

Getting to Know Richard Rodgers

Shedd explores songwriting legend

Ever since The Beatles demolished the division between popular music performers and songwriters, we've generally expected our greatest songwriters to also be star performers who express their personal feelings in song. But in the first half of the last century, even the greatest pop songwriters usually labored as behind the scenes craftsmen who adapted their genius to the needs of Broadway musicals, Hollywood movies and TV shows, or star performers.

So unless they saw PBS's recent American Masters documentary biography of Richard Rodgers, hardly anyone would have recognized a photo of the creative genius who scored such varied classics as Elvis Presley's "Blue Moon" and plenty of other early rock hits, John Coltrane's "My Favorite Things" and dozens of other jazz standards ("My Funny Valentine," "It Might as Well be Spring" and many more), Frank Sinatra's "The Lady is a Tramp" and scores of other pop masterpieces. Next week, the Shedd devotes this summer's Oregon Festival of American Music to raising Rodgers' profile to its deserved heights.

Over six decades, nearly 1,000 songs, five dozen stage and screen musicals and hordes of awards (Grammys, Emmys, Tonys, Oscars, even a pair of Pulitzers), Rodgers dominated midcentury American music, because this was the period in which musicals generated the bulk of the country's greatest sounds. His first songwriting partner was Larry Hart, whose often gloomy love life, shadowed by alcoholism and the era's repressive anti-gay social mores, darkened and deepened his clever lyrics and thus Rodgers' music — the finest of his career. After Hart's untimely decline and death in 1943, Rodgers joined another old friend, Oscar Hammerstein II, who supplied less-complex lyrics for more ambitious theater, film and even TV productions like *Carousel*, *Oklahoma* and *The King and I*. Rodgers enjoyed middling success solo and with other collaborators between Hammerstein's death in 1960 and his own in 1979.

The festival provides multiple perspectives on Rodgers' incomparable career.

• **Musicals.** Rodgers wrote great songs, but hearing them only in concerts wrenches many of them out of their original musical theater context. So six years ago, the Shedd added a big musical production to OFAM, and this year it's doubling the number so as to include both of Rodgers' great partners. We'll get to see and hear the Rodgers & Hammerstein perennial *South Pacific* (directed by Ron Jessup with live music by the American Symphonia, conducted by James Paul), which OFAM head James Ralph calls "one of the greatest American musical dramas of all time, almost a musical tragedy." This year's rediscovery: the original 1937

production of Rodgers & Hart's *Babes in Arms*, which OFAM considers superior to Rodgers' 1959 revision. "*Babes in Arms* is the quintessential Rodgers & Hart show, and particularly appealing to me because they've re-released a very close proximity to the original book and score," Ralph says. "And it is arguably the best musical comedy score ever created, with a phenomenal number of standards."

• **Jazz.** Matinees on Aug. 2, 4 and 10 reveal just how resilient Rodgers' harmonic structures could be; his tunes provided the vehicles for stratospheric flights of improvisatory genius by even modernist jazz giants like Trane, Evans, Miles Davis and so many others. OFAM regulars Ken Peplowski (the clarinet vet taking the jazz adviser reins from legendary New York pianist/arranger Dick Hyman, who'll also appear), guitarists Howard Alden and the legendary Bucky Pizzarelli and bassist Doug Miller perform.

• **Talks.** OFAM excels at combining historical context with fun performances, keeping the education from being too dry while deepening the musical experience. This year's free talks look especially fascinating as they offer a glimpse into a genius's creative process by comparing Rodgers' work with Hart and with Hammerstein, an ex-

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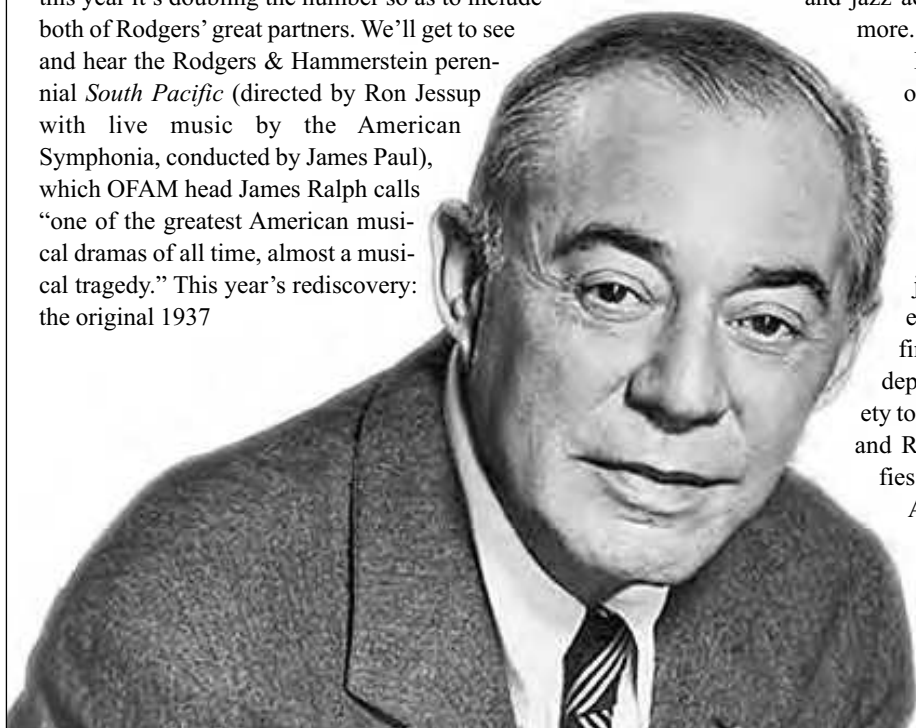
amination of what makes his songs great and how they fought racism, plus looks at the exciting beginning and poignant last days of the doomed Hart's partnership with his longtime colleague.

• **Film.** Though Rodgers and Hart considered their 1931-35 Hollywood sojourn unsatisfying, many of their most memorable songs eventually appeared in films, including adaptations of their Broadway productions. OFAM includes free showings of *Flower Drum Song*, *Pal Joey* and more.

• **Vocal concerts.** The Aug. 3 Hart vs. Hammerstein and Aug. 9 Twenties concerts with Ian Whitcomb and ensemble, and Aug. 10 duets show with Brabham, Julie Alsin and Michael Stone, place Rodgers' songs in the kind of cabaret setting where they flourished after their stage incarnations. Hyman, Peplowski and the engaging singer Maria Jette try a more "classical" setting on Aug. 2.

The Aug. 1 opening gala and Aug. 11 closer give excellent overviews of OFAM's characteristically comprehensive survey of Rodgers' music, much of it written for early musicals now barely remembered in the wake of his later triumphs. The festival also includes performances by students at the Shedd's music and dance camps and jazz academy, a free public jam and more.

For 16 years, the great strength of OFAM has been how thoughtfully and entertainingly it combines history and performance. It's rare to find any festival that delves so exhaustively and rewardingly into a single subject yet keeps things swinging enough for casual fans. A key is finding subjects worthy of such depth while offering enough variety to sustain a dozen or more events, and Rodgers' music certainly qualifies. The Shedd keeps proving that America's musical legacy is an inexhaustible trove of riches and reaffirms OFAM's status as Eugene's most important musical institution. **EW**



The Genius of Hillstomp

Misery loves a driving guitar riff

Say you have a friend coming to town. You're not *not* excited to see that person, but it's been a while and you're worried about how to entertain him or her. Maybe you were Goths back in the day and you've heard your buddy works for Pfizer now, or you used to barbecue together and so-and-so's become an anarchist vegan. Rather than learning to cook tempeh or brushing up on the latest in pharmaceutical patent

law, your best bet would be praying to your deity of choice that Hillstomp is playing in town that night (or driving to wherever they *are* playing) because if your houseguest doesn't end up liking Hillstomp, you probably don't want to be their friend anyway.

It's true that you generally can't go wrong with the blues, but Hillstomp goes so *right* with the blues that pretty much anyone who sees their show becomes an instant convert. Fans who caught Henry Kammerer and John Johnson at John Henry's last year may want to listen for their own hoots and hollers on the backtracks of the duo's latest album, *After Two But Before Five*, partially recorded live at Eugene's most beloved hole in the wall. Johnson and Kammerer make it sound so easy: two guys, some buckets, a guitar, a distortion microphone ... but that's the genius of it. The aching, soul-twisting impact of songs like "Roustabout" or the classic "Dark Clouds a-Risin'" is a product not only of talent but a visceral understanding of how minor chords, relentless percussion and songs in the key of misery can strip an audience bare. Not that Hillstomp is a downer; fortunately, misery loves company and a driving guitar riff, and you're guaranteed both at this show.

Call it trance blues, "hill country blues stomp," "bucket 'n' slide rock 'n' roll" or whatever. Hillstomp's reverent modernization of classic blues (including covering greats like R.L. Burnside and Mississippi Fred McDowell) has carved a musical niche that is nothing short of revolutionary. Don't miss your chance to say you saw them when.

— Adrienne van der Valk

Hillstomp, Cicada Omega, Glassell Park
9 pm Friday, July 27
John Henry's • \$5
21+ show