

The American Century Theater
presents

One Night with
**FANNY
BRICE**

by Chip Deffaa



Audience Guide
Edited by Jack Marshall



November 5-27
Rosslyn Spectrum



*Theater you can afford to see—
plays you can't afford to miss!*

About The American Century Theater

The American Century Theater was founded in 1994. We are a professional company dedicated to presenting great, important, but overlooked American plays of the twentieth century . . . what Henry Luce called “the American Century.”

The company’s mission is one of rediscovery, enlightenment, and perspective, not nostalgia or preservation. Americans must not lose the extraordinary vision and wisdom of past playwrights, nor can we afford to surrender our moorings to our shared cultural heritage.

Our mission is also driven by a conviction that communities need theater, and theater needs audiences. To those ends, this company is committed to producing plays that challenge and move all Americans, of all ages, origins and points of view. In particular, we strive to create theatrical experiences that entire families can watch, enjoy, and discuss long afterward.

These audience guides are part of our effort to enhance the appreciation of these works, so rich in history, content, and grist for debate.

The American Century Theater is a 501(c)(3) professional nonprofit theater company dedicated to producing significant 20th Century American plays and musicals at risk of being forgotten.

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Chip Deffaa: **The Creator of *One Night with Fanny Brice***

TACT first met Chip Deffaa when it's earlier "Reflections" production, *Danny and Sylvia*, was presented in the Chip Deffaa Theater Festival in Manhattan.

ASCAP/Deems Taylor Award–winner Chip Deffaa is an internationally produced playwright and director with a special love of show business and the rich history of Broadway. He is the author of eight acclaimed books dealing with music and popular culture, including *Blue Rhythms* and *Voices of the Jazz Age*, both published by the University of Illinois Press.

In 2010, Deffaa has been represented as a playwright and director by three different plays at three different festivals in New York—*The Seven Little Foys* at the Fringe Festival, *Theater Boys* at the Fresh Fruit Festival, and *A Few Moments . . .* at the Strawberry Festival. In addition, his award-winning *George M. Cohan Tonight!* opened at the Edinburgh, Scotland, Fringe Festival. And his *Johnny Mercer Jamboree* is currently running at the Rochester Downstairs Cabaret Theatre.

He has written and directed in New York no fewer than five different shows about George M. Cohan, the most recent being *George M. Cohan Tonight!* (starring Jon Peterson), originally produced Off-Broadway in New York by the Irish Repertory Theater. Deffaa is considered one of the nation's foremost authorities on Cohan.

For 18 years, Deffaa covered entertainment, including jazz, cabaret, and theater, for *The New York Post*. He has written for magazines ranging from *Downbeat* to *Entertainment Weekly*. In addition to the ASCAP/Deems Taylor Award, he has been honored with a New Jersey Press Association Award and an IRNE AWARD (Independent Reviewers of New England).

Chip is a member of the Dramatists Guild, the Society of Stage Directors and Choreographers, the Drama Desk, the American Theater Critics Association, the Jazz Journalists Association, and NARAS (which awards the Grammys).

Brilliant, Forgotten Fanny Brice

—*Jack Marshall*

Fanny Brice is the epitome of a great American performer whose image and public memory is distorted by the most recent images of her. To those who still remember her at all, she was Fanny Brice, radio comic, the final segment of her career that extended until her death. Fanny Brice, the groundbreaking female comedian, at a time when only men were allowed to be funny? Forgotten. Fanny Brice, the originator of classic American ballads? Fanny Brice, the recording star? Vanished. Fanny Brice, the Zeigfield Follies headliner?

Huh? What was the “Zeigfield Follies”?

To the extent Fanny Brice is remembered by younger members of the public, she is remembered as the flamboyant, mannered, brilliant but very unFanny-like Barbra Streisand, '60s vintage, who played her on Broadway and on film in the hit musical, *Funny Girl*. But the film's version of both Fanny's life and Fanny herself is misleading and full of fiction. Especially the portrayal of Fanny herself: while Streisand is a singer who could be funny, Fanny Brice was a comedienne who could break your heart with a song. She was more Carol Burnett than Barbra.

Fanny was born Fania Borach, on the Lower East Side of New York in 1891, the third of four children of immigrant saloon owners. A natural mimic and clown who also had a lovely singing voice, Fanny was determined to become a performer even as a child. She dropped out of school after the eighth grade and found work as a chorus girl in a burlesque review. By the end of that year, she had changed her name to Brice, possibly to give her a chance to avoid being permanently typecast in Jewish roles. But her decidedly unSwedish looks were enough: a year later, she would make her Broadway debut in a musical comedy, *The College Girls*, singing a song Irving Berlin wrote for her, “Sadie Salome, Go Home,” complete with a fake Yiddish accent. Berlin's song, enhanced by Brice's inspired parody of Salome's seductive veil dance, brought down the house. From then on, however, she had to fight typecasting, and she didn't fight very hard. She made an exaggerated Yiddish accent part of her standard repertoire, though she spoke no Yiddish, and spoke without much of an accent, less and less as time went on.

Brice starred in the Ziegfield Follies in the 1920s and 1930s as a triple threat: singer, dancer, and comic, especially the latter. She believed, and was probably right, that she could do straight dramatic roles, but audiences just wouldn't accept her in drama, though she tried several over the course of her career. Like many natural comics, being funny came too easily for Brice, and she devalued her own gift.

Meanwhile, her personal life supplied drama enough, for it was a mess. In 1919, she began a second marriage (her first had been short and unpleasant) to Jules "Nicky" Arnstein, a tall (6'6"), arguably handsome, dashing mobster and confidence man after living with him for six years. Why so long? Well, Fanny had Nick investigated and learned he was married. She had to wait seven years for him to get a divorce and married him just two months before the birth of their daughter Frances. The scene in *Funny Girl* where Fanny does a blushing bride number in the Follies showing an advanced pregnancy for laughs never happened (Flo Ziegfield didn't permit that sort of low comedy), but her real wedding was something like that.

The portrayal of Arnstein in *Funny Girl* as a harmless gambler driven to crime because his ego couldn't accept being the "kept man" of a star was far, far too kind. The real Arnstein exploited Brice mercilessly, spent her money shamelessly, cheated on her repeatedly, and was a peer of some of the most notorious gangsters and thieves of the era, and there were a lot of them. He was sent to Sing Sing Prison for illegal wiretapping, and the devoted Brice stayed with him, paid his legal bills and supported him by working on stage almost constantly until his release.

Her well-publicized marriage to a scoundrel made her more of a celebrity and brought her some sympathy, too. More important, it gave extra oomph to the best song Brice ever got to sing. When she was appearing in the Ziegfield Follies of 1921, she moved audiences to tears with her rendition of "My Man," which like later iconic hits such as Bobby Darin's "Beyond the Sea" and Frank Sinatra's "My Way," was an English adaptation of a French love ballad. When it ended with the autobiographical lyrics, "But whatever my man is, I am his—forever more," nobody had any doubts who Fanny Brice was singing about.

As painful as her personal life was at the time, Brice (and Flo Ziegfield) knew the value of playing it for all it was worth. Perhaps this triumph also moved Brice to take another step toward avoiding the comic Jewish

stereotype that she found constricting: photos show that she had her famous nose surgically straightened.

Imagine Barbra Streisand doing that!

In 1924, Arnstein got in trouble yet again, and it was more serious than before. He was charged as a conspirator with a gang that stole five million dollars worth of Wall Street securities. Instead of gallantly turning himself in as depicted in the *Funny Girl*, Nick went on the lam for four months, leaving Fanny to face harassment by the press and law enforcement authorities who were convinced she knew more than she was saying (as indeed she may have.) She gave birth to her son William while enduring this stressful period. Nick finally surrendered but fought the charges on every available legal theory for four years, as Fanny worked to pay for it all.

And it was all for nothing. A federal court sent Arnstein to Leavenworth for 14 months, as his loving Fanny used her influence to arrange for special treatment, including gourmet meals cooked by the warden's wife. When he got out, Arnstein proved his pedigree as a thoroughbred rat by running to the arms of another woman, leaving Fanny and the two children to their own resources. That did it. Fanny divorced him.

Brice married Broadway producer, investor, and songwriter Billy Rose (best remembered now as the composer of the ultimate bump-and-grind tune, "The Stripper," and as the producer of the spectacular circus musical, *Jumbo*), perhaps because "Rose" was a continuing theme in her life: her mother's name was Rose, and two of her signature songs were "Second Hand Rose" and "Rose of Washington Square." This Rose, however, wilted: the marriage quickly failed.

In her forties, with the Follies fading along with her youth, the indomitable Brice launched a radio show in which she, incongruously, played a mischievous and precocious tot named "Baby Schnooks." The role didn't show her versatility and didn't allow her to show off her voice, but she nailed it, and the routine became both a radio comedy classic and a money-maker. Fanny Brice was still going strong in the part when she died of a heart attack in Hollywood, in 1951.

Her timing was terrible: just a few more years, and she would have been a familiar presence to television audiences, like her contemporaries Sophie

Tucker, Jimmy Durante, Eddie Cantor, and Ed Wynn. She made it to the small screen just once, playing Baby Snooks, shortly before she died.

Fanny Brice was a major star, a remarkable talent, and a unique presence whose memory will be threatened with extinction as time goes on. For this reason, *Funny Girl* is a blessing, for it will keep her name alive. Very soon, there will be no one on earth who actually saw Fanny Brice perform live, and the few film clips that show her will only raise questions about what made her special. The spark cannot be resuscitated, any more than Fanny Brice can. All we have as evidence is her legacy: her thirty year reign as a star of stage, recordings, and radio; the great female comedians who followed in the trail she blazed; and the immortal songs like “My Man,” “After You’re Gone,” “You Made Me Love You,” “Rose of Washington Square,” and “Second Hand Rose” that she turned into standards and that are still performed today.

She was special, all right.



“Baby Snooks”

—Tom Fuller

One Night with Fanny Brice tells how Fanny began working on the burlesque circuit, but first found fame starring in *The Ziegfeld Follies* from 1911 to 1923. Flo Ziegfeld was a Hungarian impresario whose Follies, featuring choruses of beautiful women, lavish sets and costumes, and original comedy routines ran from 1907 until 1936.

In 1932, the Follies came to radio for three months as *The Ziegfeld Follies of the Air*. The radio show featured Fanny Brice and many of the same performers who appeared in the live productions—Billie Burke, Jack Pearl, Will Rogers, and even Ziegfeld himself. Much like the live revue, the radio show featured music, singers, sketches and comedy bits. Eddie Dowling hosted the show with Al Goodman leading the orchestra. The half-hour series had several sponsors beginning with Chrysler Motors and aired from April to June of that year.

Ziegfeld died a month later, on July 22, 1932. In 1936, the year of the last Ziegfeld Follies on Broadway, the radio series was brought back as a tribute to the Ziegfeld mystique. This second radio series ran from February 22 to June 6, 1936. Phil Rapp, who also wrote for Eddie Cantor and Danny Kaye and would later create the radio hit *The Bickersons*, wrote and directed most of the shows. In 1937, still under Rapp's guidance, Brice moved to the variety show *Good News*, and Baby Snooks was born.

Baby Snooks was the result of a dentist's accident. Fanny had had teeth problems for years, and after a dental session before one radio rehearsal, her dentist inadvertently kept her dentures. Fanny was unable to speak properly. Frantic, the producer suddenly remembered a cute baby act Fanny would do at parties and in front of friends. It was the only thing she could do in her current condition. "What do you call her?" the producer cried. "Schnooks," lisped Fanny.

But she needed material—instantly. Rapp and David Freedman (his writing partner at the time) burrowed through the nearest bookcase and came up with an out-of-print (and, more importantly, public domain) collection of sketches by Robert James Burdette titled *Chimes from a Jester's Bells*. Finding a humorous piece about a kid and his uncle called "The Simple Story of George Washington," the boy was switched to a girl, Rapp changed "Schnooks" to "Snooks," and history was made. Later on, in 1940, Snooks became the chief attraction on *Maxwell House Coffee Time*, and in 1944 began her own radio program, *The Baby Snooks Show*.

The series dealt with the childish innocence and constant questioning from little baby Snooks, to the never-ending exasperation of the long-suffering "Daddy," first played by film actor Frank Morgan (the original Wizard of Oz). Alan Reed then played the role for a short time, but it is Hanley Stafford's version of Daddy that is most remembered, with his uncontrollably painful line readings of "Ooooooh Snoooooooks!"

Lalive Brownell and then Arlene Harris played the mother, while versatile child impersonator Lenore Ledoux squawked cries in the background as little baby brother Robespierre. The announcers switched between Ken Roberts and Harlow Wilcox (famous as the *Fibber McGee* announcer). The sponsors for *Baby Snooks* included Post cereals, Sanka coffee, Spic-n-Span, Tums antacid, and Jell-O. The musical theme was "Rock-A-Bye Baby." Rapp wrote all the material.

Baby Snooks appeared on television only once, in the the June 12, 1950 edition of CBS TV's *Popsicle Parade of Stars*. This was also Fanny Brice's only TV appearance. The kinescope of this show (the kinescope was an early device used to make rough recordings of live television performances) has survived, and you can still see Fanny incongruously dressed as a little girl, surrounded by normally dressed adults who seem nonplussed by the incongruity.

The radio series ended with Fanny's unexpected death at the age of 60 in 1951. Audiences widely believed that no one could replace her in the title role of Snooks. They were right; no one did. A tribute program aired the week following her death. After that, Baby Snooks must have grown up, because the little girl never appeared again in a live performance.



The Interesting People in Fanny's World

These are some of the many famous or important figures mentioned in Fanny's life story—

Gypsy Rose Lee (January 8, 1911–April 26, 1970) was an American burlesque entertainer, famous for her striptease act, and later for her quick wit and engaging personality that made her a regular guest on TV talk shows. She was also an actress, author and playwright, whose 1957 memoir was made into the stage musical and film *Gypsy*. Her sister was actress/playwright/author June Havoc.

Keeney's Vaudeville Theatre was a famous *vaudeville* house on Fulton Street in Brooklyn, New York.

John Barrymore, Edwin Booth, Sarah Bernhardt, and Boris Thomshefsky were all famous actors. **Booth** was perhaps the greatest and most popular actor of the mid-19th century (at least until his brother shot Lincoln); **Barrymore** was the most acclaimed stage actor of the early 20th century (though his less flamboyant—and less drunk—brother Lionel is much better known because of his many famous film roles, like “Mr. Potter” in *It's a Wonderful Life*; and **Sarah Bernhardt** (of whom a terrific new biography has just been published) was a legendary stage actress whose

career overlapped that of both Booth and Barrymore. The less generally known member of the quartet is **Boris Thomashefsky** (1868–1939), although his name would have been as familiar to Fanny Brice as the others. He was a Ukrainian-born (later American) Jewish singer and actor who became one of the biggest stars in Yiddish theatre. In 1881, barely a teenager, Thomashefsky is credited with the first performance of Yiddish theatre in New York City and has been called the Father of Borscht Belt entertainment.

Al Jolson (May 26, 1886–October 23, 1950) was an American singer, comedian and actor, still regarded today as one of the greatest entertainers who ever set foot on a stage. His performing style was brash and flamboyant; his singing voice was unique, and he popularized a large number of songs that benefited from his “shamelessly sentimental, melodramatic approach;” Fanny Brice borrowed heavily from his repertoire. She was only one of many singers influenced by his music and performing intensity, others included Bing Crosby, Judy Garland, and Jerry Lee Lewis, and even Bob Dylan. Jolson is forever part of film history too, as he starred in the very first “talkie,” *The Jazz Singer*.

Eddie Cantor (January 31, 1892–October 10, 1964) was an American performer, comedian, dancer, singer, actor and songwriter who developed an unusual singing style and comic presence, innocent and naughty at the same time, and just a tiny bit fey. He started young, made a mark in *The Ziegfeld Follies* and Broadway and in recordings, then conquered radio and movies. His skipping, hand-clapping, wide-eyed style (his nickname was “Banjo Eyes”) also made him a favorite of impressionists and cartoonists. Some of his hits include “Makin’ Whoopee”, “Ida (Sweet as Apple Cida)”, “If You Knew Susie”, “Ma! He’s Makin’ Eyes at Me”, “Margie,” and “How Ya Gonna Keep ’Em Down on the Farm (After They’ve Seen Paree?)” He wrote a few classics himself, including “Merrily We Roll Along.” Cantor’s charity and humanitarian work was extensive, and he is credited with coining the phrase and helping to develop The March of Dimes. Singer/comedian Danny Thomas (Marlo’s father, but famous in the sixties for his sitcom *Make Room for Daddy*) consciously imitated Cantor’s storytelling style and used many of his songs and was inspired by Cantor’s charity work to build St. Jude’s Hospital.

Bert Williams (November 12, 1874–March 4, 1922) was one of the preeminent entertainers of the vaudeville era and one of the most popular comedians of his time. He was by far the best-selling black recording artist before 1920. In an age when segregation and stereotyping were

commonplace, he was the first black American to take a lead role on the Broadway stage and did much to push back racial barriers during his career. Fellow vaudevillian W.C. Fields, who appeared in productions with Williams, described him as “the funniest man I ever saw—and the saddest man I ever knew.”

W.C. Fields (January 29, 1880–December 25, 1946) was an iconic American comedian, actor, juggler, and writer. Fields created a comic persona as a misanthropic and hard-drinking egotist who remained a sympathetic character despite his snarling contempt for dogs, children, and women. His odd manner of speaking is still imitated today, and he remains well known thanks to several classic film performance, including a dramatic turn as Mister Macawber in the classic film adaptation of *David Copperfield*.

Florenz (Flo) Ziegfeld (March 21, 1867–July 22, 1932) was a legendary Broadway impresario. He is celebrated today for his series of grand and flashy theatrical revues, *The Ziegfeld Follies* (1907–1931), inspired by the *Folies Bergère* of Paris. *The Follies* introduced scores of the singers, comedians, dancers, and songwriters who would dominate American entertainment for a half century. Ziegfeld also produced many major Broadway book musicals, including his very last and most important, opening shortly before his death, *Showboat*. Although it is heavily fictionalized, the MGM biopic about his life and career, *The Great Ziegfeld* starring William Powell, provides an indispensable sense of this remarkable man’s style and importance. (Skip the sequel.)

Aimee Semple McPherson (October 9, 1890–September 27, 1944) is yet another fantastic American original who is fading from popular memory. She was a flamboyant Los Angeles evangelist and media celebrity in the 1920s and 1930s. McPherson preached a conservative gospel but in creative and entertaining ways, using radio, movies, and stage acts. She gained support from women by advocating women’s suffrage, but many regarded her as a charlatan and a fraud, particularly after a sensational “kidnapping” that never quite added up, leading to speculation that the messenger of God was really engaged in a tryst or getting an abortion. She preached to huge audiences, often in tents, and would employ faith healing and speaking in tongues on occasion.

Henry and Charles Gondorf, Arnold Rothstein, Meyer Lansky, Legs Diamond, and Dutch Schultz—occasional associates of Fanny Brice’s husband and curse, Nicky Arnstein—span the first part of the 20th century, and almost every crime imaginable. **The Gondorfs** were early 20th century

con men: Paul Newman played Henry Gondorf in *The Sting*. **Arnold Rothstein**, as Fanny notes, fixed the 1919 World Series by engineering the bribery of eight key players on the Black Sox, including Shoeless Joe Jackson. He was also a pioneer in organized crime. (You can see Arnold in all his post-Black Sox scandal glory in the current HBO series, *Boardwalk Empire*.) **Meyer Lansky** (immortalized as the fictional Hyman Roth in *Godfather II*) was the long-time mob financial whiz and childhood pal of Bugsy Siegel who helped get Siegel the funds to build Las Vegas. (That story is told in another movie, Warren Beatty's *Bugsy*.) **Jack "Legs" Diamond** was a New York Rothstein crony and Prohibition era bootlegger and gangster. **Dutch Schultz** was Diamond's rival and nemesis, a vicious gangster and killer who, when he was gunned down himself, achieved a strange lasting fame by uttering some of the most bizarre last words ever recorded for posterity. (They have been made into poems, books, lectures, and songs). Here is a sample:

... Oh, mamma, mamma! Who give it to him? Who give it to him? Let me in the district-fire-factory that he was nowhere near. It smoldered. No, no. There are only ten of us and there ten million fighting somewhere of you, so get your onions up and we will throw up the truce flag. Oh, please let me up. Please shift me. Police are here.

Communistic...strike...baloney...honestly this is a habit I get; sometimes I give it and sometimes I don't. Oh, I am all in. That settles it. Are you sure? Please let me get in and eat. Let him harass himself to you and then bother you. Please don't ask me to go there. I don't want to. I still don't want him in the path. It is no use to stage a riot. The sidewalk was in trouble and the bears were in trouble and I broke it up. Please put me in that room. Please keep him in control. My guilt edged stuff and those dirty rats have tuned in. Please mother, don't tear, don't rip; that is something that shouldn't be spoken about. Please get me up, my friends... The shooting is a bit wild, and that kind of shooting saved a man's life. No payrolls. No wells. No coupons. That would be entirely out. Pardon me, I forgot I am plaintiff and not defendant. Look out. Look out for him.

Please. He owed me money; he owes everyone money. Why can't he just pullout and give me control? Please, mother, you pick me up now. Please, you know me. No. Don't you scare me. My friends and I think I do a better job. Police are looking for you all over. Be instrumental in letting us know. They are Englishmen and they are a type I don't know who is best, they or us. Oh, sir, get the doll a roofing. You can play jacks and girls do that with a soft ball and do tricks with it. I take all events into consideration. No. No. And it is no. It is confused and its says no. A boy has never wept nor dashed a thousand kin. Did you hear me?...Come one, get some money in that treasury. We need it. Come on, please get it. I

can't tell you to. That is not what you have in the book. Oh, please warden. What am I going to do for money? Please put me up on my feet at once. You are a hard boiled man. Did you hear me? I would hear it, the Circuit Court would hear it, and the Supreme Court might hear it. If that ain't the pay-off. Please crack down on the Chinaman's friends and Hitler's commander. I am sore and I am going up and I am going to give you honey if I can. Mother is the best bet and don't let Satan draw you too fast.... They dyed my shoes. Open those shoes. Give me something. I am so sick. Give me some water, the only thing that I want. Open this up and break it so I can touch you. Danny, please get me in the car...Look out mamma, look out for her. You can't beat him. Police, mamma, Helen, mother, please take me out. I will settle the indictment. Come on, open the soap duckets. The chimney sweeps. Talk to the sword. Shut up, you got a big mouth! Please help me up, Henry. Max, come over here. French-Canadian bean soup. I want to pay. Let them leave me alone!

William Fallon (1886–1927) was a colorful and corrupt lawyer known as “The Great Mouthpiece.” Though Fanny Brice says otherwise, he was neither the best known nor most highly regarded criminal lawyer in the country in the 1920s: that distinction clearly belonged to Clarence Darrow. While Darrow was fighting racism, fundamentalism and the death penalty, Fallon specialized in keeping killer and gangsters out of jail. (One newspaperman called Fallon “The Jail Robber.”) He represented some of New York’s leading pimps, illegal narcotics dealers, embezzlers, and swindlers. Fallon was counsel to Arnold Rothstein while he was organizing crime in New York. Fallon’s reputation stemmed from his success defending accused murderers. He represented over 120 homicide defendants, and none was convicted. Fallon was a dandy who dressed like Sky Masterson in *Guys and Dolls*; his suits were exquisitely tailored, his ties of finest silk and he wore no shirt more than once. But he left his cobbler-made shoes unshined; that was his trademark.

While he was alive and for years after, Fallon was considered the archetype of the amoral but brilliant criminal defense lawyer. His voice was resonant, his diction flawless and he never wanted for the right words. He was a superb tactician, with a keen grasp of procedure. Fallon, it was said, could read and memorize a book, nearly word for word, within two hours.

When Fanny Brice’s slimy husband, Nicky Arnstein, somehow became obscurely involved with the theft of \$5 million in securities, he retained Fallon as counsel. Most people involved assumed that Arnstein, widely regarded as a lightweight fueled by a thin mix of charm, was Arnold Rothstein’s fall guy, and Fallon’s appearance as his lawyer only seemed to

prove this assessment accurate. On Fallon's advice, Arnstein declined to answer questions because the answers might incriminate or degrade him. It was one of the first times a defendant "took the Fifth." The state court held Arnstein in contempt. Arnstein was then tried on federal securities charges in Washington, D.C. The jury deadlocked, but before his second trial, Arnstein had a falling out with Fallon, insisting that he could have won the first trial if Fallon had not been heavily drinking and womanizing. That tore it: Arnstein had insulted Fallon's professional integrity, such as it was, as well as Fallon's current mistress. He withdrew from representing Arnstein.

But Arnstein's complaint had merit. Fallon had been a teetotaler until he was 29, but he made up for the lost time by drinking most of the day during his thirties, even before trial. It is recorded that Fallon once appeared soused at a federal hearing. The judge asked him to approach the bench and asked, "Is it possible the court smells liquor on counsel?" Fallon bowed. "If Your Honor's sense of justice is as keen as your sense of smell," he said, "then my client need have no fear in this court!" He was smooth, all right.

As his drinking problem got worse, however, it was rumored that his victories were coming by way of bribery rather than brilliance. In 1924, Fallon was tried for jury tampering. With another attorney as nominal counsel, Fallon conducted his own defense, delivering the opening remarks, cross-examining the prosecution witnesses, putting himself on the stand and surviving cross-examination, and concluding with a two-hour summation, to all accounts a triumph of oratory. His ingenious and audacious argument: the entire case was a frame-up engineered by William Randolph Hearst, because Fallon had discovered birth certificates in Mexico for twin children Hearst had allegedly fathered with a movie actress. The jury returned to the courthouse within an hour of deliberation on its verdict. They found Fallon "Not guilty." Relieved, Fallon strode over to a reporter friend, shook his hand, and said, "Nat, I promise you, I'll never bribe another juror." It was his last triumph. The Great Mouthpiece died on April 29, 1927. He was 41 years old.

William "Billy" Rose (September 6, 1899–February 10, 1966) was not quite in Ziegfeld's league, but then nobody was; Rose came a close as anyone. He was a producer, theatrical showman and lyricist. Rose was inducted into the Songwriter's Hall of Fame for such famous songs as "Me and My Shadow" (1927), "It Happened in Monterey" (1930) and "It's Only a Paper Moon" (1933). Billy Rose was a major force in entertainment for decades, with shows, such as *Jumbo* (1935), *Billy Rose's Aquacade*, and *Carmen Jones* (1943) Rose's Diamond Horseshoe nightclub, and the

Ziegfeld Theatre, which he owned and operated, played a key role in the careers of many stars.



America and Its Popular Songs as the Century Turned

—*Tom Fuller*

At the arrival of the 20th century (1900 or 1901—choose your date, although the big celebrations at the time took place in 1901), Theodore Roosevelt had just succeeded to the U.S. presidency after the assassination of William McKinley. Henry Ford’s founding of the Ford Motor Company was still two years in the future. Americans were flocking to the remote Klondike, where the Alaskan Gold Rush was in full stride. The flag had only 45 stars.

There were 92 million Americans, and the country was just emerging as a force to be reckoned with on a global scale. Life expectancy was 50 years, and \$750 was a pretty good annual salary. The motion picture industry took off—30 million Americans a week went to the silent pictures—while 25,000 live performers were touring through over 4,000 theaters throughout the country. Automobiles started going fast enough to make speed an issue.

And people were singing new songs. Fresh tunes were everywhere: “When the Red, Red, Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbing Along,” “In the Good Old Summertime,” and “I Wonder Who’s Kissing Her Now” (which comics turned into a bawdy song by pausing before the last word). Vaudeville was swinging. Engineer John Luther Casey Jones was killed when his Cannonball Express collided with the rear of a freight train. The term “Tin Pan Alley” was coined to represent the cluster of song publishers located on 28th Street between Sixth Avenue and Broadway in New York City—said to have gotten its name from the clattering of mis-tuned pianos pouring out of every window there.

This was a period of excitement for the American music scene: plays on Broadway, motion pictures, gramophones, and animated cartoons were developed in the early century. George M. Cohan, Florenz Ziegfeld, and Irving Berlin were on the scene. In St. Louis, in 1904, the country celebrated the World’s Fair. People came from far and near to enjoy the spectacle and

music. 1910 marked the beginning the popularity of ballroom dancing. Enrico Caruso started making records instead of wax cylinders.

New musical idioms were also flooding the country. The blues, created by African Americans, is one of the few new art forms of modern times; it uses a 12-measure construction and a “blue” scale that appears to have been of African origin. At the turn of the century, ex-slaves sang work songs filled with irony, imagery, and love, offering relief from the tensions of their lives. Many soon-to-be-great blues singers were recorded by talent scouts as they sang in the cotton fields. Bessie Smith, the greatest of all blues singers, was labeled the “Empress of the Blues” and recorded throughout the 1920s. Ma Rainey and W.C. Handy would also have topped the charts—except that there were no charts at the time.

Ragtime was also born during this era. Scott Joplin and Jelly Roll Morton performed at concert halls, public parks, restaurants, dance, and funerals. The new-fangled player piano cranked out songs from piano rolls in venues in areas that were too sparsely populated to afford the luxury of a live pianist. The new musical voices were part of a larger, more smokily defined language called jazz, and with the help of talented artists, black and white, accustomed the public to the idea of new songs, new styles, and musical adventure.

Fanny Brice couldn't have picked a more vibrant time to enter the world of American music and show business. Victorian propriety was giving rise to a backlash of flair, naughtiness, and experimentation that perfectly suited Brice's styles and strengths.

Fanny Brice the performer was keenly aware of, affected by, and proud of these traditions. Her strength was live performance (live on radio, too), and her world was finally being seriously challenged as she neared her life's end. In 1946 she would write:

The performer is different today. Years ago we had a school. The school was vaudeville and burlesque. You knocked around. So it seasoned you. Made a mensch of you. So it gave you an interesting background before you clicked. Today, they go into pictures from nowheres. Somebody sees a girl flipping hamburgers in a drive-in joint, so right away she gets a screen test and she photographs good so they develop her and give her a face and clothes. But they can't give you a real personality or

give you a natural technique of acting to give you an audience or your own school. If they had put me in front of a camera thirty-five years ago when I was starting out, I had such a kisser the camera would have stood up and walked away in disgust.

It was her good fortune back then to be born into a world that could develop and showcase her unique talents. It is our good fortune today.



Say It with Music

from *The Seven Lively Arts* by Gilbert Seldes (1924)

The popular song is never forgotten—except in public. Great events and seven-day-wonders pass into oblivion. Hobson, who was a hero, became a prohibitionist; Aguinaldo, a good citizen; McKinley, a martyr—but “Good-by, Dolly Gray,” “In the Good Old Summer Time,” and “Just Break the News to Mother” are immortal in our private memories and around them crystallize the sights and sounds and smells, the very quality of the air we breathed when these songs were in their high day. A more judicious pen than mine may write about these songs without sentimentality; I cannot. For in addition to the pathos of time past, something else brings an air of gentle melancholy to “words and music.” In recent years a change has come and the popular song is no longer written to be sung, but to be played. The new song that can’t be sung has virtues of its own—on the whole they are virtues I prefer. But I doubt whether it will ever be, as the old song was, a clue to the social history of our time.

The popular song is so varied, so full of interest, that for a moment at least one can pretend that it isn’t vulgar, detestable, the ruin of musical taste, and a symptom of degeneracy; we can pretend also that “Less Than the Dust” isn’t more artistic than “Swanee.” Since the Spanish–American War the American popular song (including the foreign song popular in America) has undergone the most interesting modulations; it has expressed everything except *fin de siècle*. Out of the ’nineties persisted a characteristic song: “Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay,” the chorus and tune of which, woven into mysterious words about “three little niggers in a peanut shell” I must have heard at the

same time as “Daisy” with its glorification of the simple life “on a bicycle built for two.” Since then, for a rough generalization, we have had three types of popular song: the exotic-romantic, the sentimental, and the raggy-gay. The sentimental song we have always with us. “That sweet melody with a strong mother appeal” is advertised on the back of “Those Black Boy Blues” and Irving Berlin writes “When I Lost You” between “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” and “Some Sunny Day.” At moments it is dominant and a fake ballad, with a simple and uninteresting tune, makes “After the Ball,” by Charles K. Harris, a world wonder. Or we have a simplification of the whole history of romantic love in “Love Me and the World Is Mine.” The curious about social life in America may compare this song with “I’m Just Wild about Harry.”

Beaumarchais, who knew no jazz, makes Figaro say that what can’t be said can be sung—and this applies far more to the sentimental than to the obscene. Think of the incredible, the almost unspeakable idea in the following, presumably spoken by a father to a child:

*Down in the City of Sighs and Tears,
Down by the White Light’s Glare,
Down in the something of wasted years,
You’ll find your mamma there!*

Or consider the pretty imagery and emotion of “I’m Tying the Leaves,” as sung by a precocious and abominable child who has been told that mother will die when the leaves begin to fall. It would be easy to say that these songs are gone never to return; but it was only two years ago that “They Needed a Songbird in Heaven—so God Took Caruso Away” (“idea suggested by George Walter Brown” to the grateful composers). I do not dare to contemplate “A Baby’s Prayer at Twilight” or to wonder what constituted the “Curse of an Aching Heart”; but history has left on record the chorus of

*My Mother was a Lady
Like yours, you will allow,
And you may have a sister
Who needs protection now;
I’ve come to this great city
To find a brother dear,
And you wouldn’t dare insult me, sir,
If Jack were only here.*

It was for songs like this that a masterpiece in another genre, the burlesque popular song, was created. I have heard “A Working Girl Was Leaving Home” credited to the brothers Smith (the boys the mother-in-law joke invented, according to George Jean Nathan, and for their sins they should have written this song) and to the late Tiny Maxwell, and to an unidentified English source. Its title and chorus at least are immortal:

(Then to him these proud words this girl did say):

*Stand back, villain; go your way!
Here I will no longer stay.
Although you were a marquis or an earl.
You may tempt the upper classes
With your villainous de-mi tasses,
But Heaven Will Protect the Working Girl.*

The cure for the sentimental song is the ironic; and irony, it happens, is not what America lives on. Even so mild an English example as “Waiting at the Church” gained its popularity chiefly from the excellent tag line:

*Can't get away
To marry you to-day.
My wife won't let me.*

Yet appearing from time to time we had a sort of frank destruction of sentimentality in our songs. Some, like “I Picked up a Lemon in the Garden of Love,” appeal directly to the old “peaches” tradition; but we went further. In the same year as the romantic “Beautiful Garden of Roses”—it was one of the early years of the dance craze—we heard “Who Are You with To-night (to-night? . . .)” down to “Will you tell your wife in the morning/Who you are with to-night?” and the music perceptibly winked at the words. “I Love My Wife (but, Oh, You Kid!)” had little quality, but the dramatization of an old joke in “My Wife’s Gone to the Country” rose to a definite gaiety in the cry of “Hooray! Hooray!” So, too, one line in the chorus of “I Wonder Who’s Kissing Her Now,” a song which skillfully builds up a sentimental situation in order to tear it down with two words:

*Wonder who’s looking into her eyes,
Breathing sighs, telling lies . . .*

where the music pretended to make no difference between the last two phrases, except for softening, sweetening the second. Yet another in the

malicious mould is “Who Paid the Rent for Mrs. Rip Van Winkle (when Rip Van Winkle Went Away)” —unforgettable for the tearing upward phrase to a climax in the first “Rip” with a parallel high note on the second.

The characteristic of these songs is that they were rather like contemporary fiction in giving form to social phenomena without expressing approval or disapproval. Eternal love and fidelity go by the board with “the dreamy, peachy, creamy, Vision of pure delight,” the companion who will not be mentioned to “your wife in the morning.” “Tell me, Mister, Is it your sister . . .” Well, hardly. There were, beside these realistic treatments of marriage (I continue the professorial tone) a few slightly suggestive songs, and these also were opposed to current morality, and these also were popular. One was called, I think, “Billy,” and purported to be a statement of virginal devotion: “And when I walk, I always walk with Billy . . .” and so following, to “And when I sleep, I always—dream of Bill.” There were delicious implications in “Row, Row, Row,” as Al Jolson sang it; earlier still was Hattie Williams’s song “Experience,” in *The Little Cherub*. The persistence of these songs is something of a miracle and the shade of difference between the permissible and the impossible is of vast importance in the success of a song. About fifteen years separate “Who Are You with To-Night?” (I quote all these songs and titles from memory, but I am fairly sure about the grammar of this one; if it was printed “whom” it was sung “who”) and “He May Be Your Man (but he comes to see me sometimes),” and the second song is more explicit; when Edith Wilson or Florence Mills sang the repeat chorus it shocked her audience. Essentially it is the same thing, only, fifteen years ago, the questionable stanza would have been left to the unauthorized street version.

The exotic romantic song in America has little to do with all of this. Before the professional glorification of our separate states began, we had the series of Indian songs of which Neil Moret Hiawatha is the outstanding exemplar. The stanza is almost as hard to sing as “The Star-spangled Banner”; the chorus—it is always the chorus which makes a song—is banal, a pure rum-tum-tiddy. Yet it was more than popular, for it engendered a hundred others. “Cheyenne” and (musically) “Rainbow” are its descendants. Hiawatha bewilders and baffles the searcher after causes; but its badness as a song explains why the Indian song was submerged presently in the great wave of negro songs which have shown an amazing vitality, have outlived the Hawaiian exotic, and with marvelous adaptability (aided by one great natural advantage) have lived through to the present day.

The negro song is partly, but not purely, exotic. Remembering that songs are written on Forty-fifth Street in New York and put over in New York cabarets, it is easy to see how “California in September” (a dreadful song) and “Carolina” (I recall five songs embodying the name of that state; the latest is superb) are also exotic; and how “Over on the Jersey Side” and songs about Coney Island came to be written to glorify New York as a summer resort. The rustic period, again, reacts against sophistication as “In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree” reacts against the exoticism of the sheltering palm. Neither rustic nor local, however, achieves the highest success, and it is left for the Pacific to give the last setting before the shouting song of the negro and his plaintive cry are triumphant in our music.

First, however, the era of the waltz song. In earlier days America had little to do with the waltz out of comic opera and *The Merry Widow* and *My Hero* and *Beautiful Lady* and the superb melodies from *Gypsy Love* and from *Die Czardas Fürstin*, of which I forget the American name, and something from *The Arcadians* came from anywhere across the sea and captured us. “The Velia Song” and “The Girl from the Saskatchewan” were better than their corresponding waltzes; *The Chocolate Soldier* had pages of music as good as *My Hero*—many better. Only *The Dollar Princess* managed to put over its less ostentatious pieces—and that is rather amusing, since Leo Fall is held by the Viennese to be the true successor of Johann Strauss.

The mention of that great name makes it clear that the waltz song itself is a hybrid; for whatever words have been sung to “The Beautiful Blue Danube,” the music was meant to be played and for the dance; it was not meant for song. Yet the slow tempo, the softness, the gentle sentimentality of the waltz lends itself peculiarly to song—and to memory. I do not think it has anything to do with the really great things in our popular songs, but I cannot resent its success—any more than I can resent the success of another song, wholly out of our American line—“Un Peu d’Amour.” This was the last great song before the war; it held France and England and America enslaved to its amorous longing.

Something more cheery and more male had to be found for the English soldier, who eventually picked up “Tipperary” (also a song of nostalgia), and for the American something snappier; but “Un Peu d’Amour” persisted during the war. To hear a soldier standing on the fire-step on a dark night, leaning his cheek against the disc of his Lewis gun, and softly humming “Un Peu d’Amour,” was to recognize that for actual millions that song and a few others like it, and not the great music to the condition of which all art

aspires, were all of beauty and all of exaltation they were ever to know. The materials in this particular case were not tawdry, only equivocal. For it was a better song as “A Little Love” than in the French. The word *amour* means, but does not signify, the same thing as the word love, and “*pour t’entendre à ce moment suprême, Murmurer tout bas, tout bas: Je t’aime*” has connotations not transferred to the English. The song is a fake French and a good Anglo–Saxon piece of sentiment, precisely the counterpart of the waltz song. Like them it conquered a world.

Lehar and Monckton and Caryl and Fall and Kalman followed successes with moderate failure, and at the same time revues and American musical comedies stepped out grandly. I note three songs from this source which actually claimed all of the popular attention. The song to be sung was at its best in the *Princess* shows—best of all in “The Siren Song” from *Leave It to Jane*. It is Mr. Kern’s masterpiece, a sophisticated, tidy score with amusing and unexpected retards and pauses, with a fresh freedom of tonalities. “The Siren Song” never actually came up to “The Love Nest” in acclaim; Mr. Hirsch’s bid for immortality is almost contemptible in words and music and has only a single point of interest—the three notes against two in the second line of the chorus (“cozy-and-warm” instead of, say, “nice-and-warm”). It is impermissible in a man who only a year later wrote “It’s Getting Very Dark on Old Broadway.”

The third song is “Say It with Music.” Mr. Berlin is as much responsible as anyone for the turn from the song-to-be-sung to the song-to-be-played; yet he is so remarkable that he can reverse himself, and just as in 1915 he produced a whole revue (*Stop! Look! Listen!*) from which not one song became really popular, so, seven years later, when the singing-song had gone out, he produced a revue and gave us one more of his tributes to the art he adores. It isn’t musically half as interesting as “I Love a Piano”; but it is much more singable and it has great virtues. Nothing that a jazz orchestra can do has any effect on the purity of its musical line. I wonder whether it may not be the last of the songs; for we are now full in the jazz age and darkness has set in.



How This Play Came To Be

—*Chip Deffaa*

Since boyhood, I've been fascinated by the stars and sounds of earlier eras—George M. Cohan, Al Jolson, Fanny Brice, Eddie Foy, Eddie Cantor, Jimmy Durante, Mae West, Burns and Allen, Bessie Smith, Cab Calloway From old recordings that I found as a child in our basement, to vintage film clips, to books that my supportive older brother, Art, got for me, I learned a lot—and wanted to learn more.

And by a lucky chance, there were people in my life who'd known, seen, worked with these legends. I loved listening to the reminiscences of an old-time vaudevillian, Todd Fisher, who not only remembered the songs introduced in *The Ziegfeld Follies* by Fanny Brice, Eddie Cantor, and others—he taught them to me. (As a kid, I got to perform numbers like Irving Berlin's "You'd Be Surprised" in American Legion variety shows Fisher directed.)

I loved seeing *Funny Girl* on Broadway, but Fisher explained that there was a lot more to Brice's story than that entertaining show suggested, and that Brice and Nicky Arnstein—who was then still alive, he told me—were more complicated than the show suggested. "You should ask Gypsy Rose Lee about Fanny sometime," he'd say, and pull out from his wallet an ancient snapshot of him with a very young Gypsy Rose Lee, her sister June, and their mother, Rose. "And I wish they'd found some way to at least mention Billy Rose, who was married to Fanny after Nicky; Billy was a character in his own right."

The late Robert Alexander—who was the biggest single influence upon me, and the best mentor in my youth—was able to fill in some gaps; he'd helped Billy Rose devise his famed *Aquacade* back in the 1930s. And he certainly well remembered Rose, Eleanor Holm, *et al.* Having personal connections to their era made them feel closer. And every time I got to meet someone else with a long history in show business—a Cab Calloway, say, or a George Burns—the past seemed less and less remote.

Fanny Brice sure had something. Friends will drop by for a visit at my home today and I'll play 'em a 78-rpm record she made long before she was born, and she speaks to us—and reaches us. And for a moment, she's there—she's right there in the room with us.

Some plays are very hard to write. This play, *One Night with Fanny Brice*, seemed to write itself.



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