

THE ASTAIRE-ROGERS SONGBOOK



Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers dancing to Herb Magidson and Con Conrad's "The Continental" in *The Gay Divorcee*

It's ironic that the most enormous chunk of the blue-chip American Songbook during Hollywood's golden age should be centered on two dancers. (Apologies to Bing Crosby, who is either the exception or the runner-up, depending on how you look at it.)

Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, in the ten movies they made together, and subsequently in Astaire's later films with other partners, are not only among the most iconic movies ever made, but feature scores by America's most lionized composers and lyricists—among them, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Dorothy Fields, Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer, Harold Arlen, Alan Jay Lerner and Burton Lane, and Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz. The list of songs includes standards like "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," "They All Laughed," "The Way You Look Tonight," "Night and Day," "A Fine Romance" and so many others embedded in our everyday consciousness that it would be impossible to list them here.

Frederick Austerlitz was born May 10, 1899, in Omaha, NB, where his father, an Austrian immigrant, worked as a brewer. Virginia Katherine McMath was born July 16, 1911, in Independence, MO, to a mother who would soon divorce her father to pursue greener pastures for her daughter's talents. (Rogers, which Ginger eventually took as her stage name, was the surname of her mother's second husband.)

Throughout the 1910s and 1920s, Fred famously teamed with his older (and, initially, many thought more talented) sister Adele, touring in vaudeville and starring on Broadway. It was there that he first met Rogers, who became a star (as did Ethel Merman) when the Gershwins cast her as the leading lady in 1930's *Girl Crazy*.

Converging again in Hollywood a few years later, after Astaire made his screen debut for MGM with Joan Crawford in *Dancing Lady*, and Rogers had her breakout film role in Warner Brothers' *42nd Street*, they both found themselves signed and teamed by RKO in 1933's *Flying Down to Rio*. Their specialty number, "Carioca" (words by Gus Kahn and Edward Eliscu, music by Vincent



On the set of *Shall We Dance*—seated: Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, George Gershwin; standing: choreographer Hermes Pan, director Mark Sandrich, Ira Gershwin, musical director Nat Shilkret. (Courtesy of Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts)

Youmans) was such a hit, their presence so engaging, that they eclipsed the movie's actual stars, Delores Del Rio and Gene Raymond. Hollywood, RKO and movie dancing would never be the same.

What followed were eight more films together for RKO guided by Pandro S. Berman, RKO's resident "Boy Wonder," and creatively led by Astaire. They revolutionized not only the way dance



Rogers and Astaire with Irving Berlin, who wrote music for *Top Hat*, *Follow the Fleet* and *Carefree*.

would be honed for the movies and the slew of photographic and technical developments that went with it; but the films themselves pioneered the nuance and sophistication of how movie musicals told their stories—

particularly in the way characters would break into song (as well as dance) to further the story (rather than the till-then norm of relegating songs to the obligatory "nightclub scene").

The films that followed—*The Gay Divorcee* (1934), *Roberta* (1935), *Top Hat* (1935), *Follow the Fleet* (1936), *Swing Time* (1936), *Shall We Dance* (1937), *Carefree* (1938) and *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939)—all (except the last) had essentially the same plot, but it didn't matter. It was the musical scores that carried the films.

And as with his reunion picture with Rogers in MGM's *The Barkleys of Broadway* (1949), the songs continued to carry Astaire through two more decades of films. His partners not only included Eleanor Powell, Rita Hayworth, Judy Garland, Ann Miller, Cyd Charisse, Jane Powell, Leslie Caron and Audrey Hepburn, but the aforementioned Berlin, Gershwins, Mercer,

et al., with whom he had ongoing personal and collaborative relationships.

A jazz pianist himself, Astaire's singing was frequently cited by composers and lyricists



Astaire and Rogers dancing to Dorothy Fields and Jerome Kern's "Pick Yourself Up" in *Swing Time*.

as the preferred interpretation of their work, because of his conversationality, attention to lyrics and phrasing, and flawless rhythmic sense. He wrote his own popular songs: his collaboration

with Mercer, "I'm Building Up to an Awful Letdown," was number four on the Hit Parade in 1936, and Benny Goodman recorded his "It's Just Like Taking Candy From a Baby." He also recorded albums of his hallmark standards, and hung out with jazz musicians, for whom he had a special affinity. His 1952 studio sessions with Oscar Peterson, released as a four-LP set called *The Astaire Story* (repackaged and available on CD) were especially notable.



Fred in rehearsal of *Shall We Dance* with George and Ira Gershwin.

Astaire, like Rogers years before him (she won a 1940 Academy Award for her dramatic performance in *Kitty Foyle*), eventually

gave up musicals for straight acting roles. But luckily not before together and separately, they changed the course of the American Songbook. Not bad for a couple of dancers.

—Deborah Grace Winer