

Alexander's Ragtime Boy



Irving Berlin—publisher, key-polisher, apostle of melody, toast of the 'teens—holds his own in the dissonant nineteen-thirties.

By SAMUEL CHOTZINOFF

I was complimented and pleased when asked to write a piece on Irving Berlin. America's most popular songwriter had just celebrated the half-century mark. His latest picture, *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, had been given a preview in Hollywood which had induced in the press boys and girls ecstasies of admiration. He was planning a new revue on Broadway, from which he has been lamentably absent for five years. The time for a piece on Irving Berlin seemed right; I made an appointment to meet him at his office.

I knew I would like to give a true picture of the man and indicate his approach to his art—or, as he himself would say, to his work. But beyond that I had no preconceived idea of what I might write. So I looked around the Berlin office for some possible hint, some clue to his personality. I found none. Not a picture in the place, not a single reminder of Irving Berlin's amazing career.

Berlin came in and my article receded further and further as we talked about our respective families, the outlook for America, the political set-up (or rather upset) in Europe. I told him he looked younger than ever at fifty, and he does. Being fifty also, I tried hard not to be envious of his

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George Gershwin (left), friend and contemporary, the camera up in front of Berlin as he was playing the piano one day last year, stepped back and let it take this picture.

boyish figure and restless vitality, and I wondered whether his perennial youthfulness had something to do with the continued popularity of his songs. He thought I had grown stouter.

"Well now . . . about this piece," I said finally. "The trouble is you've been written up too much. Your fiftieth birthday was front-page news not so long ago. The whole country knows what you think of swing. Everybody knows that you started as a singing waiter in "N***** Mike's" on the Bowery, that you got a \$25-a-week job with Ted Snyder's Music Company, that you composed *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, which swept the country and Europe, and set you on the road to fame and fortune, that you play by ear and only in the key of F sharp, that you married Clarence Mackay's daughter, and that there appears to be no limit to your talent and your luck. I want to get a new angle on you for my piece. Perhaps you can help me out by just talking."

All this time Berlin kept moving about. He would sit leaning forward, his legs crossed and his hands clasped, listening intently, then suddenly abandon this position and perch on the arm of the sofa. The telephone would ring and he would make a run towards it. Once a friend walked into the room and Berlin asked him where he would be later. "Where will you be, Oscar, around two-thirty in the morning?" he inquired, trying politely and hastily to dismiss the intruder. I grabbed at Oscar as at a straw. "Listen," I said, "I've got to write a piece about Berlin and I'm stuck. I don't know what to say. Perhaps you can tell me something?"

And Oscar, delighted to remain, said, "Maybe this will help you. Out in Hollywood Irving met Arnold Schoenberg. 'I am glad to meet you, Mr. Schoenberg,' says Irving. 'I've

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heard so much about you from Oscar.' 'Well,' says Schoenberg, 'that's dandy'—or some such bitter remark."

Berlin, gesticulating vehemently, tried to explain. "How should I know that Schoenberg is one of those real composers? I'm only a songwriter myself."

"You know," Oscar volunteered again, "I have known a good many songwriters in my time, but Irving is the most honest and painstaking craftsman of them all. For him the lyric and the music are equally important, and he will work days to get a single line or the smallest musical phrase just right." This rather interested me, for I had often wondered how Berlin worked on a song and what came first with him, the words or the music. And since I had so far not obtained any material for my piece on Berlin, I decided to forget the assignment for a while and follow, instead, my personal bent. "You see," said Berlin in answer to my question, "I get an idea at first, or perhaps a title. *Alexander's Ragtime Band* was one of the few songs where the music came first, and that was because in those days (1911) instrumental music was the rage."

The mention of *Alexander* threw him into a reminiscent mood. "In 1911 Jesse Lasky was managing the Follies Bergere, a kind of night-club restaurant which was the forerunner of the Casa Mañana, that kind of thing. Ethel Levey was the star, and I submitted a couple of things I had written, among them *Alexander's Ragtime Band*. She turned it down, but she took it up after it had become popular, and it eventually became a sort of theme song for her. That song was a milestone in my musical career because it was while I was composing it that I discovered the fourth above. Let me show you."

He sat down at his piano, started to play and sing, broke off, saying, "It's too high," pressed a lever which shifted the keyboard to the key he desired and began again. "Tara-tara. Tara-tara," he sang in a plaintive falsetto, his whole body swaying and quivering with emotion, "tara-tara-ta-ta-ta." He stopped. "What to do next?" he said. "I suddenly struck the fourth above 'Tara-tara, tara-tara' . . . see? It was an eye-opener for me, that fourth above. I was so infatuated with that fourth above that

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The exciting story of the fourth above threw a light for me on the mystery of Irving Berlin. A wonderful melodist by instinct and a simple harmonist, Berlin has never studied music and is unable to read notes. Yet his songs have been increasingly full of melodic and harmonic surprises. Now these surprises are, by his own confession, the result of his own gradual and painful discoveries of ordinary melodic and harmonic procedures. An erudite composer peppers his music with the collective fruits of the latest musical developments, but the very profusion of complicated and strange harmonies which he employs blunts the ear of the listener. Berlin's discoveries are isolated events and are the direct result of his own experimentation. Therefore his excursions into modulations, while infrequent, are all the more effective.

The melodic irregularities in his songs are not put there for effect but are implicit in the rhythm of his verse. He played for me three songs from a forthcoming picture for Astaire and Rogers—*The Yam, Color Blind, and Change Partners*,—and in each one the melodic line and the harmonization appeared to be a flowering of the lyrics. Hearing them played by orchestras, you will be enchanted by their lovely tunefulness, by a few telling modulations, and by some curious and very effective syncopations. But every note and every modulation and each unexpected accent has its origin in the words. Nor will the full effect of these songs be felt by any one who has not heard Berlin play and sing them. Though you may guess the sentiment that underlies *Color Blind* and *Change Partners*, you cannot imagine the sincerity, the ecstatic emotion, the winning pathos they convey through the husky small voice of Irving Berlin and through his agonized manipulation of his transposing piano.

These songs, as well as his three new hits from the film *Alexander's Ragtime Band*—*Now It Can Be Told, My Walking Stick, and Marching Along*—are spontaneous and seem born of the present moment. But then all of Berlin's songs seem contemporary, even though some of them hark back in sentiment

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to what we regard as the dim past. Indeed, the dates of thirty-odd Berlin song-hits provide the historical background for the *Alexander* film, for each is startlingly identified with some provocative, tragic, or nostalgic period of the last thirty years. The wonder is, of course, that each year finds Berlin wholeheartedly of his time, and that changes in manners, temper, and habits never find him napping. Other songwriters also reflect the temper of their era, but none so melodiously as Berlin. Whatever else he may do in his music, he always sings, and his melodies have that mysterious attribute which keeps them ever fresh and engaging.

These and similar thoughts flashed through my mind while Irving Berlin, at my instigation, sang and played song after song out of his endless repertoire. And then suddenly I remembered the piece I was supposed to write. At the same moment Oscar wandered in again, having thought of another Berlin story which might help me out. "Never mind stories, Oscar," said Berlin hastily, quitting the piano and beginning to walk about the room nervously. "What we need is an angle. An approach. You know, this is the first time I've been interviewed by a music critic, and I'll be darned if I can think up anything to say."

It did look rather hopeless and I decided to drop the matter and make some plausible excuse to the editor. Oscar looked rather skeptical when I said that at any rate we had had a good time, and the truth was that we had. Berlin walked me to the elevator and I couldn't help remarking on the activity that went on in the offices of his publishing house. "Yes," said Berlin, "we are doing pretty well at the moment. You see," he added with a grin, "we are the publishers of the music of *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*."

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