

Notes on Fred Astaire

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Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in *Follow the Fleet* (1936). Scan from Doctor Macro collection.

1.

Fred Astaire is one of the ten most important figures in twentieth-century American popular music. Here are the ten, in chronological order of their births:

1. Irving Berlin (1888)
2. Duke Ellington (1899)
3. Fred Astaire (1899)

4. Louis Armstrong (1901)
5. Richard Rodgers (1902) (with both Lorenz Hart and Oscar Hammerstein II)
6. Bing Crosby (1903)
7. Frank Sinatra (1915)
8. Thelonious Monk (1917)
9. Elvis Presley (1935)
10. Buddy Holly (1936)

To forestall arguments, I will list the next fifteen, to complete a top 25:

11. George M. Cohan (1878)
12. Jerome Kern (1885)
13. Al Jolson (1886)
14. Cole Porter (1891)
15. George Gershwin (1898)
16. Benny Goodman (1909)
17. Billie Holiday (1915)
18. Ella Fitzgerald (1917)
19. Charlie Parker (1920)
20. Hank Williams (1923)
21. Chuck Berry (1926)
22. Ray Charles (1930)
23. Sam Cooke (1931)
24. James Brown (1933)
25. Bob Dylan (1941)

This is heady company. Although Astaire had ambitions as a songwriter, he had only one minor hit, "I'm Building up to an Awful Let-Down" (lyric by Johnny Mercer), an obvious imitation of Berlin's "I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket," which Astaire introduced the same year in *Follow the Fleet* (1936). Although he was an accomplished drummer and pianist, he rarely relied on those skills in performance. (Exceptions would include his playing piano in *Roberta* (1935), and the drums in both *A Damsel in Distress* (1937) and *Easter Parade* (1948).) In *Holiday Inn* (1942), his vaudeville routine with Bing Crosby, "I'll Capture Your Heart," declares that Astaire's singing will not do the trick: he will have to count on his dancing to win out over Crosby's suit.

Although that number dismissed Astaire's singing as the equivalent of Crosby's (almost non-existent) dancing, Bing knew better: "I consider this high praise," he offered, "because I think Fred sings very well indeed. He has a remarkable ear for intonation, a great sense of rhythm, and what is most important, he has great style – delivery, phrasing, but most of all presence."¹ If most people still think of Astaire as only a dancer, who occasionally sings in a modest voice, the cognoscenti now tend to overrate his 1952 recordings of standards (many associated with him), done with a small jazz combo that included Oscar Peterson, Barney Kessel, and Ray Brown. In fact, those jazz sides, like the earlier versions of the movie scores, re-recorded for wide release, fall short of the soundtracks, where Astaire shines as a singer. This fact offers an important clue to Astaire's approach. Starting a decade before Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma* (1943) supposedly integrated plot and song, Astaire was

almost singlehandedly demonstrating how seamlessly a musical number could issue out of particular narrative circumstances. Just as even his most spectacular dancing set-piece holds our attention less than a casual *pas des deux* with Ginger Rogers, his singing needs a story.

The stories in which he found himself enabled him to introduce more songs that have become standards than any other singer: "Fascinating Rhythm," "Funny Face," "S Wonderful," "My One and Only," "Night and Day," "Let's Begin," "I Won't Dance," "No Strings," "Isn't This a Lovely Day?," "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails," "Cheek to Cheek," "I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket," "Let's Face the Music and Dance," "The Way You Look Tonight," "A Fine Romance," "Never Gonna Dance," "I've Got Beginner's Luck," "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off," "They Can't Take That Away from Me," "Shall We Dance," "I Can't Be Bothered Now," "Things Are Looking Up," "A Foggy Day," "Nice Work If You Can Get It," "I Used to Be Color Blind," "Change Partners," "You're Easy to Dance With," "You Were Never Lovelier," "My Shining Hour," "One for My Baby (and One More for the Road)," "Something's Gotta Give." These titles alone evoke a whole world of high-spirited elegance, playful sophistication, off-hand perfection indelibly associated with Astaire. Writing about "Cheek to Cheek," Alec Wilder suggested the reason:

every song written for Fred Astaire seems to bear his mark. Every writer, in my opinion, was vitalized by Astaire and wrote in a manner they had never quite written in before: he brought out in them something a little better than their best – a little more subtlety, flair, sophistication, wit, and style, qualities he himself possesses in generous measure.²

Todd Decker's *Music Makes Me: Fred Astaire and Jazz* (2011) reveals how much Astaire himself contributed to this process, auditioning (and rejecting) songs from even the best writers (Berlin, Porter, Kern, Gershwin), pushing them towards more rhythmic urgency ("Make it swing," he regularly advised) and melodic surprise. Had Berlin ever before composed a song like "Cheek to Cheek," with its two entirely different bridges (the song's form is AABBCA)? "With Astaire," Wilder observed, "anything could happen."³ And with Astaire, even a song ("Puttin' on the Ritz") introduced by someone else (the now-forgotten Harry Richman) could become his own theme.

2.

Gerald Mast observed that "Fred Astaire is the single most remarkable figure in the American film musical. He is also among the most remarkable figures in the American stage musical."⁴ Will Friedwald has extended this tribute, insisting that

Fred Astaire was the single most significant figure in the entire Broadway and Hollywood musical experience ... No other star, no composer, no choreographer, no singer or dancer, no producer or director so personified everything that was great about musical comedy.⁵

And yet, we still tend to forget that by the time he made *Flying Down to Rio* (1933), his second film, Astaire was already in his mid-thirties and famous on Broadway and in London's West End. He had starred in at least four major shows, two by the Gershwins (*Lady, Be Good*: 1924; *Funny Face*: 1927), Dietz and Schwartz's *The Bandwagon* (1931), and Cole Porter's *Gay Divorce* (1932). The first three of these had also enjoyed long runs in London, where Astaire was even more popular than in America.

Astaire's pre-Hollywood career, however, threatened to unsex him (to use Lady Macbeth's word). Always paired with his older sister, Adele, he grew so used to not playing love scenes that he seemed lost when she suddenly retired. His *Gay Divorce* co-star, Claire Luce, had to warm him up for their big number, "Night and Day": "Come on, Fred," she told her bashful leading man, "I'm not your sister, you know."⁶ His persistent sexual diffidence became a major asset; with Ginger Rogers, whom he tried to avoid kissing, it displaced sexual tension into dance, transformed from presentational display into representational emotion.

Adele, in fact, had been the bigger star. With her over-size head, round face, big eyes, and petite body, she drew comparisons to Krazy Kat; but despite her voice (revealed by recordings as painfully shrill and thin), Adele was naturally charismatic and quick. Fred's perfectionist need for repetitive rehearsals ran up against Adele's wilful devil-may-care. He called her "Goodtime Charlie," she named him "Moaning Minnie," and they adored each other. When the American Film Institute honoured him with its Lifetime Achievement Award, Fred talked about Adele, who had died just eight weeks before:

My sister Adele was mostly responsible for my being in show business. She was the whole show, she really was. In all the vaudeville acts we had and the musical comedies we did together, Dolly was the one that was the shining light, and I was just there pushing away.⁷

Adele's last show was *The Band Wagon*, her final performance in early 1932. He worried that his own career might also be over. He went into Cole Porter's *Gay Divorce*, but the critics wrote things like, "Fred Astaire stops every now and then to look offstage towards the wings as if he were hoping his titled sister, Adele, would come out and rescue him."⁸ But despite such reservations, the show succeeded, defined by the *tour-de-force* of "Night and Day," and it traveled to London. It proved Fred Astaire's last stage appearance. It also contained a song whose title specified the challenge he now faced post-Adele: "After You, Who?"

3.

The answer, of course, would be Ginger Rogers. After Astaire's cameo playing himself in the Gable-Crawford *Dancing Lady* (1933), he appeared for the first time with Rogers in *Flying Down to Rio* later that year. They had known each other in New York, and she had already made nineteen movies, including *42nd Street* (1933), as "Anytime Annie," and *Gold Diggers of 1933*, singing "We're in the Money" in Pig Latin. But she still seemed destined for the chorus, and *Flying Down to Rio* had them playing second-

fiddle to Gene Raymond and Dolores Del Rio. Astaire and Rogers, of course, stole the show, and they were off on their run of ten films together.

Why did this seemingly unpromising pairing not only bring out the best in Fred Astaire but ultimately define him? This is the single most important question we can ask about Fred Astaire, the one whose answer provides the best insight into his abiding appeal. Rogers, of course, was a superb dancer, but Astaire would have more accomplished partners: Eleanor Powell (*Broadway Melody of 1940*), the raised-as-a-dancer Rita Hayworth (*You'll Never Get Rich*: 1941, and *You Were Never Lovelier*: 1942), Judy Garland (*Easter Parade*: 1948), Cyd Charisse (*The Band Wagon*: 1953). None came close to matching the Astaire-Rogers chemistry. Why not?

The standard answer invokes Katharine Hepburn's famous diagnosis: "She gives him sex, and he gives her class." This line starts to get at Astaire's ethereal elegance, the product of no apparent effort, and Rogers's down-to-earth doggedness, always the result of necessity. Each knows something about the world and its possibilities unseen by the other. Lasting marriages are made from such things, and their movies together record that (screen) marriage and the conversations it entailed, conversations replacing the contemporary screwball comedies' dialogue with music and dance. Sometimes almost literally: in *Roberta's* "I'll Be Hard to Handle," they "talk" back-and-forth, making what Robert Frost called "the sound of sense" with their taps.⁹

Their best movies follow a similar narrative: a cute meet (often accidental) leads to her resistance (typically derived from the farce's mistaken identities or misunderstandings) and his frustrated, but ultimately successful pursuit. Almost always, the plot requires Rogers to have a change-of-heart, while leaving Astaire unchanged. These elements recur throughout the series, but we can look at one typical, and especially wonderful example: *Top Hat's* (1935) "Isn't This a Lovely Day (To Be Caught in the Rain)?" Immediately irritated by Astaire's dancing ("No Strings") in the hotel room above her own, where she is trying to sleep, Rogers seems bent on her characteristic scorn of his subsequent overtures: both the requisite flowers and his willingness to impersonate a London cabby. She, of course, will have none of it, ordering him to leave her in a park.

Arriving from off-screen in his horse-drawn cab, he finds her alone, seeking shelter from the rain in a small, deserted bandstand. Ignoring her protests, he approaches and sits beside her, explaining as one would to a child the origins of thunder and lightning. His talking slips almost imperceptibly into song, and he continues the one-sided conversation with Berlin's "Isn't This a Lovely Day?" She listens, with her back towards him. Her face, however, revealed by the camera, shows us that her attitude is softening. He stands and ambles rhythmically away from her, his movements straddling the border between walking and dance. She rises and begins, mockingly, to imitate those movements, helped in doing so by her masculine riding costume, jacket, pants, and boots. Strutting with her hands in her pockets, she matches him step-for-step as they begin to dance. They do not touch. Even when they turn to face each other, and allow themselves to come very close, they restrain from a conventional dancers' embrace. Only in the final minute of the number, prompted by a thunder crash and the music's acceleration, does he, at least, take her in his arms. No kissing.



Fred Astaire with Ginger Rogers in *Top Hat* (1935).

This scene suggests several things. First, Rogers's mobile facial expressions, here and in almost of all of her dance scenes with Astaire, confirm John Mueller's famous comment that "she was cagey enough to realize that acting did not stop when dancing began."¹⁰ Second, Astaire's appeal depends on his regular demonstrations that the regimes of everyday life (where we merely walk and talk) and those of utopian transcendence (where we dance and sing) are not as distinct as we have been taught. The boundary between them is not secured; we merely have to step across it. Third, Astaire's modest vocal equipment, having its visual correlative in the strain on his face when he reaches for high notes, humanizes his dancing, whose perfection threatens to become unearthly, abstract, or mannered. Significantly, in his movies with Bing Crosby (*Holiday Inn* and *Blue Skies*), where he sings much less, a different aspect of his personality surfaces, "curiously shifty ... a little nasty," as Elizabeth Kendall puts it.¹¹ In *Roberta*, Astaire is the all-American "Huck Haines"; in *Holiday Inn*, he's a city-slicker, whose efforts to steal Crosby's girl the film encourages us to root against.

But why Rogers? What about her screen presence brings out the best in Astaire? Her contemporary non-musical roles provide the clue. In *42nd Street* (1933), *Gold Diggers of 1933* (1933), *Rafter Romance* (1934), *Upperworld* (1934), *Vivacious Lady* (1938), *Bachelor Mother* (1939), *Fifth Avenue Girl* (1939), *Primrose Path* (1940), *Kitty Foyle* (1940), *Tom, Dick, and Harry* (1941), *Roxie Hart* (1942), *The Major and the Minor* (1942), *I'll Be Seeing You* (1945), she plays parts that might easily have gone to Barbara Stanwyck – tough dames, working-girls escaping the chorus, the department store, or even prison. Astaire is inconceivable in these films. But Rogers, as James Harvey notes, "is the movies' emblematic wise girl – with her glamorous, sardonic, dead-pan style."¹²

A wise girl, however, can be too wise for her own happiness, and that lesson is what Astaire has to teach her. Harvey, one of the best writers about Astaire-Rogers, notes that her initial resistance to him “is not primarily a sexual reluctance,” but rather something resulting from her “no-nonsense radar” that makes her suspect Astaire’s enthusiastic, impractical, heedless romanticism.¹³ But as their movies together suggest, this attitude, as Harvey puts it, “is also sometimes a trap,” implying “a fear of the freedom of feeling, of the risk and ambition, that Astaire’s dances with her so transcendently express.”¹⁴ If Astaire by himself can seem too remote for everyday concerns, Rogers without him often suggests that hard-headed practicality can become joylessness. Together, they gesture toward a better world, not in heaven (despite “Cheek to Cheek”), but here and now.

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¹ Quoted in Will Friedwald, “The Dancing Man Who Also Sang up a Storm,” *The New York Times*, 11 June 1989, Section II, p. 29.

² Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), p. 109.

³ Wilder, 109.

⁴ Gerald Mast, *Can’t Help Singin’: The American Musical on Stage and Screen* (Woodstock, NY: The Overlook Press, 1987), p. 141.

⁵ Will Friedwald, *A Biographical Guide to Great Jazz and Pop Singers* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2010), 17.

⁶ Quoted in Kathleen Riley, *The Astaires* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 160.

⁷ Quoted in Riley, *The Astaires*, 189.

⁸ Quoted in Riley, *The Astaires*, pg. 158

⁹ Frost’s “the sound of sense” appears in his letter of 4 July 1913 to John T. Bartlett. *Frost: Collected Poems, Prose, and Plays* (New York: The Library of America, 1995), 664.

¹⁰ John Mueller, *Astaire Dancing* (New York: Knopf, 1985), 8.

¹¹ Elizabeth Kendall, *The Runaway Bride: Hollywood Romantic Comedy of the 1930s* (New York: Knopf, 1990), 98.

¹² James Harvey, *Romantic Comedy in Hollywood* (New York: Knopf, 1987), 320.

¹³ Harvey, 199.

¹⁴ Harvey, 199.