

We'll Always Have 'April in Paris'

"Something to Sing About: America's Great Lyricists" by Philip Furia, in *The American Scholar* (Summer 1997), 1811 Q St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20009.

They're the standards now, heard in jazz and cabaret performances, in Broadway revivals, and on Hollywood soundtracks: "April in Paris," "Embraceable You," "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered," . . . the list goes on and on.

The vast Tin Pan Alley songbook is the product of a uniquely American style of composition. When A. S. Sullivan, of the famous 19th-century English songwriting team Gilbert and Sullivan, was asked which came first, the words or the music, his answer always was: "The words—of course." He provided melodies to fit W. S. Gilbert's light verse. This seemed the only possible way to get clever, sophisticated lyrics.

In America, however, notes Furia, author of *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley* (1990), songwriters traditionally put the music first. This made the lyricist's job much harder—especially with the rise of jazz and its intricacies. Ironically, an Englishman showed a new generation of American lyricists the way.

In a series of musicals mounted between 1915 and 1917 in New York's tiny Princess Theatre, P. G. Wodehouse supplied the sophisticated lyrics to Jerome Kern's music, coming up with imaginative rhymes and making the lyrics sound more colloquial and less like poetry. Thus, "Kern's sequence of 'twiddly little notes' in 'Till the Clouds Roll By' inspired him to come up with the subtle rhymes of 'What bad *luck!* It's coming down in *buckets.*'" Said Wodehouse: "I couldn't have thought of that in a million years—why, dash it, it doesn't scan."

"No one embraced the Princess Shows more eagerly" than budding New York lyricist Lorenz Hart, who teamed up with a young composer named Richard Rodgers, Furia writes. For years, "Hart's clever rhymes and literate wit were dismissed by [Broadway] producers as 'too collegiate.'" The partners finally struck gold with a 1925 fund-raising revue. Scheduled for two performances, the show—with the songs "Manhattan" and "Mountain Greenery"—ran for more than 200. Rodgers and Hart continued to collaborate on shows, writing such popular tunes as "Here in My Arms" and "With a Song in My Heart." For the rest of the decade, Furia writes, Hart, Ira Gershwin, and Oscar

Hammerstein "led the lyrical way." Using such common expressions as "you took advantage of me" and "my heart stood still," they and other lyricists "took the American vernacular and made it sing." Nearly all were the children of Jewish immigrants who had learned English on the streets of New York and poetry in the public schools.

Though the Great Depression ended the Broadway musical's heyday, musical theater adapted, turning to smaller revues and frugally staged "smart shows" with a satirical edge. And the coming of sound films, making it possible to present songs more intimately than on stage, lured songwriters to Hollywood.

"As America emerged from the



Composer Rodgers, left, and lyricist Hart, in a 1938 New Yorker caricature

Depression, many songwriters returned to Broadway and collaborated on a series of successful shows, each filled with stellar songs," Furia says. After Hart's death in 1943, Rodgers teamed up with Hammerstein to produce *Oklahoma!*, and later, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, and *The King and I*. But with the birth of rock 'n' roll in the mid-1950s, Furia writes, the "Golden Age of American Song" reached the beginning of the end.