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Lawrence Welk

Champagne Music, Ovaltine Politics

ABSTRACT This essay explores the musical politics of Lawrence Welk, the bandleader whose television show was a mainstay of American popular culture from 1955 through 1982. I argue that Welk's interests in gender, family, and work—both philosophically and musically—reveal the maestro as a harbinger of late twentieth-century political and cultural discourse. I focus on Welk's transition (around 1970–1973) from his trademark champagne sound—which featured woodwinds and ornamentation—to a “Big Band Sound,” which emphasized the unison open brass. Around the same time, he stopped referring to his ensemble as “The Champagne Music Makers” and began calling them his “Musical Family.” I argue that his “Big Band Sound” was in fact a musical articulation of his “Musical Family”—and that Welk instituted both of these changes in response to what he perceived as the decline of American work ethic and sexual morality. I suggest that Welk's champagne sound, which once signified whiteness, was now feminized and seen as emblematic of indolent hedonism. He sought to purge this feminization—and this aversion to work—precisely by adopting the more “masculine” brassy sound. I also show how he deployed family acts—and his managerial scheme of a “Family Plan”—to promote his conservative ideals about work and the family. In this way, Welk provided the sound of the Nixonian “silent majority.” I conclude by noting how three elements of Welk's show—his fondness for mistakes, the emphasis on visual spectacle, and the erratic temporality of syndication—provide the potential for a counter-reading of his efforts.

KEYWORDS Lawrence Welk, sweet band, jazz, big band music, family, gender, capitalism, work, labor, neoliberalism, gender, sexuality, American music, kitsch

In his book *The Big Bands*, George T. Simon dismisses Lawrence Welk by writing that his music “has all the subtlety and polish of a used-car salesman's pitch. It has a job to do, and it does it well, and though the product may lack musical imagination, it does satisfy those who are looking for nice, clean, Rotarian entertainment.”¹ No one would dispute the Rotarian allegation, since Welk—the bandleader who was a mainstay of American popular culture from the 1950s through the 1980s—was widely hailed as epitomizing a certain kind of all-American image: Even in 1955, when *The Lawrence Welk Show* (fig. 1) was first broadcast coast to coast, Walter Winchell said that “Lawrence Welk is more

1. George T. Simon, *The Big Bands* (New York: Macmillan, 1967), 450.



FIGURE 1. Lawrence Welk on the set of *The Lawrence Welk Show* in 1957. (Allan Grant/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock)

than a television personality. He is an American institution . . . as all the polls indicate . . . and as documented by Mr. and Mrs. America and all the ships at sea.”² But what of Simon comparing Welk’s music to a “used-car salesman’s pitch”?

2. Quoted in William K. Schwenher, *Lawrence Welk: An American Institution* (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1980), 5.

Simon echoes this characterization elsewhere in his book, when he classifies band-leaders according to the relative proportion of their artistic and commercial faculties. In contrast to relentless perfectionists, such as Artie Shaw, and slightly more relaxed but still artistically significant leaders, such as Woody Herman, Simon posited a third group of “other leaders, often less musically endowed and less idealistically inclined,” who “approached their jobs more from a businessman’s point of view. For them, music seemed to be less an art and more a product to be colorfully packaged and cleverly promoted.”³ Simon felt that Lawrence Welk was one such bandleader, one of the “men respected more for commercial cunning than for artistic creativity.”⁴

Simon’s dichotomous presentation of art and commerce is easily dismissed, but the analogy of Welk as a salesman cannot be so readily disregarded. Indeed, accordionist Myron Floren, Welk’s second-in-command, remarked that he thought of Welk as a “supersalesman,”⁵ and Welk himself once wrote, “I’m not a creative kind of musical director in the sense that I come up with something entirely fresh and unusual . . . In some ways I guess I’m more of a salesman than anything else.”⁶ But if Welk was such a remarkable salesman, what was he selling? Was the world of Welk one where all that mattered was facing the music and dancing, where the grand Geritol sign was nothing more than a subconscious inducement to let the music flow in one ear and out the other, flushed afterwards as the credits rolled by? Whereas Welk made his own claims about salesmanship in the context of “selling” his singers—whose talents he was endorsing quite genuinely—he ultimately sold more than just his roster of entertainers. And he sold more than just the products of his sponsors, Dodge and Geritol (fig. 2)—though he did so with such success that, according to a telephone survey in the 1960s, “one-half of the adults who were questioned did associate Lawrence Welk with Geritol.”⁷ Whatever Welk was in fact selling, it certainly found a very receptive audience, given his unprecedented 27-year television run. The first song Welk broadcast nationally in 1955 was “Say It With Music,” and in this essay, I argue that Welk in fact was saying—and selling—a lot more than his trademark lines “Wunnerful, wunnerful!” and “Ah-one, ah-two.” In fact, he was selling a complex nexus of musical ideas linking gender, family, and work that reveals the maestro as a harbinger of late twentieth-century American political and cultural discourse.

Welk’s seemingly instantaneous success in nationwide broadcasting belied the many years he spent touring the country, where he honed not only his sound, but also his deep connection to his audiences. After spending the first 21 years of his life on his family’s farm in Strasburg, North Dakota, Welk ventured out into the world, playing weddings and barn dances. His first break came when he joined the “Peerless Entertainers” of George Kelly, who taught the young accordionist much about being the head of a troupe. Empowered by the knowledge he gained under Kelly’s tutelage, Welk set out on his own

3. Simon, 8–9.

4. *Ibid.*, 9.

5. Lawrence Welk with Bernice McGeehan, *You’re Never Too Young* (Boston: G. K. Hall, 1982), 215.

6. Lawrence Welk with Bernice McGeehan, *Ab-One, Ab-Two!: Life with My Musical Family* (New York: Prentice-Hall, 1974), 151.

7. Schwienher, *Lawrence Welk*, 131.



FIGURE 2. Welk dances with Tanya Falan as the orchestra plays under the grand Geritol sign. (ABC Photo Archives/Walt Disney Television/Getty Images)

as a bandleader, establishing a base in Yankton, South Dakota—where, incidentally, he would have his first encounter with radio broadcasting. Over the following years, Welk would appear at hotels and ballrooms in virtually every major city in the country.

A milestone, though, was Welk's 1951 engagement in Los Angeles at the Aragon Ballroom, which had been broadcasting its dances on the television station KTLA. Welk's KTLA debut on 11 May 1951, led directly to his nationwide television show, which was first broadcast on 2 July 1955. To quote biographer Mary Lewis Coakley's magniloquent description of the moments preceding Welk's fateful national debut, "a silence more unearthly than ever descended. Its immensity was broken by one dramatic sound effect, the thump-thump of his own heart. But somehow he lived through the seeming eternity of it all, and at the precisely correct moment he heard himself utter his mystic formula: 'Uh-one, and uh-two, and . . .' and music came in great bolstering swells. From then on he was on 'Champagne Time,' skipping along at a quick, gay tempo."⁸

Coakley's invocation of "champagne time" refers to the maestro's trademark style of "champagne music." Though Welk was a teetotaler who had milk and cookies before shows—and who once described unexpectedly enjoying a cocktail party because his hosts "had even arranged to have a glass of cold milk for me"—his music was known as "champagne music."⁹ The sobriquet dated from 1938, when Welk's engagement at the William Penn Hotel in Pittsburgh was also broadcast on the Mutual Radio Network. When fan letters poured in saying that Welk's light, effervescent style reminded them of

8. Mary Lewis Coakley, *Mister Music Maker* (New York: Doubleday, 1958), 239–40.

9. Welk, *Ab-One, Ab-Two!*, 100.



FIGURE 3. Champagne Lady Norma Zimmer. (ABC Photo Archives/Walt Disney Television/Getty Images)

“champagne,” so was born the term “champagne music.” And just as most dance bands of the period had a female singer, Welk had a “Champagne Lady” long before he acquired his extended menagerie of entertainers. When Norma Zimmer (fig. 3) was offered the position of “Champagne Lady,” she bristled at the moniker: “Well, it bothered me . . . I thought, oh dear, beer lady, whiskey lady . . . But then he kept saying, ‘Norma, my music is champagne music. It only means effervescent personality, bubbly personality, bubbling music.’ Which is true. I finally said yes and I haven’t regretted it. It’s a lovely title.”¹⁰ But what exactly did champagne music sound like?

In 1958, Welk gave his biographer a description of his music, as written by George Thow, a trumpeter and one of his production team members:

Lawrence Welk relies on the delicate woodwinds—flutes and clarinets—rather than on saxophones; on muted brass as against the blaring ‘open’ sound; on muted violins and a great deal of accordion and organ. The reeds concentrate on a graceful style which

10. Coyne Steven Sanders and Ginny Weissman, *Champagne Music: The Lawrence Welk Show* (New York: St. Martin’s, 1985), 36.

consists largely of triplets or dotted eighths and sixteenth notes. The brass play staccato for the most part. The violins play melody or obbligato as the music calls for. The organ and accordion supply variety and tonal color. Underlying these several sections and furnishing a foundation and definite beat is the rhythm section on drums, bass viol, guitar, and piano.¹¹

Thow's description usefully draws our attention to the ornamentations—the skittish dotted-eighth rhythms, the “graceful style,” the “variety and tonal color”—that are essential to Welk's signature aesthetic. Indeed, nothing is more fundamental to champagne style than its overwhelming deployment of ornaments, whether these be chromatic grace notes, melodic triplets, diatonic runs, or other various alterations of melody. To further explore champagne music, we shall use Welk's bubbles as our epistemological tools, letting various moments float before us as we bask, necessarily, in their iridescence, discovering exactly what Welk—and his sound—were selling.

Our first epistemological bubble is a 1958 performance of “Polly,” arranged in Welk's trademark champagne style.¹² “Polly” begins with the flutes and clarinets playing a terrifically fast melody consisting largely of triplet patterns that approximate the feeling of dotted-eighth and sixteenth notes. The tempo is bright, with a good deal of ornamentation: accordion triplets; organ blips (i.e., fast grace notes which hardly register); almost always muted trumpets playing triplet patterns on four that link to the downbeat. In one chorus, there is a something of a duel between the trumpets and trombones—playing without mutes—and the accordion and keyboard. As the accordion and keyboard emerge victorious, the champagne-style chorus begins again: the “delicate woodwinds,” with their elaborate ornamentations, are given center stage, while the trumpets and trombones reinstate their mutes. The song concludes just as each chorus does: by Welk plucking his cheek to produce a trademark “cork-pop” (fig. 4).

Welk often crowed about the importance of “playing the melody.” Myron Floren recalled that when Welk finally “felt secure enough” to build a home for his family in Pacific Palisades, he announced at his housewarming, “See what can happen when you just play the melody!”¹³ However, as we have seen, the appeal of Welk's sound comes precisely from the baroque trappings that pleasurably exceed and overwhelm the melody. The same could be said of Guy Lombardo, a bandleader Welk deeply admired, who was well known for his twin pianos, one of which played the melody in octaves; the other piano, meanwhile, played ridiculously rococo ornamentation. To be sure, sweet bands, like those of Lombardo and Welk, may have played the melody, but they did so as a construct around which to explore the very limits of melody. In champagne music, every grace note, every ornamental triplet, every chromatic adornment is something to revel in, the chromaticism therein acting as reminders of the possibility of other keys, but always landing back firmly in the given key. Welk's music is always on the run—usually

11. Coakley, *Mister Music Maker*, 37.

12. *The Lawrence Welk Show*, 15 March 1958.

13. Quoted in Sanders and Weissman, *Champagne Music*, 133.



FIGURE 4. Welk plucks his cheek to produce the cork-popping sound of champagne music. (Allan Grant/The LIFE Picture Collection/Shutterstock)

step-wise—playing his fascinating tremolo of straightforward melody and florid ornamentation.

Perhaps the most compelling moment in “Polly” comes when the trumpets and trombones get bold enough to stand up and play without their mutes, whereupon they are rebuked by accordionist Myron Floren, ornamentalist extraordinaire, who, along with the strings, remind the brass who is in charge. The brass, though, pay little heed and forge ahead, but Myron and the strings—reinforced by the pianos in a forceful display of ornamentation—assert themselves again. Then, as if to ordain the resurgence of the keyboards, strings, and delicate woodwinds, into the screen zooms Welk, popping his cork, a climax that ushers in a repeat of the champagne style, with the trumpets—muted trumpets, to be sure—resuming their peripheral function of ornamenting the melody. Champagne music is very much like the cork that Welk pops—it’s too buoyant to be submerged for long. If the trumpets and trombones remove their mutes and force the cork under, no matter, for it will soon resurface.

Our second epistemological bubble comes from a 1966 episode titled “Musical Visit to Vienna.”¹⁴ Perhaps nothing epitomizes the champagne aesthetic more so than the cory-bantic musicality of ragtime pianist Jo Ann Castle (fig. 5), who pounds the ivories to kingdom-come. Seated at her upright piano—always gaudily painted and thus itself

14. *The Lawrence Welk Show*, 26 February 1966.



FIGURE 5. Jo Ann Castle. (ABC Photo Archives/Walt Disney Television/Getty Images)

ornamented—Jo Ann races her nimble fingers up and down the keys, while the exposed hammers of the piano suggest a kind of musicalized whack-a-mole as they chaotically strike and release. Castle’s formulaic manner of “ragtiming” a song inevitably includes a section where her militant ornamentation—her octave tremolos, endless arpeggios, right hand crossovers, and slides—essentially becomes the melody. In this 1966 episode, her repertoire of stride ornaments unleashes a musical monsoon on the otherwise still waters of a Strauss waltz, easily rendering what Welk calls a “Blue Danube Boogie.”

Our final bubble comes from the show that opened the 1969 season, which Welk had already presented across the country as part of his summer tour.¹⁵ 1968 was, of course, *the* year of American history, so revolutionary that it roused everyone—but was this social turbulence radical enough to unsettle champagne music, that bastion of solidarity for the delicate woodwinds? In the show’s first number, the singers perform the “Pennsylvania Polka,” complete with a solo by accordionist Myron Floren and a dance by former

15. *The Lawrence Welk Show*, 27 September 1969.



FIGURE 6. Lawrence Welk in hippie garb. (ABC Photo Archives/Walt Disney Television/Getty Images)

Mouseketeer Bobby Burgess and his partner, Cissy King. Following the song, Welk enters, dressed as a John Lennon-esque hippie figure (fig. 6), with “a sleeveless bearskin jacket over a bright green flowered shirt . . . little glasses on the end of [his] nose, hippie beads, and a long black wig that flowed down over [his] shoulders.”¹⁶ The maestro-as-hippie says to the band, “Don’t you cats know this polka jazz is strictly from Squaresville?” Citing the Beatles and the Monkees, Welk announces his new group, “The Soul Sisters and the Babbling Baboons,” prompting Sandi and Salli, the “Pennsylvania Polka” singers, to “protest” and tear off Welk’s hippie garb, revealing his suit and tie. Welk, laughing, tells the audience that he was joking, that he would never change, “never do that to you nice people.”

Having introduced the number while on tour, Welk wrote that audiences at Harrah’s at Lake Tahoe received the number enthusiastically, unlike audiences in other parts of the country, who were far less amused—a distinction he attributed to the enormous size of those arenas, such that the audience could not discern “who those screaming girl-singers

16. Welk, *Ab-One, Ah-Two!*, 133.

were, or who that long-haired hippie was, and I got the coldest reception I've ever gotten in my lifetime. There was just a great silence while the audience sat there trying to figure out what was happening, and you could almost hear them thinking—'Well, here's another one gone wrong!'"¹⁷ In the same discussion, Welk even lamented his occasional foray into contemporary music, writing, "I'll confess right now that I did let some of that music leak through into our band. And it was the worst mistake I ever made."¹⁸ Of course, the depth of Welk's lamentation is quite disproportionate to his actual transgressions, which never exceeded, say, the occasional easy listening cover of "Windy."

But Welk testified somberly to his compunction. Recalling the positive reactions of tour audiences later in 1971, Welk wrote that "our fans told us with cheers and applause and requests that they liked 'our' music, music with a heart, a beat, music you could remember and hum, that brought back memories."¹⁹ Calling a production meeting, Welk told his staff that "like the nation . . . we just got out of balance last year, and went too far in the wrong direction. We've just got to get back to what we do best."²⁰ But while Welk concluded his hippie act precisely by insisting he would never change—and while these comments in 1971 suggest that Welk would remain true to his old style—he most certainly did change, precisely by bringing an end to what Coakley referred to as "champagne time." To see how he changed, we could consult almost any show after around 1973.

Let's take Welk's 1980 Halloween show, which opens with "Jeepers Creepers." Forget about the peepers—where'd ya get that brass?²¹ There's not a delicate woodwind—flute or clarinet—to be found, though what's present and more than accounted for are the trumpets and trombones, without mutes and blaring in unison. There are some saxes, cousins of the formerly carbonated cohort of clarinets and flutes—but relatives or not, champagne music depends, as George Thow noted, on the delicate woodwinds, not these reinforced foghorns. Our music has been reduced to melody alone, virtually devoid of ornamentation. Welk finally lived up to his claim about playing just the melody: the rococo frenzy of champagne style is no more, the effervescence only a memory, the music flat. Welk's new sound—announced in the opening credits as "the Big Band Sound of Lawrence Welk," having replaced the formerly announced "champagne music of Lawrence Welk"—has a dramatically changed pulse: what was once a frolic in a brook is now George Washington crossing the Delaware.

At the same time that Welk abandoned champagne music, he also abandoned the name he had long used to refer to his orchestra and ensemble: "The Champagne Music Makers." As he began to play the new "Big Band Sound," he simultaneously institutionalized a new sobriquet: the "Lawrence Welk Musical Family." The maestro emphasized this "Musical Family" whenever he could, regularly announcing it in his broadcasts and referring often in his writings to, say, "my musical children, my 'kids,' the members of my

17. *Ibid.*, 133–34.

18. *Ibid.*, 134.

19. *Ibid.*

20. *Ibid.*

21. *The Lawrence Welk Show*, 25 October 1980.

Musical Family,”²² or to the women of his company as “[m]y daughters, the girls in the family, girls I loved like my own.”²³ The elimination of the name “Champagne Music Makers” makes sense, given that the champagne sound was purged—but why a “Musical Family”?

Linking his “Musical Family” to his own biological family, Welk wrote, “I believe in families. I wouldn’t be calling our group today a musical family if I didn’t. I sensed the strength of a good family even during my earliest days on the farm. . . .”²⁴ Welk felt, however, that the American family was endangered. In one of his treatises, *My America, Your America*, Welk wrote that “throughout history the family has always been a most stable and consistent force for good in any established human society. But today, families are under attack from all sides. They’re getting smaller, breaking apart, disappearing completely. People are beginning to live more and more for themselves.”²⁵ “There is just no love like family love,” he concluded.²⁶ In *This I Believe*, Welk elaborated further, citing the family as the only redemption possible for a nation doomed by its hedonism, decrying

the complete breakdown of moral principles in our current life style, particularly our sexual morality. The total absence of any kind of restraints certainly hasn’t made us happier. . . . Our parish priest said recently that in the history of man there has never been a healthy, successful society that didn’t impose definite sexual restraints on all its people. Conversely, every society which allowed complete sexual license has collapsed completely. It makes me fear for the future of our country, our children, and our children’s children. In my opinion, we must hold on to the family as our strongest bulwark and our best protection.²⁷

In a similar vein, his “Musical Family”—with the “Big Band Sound” it produced—was to be a musical bulwark against the ills of society that he denounced.

Just as the American family was under siege, Welk felt, so were the values it inculcated—chief among them the importance of work. He credited his own biological family for his own disciplined work ethic and his sense of personal responsibility: “I really feel so very fortunate that my brothers and sisters and I were all taught, early in life, to discipline ourselves. We did our assigned chores on the farm when the chores were scheduled—and not when we felt like doing them. We got up every morning at daybreak . . . because that was the only way we could get our day’s work done.”²⁸ Alarmed that his work ethic was not universally held, Welk was deeply troubled by what he saw as a growing number of people who, in his inimitable phrasing, “are looking for free buggy rides through life,” characterizing them as “the free riders who live off the labors of others.”²⁹ Welk argued

22. Welk, *You’re Never Too Young*, 172.

23. Welk, *Ab-One, Ab-Two!*, 118.

24. Lawrence Welk with Bernice McGeehan, *My America, Your America* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1976), 89.

25. *Ibid.*, 91–92.

26. *Ibid.*, 92.

27. Lawrence Welk with Bernice McGeehan, *This I Believe* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1979), 139.

28. *Ibid.*, 26.

29. Quoted in Schwienher, *Lawrence Welk*, 69.

that “the fundamental law of life is that man must earn what he receives if he wishes to live with dignity, independence, and security. Man can, of course, live off the labors of others, but when he does, his personality disintegrates and decays, he becomes a parasite, a whining, frustrated weakling. Let man, however, feel the challenge of creating his own life and of getting what he needs through his own labors and he becomes strong, virile, and confident. He has found the way to dignity, independence, and security—his life is his own. I have tried to instill this type of philosophy in all the members of our musical family.”³⁰

Just as Welk linked his own biological family life with his work ethic, his “Musical Family” was, in a sense, a family *business*. The “Family” centered on Welk as the father: after elaborating on all the various members of the family, Welk said that “tying the whole thing together is the ‘father’ up front, the one waving the baton – me!”³¹ As the head of his “Musical Family,” Welk adopted a paternal attitude towards his “children,” focusing on developing their particular talents. Linking his notions of business and family, Welk wrote that his family approach—“the heart of our entire concept”—“springs quite naturally from my conviction that ours is a ‘family’ business, and everyone in it is a member of our family . . . they are my children; and I try to do for them what I would do if they were my own.”³² Elsewhere he wrote, “[I]t’s as if I’m a father with forty-five children. I try to help my ‘kids’ realize their dreams—and they try to make me proud of them.”³³ Arguing that this “family feeling” was the most important facet of his enterprise, Welk developed his attitude of fatherly stewardship into a business model that he termed his “Family Plan.”³⁴

Welk’s “Family Plan” was a managerial strategy that encouraged employees to develop their own talents, assume more responsibility within the organization, and participate in a generous profit-sharing scheme. Insisting that his plan could serve as a model for employers in any field, Welk argued that his plan could develop a work ethic in American youth and thereby benefit the country as a whole: “we train and develop our newcomers in ways which I feel would benefit the whole nation. If enough qualified businesspeople would do the same type of thing for young people interested in *their* particular field—teach them the tricks and skills of their trade and inculcate them with the basic fundamentals of wholesome living, what a boost that would be for this country.”³⁵ He even thought that employers adopting his plan could provide a “home-away-from-home” for

30. Ibid.

31. Welk, *This I Believe*, 2.

32. Ibid., 195.

33. Welk, *Ab-One, Ab-Two!*, 81.

34. Welk, *This I Believe*, 79. Welk also notes, “I’m completely sold on our people from the time I find and hire them. And once I’m sold on them, I keep selling them all the time—to themselves as well as everybody else . . . I let them know from the start that I like them, that I’m interested in them—phone them, invite them in for chats, share jokes with them. And I’m a great one for shaking hands or giving a quick hug . . . It all helps build the warm and close ‘family feeling’ which is the undergirding of our system.” 78–79.

35. Ibid., 76.

“youngsters whose home life is poor, or non-existent.”³⁶ Citing a litany of issues that plagued America’s teenagers—delinquency, unemployment, mental illness, and a general malaise—Welk argued that “there *is* a way to solve every single one of those problems. In fact, I know there’s a way—because we’ve been using it for years in our orchestra.”³⁷ This solution, Welk’s “Family Plan,” was actually a work plan: as he put it, “The best answer to every single problem that plagues our young people today is simply to let—them—work!” His evangelizing for the rewards of work was insistent: “‘work’ is the reason I’m here today! Work is the reason our whole show is here. The people in our orchestra, almost without exception, are great believers in work.”³⁸

Insisting that “our kids need to work,” Welk argued that “the best thing we can do to help our younger generation today is to get rid of the one law that has been holding them back the most—and that’s the child labor law.”³⁹ While he acknowledged that these labor laws were passed in response to the exploitation of young workers, Welk felt that these laws actually punished the children—“by taking away their inborn right to work”—instead of the actual culprits, the employers.⁴⁰ He also voiced complaints about the minimum wage requirement, but he reserved special opprobrium for unions, which in his view had demonstrated “little interest in young people’s development” and, along with the government, tended to “curb human incentive.” Indeed, Welk felt that these various union and governmental constraints were directly at odds with his system’s intense focus on developing youth through work opportunities and were “essentially feeding into a growing American movement that dismissed the importance of work to one’s own character.” Despite these perceived obstacles, Welk forged ahead with his Family Plan, which sought to save the ideal of free enterprise and instill this philosophy of self-reliance not only in the members of his Musical Family, but in his entire audience—as seen in his endless espousal of these ideas in his long line of mass-market books.

Welk conceded that society needed to take care of those who were truly unable to care for themselves, but inveighed against abusing this obligation: “That is not only our duty, it is our privilege, something we should be proud and happy to do for those who need it. But not for those of us who can take care of ourselves! Not for you and for me and the overwhelming majority of Americans who still believe in God and each other and the destiny of this country, those of us who are willing to stand alone and do it ourselves!”⁴¹ And indeed he felt that the “destiny” of the United States was bound up with just such an attitude, extolling “the right to do things for ourselves, to face life on our own, not as weak people depending on others to take care of us, but as strong citizens living up to the potential God gave us . . . living up to the very best that is within us. Then I see an America—my America, your America—living forever.

36. Ibid., 156.

37. Ibid., 14.

38. Ibid., 16–17.

39. Ibid., 14.

40. Ibid., 15. He also notes, “I don’t want to make our youngsters work and I want to make that very, very clear. I just want to give them the opportunity.” 173.

41. Welk, *My America, Your America*, 160.

In peace. In pride. And in freedom.”⁴² The “Family Plan” championed what he identified as the country’s most essential ideals: “free enterprise, self-determination, personal initiative, individual responsibility.”⁴³ In his view, “work—hard work—is the answer if we are to return to these ideals and keep our country strong.”⁴⁴

Welk felt that his experience in the music profession had given him insight into the precarious situation he felt the country was facing. Indeed, he felt that the decline of free enterprise had not only cultivated societal parasites—but had also driven out the big bands of the past. He warned that there was “a close correlation between what happened to the Big Bands and what could happen . . . or is happening . . . to our country. As long as the bands competed eagerly, freely, tried to produce the best “product” they could, operated in freedom so that no one was held back . . . then we had superior bands, a thriving business, and happy people.” “When they abandoned the principles of free enterprise,” however, “and failed to protect their freedom . . . they lost everything. It makes me unhappy to think this happened to our Big Bands. It frightens me to think the same could happen to our country.”⁴⁵ And it was precisely because he understood his band as a microcosm of the nation that he felt his “Family Plan” was relevant to American life more generally: after delineating principles that had guided his musical ensemble, Welk commented that the act of “writing down these Golden Rules for our Musical Family made me feel it wouldn’t hurt if we had a similar list for our great American family!”⁴⁶ As he put it elsewhere, he thought of his band as “somewhat of a little ‘America,’ too, a little democracy all its own”—hence his sense that what cured the ills of his “Musical Family” could work more broadly.⁴⁷ “I have hopes,” Welk declared, “that through our Family System we may be able to bring back the true meaning of free enterprise once again—and save it for generations to come.”⁴⁸

And thus if we return to George Simon’s complaint that Lawrence Welk was “respected more for commercial cunning than for artistic creativity”—and Welk’s own admission that “I’m more of a salesman than anything else”—we see now that his “commercial cunning” and his “artistic creativity” were actually intertwined with the concept of his “Musical Family,” which was in fact selling free enterprise itself to an America he felt had lost its way. What is even more fascinating, however, is that for Welk, the “family” itself was part of the domain of free enterprise. As we saw earlier, he noted that his family approach “springs quite naturally from my conviction that ours is a ‘family’ business.” His was a family business whose business was selling the (idea of the) family to an America that he thought was suffering from “a wave of decadence and growing indifference.”⁴⁹ So how did Welk *sell* the “family”?

42. Ibid.

43. Quoted in Schwiener, *Lawrence Welk*, 69.

44. Ibid.

45. Welk, *My America, Your America*, 39.

46. Ibid., 174.

47. Ibid., 109.

48. Ibid., 30.

49. Ibid., 108.



FIGURE 7. Ralna English & Guy Hovis. (Art Zelin/Archive Photos/Getty Images)

Interestingly, Welk had been associated with a family act long before he expressed his concerns about the decline of American morality. The Lennon Sisters, popularly known as “America’s Sweethearts of Song,” were the first real superstars of the Welk phenomenon. After having been brought to Lawrence’s attention by his son, Larry, in 1957, the Lennons joined the show and caught the attention of the nation with their down-home charm, youthful exuberance, gingham dresses, and close harmonies. However, the *familial* dimension of the talented Lennons was only a part of their appeal, and once they left the show, Welk filled the void with a number of unrelated performers: Sandi Jensen, Salli Flynn, Tanya Falan, and Lynn Anderson. But in the wake of the transition to the “Musical Family” and the “Big Band Sound,” Welk unsurprisingly introduced a number of family acts, including Guy and Ralna (fig. 7), the so-called “happy married couple.” Ralna’s exceptional talent brought even more attention to the married act, which reinforced, to even the casual Welkie, the strong emphasis on musicmaking as an extension of the conventional family. Towards the end of his run, Welk introduced the “Aldridge Sisters and the Otwell Twins,” whom he originally wanted to bill as “Brothers and Sisters.”⁵⁰ The jewel in his crown, though, was the group he found as a successor to the

50. Welk, *This I Believe*, 62.

Lennon Sisters: The Semonski Sisters, a “raw and untrained” family troupe Welk hoped to transform into a television-quality ensemble.⁵¹ As he so generously phrased it, “I was in Florida playing a golf tournament when I spotted them. Six little Polish girls from New Jersey. They were terrible, just terrible. Somebody had taught them all wrong. But I saw potential there. I moved them out to my mobile-home-park-restaurant in Escondido and made the older ones singing hostesses. That would give us time to work.”⁵²

But why did Welk turn to the Semonskis, who might not initially seem to glorify his family ideal as much as some near-perfect neo-Lennons? The answer can be found in one of Welk’s books, *My America, Your America*, in which the saga of the Semonskis serves as the central narrative thread. Welk notes that when he first engaged the Semonskis to perform, they “more than confirmed my first impression: They were nice girls, sweet girls, but completely unprofessional, lacking that certain little extra that marks the difference between seasoned performers and rank amateurs.”⁵³ Nonetheless, Welk hired them in part because “I wanted to prove once and for all that our Family Training and Sharing System could develop anyone with a reasonable amount of talent plus a genuine desire to succeed.”⁵⁴ His quest would prove troublesome, however, precisely because, as he lamented, the Semonskis “just didn’t know how to work! They thought they did. In fact, they looked absolutely baffled when I said, almost in desperation, one day, ‘Girls, you simply must buckle down and get to work! You’ve got to learn how to work!’”⁵⁵ When talking about the diligence of his musicians at practicing, he wrote, “It filled me with pride and gratitude. How fortunate to have men so anxious to improve, so willing to work on themselves! They had found the secret of perfection. But the little Semonskis had not yet found it.”⁵⁶

Discussing a successful number that the Semonskis performed, he complained that “they were still inclined to treat the whole thing as something of a lark, an adventure, a chance to dress up in pretty costumes and bask in the spotlight. They still hadn’t fully grasped the absolute necessity of working on themselves with any kind of sustained and concentrated effort . . . and I had to find some way to get that message across to them.”⁵⁷ But when the Semonskis finally learned the value of work, Welk made a dramatic offer onstage for them to become a part of his “Musical Family”: as he told them, “You know, there were many times during this past year when I was really worried about you . . . But you’ve come through just the way I’d dreamed—maybe even better than I hoped. You have really learned how to work! And so . . . I think you can now consider yourselves permanent members of our Musical Family.’ I opened my arms wide. ‘You are now my Musical Children.’”⁵⁸ There you have it: the Semonskis, a family that had to learn to

51. Welk, *My America, Your America*, 20.

52. Sanders and Weissman, *Champagne Music*, 124.

53. Welk, *My America, Your America*, 13.

54. *Ibid.*, 12–13.

55. *Ibid.*, 22.

56. *Ibid.*, 32.

57. *Ibid.*, 33.

58. *Ibid.*, 140.

work together in order to make beautiful music. Welk juxtaposes his chronicle of the Semonskis with his lamenting the death of enterprise in the big bands of the past—a telling juxtaposition, for, as we will see, Welk’s own move to the “Big Band Sound” was working musically to inculcate the same philosophy of work that he was trying to instill into the Semonskis, content as they were to dress up in pretty costumes, treating him as a “lark.”

But why would families need work? Welk suggested that a decline in American sexual propriety was undermining the idea of the family—a concern not unrelated to his gendered sense that work would make one “virile” and not a “weakling.” As we saw earlier, he cited the family as the only redemption possible for a nation doomed by its hedonism, arguing that since “every society which allowed complete sexual license has collapsed completely . . . we must hold on to the family as our strongest bulwark.” He linked the culture of government dependence with morality itself, complaining of a culture of “depending on the government for many of our needs, and accepting a range of moral standards so broad there are really no standards left.”⁵⁹ Welk wrote, “I hope—I pray—that we will choose the personal responsibility and strict moral codes which will not only enhance our own lives but the country’s as well.”⁶⁰ Welk’s embrace of “hard work” goes hand in hand with his disdain for “the complete breakdown of moral principles in our current life style, particularly our sexual morality” and his exhortation of “strict moral codes.”

Contrary to the commonplace assumption that Welk was off in his own oblivious bubble—an antiquated throwback ignorant of the dominant trends of his time—his investments in the “family” and in work were a direct response to the political concerns of his day. Indeed, as historian Robert Self has noted, feminists, queer people, and “nonconformists of all sorts” in the 1960s “forced Americans to engage in debates about the meaning of manhood and womanhood, what it is to be sexual, what it means to construct families, and what all of these matters have to do with politics and the nation.”⁶¹ These activists “upended existing gender and sexual norms and redefined the public and private spheres of American life. They challenged male privilege, fought for women’s equality, and invented the term ‘sexual politics’ to describe the struggle over women’s—and later, all—bodies.”⁶² Conservatives, meanwhile, fearful that the ideal of the family was being undermined by these new attitudes, “cast the nuclear family as in crisis and its defense as their patriotic duty.” As Self writes, “the way they sought to constrain government interference in an idealized private family sphere was intimately linked to the way they also sought to limit government interference in the private market.”⁶³ This link between the “idealized private family sphere” and the “private market” is precisely Welk’s link between his “Musical Family” and the concept of work.

59. Welk, *This I Believe*, 188.

60. *Ibid.*

61. Robert O. Self, *All in the Family: The Realignment of American Democracy Since the 1960s* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 5.

62. *Ibid.*

63. *Ibid.*, 6.

Welk's arguments mirrored a broader national discourse that depicted welfare as disincentivizing work and dissolving the family. In 1969, Richard Nixon addressed the nation, arguing that the welfare system "stagnates enterprise and promotes dependency" and thus "has to be judged a colossal failure." Among its greatest faults, he argued, was that "it breaks up homes. It often penalizes work." As Nixon distilled the problem, "any system which makes it more profitable for a man not to work than to work, or which encourages a man to desert his family rather than stay with his family, is wrong and indefensible."⁶⁴ Nixon and Welk meet in their insistence that men must work, and fathers must support their families. Ultimately, then, far from being ignorant of, or irrelevant to, the political issues of the time, Welk's "Big Band Sound" represented the musical manifestation of the Nixonian "silent majority" that would find its fullest expression in the Reagan Revolution of the 1980s. And thus it is unsurprising to read a 1969 article describing Ronald Reagan's Los Angeles office as containing, in addition to pictures of Reagan with Eisenhower, the Pope, and Billy Graham, "[b]ooks, too, including one sitting out on the desk: Lawrence Welk's autobiography, *Ab-One, Ab-Two!*"⁶⁵

Significantly, Welk's transition to the "Musical Family" and to the "Big Band Sound" occurred at a moment when Welk himself was facing major professional turbulence. In March 1971, despite his consistently solid ratings and a loyal television audience, Welk was cancelled by ABC, a decision that his manager Don Fedderson attributed in part to the network's focus on young audiences. Without a venue for his show, Welk wrote that "there were times, during that black hour, when the thought of retiring became more and more attractive to me . . . But, no matter what direction my thoughts went, they kept coming back to one central and overriding theme—my concern for the members of my Musical Family, my 'kids.'"⁶⁶ Comparing his cancellation to a moment decades before when his band had walked out on him, Welk wrote that "something far worse had happened" with his network cancellation. The difference? "Because then, I had had just Fern and myself to think about. Now, I had a whole 'family.'"⁶⁷ The cancellation of his show meant that *Welk himself* was out of a job and removed from the all-important domain of work. In the context of his own unemployment, Welk repeatedly insists that he had to support his (musical) family, and so he did not have a choice: he had to work. (His own biological family, meanwhile, was content to see the show come to an end: Welk's wife, Fern, consoled him by saying, "Lawrence, please don't feel bad if your bubble machine has broken down! You've proven your point and you've earned a rest."⁶⁸) Though Welk would develop a powerful syndication network of his own and remain on the air for another decade, Fern Welk's comment about the breakdown of the "bubble

64. "Transcript of Nixon's Address to Nation Outlining Proposals for Welfare Reform," *New York Times* (9 August 1969), 10.

65. Rick Perlstein, *The Invisible Bridge: The Fall of Nixon and the Rise of Reagan* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2015), 541. Perlstein writes that "a Reagan flack assured the columnist who recorded this 'that the books in the room did not necessarily reflect Reagan's reading tastes, that he was sent dozens of volumes by admirers.'"

66. Welk, *Ab-One, Ab-Two!*, 9.

67. *Ibid.*, 10.

68. *Ibid.*

machine” was prescient: With the “Musical Family,” Welk would leave behind champagne music and institute a new sound—the “Big Band Sound,” with its emphasis on open brass, as in “Jeepers Creepers”—that worked musically toward the same goals that Welk advocated in his prose and in his “Family Plan.”

This change from the champagne aesthetic to the “Big Band Sound” must be understood in the context of the broader history of jazz. As African-Americans developed hot jazz in the early twentieth century, the music held a transgressive allure for white audiences. Paul Whiteman exploited this by creating a domesticated version of “refined, symphonic jazz” that suppressed its African American origins and appealed to white audiences as a socially sanctioned way to indulge their love of the genre.⁶⁹ Well-known for his claim to “make a lady out of jazz,” Whiteman pioneered a genre known as the sweet band—whose lineage would stretch from Whiteman to such bandleaders as Guy Lombardo and Lawrence Welk. The economic crisis of the Great Depression brought with it a crisis in gender that propelled sweet bands to the forefront of American popular music. Indeed, hot jazz came to signify material indulgence and, for that reason, fell out of favor. Sweet bands, by contrast, according to Lewis Erenberg, “expressed youth’s inability in the 1930s to realize the dreams of the 1920s. Especially prominent was the sense that modern society had reduced the power of the once-masterful individual male. Overwhelmed by feelings of personal failure, young people’s musical tastes showed uncertainty, a destabilization of gender roles, and a desire for security.”⁷⁰

While this feminized whiteness of the sweet band sound was appealing during the Great Depression—when men *couldn’t* find work—it became a liability during a time when conservatives were anxious about men *choosing* not to work. Welk thus sought to suppress his sweet band aesthetic—which originated in opposition to material indulgence—precisely once it came to signify a different kind of material indulgence: an avowed and emasculated withdrawal from the sphere of labor. Critics regularly invoked the gendered nature of the sweet band sound: William E. Studwell and Mark Baldin, for example, discuss Welk’s “bland, yet successful” sound and then casually note that “incidentally, ‘welk’ is a German word meaning ‘limp,’ ‘flabby,’ and ‘languid.’”⁷¹ Studwell and Baldwin’s rhetoric of detumescence unwittingly tells us much about the anxieties surrounding the champagne sound. In a similar vein, George T. Simon noted that Welk’s orchestra was one of the sweet bands that featured “syrupy-sounding saxes, emasculated brasses, and reticent rhythm sections.”⁷² The ‘emasculat[i]on’ of the brass is precisely the point, precisely the element that would be most demonstrably corrected by the “Big Band Sound” (fig. 8). Indeed, when Welk returned to the air after his cancellation by ABC—in other words, when he reentered the domain of work to save his family—George Cates composed a new overture that Welk described as “a four-note trumpet introduction that

69. Lewis A. Erenberg, *Swingin’ the Dream: Big Band Jazz and the Rebirth of American Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998), 11.

70. *Ibid.*, 17–18.

71. William E. Studwell and Mark Baldin, *The Big Band Reader* (New York: Haworth, 2000), 196.

72. Simon, *The Big Bands*, 29.



FIGURE 8. Trumpeter Johnny Zell playing without mute. (Paul Natkin/Archive Photos/Getty Images)

held a lot of excitement.”⁷³ The “Big Band Sound” “remasculates” the brass, elevating them above the now-exiled delicate woodwinds.

Meanwhile, Welk’s 1969 opener, in which he dressed like a hippie, found him insisting that he would never trade his sound for the sound of groups like the “Soul Sisters and the Babbling Baboons.” It is worth noting that the latent racial connotations of this imagined group stand alongside the similarly latent racial dimensions of the welfare debate itself, as seen in the discourses of the “urban” crisis and African American fatherhood. As Robert Self noted, however, “racial struggles were often displaced into a breadwinner politics of gender and family,” and so it was with Welk, who framed his concerns almost exclusively using the rhetoric of gender, family, and labor.⁷⁴ At the same time, the fact that Welk—despite insisting that he would never abandon champagne music for rock and roll—*did* abandon champagne music (for the “Big Band Sound”) tells us that his champagne music unexpectedly shared something with the rock music he disdained: both were fake books, skeletons around which one could improvise and experiment. America needed to be reminded, though, that masculinity was a part to be memorized, practiced, and repeated. By incorporating some of the butcher elements of hot jazz, Welk was able to purge his music of some effeminacy while simultaneously marketing it as a disciplined, white, family-oriented, living room alternative to the behind-closed-doors world of rock music, with its aggressive, untamed, racialized masculinity.

73. Welk, *Ab-One, Ab-Two!*, 136.

74. Self, *All in the Family*, 7.

In this context of the fear of feminized whiteness, we might revisit one derisive nickname occasionally given to Welk: as Bob Rose noted, “his manner and grin have gotten him the label ‘The Liberace of the Accordion.’”⁷⁵ It was less Welk’s own affect than the affect of his music that warranted the comparison with Liberace, whose persona, in the words of scholar Harry Thomas, conveyed “boyishness, heterosexuality without the risk of physical aggression, a sensitivity and devotion to women’s feelings, and mannerisms that many more hegemonically masculine men would find effeminate.”⁷⁶ Indeed, the anxieties seem to emerge around the feminized dimensions of Welk’s bubbles, the ballroom chandeliers, the “delicate woodwinds,” the light rhythms of the orchestrations. This was true of all sweet bands, but of Welk in particular, whose move to the “Big Band Sound” is a rebuke of champagne style—of its emasculation of the brass, of the feminization of its sound, of the *values* also associated with Liberace.

Given these metaphors, we might consider one last epistemological bubble: a 1970 episode in which Jo Ann Castle plays a ragtime piano version of “This Ol’ House” behind a behemoth shoe, presumably the residential footwear of “There Was an Old Woman Who Lived in a Shoe,” the shoe also being the titular ol’ house. Surrounding Jo Ann are her children: a banjoist wearing a beanie, a spoon artiste atop her piano, and two other children who do a Maypole dance with the shoestrings. After Jo Ann does her standard valedictory run up the keys, she and her bizarre family wave good-bye to us—just as the champagne style gives way to the “Big Band Sound.” Indeed, with champagne music come irregular family units that push this music to its limit and then wave good-bye, ushering in a new type of music with a new type of family: conventional, patriarchal, sturdy, with god-like Father Welk as the focus. To be sure, the name change to the “Musical Family” makes even more sense now, for the types of families that champagne music would produce are rather unconventional: clearly the delicate woodwinds, identified as feminine, would reign supreme, overpowering the masculine instruments, who would resign themselves to almost always playing muted ornamentation. But (!), when the brass-men weaklings remove their mutes, prophylactic in design, and reinstate themselves, like Welk, as virile heads of their musical families, and subordinate the delicate woodwinds to playing infrequently—and when they do, only as harmonic back-up, supporting, affirming, echoing the brass, never speaking for themselves—then things are okay: the family is back on top. If we return to Welk’s champagne-style rendition of “Polly” in 1958, we might note that once the number concludes and Welk plucks his cheek to “pop the cork,” he looks into the camera and says, “See what an easy living this is, champagne music?” To be sure, champagne music was not about work; its easy listening was also easy living, the indulgence of the orchestration an inducement to personal indulgence. The delicate woodwinds were far too distracting—no, it was the melody alone, efficient and utilitarian, that got the job done.

75. Quoted in Schwienher, *Lawrence Welk*, 161.

76. Harry Thomas, *Sissy!: The Effeminate Paradox in Postwar US Literature and Culture* (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2017), 118.

In this way, Welk—and his “Big Band Sound”—sold the family itself as the product of hard work. His orchestra was to become the “Musical Family” that modeled for his considerable viewing public exactly what America could—and, in his view, should—look and sound like. Crucially, the family required its members to work hard, to dismiss a world of “sexual license” and instead commit themselves to more conventional gendered and familial relationships. At the same time, his “Big Band” sound modeled this philosophy musically, as Welk’s “easy living,” feminized sound gave way to a virile sound characterized by open, not muted, brass.

Despite the maestro’s insistence on these values, however, the show itself resists his attempts to consolidate a message. First, his own predilection for amateurs—and the mistakes they make—reveals that anything requiring hard work is prone to (pleasurable) failure. Many derisive comments have been made over the years regarding the talents of the Welk ensemble, as for instance in a 1967 article in *Television-Radio Age* that dismissed the band as “one hundred percent eligible for Medicare. . . . They remind one of a talented amateur Rotary Club band in Indiana. They might win the state contest but they’ll never make the big time.”⁷⁷ Much more interesting is the fact that variations of this sentiment were held by the Welk enterprise itself, with Father Welk seeking talent not through established professional channels but instead in everyday life: “I’ve had people stop me in hotel lobbies, airport lounges, and I even auditioned one fellow—a whistler—in the men’s room! I try always to keep my eyes and ears open, so I don’t overlook talent, no matter in what unlikely place it seems to crop up.”⁷⁸ Music Director George Cates was reported as calling the performers “not theatrical looking, but ordinary looking people,”⁷⁹ while Myron Floren said, “I think people used to look on us more like the neighbors next door, who were able to sing or play an instrument or perform in some way.”⁸⁰ Audiences clearly responded to this next-door neighbor quality: Director Jim Hobson noted that “ironically, the weakest talent we have on the show seems to have the highest mail rating. . . . there is a non-discriminating element in our audience which at times becomes very vocal in support of talent which is really not that outstanding. Frankly, our entertainers for the most part are like the next door neighbor’s kids performing.”⁸¹ Welk felt that this was an essential element of his success: “I’m sure you’re aware that instead of these people I could hire the most professional performers in Hollywood. I’d certainly have an excellent show, but it wouldn’t be the same. You’ve seen those fine young people like Mary Lou Metzger, who did the Wee Bonnie Baker number recently. There is no way I could find a professional to do such a number with the same naturalness, enthusiasm, and feeling.”⁸²

This amateur quality prompted not only identification in general, but an identification with the mistakes that these endearingly peccable artists—and Welk himself—were apt to

77. Quoted in Schwienher, *Lawrence Welk*, 173.

78. Welk, *Ab-One, Ab-Two!*, 154.

79. Schwienher, *Lawrence Welk*, 121.

80. Sanders and Weissman, *Champagne Music*, 129.

81. Schwienher, *Lawrence Welk*, 109.

82. *Ibid.*, 233.

make. This was an acknowledged philosophy: Don Fedderson noted that Welk once “made a slip in reading the cue cards and said, ‘This is my cup of dish.’” They decided not to re-tape the segment since “we insisted it would spoil the psychological identification which such a slip would bring about in so many of his viewers who might laugh, but who would readily relate to such a mistake.”⁸³ Joe Rizzo noted that Welk preferred not to stop taping, even when performers flubbed lyrics or made mistakes: “He said, ‘Nobody’s perfect and people like to see things like that.’”⁸⁴ Just as Welk takes pleasure in these glitches, in these unstable performances, the show opens up the possibility of taking pleasure in the glitches of daily life, glitches that insist on the instability and undesirability of perfection in every arena—including gender and the family.

Second, the show also opens up the potential for counter-reading in its extraordinary emphasis on visual spectacle—especially during the years of the “Big Band Sound.” During the initial discussions for Welk’s television show, advertising executive John Gaunt urged Welk to “spice it up a little” with “big production numbers that would add excitement and glamour to the show.”⁸⁵ But Welk opposed the idea strenuously, and the show was presented essentially as it had been when he performed in ballrooms as a dance orchestra. The principal visual element in those days were Welk’s trademark bubbles, which set designer Chuck Koon developed to identify the music with champagne: “I had been out with my kids to the Pomona Fair and saw the bubble machine . . . But the bubbles caused me nothing but twenty-seven years of problems! Bubbles are greasy. You had to protect the floor or somebody would slip . . . we had them behind the orchestra, and had a bank of eight or nine fans to try to keep the bubbles blowing straight up. They’d get on the violin strings and the bow would slip. They’d spot the brass. They got on the heads of the drums. Cal Tech tried to make a bubble solution that wasn’t greasy. They gave up.”⁸⁶ However, the show—once straightforward and utilitarian in visual presentation—became increasingly spectacular and, well, ornamented. First the bubbles, and then occasional attempts at spectacle in the early years: Natalie Nevins, dressed in gown and tiara, petting—and sprinkling pixie dust on—her miniature “Puff, the Magic Dragon,” or Larry Hooper singing “Minnie the Mermaid” from inside a scuba suit. As the show began to arrange itself around themes—as in “Musical Visit to Vienna”—there would often be a single colorful set used as a backdrop for the various musical numbers.

But this spectacular impulse grew exponentially in the “Big Band Sound” era. Though champagne music may have lost its fizz, its ornamentation, its ability to explore and

83. *Ibid.*, 15–16.

84. Sanders and Weissman, *Champagne Music*, 71. Note also Welk’s self-deprecating comment that “I played the accordion—if you can call that entertainment.” Welk, *Ab-One, Ab-Two!*, 64. Furthermore, production consultant Jack Imel once decided to stage “Tea for Two” with a tap dance performed in unison by all the members of the ensemble, including those who were only singers. Welk recalled that as he watched Irish tenor Joe Feeny “struggle with the time step, I wondered what had ever possessed Jack Imel to think he could make dancers out of all these singers . . . nevertheless, there was something kind of charming about the sight of all the kids earnestly tapping away together, and the audience seemed to love it.” Welk, *Ab-One, Ab-Two!*, 136.

85. Sanders and Weissman, *Champagne Music*, 10.

86. *Ibid.*, 17.

celebrate an unstable musical fringe, this impulse reemerged in the visual realm. In other words, Welk's musical chromaticism resurfaced in Technicolor chromaticism. This seems to have been the influence of Welk's director, Jim Hobson, who Welk said "constantly comes up with ideas that are really out of this world. If he had his way, we'd have overhead cameras and volcanoes spouting lava, and streams built across stage so real live boats could sail on them."⁸⁷ When Welk was planning a show for the MGM Grand, Hobson "wanted to fly an airplane into the Celebrity Room to open the show."⁸⁸ The range of Hobson's on-air spectacles can be seen in Welk's mention that Mary Lou Metzger has "driven a train, led an elephant across the stage, sung a love song to a real live wolfhound."⁸⁹ This was the genius of Hobson, who Welk said "with his brilliant theatricality and overall eye for television, tends to see things in dazzling production numbers. He started out in life to be an actor, and I imagine he would have been a great one, with his flair for dramatics."⁹⁰ Hobson, the would-be actor, came to Welk after having directed none other than *The Liberace Show*.

This visual Alka-Seltzer certainly alleviated the musical indigestion of the "Big Band Sound" and, like the Champagne Music of yesteryear, seemed to function largely as a means to explore alternate meanings. Indeed, many of the show's bizarre spectacles often seem to subvert the widely accepted meaning of songs. For example, Guy and Ralna sing "Leaving on a Jet Plane"—a song lamenting a romantic parting—in a large, hovering two-seater plane, together as a *duet*—thereby defeating the ostensible meaning of the song. Better yet, take Anacani, Welk's "pretty little Mexican señorita," as the epithet went, who, in one episode, hovers on a scooter-like module on some hazy orb, while the planet Earth looms in the background. The fantastic oddness of this spectacle is trumped only by its incongruity with the meaning of the song: Anacani is singing "Fly Me to the Moon"! Normally a song about how small romantic overtures such as holding hands can often mean euphoria for the lovers involved, this song becomes a moment of lunar lunacy that, like "Leaving on a Jet Plane," seems to present strategies of escaping—whether through flight or otherwise—the meaning of the lyrics.

Welk's "Big Band Sound" aesthetic was the ultimate act of patriotism (fig. 9), deploying its clarion trumpet call to reawaken free enterprise, the family, and the nation all with the same reveille. But just as Sandi & Salli's 1969 tongue-and-finger-in-cheek protest was counterproductive, so too was Welk's move to the "Big Band Sound," as the erratic temporality of syndication has only amplified the contingency of his mandates. Still, that Lawrence Welk has endured on television for more than sixty-five years—broadcast even today on PBS—is a testament to the buoyancy of the champagne philosophy, which is nothing less than a genius strategy of survival for ornamentation in a world where the melody began to assert itself as the only possibility. Champagne music, a presumed novelty, ridiculed as amateurish, had shown that the melody was, actually, nothing too

87. Welk, *You're Never Too Young*, 189.

88. *Ibid.*, 120.

89. *Ibid.*, 195.

90. *Ibid.*, 190.



FIGURE 9. A patriotic tribute on *The Lawrence Welk Show*. (ABC Photo Archives/Walt Disney Television/Getty Images)

special. Indeed, the champagne philosophy made the ornamentation central—first in the music, then in the presentation, but always ideologically, proving that the “Musical Family” that Welk was selling, at least in his “Big Band Sound,” was not the only type of musical family possible, that there were many types of possible arrangements, and that—as Jo Ann whirled her way up the keys, almost ignoring the melody—so too could we float, like Welk’s bubbles, out of the world of the mundane and pedestrian, be it in the form of melodies or of the status quo, into a world where ornamentation, replete with chromoeroticism and suggesting those other familial arrangements and gendered roles, reigned supreme, or at least had citizenship. In a time when melodrama rules politics, Lawrence Welk’s champagne music teaches the ultimate lesson: one in queering the kitsch.

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