



May Irwin: Singing, Shouting, and the Shadow of Minstrelsy (Music in American Life)

Sharon Ammen

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May Irwin reigned as America's queen of comedy and song from the 1880s through the 1920s. A genuine pop culture phenomenon, Irwin conquered the legitimate stage, composed song lyrics, and parlayed her celebrity into success as a cookbook author, suffragette, and real estate mogul. Sharon Ammen's in-depth study traces Irwin's hurly-burly life. Irwin gained fame when, layering aspects of minstrelsy over ragtime, she popularized a racist "Negro song" genre. Ammen examines this forgotten music, the society it both reflected and entertained, and the ways white and black audiences received Irwin's performances. She also delves into Irwin's hands-on management of her image and career, revealing how Irwin carefully built a public persona as a nurturing housewife whose maternal skills and performing acumen reinforced one another. Irwin's act, soaked in racist song and humor, built a fortune she never relinquished. Yet her career's legacy led to a posthumous obscurity as the nation that once adored her evolved and changed.

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