

# No, That Isn't Horatio Alger, It's Irving Berlin

## Creator Of Jazz Now Writing Songs For Movies

Irving Berlin, Who Rose From Nigger Mike's Saloon to Be One of the Foremost Song Writers in the World.



Dick Powell in a Scene from "On the Avenue," the Music for Which Berlin Has Just Finished. The Background is a Reproduction of Old-Time Atlantic City.



By Doris Lockett

IT WAS exactly 30 years ago that a young singing waiter, still in his teens, thought he would put on paper the lyrical quality he had discovered in himself while entertaining and serving the half-stewed customers in Nigger Mike's saloon in New York's Chinatown.

That first song which he wrote and published brought no financial returns, and no ripple in the world of popular music—but it was the beginning of the man who was responsible for ragtime and the jazz age. It was called "Marie From Sunny Italy"—but no one cared.

And 30 years later, Irving Berlin is still writing America's greatest song hits, but through a medium which reaches a simultaneous world audience—the movies. In a Beverly Hills home and an office in the 20th Century-Fox studio, Berlin has completed six song hits for the picture, "On the Avenue," in which Dick Powell, Madeleine Carroll, Alice Faye, and the Ritz Brothers take part. That finished, he is now starting another cycle of songs for his next picture, "Alexander's Ragtime Band," named after his 1911 song hit which first set feet shuffling to the new rhythm which he had then discovered.

Despite his 30 years of activity and his position as an historical pioneer in American music, Berlin is still a young man, dark, slim and dapper, with a nervous excitability which becomes heightened whenever he is in the throes of creation.

Another thing that has not changed about Berlin is his piano. This battered old upright instrument has, like its owner, become of historical importance in American music. For over 25 years it has poured out the melodies, rhythms and tempos which have been accepted by the world as the musical mirror of modern American life.

Beside its ordinary wear and tear, the piano owes much of its battering to its well traveled existence. It has boarded many a ship plying between American, European and West Indian ports. It has rattled its way many times across the continent between New York and Hollywood. Hundreds of moving vans have carted it between offices, mansions and apartment houses in various cities and countries.

Today it reposes in the Beverly Hills home which Berlin has made his headquarters. There it jangles out its tunes at ungodly hours of the night and early morning.

IT WAS this same piano, which composed the song hits for "On the Avenue," which also aided Berlin in crystallizing America's nascent Jazz Age over a quarter of a century ago with the composition of "Alexander's Ragtime Band."

At the time, negro rhythms and "ragging" were just being recognized by a few white people interested in such things. Small negro bands, particularly in the South, were experimenting with it. Berlin was the first composer to put it into concrete form in the song which he named after just such a negro band. The word "ragtime" caught on and was used to designate this form of music until it was supplanted by "jazz."

Since that time, Berlin has composed hundreds of songs which have been played, sung, hummed and whistled in every corner of the globe. It did not take him long to become the reigning Muse of American music, even though, to this day, he has never taken a music lesson in his life.

Like his general education, Irving Berlin's music is entirely self-taught. He began picking out tunes with one finger on the piano in Nigger Mike's. By a hit and miss method on the black keys alone he soon taught himself to improvise chords with his left hand.

The old black key habit stuck to him, and now he can only play in the key of F-sharp. And that is why he sticks to his one favorite piano all through the years.

As soon as he was able to afford a piano, he bought an upright and had the keyboard specially built so that, with a little lever, the key-



(Left) Alice Faye in a Scene From "On the Avenue." (Above) Six Girls in a Pensive Mood From the Same Picture. Berlin Wrote Six Songs for This Movie.



board could be shifted to any position. With the aid of the action of this lever he can shift to any key he desires while still actually pounding only his favorite black keys.

During the years, he has taught himself to play the piano in a very effective manner, nor does he have to be coaxed to perform, even for strangers.

An interviewer who drops in on him after he has finished one of his compositions is bound to be made a preview audience for the song. While talking about "On the Avenue" which was in the midst of production, Berlin naturally talked about the six songs he had written for it, and without any coaxing sat down at the piano and played and sang them.

HE PLAYED lustily and sang in a barely audible voice such numbers as "You're Laughing At Me," "He Ain't Got Rhythm," "The Girl On the Police Gazette," "Slumming On Park Avenue," and others.

This seemed like a rare honor for the lone

interviewer to have Berlin play and sing all of his new numbers. But a little inquiring revealed the fact that as soon as Berlin finishes a song he will press the first person he sees into service as an audience. In this matter of "trying it on the dog," messenger boys, servants and casual acquaintances have been the first persons to hear many of the greatest hits he has written.

Although his voice is not like it was when he was a youngster earning his money by singing in Bowery saloons, Berlin still has the flair of the performer. Unlike most composers, he is not an introvert, but has a lot of the qualities of the actor who likes to display his wares.

"Writing music for the movies," Berlin said, offers a different method of approach than in stage revues. I am quite enthused over the six numbers I have written for "On the Avenue," not because they happen to be my most recent but because I have been given a chance to do something different.

"Instead of writing songs which are fitted into the picture irrespective of what the story is about, I have used definite ideas which fit right into the story and the people playing in it.

"In the Music Box revues which I did in New York, the procedure was usually that of first writing a song and then figuring out the number that could be staged around it. Now the procedure takes somewhat of a reverse angle."

To illustrate what he meant, Berlin sat down at his old, upright piano with the shifting keyboard, and played and sang "Slumming On Park Avenue." When he was through, he said:

"This song, which can become a popular number for singing and dance orchestras apart from the movies, has a definite bearing on the story which we are filming. Our script deals with the richest girl in the city, played by Madeleine Carroll, and a musical show which was written as a burlesque on her, her father, and her fiancé. Thus, instead of breaking off in the middle of our story and bursting into song, we have something which tells our story and adds motivation for what happens after that."

To understand Berlin's enthusiasm for "idea" songs, one must first know that his first attempts at music writing were centered around the lyrics. The writing of the music came a little later, but since then he has never needed a collaborator, but does words and music himself.

He cannot work in the daytime, for ever since his night work as a singing waiter when he would always go home to sleep when others were just getting up to go to work, he has stuck to these owl hours. He will stay up all night at the piano, and his usual rising hour is never before noon.

It was this habit which was responsible for his most popular song during the World War period. As a private in the United States Army at Camp Upton, his greatest hardship was getting up at bugle call in the small hours of the morning. This he translated into the song, "Oh, How I Hate To Get Up In the Morning," which, together with George M. Cohan's "Over There," became one of the doughboys' favorite marching songs.