Lincoln Center presents January 28–June 12, 2014

American Songbook

Sponsored by Prudential Investment Management

Friday Evening, March 7, 2014, at 7:30 and 9:30

Jim Caruso's Cast Party Goes to the Movies

with **Billy Stritch**

featuring **Christina Bianco, Jeffry Denman,**
Natalie Douglas, Marilyn Maye, Jane Monheit,
and **Clarke Thorell**

Billy Stritch, *Musical Director and Piano*
David Katzenberg, *Bass*
Daniel Glass, *Drums*

Jim Luigs, *Director*

This evening's program is approximately 75 minutes long and will be performed without intermission.

Major support for Lincoln Center's American Songbook is provided by Fisher Brothers, In Memory of Richard L. Fisher; and Amy & Joseph Perella.

Wine generously donated by William Hill Estate Winery, Official Wine of Lincoln Center.

These performances are made possible in part by the Josie Robertson Fund for Lincoln Center.

Steinway Piano
The Allen Room
Jazz at Lincoln Center's Frederick P. Rose Hall

Please make certain your cellular phone, pager, or watch alarm is switched off.

The Hollywood Musical in Close-Up

by Barry Singer

The movie musicals of Hollywood's "Golden Age" celebrated American popular song in panoramic long shots and tight close-ups, inflating the music as never before, while imparting to it a transcendent sense of intimacy. This complicated trick was deftly executed via the magnifying and personalizing magic of motion pictures. Popular song in America, pre-cinema, had largely been performed on the oversized but still human scope of the theatrical stage, before sedately taking up residence in American homes around the piano, the Victrola, and, ultimately, the radio: early 20th-century America's hearthplace.

Then came *The Jazz Singer*. The voice of Al Jolson in 1928 sang out from the height of the silver screen, dwarfing pretty much everything that had come before it. And so, the movie musical was born.

And reborn. Hollywood learned the raw lessons imparted by *The Jazz Singer* quickly and regurgitated them endlessly, while improving upon them sporadically. Whereas *The Jazz Singer* featured a soundtrack predominantly pre-recorded on synchronized discs, with only a handful of "live" sound sequences, *The Broadway Melody*, less than two years later, was truly an "All-Talking, All-Singing, All-Dancing" film. It won the very first Academy Award for Best Picture (of 1929) and triggered the following year an avalanche of more than 100 new movie musical releases.

Yet, *The Broadway Melody* is remembered today almost solely for its title song by Nacio Herb Brown and Arthur Freed, a song that was recycled endlessly in an eponymous series of *Broadway Melody* films, before being reimagined 23 years later to crown the supreme MGM screen musical, *Singin' in the Rain*.

The song's inaugural film appearance in 1929 came in a crowd scene made intimate by the confines of the movie screen. In a cacophonous Tin Pan Alley music publisher's office, filled with loudly rehearsing show people, a songwriter, Charles King, breaks into song, demonstrating "The Broadway Melody" for the first time. The moment is electrifying, intimate as only a well-filmed cinematic moment can be. The song is soon reprised as a full-fledged onstage production number. Here, the dominant long shots look (and sound) almost prehistoric to our contemporary eyes (and ears). The camera angles are too static, the movements too stiff, the soundtrack too tinny, and the kicking chorines too guffawingly zaftig. (You can catch a bemused glimpse of this in the 1973 documentary salute to MGM musicals, *That's Entertainment*.)

What *The Broadway Melody* was aiming for in 1929 was fully achieved, finally, in *Singin' in the Rain*, wherein Gene Kelly and his co-director Stanley Donen gave "The Broadway Melody"…well, everything: a Hollywood production number that remains the quintessence of Hollywood production numbers. And yet, what frames the song so effectively in *Singin' in the Rain* is a mirroring pair of lingering, tight close-ups of Kelly that open and close the number, grounding the outsized razzmatazz in face-to-face intimacy; from isolation to extravaganza and back again.

This is one of the ways Hollywood injected songs into the American bloodstream. It really is the same seize-and-release, pulsing technique used by riffing jazz musicians to carve out a groove, except that the riffers here were the directors, the cameramen, and, especially, the film editors, cutting back and forth between cinema's hyperbolic inflationary power and its contrasting ability to draw us closer than any other medium can to singers and their songs.

The master innovator in this realm was Busby Berkeley, Hollywood's fantastical geometrician, who dance-directed dozens of Depression-era films, most indelibly *42nd Street* in 1933, deploying his signature overhead camera angles and precision dancing minions in service to songs mostly written by the terrifically prolific team of composer Harry Warren and lyricist Al Dubin. Berkeley was the Hollywood musical's pioneering visual innovator, refining and expanding the genre as an overstuffed fever dream of sumptuously composed, swirling (and very much sexualized) long shots. What is often forgotten, however, is how Berkeley also personalized his dancing platoons with innumerable individuating close-ups, implying intimacy one gorgeous but anonymous chorus-girl face at a time.

In Berkeley's wake came Hollywood's matchless musical couple, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, who together redefined the movie musical as a mating dance for two. Whether prancing over living room furniture or wafting through Berkeley-like production numbers, Astaire and Rogers imparted to the Hollywood musical an ineffable cinematic double-vision—an apparition of distant, intoxicating perfection that nevertheless offered the accessible promise of intimacy.

In 1939, *The Wizard of Oz* further renovated and elevated the notion of what a screen musical could be, re-rendering it as a vehicle for fabulous storytelling and limitlessly imaginative production values. Though screen-filling long shots of Munchkinland and "The Merry Old Land of Oz" dominate the film, it is 16-year-old Judy Garland in close-up singing Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg's "Over the Rainbow" that gives *The Wizard of Oz* its heart.

After shepherding *The Wizard of Oz* as an uncredited associate producer, "Broadway Melody" lyricist Arthur Freed was rewarded with his own producing position at MGM in 1939. His "Freed Unit" quickly grew into Hollywood's most polished manufacturer of movie musicals, generating an unsurpassed roster of hits that stand to this day as among the most marvelous ever made: from the Judy Garland–Mickey Rooney "backyard" revues (beginning with *Babes in Arms* in 1939), to *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *Easter Parade* (1948), *On the Town* (1949), *An American in Paris* (1951), *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), and *Gigi* (1958).

Mastery was the Freed Unit's signature—mastery of every element in a musical's construction. Freed's stable of directors—essentially Charles Walters, George Sidney, Stanley Donen (with and without Gene Kelly), and, most decisively, Vincente Minnelli—brilliantly managed a veritable all-star team of musical performers, topped by Freed's star-crossed triumvirate: Fred Astaire (whom Freed coaxed out of retirement to MGM), Gene Kelly (whose early career Freed salvaged at MGM after David Selznick fumbled Kelly's transfer to Hollywood from Broadway), and Judy Garland (whom Minnelli, in time, married).

It was, however, Freed's behind-the-scenes staffers—the master craftsmen (and women) he chose to employ again and again—who gave his musicals their singular stamp: unseen artisans like vocal arranger, coach, and choral director Kay Thompson, or Roger Edens, composer, arranger, voice teacher, rehearsal pianist, musical supervisor, and, finally, associate producer on many Freed Unit films. Sure, gaudy long shots made movie musicals spectacular, as Arthur Freed knew better than anyone. The big picture, however, came down to the individuals. Up close, they made it all happen.

Barry Singer's most recent book is Churchill Style: The Art of Being Winston Churchill.

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