended Citation

Maurantonio, Nicole. "The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950's Philadelphia." Review. *Pennsylvania History: A Journal of Mid-Atlantic Studies* 80, no. 3 (2013): 470-72.

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Matthew F. Delmont. *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012). Pp. xi, 294. Illustrations, notes, index. Cloth, \$65.00.

More than fifty years have elapsed since the popular television program *American Bandstand* first appeared in homes across the United States, and still mere mention of the show continues to conjure images of teenagers, black and white, boppin' to the sounds of emerging musical talents from Jackie Wilson to Dusty Springfield. This very image, and the potent memory of a racially integrated youth demographic dancing together in harmony, Matthew F. Delmont argues in *The Nicest Kids in Town: American Bandstand, Rock 'n' Roll, and the Struggle for Civil Rights in 1950s Philadelphia*, is precisely the problem. Contrary to the recollections of *Bandstand's* celebrated host, Dick Clark, whose praise of the show as a powerful force resisting segregationist pressures is often cited in popular histories of the program, Delmont argues that the reality of 1950s Philadelphia was considerably more complex. As Delmont states, "Rather than being a fully integrated program that welcomed black youth, *American Bandstand* continued to discriminate against black teens throughout the show's Philadelphia years" (2). Simply, *American Bandstand* was hardly the bastion of racial integration Clark purported it to be.

This argument, Delmont admits early on in *The Nicest Kids in Town*, is not one he expected to make. Envisioning his work as contributing to the burgeoning scholarship on civil rights in the North by providing an exemplar of resistance in the face of entrenched segregation, Delmont instead found the cultural icon *American Bandstand* to be a battleground on which the struggle over civil rights was fought.¹ Not only was Dick Clark incorrect in his

remembering of the *Bandstand* of the 1950s, he grossly overstated *Bandstand*'s place within American civil rights history. That Dick Clark should offer an overly rosy picture of *Bandstand* as a racially progressive program is not particularly surprising. Not only the legacy of *Bandstand* but Clark's own legacy lay at stake. What is most interesting, and where Delmont places much of his focus, is in considering the alternatives. And, Delmont shows, there were alternatives. There was nothing "inevitable" about *Bandstand*'s segregation.

Drawing upon an impressive array of sources that range from newspapers and meeting minutes to memorabilia and original oral histories, Delmont crafts an argument that engages interdisciplinary issues of race, policy, media, and memory. In so doing, Delmont positions *Bandstand* in conversation with its surroundings, compelling his readers to consider the program as a reflection of "defensive localism" (12) in the Philadelphia housing market (chapter 1), an outgrowth of the documented growing postwar consumerist ethos (chapter 2), and a site where the integrationist rhetoric of the school system, appropriated from the Philadelphia Fellowship Commission, hardly aligned with the realities confronted by Philadelphians (chapter 3). In sum, Delmont argues, "*Bandstand* helped to normalize the racist attitudes and policies that limited black access to housing, education, and public accommodations" (49). As such, *Bandstand* contributed to a Philadelphia that could distance itself from the racial problems confronting cities more visibly in the South.

Ultimately, Delmont argues, *American Bandstand* was no better than any other Philadelphia institution. *Bandstand* buckled under social and commercial pressures, reproducing what "sold"—or, more accurately, what wealthy, white male executives presumed would sell. They may have included black teens in their vision for the consuming demographic, but representationally black teens were excluded from *Bandstand*'s regular programming. The *Mitch Thomas Show*, which receives attention in a fascinating chapter 5, was "the only television program that represented Philadelphia's black rock and roll fans" (134). *Bandstand* encouraged teens to imagine themselves as part of a cohesive national collective, a visual extension of Benedict Anderson's "imagined community," Delmont argues. However, that community, while a great boon to Italian American teenagers hailing from largely working-class homes in South Philadelphia who comprised a sizable contingent of the show's "regulars," was inaccessible to black teens. Clark's claims to have integrated *Bandstand* might be understood as his recollection of the diversity of performers, but that would be a very generous assessment. *American Bandstand*'s place in American civil rights history is rather tenuous. Was new territory truly

being charted by this show? The answer Delmont provides is a resounding and compelling no.

The Nicest Kids in Town is an important contribution to the existing and growing historiographies of postwar Philadelphia and civil rights in the North. Where Delmont's work presents opportunities for further exploration is in its examination of popular culture and memory. In chapter 8, "Still Boppin' on *Bandstand*," Delmont considers the narratives of race relations in two contemporary representations of the program, NBC's *American Dreams* and the *Bandstand*-like show represented in the movie *Hairspray*. Although Delmont uses these two texts to bolster the argument he has built carefully in the preceding chapters, his analysis reads as a largely isolated critique of these two texts, as opposed to a rich opportunity to think through the ways in which memory of *Bandstand* has been negotiated. Given that Delmont has created a companion website to the book where individuals can write in with their memories of *Bandstand* (<http://scalar.usc.edu/nehvectors/nicest-kids/index>) and considering the array of sources from which he draws, the tools exist to consider the contests and negotiations involved in understanding the past more fully. Taken together, Delmont's book and website offer a wealth of material that future scholars will surely examine with great interest and excitement.

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NOTE

1. For examples of recent work on civil rights in the North, see Thomas J. Sugrue, *Sweet Land of Liberty: The Forgotten Struggle for Civil Rights in the North* (New York: Random House, 2008); Matthew J. Countryman, *Up South: Civil Rights and Black Power in Philadelphia* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2005); and Martha Biondi, *To Stand and Fight: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Postwar New York City* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2003).