

Richard Rodgers, 1902-1979

The Premier Composer of the American Musical

Richard Rodgers is widely regarded as the **premier composer of the American musical**. With 43 Broadway musicals and over 900 songs to his credit, Rodgers was one of the most important American composers of the 20th century, and his compositions had a significant influence on popular music.

Yet many Americans today have not heard of him. This could be because of his common-sounding, very American name, Richard Rodgers, unlike the more colorful and distinctive names of well-known composers such as George Gershwin, Duke Ellington, Cole Porter, and Hoagy Carmichael. Many Americans may not have heard of Richard Rodgers, but when you ask them about **Rodgers & Hart** or about **Rodgers & Hammerstein**, more Americans have heard of him in these associations, especially the latter.

R&H vs. R&H

The 100th anniversary of the birth of Richard Rodgers was celebrated in 2002 with considerable publicity. Also, his musicals were presented again, including *Oklahoma*, *South Pacific*, and the *Flower Drum Song*. Observing this 100th anniversary, The *San Francisco Chronicle* of July 21, 2002 had an article entitled “**R&H vs. R&H, Rodgers’ collaborations left 2 different legacies**” by Robert Hurwitt, *Chronicle* Theater Critic. The **first R&H** referred to Rodgers’ collaboration with lyricist Lorenz Hart from roughly 1919 to 1943, and the **second R&H** to that with Oscar Hammerstein II from about 1943 to the end of the 1950s (when Hammerstein died of cancer).

Many believe that the songs Rodgers wrote with Hart were elegant, witty, and sophisticated, while those he wrote with Hammerstein tended toward

grandioseness, e.g., “Bali Ha’i” from the musical *South Pacific* (1949). Regardless, Rodgers and Hammerstein are recognized for having set a new standard for the fully integrated musical (song, book, choreography, etc.) with their first collaboration *Oklahoma* (1943). Other Rodgers and Hammerstein musicals, many which later became films, include: *Carousel* (1945), *The King and I* (1951), *Flower Drum Song* (1958), and *The Sound of Music* (1959).

Rodgers & Hart: A Trying Relationship

In contrast to his relationship with the organized and reliable Hammerstein, Rodgers’ relationship with Hart was often trying. Writing in his autobiography about the day he met Hart, Rodgers remembered that “he left Hart’s house having acquired in one afternoon a career, a partner, a best friend, and a source of permanent irritation.” Regardless, for the next 24 years Hart was Rodgers’ exclusive creative partner for 26 Broadway shows and nine films. A few of their many classic songs are “Manhattan” (1925), “Mountain Greenery” (1926), “My Heart Stood Still” and “Thou Swell” (1927), “Ten Cents a Dance” and “Dancing on the Ceiling” (1934), “The Most Beautiful Girl in the World” and “My Romance” (1935), “There’s a Small Hotel” (1936), “My Funny Valentine” (1937), “Spring Is Here” (1938), and “Falling in Love with Love” and “Bewitched” (1940). One of their classics not premiered on stage nor in film is “Blue Moon” (1934).

Better Songs vs. Better Shows

Rodgers and Hart wrote great songs that were used in musicals, but they were generally not developed as part of an “integrated musical” as Rodgers and Hammerstein’s songs were. It has been observed that Rodgers and Hart songs have a life quite independent from the musical they were introduced in, while Rodgers and Hammerstein songs tend to be associated with their musical, e.g., “Climb Ev’ry Mountain” from *The Sound of Music* (1959). Many music critics believe that although Rodgers and Hart may have written better **songs**, Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote better **shows**.

Nevertheless, Rodgers and Hammerstein also wrote many great **songs**, and some have been perennial favorites of jazz musicians, e.g., John Coltrane's rendition of "My Favorite Things" (from the musical *The Sound of Music*) and "It Might As Well Be Spring" (from the musical *State Fair*).

Early Life and Career

Born into a Jewish family in Queens, New York, Rodgers was the son of Mamie (Levy) and Dr. William Abrahams Rodgers, a prominent physician who had changed the family name from Rogazinsky. Rodgers began playing the piano at the age of six. He attended Columbia University as did his future musical collaborators Lorenz Hart and Oscar Hammerstein II. Rodgers was a student in Columbia's Institute of Musical Art (now the Juilliard School).

When he was just out of college, Rodgers worked as musical director for Broadway musicals. Things were tough in the music business, and Rodgers was considering quitting show business altogether to go into the apparel business. But he and Hart finally broke through in 1925. They wrote the songs for a benefit show presented by the prestigious Theatre Guild, called *The Garrick Gaieties*, and the critics found the show fresh and delightful. Although it was meant to run only one day, the Guild knew they had a success and allowed the show to re-open later. The show's biggest hit—**the song that Rodgers believed "made" Rodgers and Hart—was "Manhattan."** The two were now a Broadway songwriting force.

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