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Title	The Biggest Thing in Show Business: Living It Up with Martin & Lewis, by Murray Pomerance and Matthew Solomon
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Publication date	2026-09-04
Original Citation	Moloney, C. (2026) 'The Biggest Thing in Show Business: Living It Up with Martin & Lewis, by Murray Pomerance and Matthew Solomon', Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media, 31, pp. 155–158. https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.19
Type of publication	Article (non peer-reviewed)
Link to publisher's version	10.33178/alpha.31.19
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Download date	2026-11-02 21:09:37
Item downloaded from	https://hdl.handle.net/10468/19165



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Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media
no. 31, 2026, pp. 155–158
DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.19

The Biggest Thing in Show Business: Living It Up with Martin & Lewis, by Murray Pomerance and Matthew Solomon. SUNY Press, 2024, 342 pp.

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It is difficult, from today's vantage point, to comprehend just how big Martin & Lewis were. While Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis are still recognisable as pop culture figures individually, the present-day cultural footprint of their partnership bears no relationship to the scale of their popularity in the 1940s and 1950s. It is as if people were familiar with Paul McCartney and John Lennon's solo work, but were unaware of The Beatles. Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis spent exactly ten years as a double act: 25 July 1946 to 25 July 1956. For that decade, they were, as Murray Pomerance and Matthew Solomon indicate in the title of their book, the biggest thing in show business: "not just movies, not radio, not television, not magazines, not newspapers, not posters, not record albums", the authors write, "BUT ALL OF IT!" (8).

The Biggest Thing in Show Business: Living It Up with Martin & Lewis is a bouncy, freewheeling dive into the duo's world. It is composed of numbered fragments—ranging in length from a single sentence to multi-page shot-by-shot or beat-by-beat scene analyses—loosely arranged into chapters. These are not arranged according to specific films, time periods or themes, but according to esoteric topics like playrooms, hairstyles, and hustling. They are accompanied by a handful of interludes, written as dialogues between Pomerance and Soloman, discussing matters such as how they each discovered Martin & Lewis. (Solomon saw a retrospective of film director Frank Tashlin while a UCLA student in the 1990s, while Pomerance saw *Jumping Jacks* [Norman Taurog, 1952] with his parents at age six, possibly in Buffalo, New York.)

In a "user manual" near the start of the book, Pomerance and Solomon set out to explain how and why the book's structure deviates from standard academic formats. Though it may seem unusual to the driest of scholars, they convincingly cite numerous precedents: Leo Charney's *Empty Moments: Cinema, Modernity, and Drift*, along with the writings of Walter Benjamin and Sergei Eisenstein, all have elements of the loose, fragmentary style that Pomerance and Soloman embrace, each setting their readers adrift in the text. This structure is also, at least partially, due to the nature of their writing process at the height of Covid lockdowns: the authors shared a Google doc in which both parties wrote synchronously. But most importantly, they claim they wanted the writing in the book to mimic a Martin & Lewis routine. (Later, they argue convincingly for the ampersand between "Martin" and "Lewis" as an essential component of the duo's name: in its representation of both duality and fusion, as well as its "invisible complexity" (150)—requiring five separate keystrokes on a typewriter yet appearing effortless.) Like a Martin & Lewis routine, *The Biggest Thing in Show Business* feels

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both wildly improvisational and tightly controlled, the product of two minds yet impossible to disentangle.

The Biggest Thing in Show Business is not a primer on Martin & Lewis, and for those who are only dimly aware of their double act, it may be difficult to understand, not because it is dense or unreadable—it's a romp, really—but because it takes extensive knowledge of Martin & Lewis as a given. There are no outlines, no timelines, none of the classic anecdotes about how the two met or Frank Sinatra reuniting them on Lewis's annual telethon in 1976. Pomerance and Solomon shuttle giddily between Martin & Lewis's sixteen films together, their episodes of *The Colgate Comedy Hour*, their radio show, their live performances, and various ephemera of their wild and crazy decade together, from comic books to action figures. There is no need to make distinctions: all of it is Martin & Lewis, their miniature multimedia cosmos.

Even among those who love Martin & Lewis, their filmography has not always been appreciated, the consensus being that the medium failed to capture the anarchic energy of their live act. But film scholars Pomerance and Solomon treat the films as core texts. Indeed, they argue that sound cinema as a medium enables Martin & Lewis to play with the possibilities of synched—and more thrillingly, *un*synched—sound and image. They argue that this is a key feature of Martin & Lewis's comedy, dating back to when Lewis was doing a solo act miming to records and Martin would move the needle on the record player: ruining the act and, in so doing, making a better one.

If Pomerance and Soloman make an overarching claim, rather than offering a series of smaller reflections, it is that Martin & Lewis are deeply embedded in the many cultural currents of the postwar United States, particularly in relation to consumerism, commercialism, and a utopian fantasy of unending abundance and "harmonic prosperity" (2). Buy a washer-dryer, a refrigerator, a vacuum cleaner, a television, an automobile, and do it all again in a year when a new and improved model is released. Pomerance and Solomon understand Martin & Lewis as both reflecting and critiquing those societal currents, at once engaging with that 1950s affluent dreamland and serving as a reminder of the clash and discordance that underpinned it. Dean and Jerry pointed to "the repressed"—all the fears, anxieties and horrors that had to be locked away—but used it as "a kind of energy source, a creative irritation, that blurred the boundaries between things, rubbed off labels, stood people on their heads, warped language, blurred expression anywhere and everywhere" (7).

This thesis informs some of the book's most interesting arguments: the popularity of paediatrician Benjamin Spock's teachings underpins the idea that Martin & Lewis upend the boundary between children's play and the adult world by turning the whole world into their playroom—Jerry Lewis as Dr. Spock's monster. However, it's also prominent in the book's weakest moments: the idea that Martin & Lewis—sons of Steubenville, Ohio and Newark, New Jersey, respectively—affected a nostalgic vision of the Old South in their act seems quite a stretch, which attempts to read the 1950s into Martin & Lewis rather than the other way around. There may be a case to be made here but, as presented, it seems like a subtext so deeply buried that to highlight it at all is to overstate it.

The Biggest Thing in Show Business shines brightest when Pomerance and Solomon try to do nothing more and nothing less than capture the ineffable wonder of Martin & Lewis on paper. Sometimes that's a question of their individual magic: Jerry Lewis's extraordinary hypermobility, a performance of a body out of control over which he had complete control. Though Pomerance and Solomon exhibit a slight bias towards Jerry, particularly when

discussing their solo work, their writing about Dean's talents are more striking: they manage to make saying that all of Dean Martin's songs sounded alike into transcendent praise when they write that Martin "sang without breathing. He sang without thinking about it, beforehand or during. He sang without caring about the song; it was only a pretext for the voice" (24). But a deeper magic exists between them than in either on their own. Pomerance and Solomon describe how Martin & Lewis's comedy follows a logical sequence, but that the logic is only legible in reverse. We don't know what will happen next, but once it does, it seems like it was always inevitable. The distinctive rhythm of Martin & Lewis is as comforting as a lullaby, Solomon tells Pomerance. Martin & Lewis are jazz, Pomerance replies, with Jerry as the beat and Dean laying down a melodic line (215). Each is a genius, yet capable of filling in the other's gaps, forming something new and whole.

The reader might begin to suspect that Pomerance and Solomon are deliberately avoiding potential queer readings of Martin & Lewis, bumping right up against them then flinching. An entire chapter on mouths hardly mentions kissing (of which they did plenty). It turns out, however, the authors aren't avoiding queerness so much as saving it up. A virtuoso section near the end considers the gap in how the two men displayed, or were allowed to display, affection for one another: mooning, adoring Jerry; suave but stoic, hyper-heterosexual Dean—be it their comic personas, their real selves, or some slippage between. One fragment—the shortest in the book—reads in full, "Or was it love?" (287). I can't recall another scholarly publication that reaches a poignancy equal to those four words. These sections would pair nicely with the more elegiac parts of *John & Paul: A Love Story Through Songs*, in which Ian Leslie laments the inability of contemporary anglophonic culture to articulate relationships between men that are more than friendship but not homosexual love.

Pomerance and Solomon seem aware that Martin & Lewis no longer have the cultural cache of their heyday. They openly wonder, at points, if it is even possible to appreciate Martin & Lewis loosed from their period context. Yet at others, they wonder how it is that an audience in the 1950s could truly understand what they were witnessing. They create a sense of Martin & Lewis as both time-bound and transcendent: they are inseparable from a time, a place, a culture, and yet as eternal as the monomyth. "Always through time, Dean would be with Jerry, Jerry with Dean." Pomerance and Solomon write, "The 'break-up' was only a fable" (149).

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Suggested Citation

Moloney, Ciara. "*The Biggest Thing in Show Business: Living It Up with Martin & Lewis*, by Murray Pomerance and Matthew Solomon." *Alphaville: Journal of Film and Screen Media*, no. 31, 2026, pp. 155–158. DOI: https://doi.org/10.33178/alpha.31.19.

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