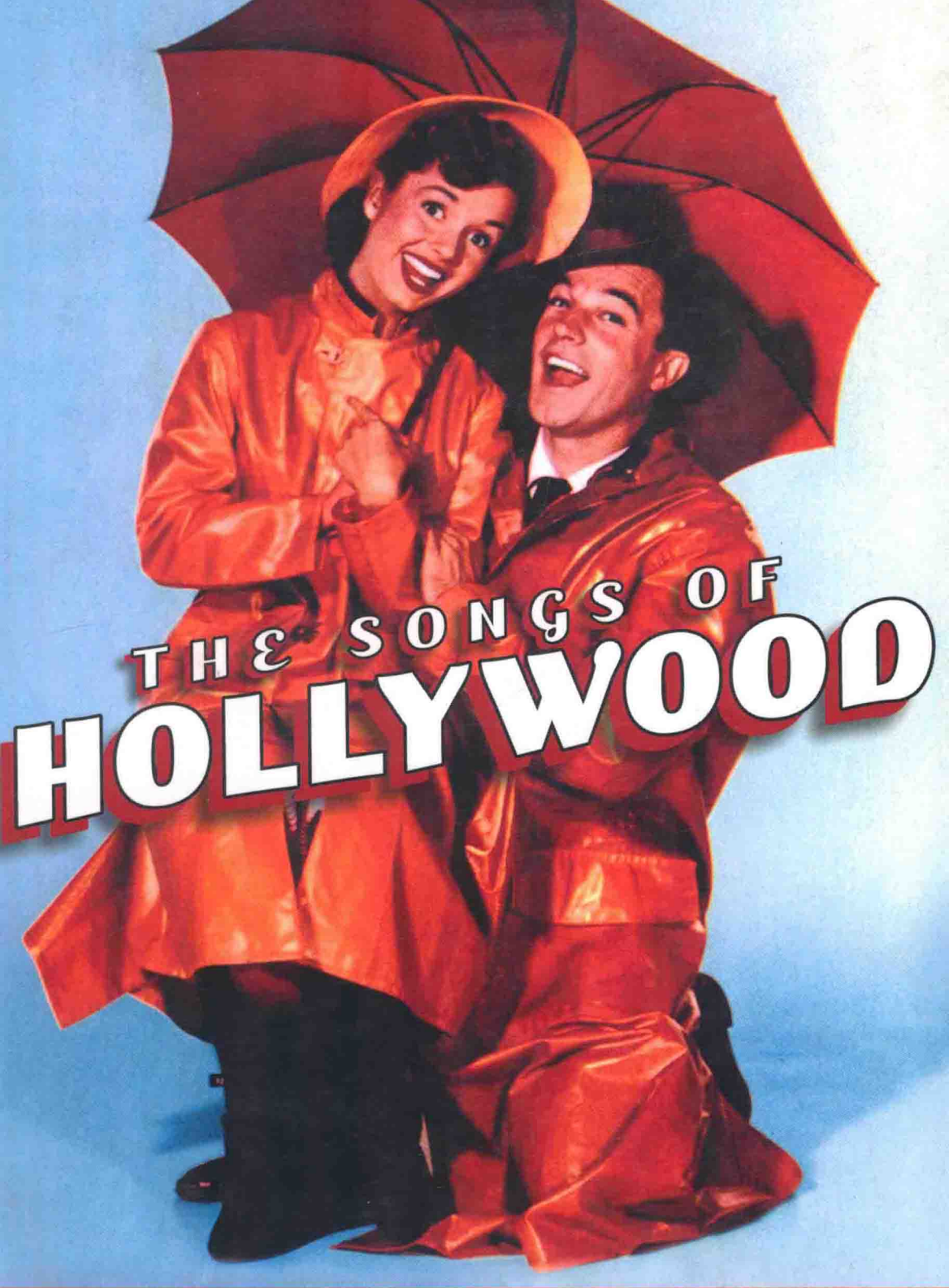

Philip Furia *and* Laurie Patterson

THE SONGS OF HOLLYWOOD



PHIL FURIA
AND
LAURIE PATTERSON

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TO

OLIVIA LEONA PATTERSON FURIA,

The Song in Our Hearts

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CONTENTS

THE SONGS OF HOLLYWOOD

1

You Ain't Heard Nothin' Yet

Songs written for Hollywood movies have always had to play second fiddle to those from Broadway musicals. We think of Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, and Cole Porter as writers of Broadway shows—*Show Boat*, *Annie Get Your Gun*, *Girl Crazy*, *Kiss Me, Kate*—but they wrote some of their best songs for Hollywood movies. Berlin, for example, wrote "Cheek to Cheek," "Puttin' on the Ritz," and, of course, "White Christmas" for films. Other songwriting teams, such as Al Dubin and Harry Warren, Johnny Mercer and Harold Arlen, and Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen, worked almost exclusively in Hollywood. In more recent years, the Sherman brothers (*Mary Poppins*), Marilyn and Alan Bergman (*Yentl*), and other Hollywood songwriters have continued to create wonderful songs for films.

Yet songwriters themselves regarded writing for the stage more highly than writing for the screen. As lyricist E. Y. "Yip" Harburg, who worked with equal success on Broadway (*Finian's Rainbow*) and in Hollywood (*The Wizard of Oz*), put it: "Broadway was the literary Park Avenue...and Hollywood was Skid Row." Still, Harburg went on to say that "for a while, especially during the Astaire-Rogers era, Hollywood was turning out some great songs." In fact, Hollywood songwriters created great songs well before and long after the heyday of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers in the mid-1930s. Beginning in 1929, lyricists and composers such as Leo Robin and Richard Whiting wrote sophisticated songs for Paramount operettas that usually starred Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald under the direction of Ernst Lubitsch or Rouben Mamoulian. At Warner Bros., Al Dubin and Harry Warren wrote jazzy numbers for films such as *42nd Street* (1933) that were spectacularly choreographed by Busby Berkeley. At RKO, the songs of Irving Berlin, Dorothy Fields and Jerome Kern, and Ira and George Gershwin were superbly rendered by Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. In the 1940s, MGM, under the leadership of producer Arthur Freed (a lyricist himself), created such films as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *The Harvey Girls* (1946), and *Easter Parade* (1948), where songs were as integral to

character and dramatic narrative as they were in the best Broadway musicals of the decade. MGM continued to produce such wonderfully "integrated" musical films throughout the 1950s, from *An American in Paris* (1951) through *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), *The Band Wagon* (1953), *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), and culminating in *Gigi* (1958).

By the late 1950s, however, original film musicals were being displaced by screen adaptations of Broadway musicals such as *Oklahoma!* (1955), *The King and I* (1956), and *South Pacific* (1958). That displacement accelerated over the next decade with film versions of *West Side Story* (1961), *The Music Man* (1962), *My Fair Lady* (1964), and *The Sound of Music* (1965). By 1970, the Broadway takeover was virtually complete as films of *Fiddler on the Roof* (1971), *Cabaret* (1972), and *Grease* (1978) outnumbered and, in box-office terms, outperformed such original film musicals as *Nashville* (1975), *New York, New York* (1977), and *Yentl* (1983). Today, most musical films, such as *Chicago* (2002), *Dream Girls* (2006), and *Sweeney Todd* (2007), are screen versions of stage shows. While some Broadway adaptations made for wonderful films, many were overly faithful reproductions of their Broadway originals, "stagey" rather than cinematic. Their songs, moreover, are not the songs of Hollywood but Broadway "theater songs" (or as they are sometimes dubbed, "show tunes").

In addition to writing for original film musicals, Hollywood lyricists and composers created great songs for dramatic films as well. What could be more sultry than Johnny Mercer and Hoagy Carmichael's "How Little We Know"—more whispered than sung by Lauren Bacall in *To Have and Have Not* (1944)? Or more winsome than Mercer and Henry Mancini's "Moon River" in *Breakfast at Tiffany's* (1961) as performed by Audrey Hepburn in her own fragile voice, not dubbed, as she was by the operatic Marni Nixon in the filmed version of *My Fair Lady* ? Equally touching is Jackie Gleason's rendition of Sammy Cahn and Jimmy Van Heusen's "Call Me Irresponsible" in *Papa's Delicate Condition* (1963), where he plays an alcoholic husband and father in a role originally offered to Fred Astaire. Standing unsteadily before his wife's dress mannequin, Gleason slurs his way through polysyllabic phrases ("Call me irresponsible,/ Call me unreliable,/ Throw in undependable, too...") as he expresses his love for a woman for whom, he knows, he has been a lifelong frustration.

Some of the greatest "songs of Hollywood" were not actually written for a film but presented in it so movingly that our impression of the song is indelibly associated with that movie. Herman Hupfeld wrote "As Time Goes By" in 1931 as an independent ballad that, despite a recording by Rudy Vallee, quickly faded into oblivion. But when Humphrey Bogart implored Dooley Wilson to "Play it!" (not "Play it again, Sam") in *Casablanca* (1942), "As Time Goes By" was transformed into a "standard" that has taken its rightful place in what has

been called "The Great American Song Book." "As Time Goes By" may thus be considered one of the "songs of Hollywood" by a process of adoption.

Still other songs were originally created for one film but more memorably presented in another. Irving Berlin wrote the title song for *Puttin' on the Ritz* (1930), where it was given a lifeless rendition by smarmy nightclub singer Harry Richman. Since then, "Puttin' on the Ritz," one of Irving Berlin's most rhythmically intricate songs, has been revived in several films. The most spectacular rendition was in *Blue Skies* (1946), where Fred Astaire danced with seven reflections of himself. The most hilarious revival came in *Young Frankenstein* (1974), when Gene Wilder introduced Peter Boyle on stage as, not a monster, but a "cultured, sophisticated man about town," then joined him—both attired in top hat, white tie, and tails—in a duet of "Puttin' on the Ritz."

Least interesting of the songs of Hollywood are those that were merely sung over the opening or closing credits of a film. Such "theme" songs, even when they are superb, often bear only a titular relation to the story and characters of a film. Johnny Mercer and Henry Mancini wrote the theme song for *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962) without even looking at the script for the movie. Its haunting images of days that run away "like a child at play,/ Through the meadowland/ Toward a closing door, A door marked 'Nevermore,'/ That wasn't there before" evoke the loss of youth but have little to do with the film's searing portrait of an alcoholic marriage. Mercer later admitted that he thought *Days of Wine and Roses* was a costume epic set in the medieval Wars of the Roses. Even when such title songs resonate with a film's narrative, the fact that they are not presented on screen makes the connection tenuous. At the end of *The Way We Were* (1973), Robert Redford rushes across the street to hold his former lover, Barbra Streisand, in a futile embrace. At that moment, the title song, with its ruefully nostalgic lyrics by Marilyn and Alan Bergman and its plangent melody by Marvin Hamlisch, comes up on the soundtrack but immediately the film concludes, and the song continues playing over the closing credits.

Songs that *do* figure in films are presented in one of two ways. From the very beginning of sound films and continuing to this day, the majority of songs are presented as "performances" by actors portraying singers, dancers, songwriters, or other theatrical characters. In such roles, they have a realistic excuse to sing because they are demonstrating, auditioning, rehearsing, or performing a song in a nightclub, in vaudeville, in a Broadway revue or musical, on the radio, or some other theatrical venue. The very earliest films to incorporate songs, such as *The Jazz Singer* (1927) and *The Singing Fool* (1928), told stories about singers who sang popular songs of their day before an audience who reacted to the performance with applause. This performance convention avoided the problem studios worried about from the outset of sound films: how would an audience

respond to an ordinary character suddenly moving from dialogue into song then back to dialogue without even the applause that cushions such a transition in a stage musical. The performance convention for presenting a song solved the problem: in a movie, performers *perform*.

Yet such presentations threatened to rob song of its greatest power. In opera, operetta, and musical comedy, characters express their deepest feelings in songs at heightened dramatic moments. What they sing is not a preexisting popular song but what purports to be an original, spontaneous song that is integrally related to their character and situation. One thing Hollywood tried to do was to capture some of that dramatic power by having "performance" numbers at least resonate with character and story. In *Rose of Washington Square* (1939), for example, Alice Faye plays a singer closely modeled on Fanny Brice. Just as Brice in real life was in love with gangster Nicky Arnstein, Faye's character is enthralled by a crook played by Tyrone Power. When Power is arrested, Faye tells fellow-singer Al Jolson she's quitting show business. Jolson dissuades her by showing her a new song, "My Man," and telling her it expresses her stalwart love for Power and she should sing it for all the world to hear: "This is your song and you sing it and they'll never forget it or you." As Faye sings the song from the stage, Power watches from the wings, but when he sees a stagehand reading a newspaper whose headline predicts he'll be sentenced to ten years in prison, he jumps bail and flees. While Power is "on the lam," he wanders, dirty and unshaven, into a diner where he again hears Faye singing "My Man" on the jukebox. The scene then cuts back to Faye singing "My Man" on stage in another performance, and the camera finds Power in the audience, listening to her one more time before he turns himself in to the police.

While songs done as performances can resonate with character and story, another, more expressive convention for presenting songs developed more gradually. This convention derived from stage musicals where characters broke into songs that expressed what they were feeling at particular dramatic moments. Such "integral" songs were not done as performances by actors portraying singers but as spontaneous emanations of emotion. Initially, only a few characters could sing without a realistic "excuse": cartoon figures (since they were already stylized, what did it matter if they broke into song?); children (who uninhibitedly burst into song); and, in a strange racist twist, blacks, who, stereotypically, were thought to be full of "natural rhythm." The convention of breaking into song gradually extended to Europeans in films Maurice Chevalier made at Paramount in the early 1930s. Then, with the Astaire-Rogers films at RKO in the mid-1930s, ordinary Americans could move from dialogue into song as easily as they moved from walking into dancing, though in most of their films

Astaire and Rogers portrayed professional singers or dancers, so that their forays into song put less strain on verisimilitude. By the late 1930s, the convention was finally established that characters could sing songs that were an integral expression of what they felt at a particular dramatic moment. The studio that capitalized on this new convention was MGM, which, under the supervision of producer Arthur Freed, created musical films where characters broke into integral song as easily as did characters in Broadway stage musicals. And, again as in stage musicals, other characters take no notice of the fact that a fellow performer has just moved from talking into singing.

The way many songs were presented in Hollywood movies, either as performances or integral expressions of character, was different from the way songs were presented on Broadway. As Busby Berkeley was one of the first to demonstrate, cinematography and editing could render a song more spectacularly on the screen than would be possible in even the most lavish stage production. Berkeley filmed dancers from overhead in kaleidoscopic patterns that could never have been seen from the perspective of a theater audience. His camera also tracked through the outspread legs of gorgeous chorines in his patented "crotch shots." When the sequences were edited, shots were juxtaposed in montages that would be impossible to present in a live stage performance.

Cinematography and editing could also render a song more intimately than any stage production. In *Swing Time* (1936), Fred Astaire sits at a piano in Ginger Rogers's apartment and sings Dorothy Fields and Jerome Kern's "The Way You Look Tonight" to himself as she washes her hair in the bathroom. The camera cuts back and forth between him and her as she becomes increasingly enthralled by the song. As she wanders out of the bathroom to be near him, her hair still smothered in shampoo, the camera moves in on her in an extreme close-up. Her slightest facial movements, movements that would not be visible to the audience of a stage production, register how deeply she is touched by the song while her shampooed hair adds a delightfully comic counterpoint to her rapture.

Just as songs in film could be presented in ways that outshone stage productions, they were often crafted differently from Broadway songs. A song such as "The Way You Look Tonight" is more understated, musically and lyrically, than ones created for stage performance—more casual, nonchalant, conversational; less florid, less operatic, less, well, "theatrical." In writing for a Broadway musical, in days when performers weren't "miked" as they now are, composers had to create "singable" melodies with plenty of long notes that performers could sustain and project to the back of the balcony. Lyricists then set such long notes with equally long open vowels—"oohs" and "aahs"—and tried to avoid ending a phrase with a word that had a terminal consonant that could not be sustained

by a singer (Oscar Hammerstein once fretted about concluding a line with "and all the rest is *talk*!")

In the early 1930s, however, Hollywood devised the "playback" system, which changed the rules of songwriting. In this system, performers first recorded a song in a sound studio by singing into a microphone. Then, during shooting, they would lip-synch to a playback of their own recording. For songwriters, the playback system meant that composers need not worry about providing long notes to give a melody "singability"; because singers were using a microphone, every note, even the shortest, was picked up clearly and amplified. For lyricists, the microphone provided even more flexibility: instead of concentrating on long open vowels, they had a wider palette of short vowels and consonants—not just the more singable "*l*s," *m*s," and "*n*s" but dental "*t*s" and "*d*s," guttural "*k*s" and "*g*s"—even plosive "*p*s" and "*b*s" (though these could sometimes "pop" the mike). Since, as a Germanic language, English is rich in such consonants, lyrics that used them liberally—"Isn't It Romantic?" "Cheek to Cheek," "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off"—sounded more like everyday conversation.

The playback system also offered new opportunities for the way songs were performed in film. Because singers merely had to lip-synch to their own prerecording, they could seem to be singing while performing the most athletically demanding dances, as Donald O'Connor does with "Make 'Em Laugh" in *Singin' in the Rain*. On the other hand, prerecording enabled them to render the most intimate songs with casual nonchalance. Some of the best performers in musical film, such as Maurice Chevalier, Fred Astaire, and Gene Kelly, never sang out bombastically but rather presented a song as if they were talking rather than singing. "The one advantage that nonsingers like myself have on good singers," Kelly observed, "is that we can almost talk what we have to say." More gifted singers, such as Judy Garland, learned to deliver songs more informally and understatedly than she had from the vaudeville stage.

Given the fact that Hollywood movies could showcase songs much more spectacularly, as well as more intimately, than Broadway stage productions and that the prerecording and playback system gave composers and lyricists so much more freedom as they crafted words and music, it might seem strange that songwriters would compare writing for Broadway to "Park Avenue" and working in Hollywood as "Skid Row." Part of the discrepancy simply reflected the songwriters' sense of disruption as they moved from the East to the West Coast. While some songwriters gladly left New York for Hollywood with the advent of sound films, the major Broadway songwriters—Kern, Porter, the Gershwins—trekked westward only because the Great Depression darkened so many Broadway theaters. As Broadway songwriters migrated to Hollywood in the early 1930s, they found film a very different venue for their work.

In a Broadway musical, lyricists and composers were central to the production from the very beginning, working with producers and playwrights on where to place songs in the story. Their songs had what songwriters called "particularity," for they were integrally tailored to certain characters and dramatic situations. Musically, such songs could be intricate and daring, for stage singers often had trained voices that could traverse three octaves and change keys in the course of a melody. Lyricists, many of whom had started out as writers of *vers de société*, wrote witty, literate lyrics that were appreciated by sophisticated Broadway audiences. During rehearsals, songwriters collaborated with directors and choreographers to revise songs to suit the abilities of singers and dancers. Before a show opened in New York, songwriters rewrote or replaced songs based on the reactions of audiences at out-of-town "try-out" performances. On opening night on Broadway, their names appeared on the theater marquee, often above even the title of the show—Oscar Hammerstein and Jerome Kern's *Show Boat*, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart's *A Connecticut Yankee*, George and Ira Gershwin's *Strike Up the Band*.

In Hollywood, by contrast, the compartmentalized, assembly-line production of movies had long been established by 1927 and was not about to change when songwriters arrived. They were told to write songs—period. Since the songs were usually presented as "performances," they need have little relation to character or dramatic situation. Usually, the lyricist and composer were given a screenplay—sometimes only a narrative treatment and occasionally even less than that—and sent off to a bungalow on the lot to crank out songs, songs that were expected to become *hits*. They seldom had any say in how their songs were presented and frequently were berated by producers who were wary of music or lyrics that departed from the simplest of formulas. As film historian Richard Barrios notes, "the film spectator was deemed on a lower plane than the more sophisticated Broadway equivalent, and songs had to be tailored accordingly. Simpler and more accessible modes of current pop tunes were held as the prototype for film use. In this formula, lyrics were kept plain and often repetitive, rhyme schemes obvious, melody and harmony non-adventurous." Sam Goldwyn once ordered George Gershwin to write more like Irving Berlin. Richard Whiting had to endure the scorn of a producer who, after listening to the composer demonstrate a new melody, tore the sheet music from the piano, threw it on the floor, and shouted "Phooey!" When a movie came out, the names of the songwriters were buried in the middle of the credits, and even the most successful Hollywood composers and lyricists were virtually unknown compared to their Broadway counterparts. Composer Harry Warren, who had written almost as many hit songs as Irving Berlin, was bitter that his name was unfamiliar to most people because he had not written

a successful Broadway show. "In Hollywood," he grumbled, "a songwriter was the lowest form of animal life."

In effect, writing songs for Hollywood was less like writing for a Broadway musical and more like working on Tin Pan Alley. To understand the songs and songwriters of Hollywood, therefore, one needs to know something about Tin Pan Alley and its long-standing link to the movies. Before Tin Pan Alley, there really was no popular song industry in America. The relative affordability of factory-built pianos in the latter decades of the nineteenth century made the sing-a-long around the parlor piano the center of middle-class home entertainment in the days before the phonograph or radio. The new pianos created a demand for sheet music, but traditional music publishers did not try to meet that demand. Such publishers were spread across the country, and, while they might publish popular songs, they first waited until a song had *become* popular, through such venues as minstrel shows, before they would publish the sheet music for sale. Their mainstay was in church hymnals and music instruction books, so the publication of a song was a sideline. When one of Stephen Foster's songs, "Massa's in de Cold, Cold Groun'" (1852), sold 75,000 copies of sheet music, it was considered a phenomenal hit.

But in the 1880s a new breed of sheet-music publishers set up shop, first around Union Square in New York, then off Broadway and West 28th Street, where, so the story goes, the din of so many tinny pianos cranking out new songs struck a newspaper reporter as sounding like clanging tin pans and earned the area its sobriquet. These publishers, most of them Jewish immigrants who had started out as salesmen, believed that if you could sell corsets and neckties, you could also "sell" songs. They specialized exclusively in popular songs and tried to make songs to order for the public taste by following simple musical and lyrical formulas. Once manufactured in the publishing office, a song could then be *made* popular through what came to be called "plugging." Plugging could range anywhere from bribing a vaudeville performer to work your company's new song into her act to sending "pluggers" out to a busy street corner with a piano mounted on a truck. In 1892, a Tin Pan Alley song, "After the Ball," sold more than a million copies of sheet music, demonstrating the popular music industry's power to create and plug its songs far beyond the success of even Stephen Foster. By 1910, the sheet-music publishers of Tin Pan Alley were producing virtually every popular song in America.

With the emergence of the film industry at the turn of the century, Tin Pan Alley saw another avenue for plugging songs. Although, as film historian Rick Altman has established, "many early films were shown in silence," popular songs still found their way into the earliest storefront nickelodeons. As reels were changed, which had to be done every ten minutes, slide photographs,