
The Jews on Tin Pan Alley, 1910–1940

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Irving Berlin, born 1888

By the mid-1890's, many of the original [New York music] publishers had outgrown their offices and relocated. The first to do so was M. Witmark and Sons. They moved from 14th Street, at the heart of the theatre district, to an uptown area, around 28th Street. The others followed, and by the late 1890's virtually every other publisher was on or near the same street. Monroe Rosenfeld, a journalist-songwriter, described the area in a magazine article on popular music. Harry Von Tilzer, the songwriter turned publisher, had wound pieces of paper over the strings of a piano to make it give off a tinny sound that he was fond of. While visiting him to research the piece, Rosenfeld heard the piano, which gave him the title for his article, "Tin Pan Alley." From that time on, the area, and eventually the American music business in general, was known as "Tin Pan Alley." Later on, Von Tilzer claimed

that he had coined the name, but whether or not this is true, it was Rosenfeld who made it stick by giving it large circulation.

Sing a song of Tin Pan
And Cock Robin, too;
Who really scores the hit
That magnetizes you?

"I," says the lyricist,
"With my words and patter;
Take my lines away
And the rest doesn't matter."

"I," cries the composer,
"With my tune and tinkle;
Without them the song
Would be dead as Van Winkle."

The arranger looks on
With a cynical frown.
"He thinks up the tune
But I set it down."

"You?" sneers the plugger
"Go tell that to Grover.
You guys set it down,
But I put it over!"

Mr. Publisher smiles.
"And whose shekels stake it?
If it wasn't for me,
How could you fellows make it?"

From the wings speaks a ghost,
"How these kids run amuck!
Shall I tell them the truth,—
That it's me, Lady Luck?"¹

Tin Pan Alley was symbolic of the creativity that filled the music world from the 1890's to the 1940's. From hundreds of offices in several closely situated office buildings came words, music, and chaos. From the windows of the Brill Building and others, flew out songs and words

which often lasted no longer than the time it took to write them. The songs may have died, but the singing lived on.

The Golden Age

The era between the two world wars was the golden age of music in America. Many talented songwriters and lyricists turned out hundreds of popular and brilliant songs that soon spread over the entire world. In addition to creative brilliance, these luminaries all had another characteristic in common. George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Oscar Hammerstein, Richard Rodgers, Jerome Kern, Lorenz Hart, and many other major musical figures of this period were all Jews.

In the history of American popular music, each period of development has been dominated by a single group. For the years 1910 through 1940, that group was the Jews. Before the twentieth century, Jews played but a small part in the world of popular music, probably because of their small numbers, but problems in Russia and Europe at the turn of the century soon brought about an increase in Jewish immigration to America.

By 1910 there were about a million Jews in New York City alone. These new immigrants saw the theatre as a way to become Americanized. It was a school as well as an entertainment.² Moreover, while the immigrants were often poorly educated, some of them were well trained as far as a skill was concerned. Although they encountered less anti-Semitism than in Europe, still it existed, so they went into trades and fields where Jews were already active. The music and entertainment industries are two major examples.

Many of the immigrants anglicized their names: Israel Baline became Irving Berlin, Billy Rosenberg became Billy Rose, Asa Yoelson became Al Jolson. Harry Jolson wrote, "As Asa and Herschel we were Jew Boys, as Al and Harry we were Americans."³ In addition to becoming Americanized, these immigrant Jews formed the music to suit themselves. Popular songs were soaked in the wailing of the synagogue cantorial. The Yiddish singing style, with the cry in the voice and the heart on the sleeve, was typified by Al Jolson, Norah Bayes, and Sophie Tucker, the vaudeville stars who made the Tin Pan Alley songs into hits. They fused Yiddishisms into all-Americanisms. "My Mammy" may have been a Yiddishe Momma, but she was also as American as apple pie.⁴

The vaudeville circuit—by 1910 already 2,000 theatres strong—was largely dominated by Jews. The Shubert brothers—Sam, Lee, and Jake—were the sons of a Lithuanian peddler named David Szemanski who came to America in the late 1880's. The nightclub business was invented by a Jew, Jack Levy, who in 1907 induced several restaurants at which he was a patron to accept singers as entertainers during eating hours. The nightclub became a new place for songs to be heard and another place where Jews played important roles.⁵ Marcus Loewe, Adolph Zukor, and Martin Beck (Morris Meyerfeld),⁶ who founded the Orpheum circuit, all were founders of the Hollywood movie industry as well. They were joined by Louis B. Mayer, Samuel Goldwyn, the Selznicks, William Fox, and the Warner brothers. The personal style and values of these entrepreneurs was aptly described by Irving Howe:

Often vulgar, crude and overbearing, they were brilliantly attuned to the needs of their business; they commanded and used to the full a profound instinct for the common denominator of taste; and they left a deep imprint on American popular culture. Trusting their own minds and hearts, shrewd enough not to pay too much attention to the talented or cultivated men they hired, the movie moguls knew when to appeal to sentiment, which twirl of fantasy, which touch of violence, which innuendo of sexuality, would grasp the native American audiences. It was something of a miracle and a joke.⁷

Why did Jews dominate the entertainment industry? First, in part, it can be attributed to talent. Also, Jews already were in the business, and this made it easier for other Jews to enter—anti-Semitism was not so difficult a problem. As Irving Howe has noted:

Just as blacks would later turn to baseball and basketball knowing that there at least their skin color counted less than their skills, so in the early 1900's Jews broke into vaudeville because here too people asked not, who are you? but what can you do? It was a roughneck sort of egalitarianism, with little concern for those who might go under, but at best it gave the people a chance to show their gifts.⁸

No matter how one views the American song industry, the Jews cannot be left out. Jews were certainly prominent among songwriters, lyricists, performers, and publishers of songs. They contributed a distinct Jewish flavor and style that added much to the flavor of popular music.

As early as 1903 performers were taking the songs of the day and adding Yiddish dialect to them.⁹ Irving Berlin ably represented the newcomers, but there were many others as well, among them Jerome Kern, Berlin's contemporary. Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Harold Arlen, Oscar Hammerstein, and many others continued the trend and contributed to the glory that is Tin Pan Alley. Alexander Woolcott, summing up the contribution of Berlin and other Jews to American music, said: "And if anyone, on hearing Jerome Kern say that Irving Berlin is American music, is then so fatuous as to object on the ground that he was born in Russia, it might be pointed out that if the musical interpreter of American civilization came over in the foul hold of a ship, so did American civilization."¹⁰

Not quite so high class, but just as important musically, was the contribution of Jews to burlesque—not the minstrel shows or the type of burlesque in which Weber and Fields or, earlier, Harrigan and Hart had starred, but the burlesque that showcased beautiful females in various states of undress involved with dance and fancy sets. From this type of entertainment came the striptease and off-color shows known as burlesque today.

By the early years of the 1900's the format of burlesque had been set. This included "blackouts"—quick skits followed by a short period of darkness in which to change the scenes—then "German" or "Jewish" comedians, followed by slapstick, dancing, and lots of girls.

Al Shean of Gallagher and Shean got his start in burlesque (he was the uncle of the Marx brothers). Eddie Cantor first received public attention by performing in one of the amateur nights that became a burlesque tradition. Sophie Tucker changed from being a "coon caller" in blackface to performing in whiteface with the advent of burlesque.

Fanny Brice also started as a coon singer. In 1910 she asked Irving Berlin to provide some specialty material for her. Let her tell the story:

Irving took me in the back room and he played "Sadie Salome" . . . a Jewish comedy song. . . . So, of course, Irving sang "Sadie Salome" with a Jewish accent. I didn't even understand Jewish, couldn't speak a word of it. But I thought, if that's the way Irving sings, that's the way I'll sing it. Well, I came out and did "Sadie Salome" for the first time ever doing a Jewish accent. And that starched sailor suit is

killing me. And it's gathering you know where, and I'm trying to squirm it away, and singing and smiling, and the audience is loving it. They think it's an act I'm doing, so as long as they're laughing I keep it up. They start to throw roses at me."¹¹

The song changed Fanny Brice from a balladeer to a comedienne, as well as the outstanding interpreter of Yiddish comedy songs. As a result of this performance, Florenz Ziegfeld signed her for the *Follies of 1910*.

Although not as important as the songs in other genres of show business, the songs that were used in burlesque received great exposure. As Alex Wilder notes in his history of American popular music, "To place a song in a burlesque show was the infallible method of establishing a hit and insuring great profits. The runs were long and by the time one show after another presented a song, the whole country knew the tune by heart."¹²

Florenz Ziegfeld played an enormous role in the history of burlesque and its higher-class sister, the Broadway revue. The more successful he became, the less popular he seemed to be. "To know him was to dislike him" became the music world's pet phrase when describing Ziegfeld.¹³ There is a question as to Ziegfeld's religion. Several sources claim he was Jewish, others deny it; there is no question, however, that Ziegfeld's first wife was Jewish and that he provided the beginning for many Jewish talents. For that reason if no other, he is included here.

Born on March 21, 1868, in Chicago, Ziegfeld was the son of Dr. Florenz Ziegfeld, president and founder of the Chicago Musical College, which he had begun the year before his son's birth. Ziegfeld Senior's contemporary, George Ade Davis, referred to him as "one of the most picturesque figures in the history of musical development in America, a pioneer who has lived to see the successful combination of his labors, to watch the growth, the budding and the blossoming of musical development and even to see the matured and ripened fruit as well. His autograph across the pages of musical history will never be defaced."¹⁴

Florenz Ziegfeld the younger began his impresario career at the 1893 Chicago Columbian Exposition, where he assisted his father in importing acts for the main show. His first efforts were enormous disasters, costing him his job. He regained his position by signing an act called "Sandow the Great," a handsome young muscle-builder able to lift

automobiles and houses and to withstand three elephants walking across his chest. Ziegfeld achieved a major public relations coup when he invited Mrs. Potter Palmer, Chicago socialite and grande dame, to visit Sandow after the show to inspect his musculature. The news of her favorable reaction created a sensation, providing Ziegfeld with a ten-times-improved box office.

Ziegfeld's next achievement was the signing of the Gallic idol Anna Held, a Polish Jew by birth, but the quintessence of French spice and personality. Her great success in American theatre and music included a song called "It's Delightful to Be Married," which she wrote for her show *The Parisian Model* (1906). Anna Held was married to her producer, Florenz Ziegfeld. When publicity was waning, Ziegfeld invented the story that she took daily milk baths to improve her beauty and skin tone. Immediately dairies noted an increase in milk sales, and the publicity carried both Held and Ziegfeld to great notoriety with the public.

Using the *Folies-Bergère* as his model and his French wife as the impetus, Ziegfeld decided to create an American follies to rival the famous French version. In 1907 he achieved this dream, and with only three exceptions, a *Ziegfeld Follies* would brighten the stage of New York for each of the next twenty-five years. Ziegfeld set out to make the "Follies girls" synonymous with taste and beauty, but he did not skimp on sets, costumes, or talent. He always hired the best, and his shows attained such prestige that his booking of Ed Wynn, W. C. Fields, Fanny Brice, Harry Ruby, Irving Berlin, Leo Edwards, and Eddie Cantor gave their respective careers a push no one else could have given. Such songs as "My Blue Heaven," "A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody" (by Irving Berlin), which became the *Follies* theme song, "Peg O' My Heart," and "Mr. Gallagher—Mr. Shean" were all *Follies* numbers. Jerome Kern, Rudolf Friml, Gus Edwards, Louis A. Hirsch, and Jean Schwartz were among the men who wrote for Ziegfeld.

When something was popular, there were always those who would borrow on the success and create their own. The directions for writing commercial popular music said, "one should fashion a song around a previous hit; to use the model as a take off. Then the chances would be that you'll finish up with something different enough to be choice, but not avant garde."¹⁵ Similarly, Ziegfeld provided the model for the theatre-music world's most successful entrepreneurs, the brothers Shubert.

Levi, Sam, and Jacob Szemanski, who became Lee, Sam, and J. J. Shubert, came from the most poverty-stricken of backgrounds. Their father, David Szemanski, was a Lithuanian peddler who fled from his hometown of Shervient to England and then to the United States.¹⁶ The most difficult problem for David was his drinking—most of the profits from his peddling went to buy whiskey.¹⁷ Nonetheless, within a short time he earned enough money to bring his family of six children (Fanny, Sarah, and Dora were the other three) and his wife to America.

Upon the family's arrival in New York in 1882, an immigration officer somehow recorded the name of David Szemanski from Shervient as David Shurbent. Apparently the script was hard to read, and various other officials subsequently changed it to Shurbart, then to Shobart, and finally to Shubert.

The Shubert brothers individually were men of great intelligence, humorlessness, and drive. Each handled a different part of their operation. J.J. was the producer-businessman, Lee the producer-artist, and Sam the international traveling real estate agent and talent scout. Although most of their productions were labeled the "Messrs. Shubert," it was largely the results of Lee's efforts which the audience viewed on stage. Fred and Adele Astaire began their careers in a Shubert show, the revue *Over the Top*, with music by Sigmund Romberg. In 1912 the Shuberts opened their competition to Ziegfeld's *Follies*, the *Passing Show*. They attempted to hire away various Ziegfeld talents, including Ed Wynn, the composers Hirsch and Schwartz, as well as the aforementioned Sigmund Romberg. Ziegfeld eventually lost the competition, as did anyone who challenged the Shubert domination of musical theatre, when the brothers bought him out and began presenting *The Shubert Ziegfeld Follies*. In 1924, due to competition from the new musical comedies as well as other more modern and innovative revues, the *Follies* and *Passing Show* revues went out of business. By the late 1920's, the revue format passed from public favor.

The Shuberts were the most powerful force in the theatre-music world in the first fifty years of the twentieth century. There was hardly a city in the country which did not sport a Shubert theatre; New York had more than six, Chicago, three. With enormous booking power came artistic power. By the beginning of World War I, virtually all the great theatrical musical talent in the United States was under Shubert control. Tin Pan Alley was the most famous Alley in New York; Shubert Alley was second.

Another theatrical opportunity for music was the “extravaganza.” The Shuberts contributed greatly to the extravaganzas when they built the Wintergarden Theatre in 1911. The production that opened the building began with a Spanish ballet, followed by a Chinese opera; but what made the evening really historical was the third piece— “La Belle Paree,” written by a newcomer to the theatre, Jerome Kern.

Another debut in “La Belle Paree” was Asa Yoelson, by then known as Al Jolson. He was born in Srednicke, Lithuania, in 1886, the son of Moses Yoelson, a chazan who later worked in New York, then in Washington, D.C.¹⁸ As a young man Al once sang along with the audience when Eddie Leonard was doing his rendition of “Ida, Sweet as Apple Cider.” The resulting appreciative applause told him that he had found his profession.

By 1909 Al Jolson had become the chief attraction of the Lew Dockstader Minstrels, and the next year he was a headliner at Hammerstein’s Victoria in New York. Even at this young age, he was a polished performer. He would stop in the middle of a show and come downstage to ask the audience if they wouldn’t rather hear some of his own favorites instead of the songs in the show—more often than not, they agreed. The newspapers noted the innovation, as did the audiences, and Jolson’s performances became very popular.

This crowd-pleasing technique was made into a permanent attraction when Shubert’s Wintergarden Theatre began Sunday afternoon concerts where Jolson could sing whatever songs he chose. Although originally a blackface performer, he would appear at these concerts in whiteface. During one of his performances in the Jean Schwartz musical *The Honeymoon Express*, Jolson was suffering from a painful ingrown toenail. To relieve the pain, he went down on one knee and threw out his arms for balance. To the audience it appeared as if he was embracing the entire group and they loved it. The gesture became a Jolson trademark.

Jolson wrote some of the songs he made famous, most notably “California—Here I Come,” and introduced several all-time greats, such as “Swanee,” “Rock-A-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody,” “Toot, Toot, Tootsie, Goodbye,” and “April Showers.” Born to poverty and begging for nickels, he left an estate of \$4 million when he died in 1950.¹⁹

One of Jolson’s favorite lyricists was the German-Jewish refugee Gus



Sophie Tucker, 1884–1966



Al Jolson, 1886–1950

Kahn. Born in Koblenz on November 6, 1886, Kahn came to the United States in 1891 and grew up in Chicago. He began publishing specialty material in 1908 and in 1927 wrote his most famous show, *Whoopee*, for Eddie Cantor. “Love Me or Leave Me” came from *Whoopee*, but Kahn was responsible for many other hits, including “Toot, Toot, Tootsie,” “It Had to Be You,” “Yes, Sir, That’s My Baby,” and “Ain’t We Got Fun.”²⁰

Kahn wrote several of his songs with composer Walter Donaldson, the two most famous being “My Buddy” and “Nothing Could Be Finer Than to Be in Carolina in the Morning.” The story is told that Kahn and Donaldson were in the Kahn living room one day attempting to write songs. Suddenly, when Kahn’s son, Donald, started yelling “dada, dada, dada,” their concentration was interrupted. Kahn angrily stomped into the room where the boy was playing, calling to Donaldson, “I’ll stop him, Walt, don’t worry!” “No wait, Gus!” shouted Donaldson. He sat down at the piano and repeated the phrase the boy had played on his toy guitar. The two men listened as if with new ears, and in short order the simple phrase was turned into the basis for the ever-popular “Carolina in the Morning.”²¹ Little Donald later became a well-known songwriter in his own right.

Gus Kahn was once asked why so many “songboys” wrote about the

South, as he had with "Carolina in the Morning." He replied that Southern place- and state-names lent themselves to rhyming, but more than that, "Our song boys are of the North. Paradise is never where we are. The South has become our never, never land, the symbol of the land where the lotus blossoms and dreams come true."²²

If blossoms and lotus were unnatural to the surroundings of Broadway, so was the operetta. Conceived originally in Europe, this musical genre had great success in America. Its original sources, ranging from Gilbert and Sullivan to Offenbach, invaded America, gaining musical success and sheet music sales.

Before long so-called Americans were creating domestic versions of the European imports. Sigmund Romberg, mentioned earlier, was the greatest of the operetta composers, but there were others. Emmerich Kalman, a Jew who was born in Siofok, Hungary, in 1882, blended his native Hungarian music with the grace of the Viennese operetta. His best works in America fused the classical and jazz styles; *The Duchess of Chicago* and *The Violets of Montmart* were the most successful. His original American effort was *Parisian Love*. The show opened at the Shulman and Goldberg Public Theatre in New York. Though it played only on Friday, Saturday, and Sunday evenings, and Saturday and Sunday matinees, this was enough to make a profit and Kalman's reputation.²³

Another composer who began in operetta but went into regular Tin Pan Alley popular songwriting was Gustave Kerker, born in Herford, Westphalia, Germany, on February 28, 1857. His family settled in Louisville, Kentucky, in 1867, and Kerker began writing a few years later. His most famous songs were "Forty Miles from Schenectady to Troy," "The Belle of New York," and "The Telephone Girl." He died in New York on June 29, 1923.

By the 1930's operetta was passé. The Broadway musical had taken its place. The greatest of the operetta composers, Romberg, died in 1950, the last of the operetta composers in America.

The second decade of the twentieth century was much faster than the first. The auto was already the established means of locomotion, and motion pictures were beginning to compete with the shows people could see on stage. Ragtime, which had already affected melody as well as rhythm as a syncopation device, suddenly created a new musical experiment, jazz.²⁴ Harry Von Tilzer wrote "I'll Lend You Everything

I've Got Except My Wife (And I'll Make You a Present of Her)." Jean Schwartz and Bert Kalmar continued the Hawaiian craze by writing "Hello Hawaii, How Are You." Suddenly all the hits were Oriental- or foreign-sounding songs. "Siam," "Bom Bombay," and Rudolph Friml's "Allah's Holiday" were the songs of 1915.

All these songs had one thing in common, they were danceable, for the period from 1910 to 1920 was a time when America went dance mad. Earlier, the most popular songs had been waltzes, and the crooners often accented and lengthened the songs so that they became difficult to dance to. Songs had many choruses and several verses because they had to tell a story. By the mid-decade, though, if you couldn't dance to a song, it couldn't achieve any success. The year 1911 even saw the first "Castle Walk" wedding, named after the two greatest dance partners in America, Irene and Vernon Castle. It all took place at the wedding of an Eizendrath to a Stein!²⁵

Sophistication was in, the natural life was out. There were always a few jeers at the hicks; New Yorker-Russian Irving Berlin wrote about "Farmer Brown raising the dickens, in a cabaret far from cows and chickens. . . . This is the Life!" (1914). Even the stately dances of the 1880's attended by high society returned as a source of musical inspiration: "At the Ragtime Ball," "At the Old Maids' Ball," even "At the Yiddish Society Ball."²⁶

Sadly, the idyllic simplicity and classic sophistication of those years did not last. With the assassination of Archduke Francis Ferdinand of Austria by a Serbian nationalist in 1914, political events got in the way. War broke out between Austria and Serbia. It didn't take long for Germany, England, France, and Russia to be drawn in; and with their involvement came a series of changes in the music of Tin Pan Alley.

First there was a spate of patriotic songs, such as Harry Von Tilzer's "Under the American Flag" and Edgar Leslie and Archie Gottler's "America, I Love You." Tin Pan Alley was in a bit of a quandary, however. There was an enormous need for music, yet despite the desire to "make the world safe for democracy" there were many on the Alley who were convinced that the Central Powers, Germany and Austria-Hungary, would be the victors. Furthermore, they recognized that many Americans favored the Germans, perceiving them as a "comfy people" who made and enjoyed the comforts of life, like beer, hot dogs, and hamburgers. Germans were seen, as well, as friendly, cheerful, and

even as lovers. No one was more "all-American" than Irving Berlin, yet in 1914 he wrote, "Oh, How That German Could Love."²⁷

Still others on Tin Pan Alley were distinctly pacifist, using music as an outlet for their political views with such songs as "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier" and "Our Hats Off to You, Mr. President" (which praised President Wilson for his 1916 campaign promise to keep America out of war). In opposition were the more martial songs. Several of these parodied the pacifist songs. "I Did Not Raise My Boy to Be a Coward" and "I Didn't Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier, I'll Send My Daughter to Be a Nurse" are good examples.

April 2, 1917, saw President Wilson, who had vowed to keep us out of war, ask a cheering Congress for a declaration of war against the Germans. Recognizing the martial value of songs, the War Industries Board allowed supplies of paper to be provided for the music publishers. As an economy measure, however, the long sheets on which music had formerly been printed were replaced with shorter ones; moreover, instead of the art work of peacetime, now there were war slogans; "Eat more fish, cheese, eggs and poultry. Save beef, pork and mutton for our fighters."²⁸

It is interesting and not surprising that the songs of the war years had many of the same themes as the prewar songs, transposed to a different setting. The ballad songs of separation were the most popular. Lew Brown and Albert Von Tilzer wrote "I May Be Gone for a Long Time" and "Au Revoir But Not Goodbye, Soldier Boy." "Hello Central, Give Me No Man's Land," by Lewis, Young, and Jerome, told about a young child calling her daddy, who is stationed overseas. The similarity to Charles K. Harris's "Hello Central, Give Me Heaven" was intentional.

Of course there were specialty numbers during the war years, songs of humor and lightness. The musical *Sinbad*, from which George Gershwin and Irving Caesar's "Swanee" came, as well as "Hello Central, Give Me No Man's Land," also included "How'd You Like to Be My Daddy" by Sam Lewis, Joe Young, and Ted Snyder.

Sam Lewis was born in New York on October 25, 1885. After working days as a runner for a brokerage house while singing in cafes at night, he turned to writing his own material as well as songs for Lew Dockstader's Minstrels and Van and Schenck. His partner, Joe Young, was born in New York on July 4, 1889. Young began his show business

career as a card boy in a vaudeville house, placing the name cards of the different acts on the marquee, and then worked as a song plugger. He died in 1939. Some of the songs Lewis and Young wrote together rank among the standards of Tin Pan Alley, including "Rock-A-Bye Your Baby with a Dixie Melody," "Five Foot Two, Eyes of Blue," "How You Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm," "My Mammy" (with Al Jolson), "Dinah," and "I'm Sitting on Top of the World."

Ted Snyder, the third partner, was born in Freeport, Illinois, on August 15, 1881. He began as a cafe pianist and opened his own publishing house in 1908. Later he merged with Irving Berlin's publishing house and retired to California to run a nightclub. His most famous songs were "The Sheik of Araby," which he wrote with Billy Rose in honor of Rudolph Valentino, and "Who's Sorry Now?"

Harry Von Tilzer wrote another comedy-type song with "Buy a Liberty Bond for the Baby," but the master of the comedy song was Irving Berlin. "They Were All Out of Step Except Jim," "Oh How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning," and "I'm Gonna Pin My Medal on the Girl I Left Behind" all came from Berlin's primary musical contribution to the war effort, the show *Yip Yip Yaphank*. Berlin's music was parodied by some of his competitors—for example, the song "When Alexander Takes His Ragtime Band to France," written by Cliff Hess and Edgar Leslie in 1918. The lyrics ran as follows;

When Alexander takes his ragtime band to France,
He'll capture every Hun, and take them one by one.
Those ragtime tunes will put the Germans in a trance;
They'll throw their guns away, Hip Hooray,
and start right in to dance.

They'll get so excited they'll come over the top,
Two step back to Berlin with a skip and a hop.
Old Hindenburg will know he has no chance,
("I haff nein Chaaance!")
When Alexander takes his ragtime band to France.²⁹

Together with E. Ray Goetz, Irving Berlin's brother-in-law, Leslie also wrote one of the most popular songs of the war years, "For Me and My Gal."

Leo Feist was the chief publisher of war songs. When the war was

almost over, he began to look for another enemy to replace the Kaiser and the Germans. He chose the so-called enemy within the country. Feist songs encouraged citizens to "Knock the bull out of the Bolshevik. With anarchy and bloodshed, our freedom's at stake, so let's wipe out each cause of it and trample on the snake."

Feist was not the only composer-publisher planning for the aftermath of the war. Jack Yellen and George Meyer wrote a series of songs dedicated to the return of "the boys." "Everytime he looks at me, he makes me feel so unnecessary. Oh, just think of it Clarice, he spent two months in Paris, and Oh! Oh! Johnny's in town." It soon became clear that the public wanted no more war songs or righteous morality songs; the twenties were coming and with them the "normalcy" of Warren Harding. But not before Billy Rose wrote a stirring epitaph to the returning soldiers.

Rose was born William Rosenberg, on the Lower East Side of New York, on September 6, 1899.³⁰ He began his career as a stenographer, becoming chief of the stenographic department of the War Industries Board. His first song, "Barney Google" (with Con Conrad), was an enormous hit, allowing him to produce and write for others as well as himself. His songs included "That Old Gang of Mine," "It's Only a Paper Moon," "Me and My Shadow," which he supposedly wrote with Al Jolson (in truth Jolson got credit because he had successfully plugged the song and it was a legal way to pay him off), and "I Found a Million Dollar Baby in a Five and Ten Cent Store." After becoming a producer, critic, and newspaper columnist, Rose went into the nightclub business. He died in 1966.

Billy Rose's songs sounded the death knell for the one-finger composers of early Tin Pan Alley. Soon they were replaced by more creative composers and lyricists who were better versed in classical formal music and words. It was not a coincidence that Romberg, Kern, Gershwin, and Rodgers were thorough musicians as well as tune men.³¹ Their time was to come.

Between the Wars

The war to end all wars was over and Americans wanted no more songs that would depress them or remind them of the years they had just suffered through. The warmth, sentimentality, and remembrance of

things past of the prewar years suddenly became a mad desire to do anything, absolutely anything, that was new. To live for today was the theme of the decade known as the "roaring twenties." Morality, at least the morality that had been the norm in the first decade of the twentieth century, was gone, and in its place came the flappers and the so-called flaming youth. Love was free, and as the greatest of the non-Jewish composer-lyricists, Cole Porter, said in 1934, "Anything Goes." Hedonism was the way; fads came and went; there seemed to be no end to the prosperity people were enjoying. Movies became an entertainment norm, and film stars became the gods and goddesses of the day.

For Jews, the 1920's were a good time to be in the music business, at least as far as working on Tin Pan Alley was concerned, but out on the road, things were much more difficult. Even so great a theatre personage as George M. Cohan, the great "Yankee Doodle Boy" and Irish Catholic, was barred from a hotel because he was presumed to be Jewish.³² The management of New York City's Claridge Hotel offered a five-dollar bill to any Jew who would willingly leave after registering. This action caused the hotel's closing. In addition to such instances of actual discrimination, the image of the Jew in the songs of the day was not terribly flattering. Jews were presented as money-grubbing, hand-rubbing old men who wore crepe hair and ran pawnshops. Sadly, the Jews of Tin Pan Alley helped to perpetuate this stereotype. A popular song mentioned earlier, "At the Yiddishe Society Ball," typified the rather anti-Jewish stereotypes of the period. The lyric told of "Abie Stein ordering some wine when he knows he is broke," and when the waiter brings it, Stein says, "Can't you take a joke?" Louis Fink, who thinks he's smart, says, "Bring me some more a la carte," and all the guests go around the hall "trottin' for nothing."³³

But the 1920's also saw some big changes on Tin Pan Alley, for a new form of entertainment had begun sweeping the country, the movies. Soon movie companies began purchasing the great publishing houses; for example, Warner Brothers purchased Remick and Company, obtaining all the songs Remick had published, and all the staff composers as well. Harry Warren and Al Dubin, who went along in the deal, helped to create several of Warner's greatest movie musicals with such songs as "42nd Street" and "I Only Have Eyes for You."

At the same time that Tin Pan Alley was spreading into New York's theatre district, much of the Alley's talent was moving out west to



George Gershwin, 1898–1937



Ira Gershwin, born 1896

*Richard Rodgers, 1902–1979
and Lorenz Hart, 1895–1943*



Oscar Hammerstein II, 1895–1960



California. By the end of the 1920's, with the advent of the "talkies," the movie industry began to undergo a revolutionary transformation that greatly increased the role of popular music in film-making.³⁴ Tin Pan Alley had been important to the movies before then, however, for silent films had needed the services of tunesmiths who could turn out the mood music and melodic underscoring needed to take up the attention of audiences in the absence of sound tracks. Even so great a talent as Victor Herbert provided music for the "flickers." At times the music was more memorable than the movie itself. One such example was Herbert's score for D. W. Griffith's sequel to his masterpiece *Birth of a Nation*, entitled *The Fall of a Nation*. A critic for *Musical America* wrote, "It is not only synchronized with the picture but its rhythms are in absolute accord with the tempo of the action. Mr. Herbert's stimulating score clearly indicated the marked advance that music is making in the domain of photoplay and should prove encouraging to composers who have not yet tried their hand at this type of work."³⁵

Song pluggers from Tin Pan Alley recognized that the movies represented an as yet untried field for selling their songs. Song slides, amateur nights, anything which could sell songs was attempted. "Ramona," the most successful song from a movie in the twenties, was written by L. Wolfe Gilbert in 1927. In the film of the same name, it was sung by Dolores Del Rio, the star and title character, accompanied by Paul Whiteman's orchestra. The recording of "Ramona" sold over 2 million discs. With this song came changes that altered the popular music industry forever.

Al Jolson was the first performer to benefit from the screen's conversion to sound. His famous movie *The Jazz Singer*, a film version of the Broadway play by Samson Raphaelson, was the first talkie. The story is by now famous. A young man gives up his father's dream that he become a synagogue cantor and instead chooses a career as a jazz singer. On the evening of Yom Kippur, when the elderly father is lying on his deathbed, the wayward son returns to chant Kol Nidrei. *The Jazz Singer* was an enormous success and proved beyond doubt that sound films were to be a permanent entertainment feature. It grossed over \$3 million, an unheard-of sum in those days.

Within two years, in 1929, came the first composer and lyricist team who wrote just for the movies. Irving Thalberg, the director of production at Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, decided to have original music for his

film *The Broadway Melody*. To write the lyrics, he chose Arthur Freed.

Freed was born Arthur Grossman in Charleston, South Carolina, on September 9, 1894. He began his education at one of America's best private schools, the Exeter Academy in New Hampshire. After working as a piano demonstrator for a Chicago music house, he became a songwriter. This resulted in his association with the Gus Edwards revues and the Marx Brothers, who were touring the country in a vaudeville show accompanied by their mother, Minnie.

With Louis Silver, Freed wrote songs and shows for New York restaurants. After World War I Freed and Silver went to Seattle and then to Los Angeles, where they managed a theatre. It was in this position that Freed began writing his own material for shows which he himself produced. He went on to become a lyricist, author, and motion picture producer of great fame and repute. His name generally meant a class production with great attention to style.³⁶ His song lyrics, such as "You Were Meant for Me," "Singing in the Rain," and "You Are My Lucky Star," exhibited the same characteristics. Eventually Freed became the producer directly in charge of all MGM movie musicals.³⁷

Sigmund Romberg, the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart, Jerome Kern, even Maurice Ravel, went to Hollywood to write for the movies. Gus Kahn, Howard Dietz, and Leo Robin also moved from the stage to the screen. By 1929, even the king of Tin Pan Alley, Irving Berlin, had traveled westward. His influence was all-encompassing; he contributed several of the greatest hits ever recorded for films, including "Cheek to Cheek," "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm," "White Christmas," "The Easter Parade," and "The Night Is Filled With Music." His talent was recognized in the first movie to feature the music of only one composer, *Alexander's Ragtime Band*. All the great Berlin hits from the stage were included, which allowed an entirely new group of people to hear and enjoy them.

George and Ira Gershwin went to Hollywood in 1930 but soon returned to New York. They went back two years later. At the insistence of their old friend Fred Astaire, they were hired to write several musicals. The songs for these movies rank among the finest written by the pair: "They Can't Take That Away from Me," "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," "A Foggy Day in London Town," "Love Walked Right In," and lastly, "Our Love Is Here to Stay." George Gershwin died while working on his fourth movie.

A composer who wrote primarily for the movies was Harold Arlen. Born in Buffalo, New York, on February 15, 1905, Arlen, whose original name was Hyman Arluck, was the son of a cantor. He reached the top of the songwriting business with movies like *The Wizard of Oz* and *Cabin in the Sky* and stage musicals like *Bloomer Girl* and *St. Louis Woman*.

Arlen's partner and lyricist, E. Y. "Yip" Harburg, was equally successful in Hollywood and on Broadway. Harburg was born in New York City on April 8, 1898, and was educated in the public school system. After graduating college he wrote poetry for popular magazines and edited the magazine of New York's City College. Subsequently, he worked in South America as an agent for a firm that went bankrupt soon after his arrival. Harburg held down several more jobs in South America and in 1921 returned to the United States, where he opened an electrical supply company. When his business failed during the depression, he turned to songwriting. He said later, "I had my fill of this dreamy abstract thing called business and I decided to face reality by writing lyrics."³⁸

Write lyrics Harburg certainly did. First, for the stage, he wrote several revues and shows, including *Finian's Rainbow*, *Bloomer Girl*, *Life Begins at 8:40*, and *Flahooley*. His greatest success was in the movies, where he wrote the lyrics and/or screenplays for *The Wizard of Oz*, *Cabin in the Sky*, and *Gold Diggers of 1936*. Among his numerous great song hits were "April in Paris," "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?" "Old Devil Moon," and "How Are Things in Glocca Morra?" His career also encompassed stage directing and film producing.

It should not be thought that the growth of the movies in the twenties caused the Broadway musical to die. Nothing could be further from the truth. In 1924 and 1925 alone there were forty-six musicals on Broadway, each of them a variation on the "gals and gags" theme of burlesque and the revue. The 1920's, in fact, was the golden age of Broadway. The revue, which reached maturity through the efforts of Florenz Ziegfeld, enjoyed its full glory, although the *Ziegfeld Follies* of the 1920's were not as bright as the earlier versions, and competition set in. Along with the Shuberts came other revue-type shows, most notably George White's *Scandals of 1919*. It was White who gave George Gershwin his start, allowing him to write the *Scandals* of 1920 through 1924. Among the more than forty songs in these shows were two of Gershwin's

greatest: "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise" and "Somebody Loves Me."

Gershwin left the *George White Scandals* in 1924 to write musical comedy and more serious music, and he was replaced by the team of De Sylva, Brown, and Henderson. Lew Brown, born in Odessa, Russia, on December 10, 1893, came to New York with his family at age five. He was educated in the New York public schools and for fun wrote parodies of popular songs. His first hit as a songwriter came in 1912 with "I'm the Loneliest Gal in Town." The music was by Albert Von Tilzer. After several years with Von Tilzer, Brown met Ray Henderson, and the two men went into partnership in publishing as well as songwriting. Buddy De Sylva was the third member of the team. After a period of success in the publishing business they sold their firm and left for Hollywood. Among their top songs were "Life Is Just a Bowl of Cherries," "The Best Things in Life Are Free," "Don't Sit Under the Apple Tree," and "You're the Cream in My Coffee."

Irving Berlin continued to have a great influence on the stage musicals of the period. His *Music Box Revue* was housed in an entirely new theatre that he and Sam H. Harris built especially for it. All the songs for the first show in 1921 were written by Berlin, and they were brilliantly received. The most outstanding was "Say It With Music." Three editions of the *Revue* followed, with such songs as "What'll I Do" and "All Alone."

The most innovative and witty musical revue of the pre-1940 years was *As Thousands Cheer* in 1933, with book by Berlin and Moss Hart. The story line was based on the pages of a newspaper, with news stories and features represented in song. Berlin wrote "The Easter Parade," "Heat Wave," and "Supper Time" for this show. The characters included Franklin D. Roosevelt, Gandhi, Douglas Fairbanks, and John D. Rockefeller, Sr.

Very interestingly, the revue saw another change in the usual ethnic makeup. In 1928, Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh wrote the songs for an all-black revue entitled *Blackbirds of 1928*. Among the songs in this show were "Doin' the New Low Down," "I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby," and "Diga, Diga Doo."

Dorothy Fields, born in Allenhurst, New Jersey, on July 15, 1905, was the daughter of Lew Fields, of Weber and Fields fame, as well as the sister of Joseph and Herbert Fields, who became famous as librettists

for musicals. She began her professional career as an art teacher in a New York high school, and also wrote poetry for magazines, but was directed into songwriting by composer J. Fred Coots.

Although Fields's first efforts were, by her own admission, terrible, she did not lose faith and continued her work. She met her first partner, Jimmy McHugh, while working for the Mills publishing company. When their initial assignment proved a failure, they were given another, to write the *Blackbirds* show mentioned above. Although the show was not an immediate hit with the critics, Fields and McHugh waived their royalties to help it continue. Only after the institution of a Thursday midnight show did the revue catch on and become the biggest hit of the season. "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" went on to sell 3 million copies of sheet music.

Dorothy Fields became famous as a librettist, book writer, and lyricist. She collaborated with some of the most famous names in Broadway history, among them Jerome Kern, Sigmund Romberg, Harold Arlen, Arthur Schwartz, Burton Lane, and Cy Coleman. Her songs included "On the Sunny Side of the Street," "I'm in the Mood for Love," "A Fine Romance," and "The Way You Look Tonight."

Always "au courant," as she liked to describe herself, Fields wrote hit shows in every decade from the 1920's through the 1970's, all in the style of the day. Undoubtedly her greatest achievement was the book and libretto she and her brother wrote for Irving Berlin's *Annie Get Your Gun*. Though the show is thirty-five years old, it is still regarded as the quintessence of the Broadway musical. Also active in civic and Jewish philanthropies,³⁹ Fields never retired, and she died while in the midst of writing a new set of lyrics for a show to follow her last hit, *Seesaw*. She was far and away the most famous woman to write for the Broadway musical or for Tin Pan Alley.

Appropriately, one of Dorothy Fields's collaborators began his career very soon after she did. Arthur Schwartz was a successful lawyer and author before he decided to contribute to a new kind of revue which made its debut in 1922–23. Called the *Grand Street Follies*, it was a slimmed-down show with little or no scenery or fancy costumes, relying instead on wit and satire. The show was advertised as "A Lowbrow Show for Highbrow Morons." Far from that, it was so successful that it moved from off-Broadway to a regular theatre and ran through several different "editions."

Schwartz was born on November 25, 1900, in Brooklyn, where he lived most of his early life. He attended Brooklyn public schools and received both his B.A. and his law degree from New York University. Before becoming a lawyer, Schwartz taught English literature at a high school and wrote songs for NYU. From 1924, when as a Phi Beta Kappa he was accepted into the bar, until 1928, Schwartz was a fairly successful lawyer. In 1928 he began writing songs professionally. He was also a librettist and producer of movies and plays. Among his shows were *The Band Wagon*, *Stars in Your Eyes*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, and *Inside U.S.A.*, which he also produced. His songs were equally numerous: "Dancing in the Dark," "You and the Night and the Music," "I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan," and "Something to Remember You By."

Schwartz's talents were seen in many avenues; but more than his own ability, he fostered a type of show which affected all of Broadway. The big musical revues, with enormous sets, costumes, and budgets, were on the way out. In their place came smaller, more intimate shows like those written by Schwartz. For instance, a group of young members of the Theatre Guild collectively wrote the *Garrick Gaieties of 1925*. Among the songs and skits were parodies of Broadway plays and of prominent actors and actresses. Herbert Fields served as the choreographer, and two of the new contributors who enjoyed hearing their first songs on Broadway were Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. "Manhattan" and "Mountain Greenery," the great Rodgers and Hart hits of the first two *Garrick* shows, were a taste of the brilliant theatre songs this team was to produce. The team of Rodgers and Hart set the pace for Broadway from that day until fifteen years later when they split up.

The *Little Shows* were sophisticated small revues much like Gus Edwards's earlier *School Days*. They helped introduce Fred Allen, Libby Holman, and several other unknowns to the world of Broadway by highlighting their special talents. The experienced performer of the troupe was Clifton Webb. All of the sketches and songs were written by Howard Dietz, who was later to achieve fame as Arthur Schwartz's lyricist.

Dietz was born in New York on September 8, 1896. He went to public school and then to Columbia University, where his classmates included Oscar Hammerstein II and Lorenz Hart. Dietz became a contributor and editor of the Columbia newspaper and also wrote for

several local New York papers. After winning a \$500 prize, Dietz went into the advertising business. In 1924 he became advertising director and promotion manager for MGM, where he stayed for thirty years, eventually becoming vice-president. All during these years he wrote lyrics, first with Jerome Kern, and most successfully with Arthur Schwartz. His songs included "Body and Soul," "Dancing in the Dark," and "Louisiana Hayride." He is also remembered for his English lyrics to the Strauss operetta *Die Fledermaus*, the standard translation in use even today.

Vernon Duke, whose original name was Vladimir Dukelsky, was a unique man who combined classical training with Tin Pan Alley. Born in Pskoff, Russia, on October 10, 1903, Duke studied composition and eventually entered the Kiev Conservatory of Music. As a result of the Russian Revolution, he left Russia in 1920 and went into classical music professionally. He began in Constantinople at the YMCA, where he came across the music to "Swanee" by George Gershwin and Irving Caesar. He was so interested that upon his arrival in New York, he called Gershwin, who then became his mentor. Gershwin even helped Dukelsky to anglicize his name to Vernon Duke. By 1932 Duke had written his most famous song, "April in Paris," with lyricist E. Y. Harburg. His other great songs include "Autumn in New York," "Taking a Chance on Love," and "Cabin in the Sky." His numerous classical compositions, which he wrote under the name Vladimir Dukelsky, ranged from concerti to symphonies, with music for the piano, cello, flute, and bassoon.

The 1920's and 1930's saw musicals by the men who today are viewed as the masters: Jerome Kern, Oscar Hammerstein, George and Ira Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Lew Brown, Irving Berlin, and Kurt Weill. Weill was born in Dessau, Germany, on March 2, 1900, and received a thorough education in classical music both privately and at the Berlin College for Music. His major musical activity was writing serious operas. Most of them were well received by the critics. They ranged in subject matter and style from a surrealist opera, *The Protagonist*, to *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, which dealt with a fictional town in Alabama run by three ex-convicts as a socialist state in which everything was either pardonable or permissible.

The Threepenny Opera, patterned on the original opera by John

Gay, and written with Bertold Brecht, was Weill's greatest success. It took Germany by storm, and by 1929, a year after its premiere, it had been performed over four thousand times in one hundred different theatres around the country. Within five years it had been translated into eighteen languages and was exported to the United States and around the world. *The Threepenny Opera* enjoyed its greatest success in America. Following its 1954 revival, the song "Mack the Knife" became a hit-parade success, selling over 3 million records.⁴⁰

In 1935, two years after the Nazis gained power, Weill was forced to leave Germany. After a short stay in Paris, he came to the United States, where he wrote the music for Franz Werfel's tribute to Jewish history, *The Eternal Road*. This show did not appear on Broadway until two years later. In the interim, another Weill production, the anti-war musical *Johnny Johnson*, was presented. All-American in style, it exhibited Weill's ability to change his music to suit the public taste. By 1938, Weill was writing truly American musicals with patriotic settings. *Knickerbocker Holiday* was typical of his work in this vein. Using New Amsterdam of the 1600's as the setting, Weill wrote about fascism as he saw it developing in Europe. His famous "September Song" came from the score of *Knickerbocker Holiday*.

With George Gershwin, Weill is held in higher critical esteem than any other American composer.⁴¹ His death in 1950 was a great blow because he was just finding an American idiom. George Gershwin was his close friend and Ira was his best lyricist. Their feelings about liberty and freedom profoundly affected Weill's work. In "How Can You Tell an American," written for *Knickerbocker Holiday*, Weill identified what he regarded as the essence of true Americanism: loving and supporting liberty. Weill made that love his theme.

Often, what makes a man great in the eyes of his peers is his ability to look into the future. Weill certainly had that ability, for he predicted the civil and social unrest of the 1930's several years before it occurred. On October 29, 1929, "Black Thursday," Wall Street "laid an egg," as *Variety* put it. By 1931, nearly 30,000 businesses had folded, 2,500 banks had failed, and 10 million people were out of work. Depression was everywhere, and the songs of Tin Pan Alley recognized the emotions and fears of the masses. Money was something no one had, so all of a sudden there was a spate of songs promising that money wasn't needed for love. "I Found a Million Dollar Baby in a Five and Ten Cent

Store,” by Mort Dixon, Billy Rose, and Harry Warren, was typical. Rodgers and Hart wrote “I’ve Got Five Dollars,” with “debts beyond endurance” and coats and collars “which moths adore.” The most representative song of the depression era was Harburg’s “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?” This song, and many like it, lamented the depths to which America had sunk, but others were written to cheer up the populace. “Happy Days Are Here Again” is the best example; it was used as Franklin Roosevelt’s theme song, later by Harry Truman, then by John F. Kennedy, and finally it became a Democratic Party anthem. Written by Jack Yellen and Milton Ager, it was introduced on the evening of Black Thursday and became an almost “hysterical” hit; everyone in the room needed cheering up. In a similar vein was “On the Sunny Side of the Street,” written by Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh (1930).

As mentioned, Kurt Weill was a stern social critic. His songs were the precursors of two very important revues in the history of American theatre. The first of these shows was entitled *Pins and Needles*. Originality and fresh spirit were combined in a unique way; everyone in the cast was a member of the International Ladies Garment Workers, and naturally the show was a union production. With a leftist point of view, its desire was to “Sing me a song with social significance, all other songs are taboo.”

The composer and lyricist for the show, Harold Rome, was new to Broadway. Born in Hartford, Connecticut, on May 27, 1908, he was educated in Hartford, later going on to Yale University, where he received a degree in arts and architecture. While still a student, Rome played with the Yale Orchestra and toured Europe with the group. He also played piano with jazz bands in an attempt to earn extra money. Following his graduation, he went to New York. He accepted a non-paying job in architecture in order to get some experience and earned his living by writing popular songs and playing piano in bars. For three summers he was musical director of Green Mansions, an adult camp in the Adirondacks, where he was required to write three complete musicals each summer. All told, Rome composed ninety songs for these various camp shows.

Rome’s camp-show collaborator was Charles Friedman. When Friedman was commissioned to write a musical revue for the ILGWU, he asked Rome to compose the songs, and this brought about Rome’s

introduction to the professional theatre. *Pins and Needles* had been intended as a show for union members and their friends, but it was so well received by critics and public alike that it continued for 1,108 performances, one of the longest runs in Broadway history to that time. In order to keep the "social significance" updated, new material was introduced every few weeks. Rome continued to write for left-leaning musical revues and later wrote several complete Broadway shows, including *Destry Rides Again*, *Wish You Were Here*, and most successfully, *Fanny*.

Rome's success fostered the second political-satire revue mentioned earlier. This one was far more politically oriented. The composer-lyricist was Marc Blitzstein, born in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, on March 2, 1905. Blitzstein was educated at the University of Pennsylvania and the Curtis Institute of Music, and enjoyed several years of study under the best music teachers Europe had to offer, among them Nadia Boulanger and Arnold Schoenberg. Upon his return to America, he was a soloist with the Philadelphia Symphony Orchestra and soon became involved in the popular music business. He also lectured at Vassar, Columbia, the Brooklyn Institute for the Arts, and the New School for Social Research.

Blitzstein's popular-music orientation was strictly in the socialist tradition, for he wrote about the masses getting trampled on, and the class struggle in America. His crowning achievement in the musical area, clearly reflecting the influence of Kurt Weill in its songs and lyrics, was *The Cradle Will Rock*, presented on June 15, 1937. The plot, which takes place in a night court, sets steel workers against employers. The capitalist, Mr. Mister, who controls the entire community, including the school, the newspaper, the church, and the court, has formed a Liberty Union to break the union started by the workers, but he fails and the workers are victorious.

The story of the show's production is quite interesting in its own right. Originally written in 1936, *The Cradle Will Rock* was accepted for production by the WPA-Federal Theatre, whose producer was John Houseman and whose director was Orson Welles. Several civic groups, angered by the play's anti-capitalist, anti-government libretto, brought about the closing of the Federal Theatre on opening night. The audience were already in their seats when the closing was announced. While the cast attempted to entertain them, the producer frantically

searched for a new place in which to present the play. The nearby Venice Theatre was procured, and cast and audience went there. As it was impossible to move the costumes, sets, and orchestra to the new theatre, Blitzstein and his cast proceeded to do the show without them, with Blitzstein at the piano explaining the scenes as they came along. Judged by the reviews, this unique presentation enhanced rather than detracted from the show's effect. Brooks Atkinson wrote, "*The Cradle Will Rock* is the most versatile artistic triumph of the politically insurgent theatre."⁴² In addition to being the theatrical event of the season, it proved to be a great financial success.

The popular songs of the depression era reflected the split in society. On the one hand there were the politically conscious songs, for the decade of the 1930's was largely spent in recovering from the excesses of the previous decade. On the other hand, the depression lay heavily on people's minds and pop-music became less bouncy and original. More often than not, the arranger became the creative force in the Tin Pan Alley world. Composers left it to the arrangers to create new and jazzy treatments of fairly pedestrian songs.⁴³ While the Hollywood movies were being brightened by the musicals of Busby Berkeley, the musical theatre tackled subjects of current concern. George and Ira Gershwin indicted World War I profiteering in their musical *Strike Up the Band*. The show was so politically potent that it had to be rewritten in a less virulent manner. Even Irving Berlin dealt with serious issues when he condemned police corruption in *Face the Music*.⁴⁴

In the 1930's, radio changed the music business greatly. Songs could be played on the air and thus did not have to be plugged in individual theatres or shows to gain popularity. Moreover, sheet music sales were no longer the marker that made a song a hit. Record sales and radio were the key factors. In line with these developments the publisher-producers invented the "Hit Parade," a radio program that played various recordings and then rated them by sales and popularity.

By 1935, Tin Pan Alley had been so thoroughly infiltrated by the new breed of theatre composers that most of the top twenty songs of the year were written by Kern, Rodgers and Hart, Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Harburg and Arlen, Vernon Duke, and Howard Dietz. The top two songs of the year were Kern's "Lovely to Look At" and "I Won't Dance," with Gershwin's "Soon" coming third. The next year Irving Caesar's "Is It True What They Say About Dixie" headed the list,

continuing the tradition of songs about the South written by Jews who had never been there!⁴⁵

The year 1938 saw an event that was quite interesting as far as Jews were concerned. The most popular song of the year, and almost of the decade, had originally come from the pen of Sholom Secunda and Joe Jacobs, two men who wrote for the Yiddish theatre. The song was recorded on November 24, 1937, by Pattie, Maxine, and Laverne Andrews—its name, “Bei Mir Bist Du Schoen.”

Two different stories are told about the origin of this song. One has it that the agent Lou Levy, thinking that an all-Yiddish song sung by three gentile girls would be an amusing hit in New York City, brought the song to the attention of the Andrews Sisters. Supposedly they cut the demonstration record in Yiddish, but Jack Kapp, the president of Decca Records, insisted that English words would have to be used.

Another story is told by Sammy Cahn, the creator-lyricist of the English version (along with Saul Chaplin), in his autobiography, *I Should Care*. Cahn says that he heard two black performers singing the song in Yiddish at the Apollo Theatre in Harlem. Though the audience couldn’t understand a single word, they seemed to enjoy the song. Cahn was impressed, so he went out and bought the sheet music. He aroused the interest of the Andrews Sisters, and they tried to convince Jack Kapp of Decca to let them record it. He agreed, but only if Cahn would translate the words into English.

The record earned \$3,000,000 for Decca, and Cahn and Chaplin attempted to repeat the success with another Yiddish song, “Joseph, Joseph,” by Nellie Casman and Samuel Steinberg. It became a second hit of the 1938 record year.

Sammy Cahn, originally Cohn, was born in New York on June 18, 1913. His parents helped in the founding of a synagogue upon their arrival from Galicia, and it was at this synagogue in New York that Sammy was Bar Mitzvah. As a boy he had been trained in the violin, and for light entertainment, as well to earn spending money, he organized his friends into a dance band. One of his friends was Saul Chaplin, with whom he began writing song lyrics.⁴⁶ Most active in the film industry, Cahn wrote such movie musical classics as *Anchors Aweigh*, *Three Cheers for the Boys*, and *Toast of New Orleans*. His stage musicals include *High Button Shoes* and *Look to the Lillies* (a flop). Cahn’s list of songs is enormous, but among his best are “Three

Coins in the Fountain,” “Let It Rain, Let It Rain, Let It Rain,” “Papa, Won’t You Dance with Me,” and “Be My Love.”

As the 1930’s drew to a close, and another major war in Europe became imminent, Americans turned inward, and patriotic songs came back into vogue. Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg wrote “God’s Country” for the anti-war musical *Hooray for What!* Al Jacobs wrote the lyrics for a song that became an American standard, “This Is My Country,” introduced by Fred Waring and his Pennsylvanians.

The song that led the way, as far as patriotism is concerned, belonged to Irving Berlin. It was originally written as the second-act closing for the World War I show *Yip Yip Yaphank*, but Berlin cast it aside when he decided that having soldiers sing about their love for America as they marched through the audience on the way to war was simply gilding the lily.

In 1938 Kate Smith, who had decided to present a radio broadcast dealing with patriotism and her pride in being an American, approached Berlin for a suitable song. He remembered the one he had discarded two decades earlier. He gave Kate Smith the rights to the song without any payment, but stipulated that any profits it might accrue should be given to the Boy Scouts, the Girl Scouts, and the Campfire Girls. All told, the song earned them over half a million dollars.

Berlin’s song became almost a second national anthem, so much so that on February 18, 1955, President Eisenhower honored Berlin with a gold medal engraved “GOD BLESS AMERICA.” It is for that song as much as any other that Irving Berlin will be remembered.

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Notes

1. Isaac Goldberg, *Tin Pan Alley* (New York: John Day, 1930), pp. 11–12.
2. Abel Green and Joe Laurie, Jr., *Show Biz from Vaude to Video* (New York: Holt, 1951), p. 9.
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