

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 417

“Over the Rainbow”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

“Magic is easy, if you put your heart into it.”

Michael Jackson.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening War Theme]

Episode 417. Over the Rainbow.

I want to begin today by talking about the blues. We last discussed the blues in episode 226, so it's time to pick up that thread again. Maybe past time. In that episode, I described the origins of the blues and the history of blues music as far as W.C. Handy, the band leader who embraced the blues. Handy also composed blues songs, notably “Memphis Blues” and “St. Louis Blues.”

This was back in the Belle Époque days, when musicians made most of their money touring and songwriters made most of their money from sheet music. You may recall that Handy founded his own sheet music business and made enough money from royalties for his own songs to live comfortably the rest of his life. And that's how it should be, right? Handy died in 1958, at the age of 84.

I also told you in that episode that Handy was known as “the father of the blues.” This was the title of his autobiography, published in 1941. But of course, Handy did not invent the blues, but he played a big part in popularizing them.

So having previously discussed the father of the blues, it seems appropriate to begin today by discussing the woman they called “the mother of the blues.” She was born Gertrude Pridgett in 1886 in Columbus, Georgia. In 1904, at the age of 18, she married William Rainey, a showman who was known by the stage name “Pa Rainey.” Gertrude had a gorgeous, powerful voice and was by this time already singing in minstrel shows. Since Pa Rainey was also an entertainer, they inevitably began performing together. Gertrude chose as her stage name Ma Rainey.

It was also around this time that Ma Rainey was first exposed to a blues song. She liked it and incorporated it into her performances. She would later claim credit for coining the term “blues” to describe this style of music. She said she needed something to say when people asked her what kind of music that was. Unlike most blues singers, Ma Rainey wrote many of her own songs, many of which referenced promiscuity and lesbianism. While it was common for male blues singers to sing about their sexual relationships, it was quite unusual at the time for a woman to get away with it.

I have encountered the claim that Ma Rainey was the first blues singer to make a record. That would have been in 1923, although it appears that the first blues record was released three years earlier, in 1920. The singer on that record was Mamie Smith, another popular blues singer of the time, known as the “Queen of the Blues,” who became not only the first singer to record a blues song, but also the first African-American woman to record a song, period. The song she recorded was titled “Crazy Blues,” and as a side note, her backing musicians were white, which led to calls to boycott the record because of its racially mixed performers, because that’s how it was in America in 1920.

Unfortunately for the racists, the record was a hit, and created a demand for more blues records. There was at this time a company called Paramount Records. It was not connected to the movie studio; they just happened to choose the same name. Paramount Records was founded in 1918, and in its early years was not doing especially well, but Paramount did wrangle a contract to manufacture records for another company, Black Swan Records, which was founded in 1921, when records produced for the African-American market were still a rarity.

Black Swan Records is notable for being the first record label owned and operated by African Americans. W.C. Handy was one of the original investors. It was created specifically to record African-American music for African-American audiences. Alas, Black Swan went bankrupt in just two years, but it lasted long enough to demonstrate there was an appetite for jazz and blues and helped encourage other record labels to explore this market.

You’ll recall that in the Twenties, the record business was strictly segregated. There were record stores in the white part of town that sold records marketed to white people, and there were record stores in the African-American part of town that sold records marketed to Black people. The record companies didn’t mind recording music for Black people, since Black people’s money spends just as good as white people’s money, though they were careful not to let on to their white customers that they were selling records to Black customers on the side.

In those days, the record industry referred to these records produced for the African-American market as “race records,” and that category included both jazz and blues music, but many of the places in the United States where African-Americans were playing the blues were also home to white Americans who were playing the blues, or something close to the blues, anyway. Some record companies were interested in recording this music as well, but since the audience for it

was white, these couldn't be marketed as "race records." They had to come up with a different name, and the one they chose was "hillbilly music." This is what today we call "country music."

Blues and country are different categories of music only because of 1920s segregation, which is why I like to say that country music is the blues for white people. I mean that in a good way.

When Black Swan went bankrupt, it was acquired by Paramount Records, which continued to record and market blues and jazz under the Black Swan label. A couple of years later, they discontinued the Black Swan label, but they continued to record the music, now under their own Paramount label.

Paramount became the premier producer of "race records" during the 1920s, and a key figure in that side of their business was an independent producer: an African-American named Mayo Williams. Williams was born in Arkansas in 1894. He became a football star in high school and at his college, Brown University. He served in the US Army during the First World War. In 1920 the American Professional Football Association was established, the ancestor of today's National Football League, and Mayo Williams was one of four African-American players in the Association. Paul Robeson was another.

Williams played football until 1926, but in those days professional football players didn't make enough money to support themselves and had to work other jobs in the off season. Williams made bathtub gin as a sideline, but he loved music and was happy to find work with Black Swan Records, and afterward for Paramount. He was never a paid employee; he made his money as a talent scout and producer of Paramount's "race records." This arrangement was useful to Paramount because it kept production of their "race records" separate from their white music business. Williams produced blues records because Paramount prohibited his Black artists from performing any "white" music.

With Williams' assistance, Paramount signed some of the most important blues musicians of the day, including Blind Lemon Jefferson, Jelly Roll Morton, and Ma Rainey, and Paramount's "race records" generated more profit for the company than the stuff they were producing on the "white" side of the business.

Mamie Smith's early blues records sold well enough to create a demand not only for more blues music, but particularly music with women vocalists. That's why Mayo Jefferson signed Ma Rainey, while Columbia Records signed another woman blues singer who was well known on the vaudeville circuit. Her name was Bessie Smith, no relation to Mamie Smith. Like Ma Rainey, she cut her first record in 1923. She had such a powerful voice that it came through strong even on the tinny acoustic recordings of the time. When electronic recording came in a few years later and listeners found out what she really sounded like, they were blown away.

By the late Twenties, Bessie Smith was the highest-paid African American in the country. Since Mamie Smith had already claimed the title “Queen of the Blues,” Bessie would be dubbed “The Empress of the Blues.”

It was a remarkable phenomenon, how female vocalists so dominated the blues music of the 1920s. Today, when you think of blues music, the image that likely comes to mind is of a man, singing alone, probably on the front porch of a ramshackle house and accompanying himself on a guitar. That stereotype actually postdates the Twenties, although Blind Lemon Jefferson certainly fit the image.

The blues bubble burst during the Great Depression, which put Paramount Records out of business and sharply diminished the opportunities for blues artists. No one was buying the records and the radio wouldn't play blues music.

Blind Lemon Jefferson died in 1929 at the age of 36, of a heart attack, they said. Bessie Smith died in an automobile accident in Mississippi in 1937, at the age of 45. A widely circulated story has it that Bessie died because her ambulance delivered her to a white hospital that refused to treat her. This story is false. The reality of the time was that no ambulance would have even thought of taking a Black patient to a white hospital. In truth, Bessie Smith was picked up by a Black ambulance, because yes, they even had segregated ambulances back then, and taken to a Black hospital, where she was treated, but died a few hours later.

She was buried in Mississippi in a grave that was unmarked until 1970, when singer Janis Joplin paid to place a tombstone on it.

The false story about her being denied treatment is perpetuated by *The Death of Bessie Smith*, a one-act play written in 1959 by American playwright Edward Albee. Fun fact: I participated in a reading of *The Death of Bessie Smith* when I was in high school.

Ma Rainey died of a heart attack in 1939, at the age of 53, in her home town of Columbus, Georgia. In 1982, African-American playwright August Wilson published a play titled *Ma Rainey's Black Bottom*. (Just for the sake of clarity here, “Black Bottom” is the name of a dance, which in turn comes from the name of an African-American neighborhood in Detroit.) The play opened on Broadway in 1984. In 2020, a film adaptation with the same title was released by Netflix, starring Viola Davis and Chadwick Boseman, who is another artist taken from us much too soon. Boseman died of colon cancer in 2020, at the age of 43, three months before the film was released. Davis and Boseman were both nominated for Academy Awards for Best Actress and Best Actor for their performances.

Mamie Smith died in poverty in New York City in 1946 at the age of 55 and was also buried in a grave that remained unmarked until 2012, when a couple of blues fans started a crowdfunding campaign that raised the funds needed to buy a monument.

[music: Handy, "St. Louis Blues."]

Frances Ethel Gumm was born on June 10, 1922, in Grand Rapids, Minnesota. Her parents were both vaudeville performers. The family had settled in Grand Rapids when her parents bought a movie house, which they also used as a venue for vaudeville performances. Frances's two older sisters were already performing occasionally in the theater as the Gumm Sisters. Frances joined the group before her fifth birthday, and was known as "Baby Gumm."

The family moved to California when Frances was still a small child and their mother, Ethel Gumm, took on the role of managing the Gumm Sisters, booking them in vaudeville shows. They sang, danced, and did comedy skits, with Baby Gumm getting most of the punch lines. She got most of the attention too; she had a natural stage presence. Playing vaudeville meant a lot of travel; her mother began feeding her barbiturates to help her sleep on the bus. This was the beginning of a life-long struggle with drug dependency.

In the early years of talking pictures, singers were in demand in Hollywood, and the Gumm Sisters sang in four short musical films in 1929 and 1930, films produced on Poverty Row. In 1933 and 1934, they performed at the Century of Progress Exposition in Chicago. It was at Chicago that they met actor and singer George Jessel. Jessel admired the sisters but disliked their name. The "Gumm Sisters" was a name that invited mockery; audiences sometimes laughed when they heard it. Some people glancing at the posters or programs read the name as the "Glum Sisters." Who would want to watch an act like that?

Jessel suggested a more elegant-sounding name: "The Garland Sisters." Later in his life, Jessel offered several different explanations of how he came up with that name. The girls liked his suggestion and began billing themselves as "The Garland Sisters." Twelve-year-old Frances took advantage of this opportunity to ditch her first name as well and began calling herself Judy Garland.

In 1935, the Garland Sisters were performing in Los Angeles when they came to the attention of Louis B. Mayer, chief of MGM, the biggest film studio in town. Judy Garland was invited to come to the studio and audition. She sang "Zing! Went the Strings of My Heart," a popular song of the time, and was immediately offered a contract. Sadly, just weeks later, her father died unexpectedly at the age of 49. The loss hit her pretty hard.

The biggest problem MGM had with Judy was that they found her hard to cast in a film. The biggest child film star of the time was of course Shirley Temple, but at 13, Judy Garland was six years older than Shirley Temple and hardly appropriate for the kinds of roles they cast Shirley in. Try to imagine Judy Garland singing "On the Good Ship Lollipop," for example.

She was physically small, not quite five feet tall, and while she was undeniably cute by ordinary American teenager standards, she was not Hollywood beautiful, so the studio devised a "girl next door" image for her, often putting her in plain dresses and doing her hair in pigtails.

Garland's first solo film appearance was in a musical short produced by MGM called *Every Sunday*, in which she was cast alongside another teenage girl just six months older than her, a Canadian-born singer-actress named Deanna Durbin. Unlike Garland, Durbin had a classically trained voice and was often called upon to sing classical music or art songs. In the film, she sings an operatic aria, while Garland—self-taught on the vaudeville circuit—sang a pop song.

MGM intended for *Every Sunday* to serve as a sort of public screen test. It would give studio executives the opportunity to examine Garland's and Durbin's performances side by side, so to speak, so they could choose which of them they wanted to invest in. The thinking went that two teenage girl singers was one too many.

But they couldn't decide. Studio head Louis B. Mayer eventually ruled that MGM could afford to sign two teenage girl singers, but these deliberations took a little too long and gave Universal a chance to steal Durbin away from them. This was the age of film musicals, and Durbin appeared in a series of them for Universal. She usually played someone's precocious teenage daughter, one with a propensity to burst into song, of course. Reportedly, the popularity of Durbin's musicals kept Universal from going bankrupt after the monster-movie thing was no longer making the kind of money it used to.

As she matured, Deanna Durbin lost patience with light musical comedy. She wanted to appear in mature, dramatic films. Universal obliged her; they had no choice, really. She was by the mid-Forties the second-highest paid woman in Hollywood, behind Bette Davis. She had the biggest fan club of any film star, and she owned a substantial chunk of Universal stock. She preferred appearing in these more serious roles, but her fans wouldn't follow her to the new films. She went back to light musicals for a time, then gave up and retired in 1949, at the age of 28. She lived the rest of her life in Paris and passed away in 2013, at the age of 91.

Judy Garland's first feature film was produced at Twentieth Century-Fox. MGM loaned her out for a musical comedy about football titled *Pigskin Parade*. She performed three songs in that film, but the performance that made MGM executives really take notice of her did not appear in a film, but at Clark Gable's 36th birthday party, which the studio hosted. At the party, Judy serenaded Gable with an old Tin Pan Alley song Al Jolson had made famous: "You Made Me Love You (I Didn't Want to Do It.)" They were so impressed, they put her in their revue film *Broadway Melody of 1938*, which came out later that year. That year being 1937, mind you. They showcased Judy singing the very same song, and here is when the public first took notice of her.

MGM hit the jackpot with their next move, which was to pair Judy with another child star, just a year older than she was, named Mickey Rooney. Rooney had appeared in his first film at the age of six; by the time he was cast alongside Judy Garland, his filmography was nearing one hundred entries. Rooney hit it big just a few months before Judy did, in a 1937 film called *A Family Affair*, in which he played Andy Hardy, the teenage son of the lead character, and served as the

comic relief in that film, but the character was so popular, that first film spawned fifteen sequels—good old Hollywood—in which Rooney’s Andy Hardy played increasingly important roles. Soon Andy Hardy became the lead character in his films. Rooney’s teenage boy characters were usually sassy and girl-crazy, but still wholesome and middle-American.

Garland and Rooney first appeared together in a musical comedy called *Thoroughbreds Don’t Cry*, in which Garland plays an aspiring singer and Rooney a jockey. That was a good role for Rooney, who was 5’2” tall in lifts and got cast as jockeys many times in the course of his career. It also made him a good match for the 4’11” Judy Garland; taller than she, but not too much taller. They clicked, on and off the screen. They worked well together and shared a close friendship, though their relationship was not a romantic one. Judy Garland was practically the only Hollywood actress Mickey Rooney didn’t sleep with in those days. The pair would make eight films together; three of them Andy Hardy films. By 1940, Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney were both topping the lists of the biggest male and female box office draws in Hollywood.

Being short and having a boyish face is great for playing teenagers, but as Mickey Rooney entered his twenties, it increasingly became a burden for him. In 1942, at the age of 22, Rooney married for the first time, to 19-year-old beauty and film star Ava Gardner. The marriage only lasted a year. Gardner divorced him; for infidelity, she said later, adding that MGM paid her off not to say so in court or in public, as that would have hurt his boy-next-door image.

In 1944, Rooney played a jockey again, opposite 12-year-old child actress Elizabeth Taylor. Later that year, Rooney was drafted. The Army used him to entertain the troops. After his discharge, at the age of 26, he was too old to play teenagers anymore, and his career suffered. Like Deanna Durbin, Rooney aspired to leading man roles. He had the talent for it, but not the looks.

He never quit acting and performing, but his career never again reached the heights of his years with Judy Garland. He occasionally appeared in film roles, including a memorable performance—memorable for all the wrong reasons—in 1961’s *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*, in which he played a cringeworthy comic caricature of a Japanese man that has offended generations of Asian-Americans. Both Rooney and Blake Edwards, the film’s director, said later that they regretted the performance.

Rooney was a frequent guest star on television from the late Fifties through the Nineties, not to mention a couple of television series of his own. He appeared on *The Love Boat*, naturally, *Murder, She Wrote*, naturally, *The Twilight Zone*, *Wagon Train*, *The Golden Girls*, and *The Simpsons*, just to name a few. Late in life, he appeared frequently in stage shows, because he needed the money. He’d earned a fortune when he was young, but in the common child-actor way, lost most of it to drinking, drugs, emotional issues, and gambling. He married eight times in

all. Mickey Rooney died in 2014, at the age of 93, which is surprisingly old, all things considered. He was reportedly in debt at the time of his death.

If Mickey Rooney's looks and stature were a problem for him, it was a minor one compared to Judy Garland's insecurities about her appearance. Yes, she was a big star; yes, she was making lots of money, but her age peers working at MGM included beauties like Ava Gardner and Elizabeth Taylor, not to mention the glamorous Lana Turner, who got into the movie business at the age of 15 when, as everyone knows, she skipped school one day, only to be spotted by a talent scout as she was sipping a Coca-Cola at a malt shop on Sunset Boulevard. When he asked her if she wanted to be in the movies, she told him, "I'll have to ask my mother first."

Lana Turner was beautiful, alluring, celebrated for her acting talent, and one of the most popular pin-up girls of the day. She actually appeared with Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney in one of the Andy Hardy films in 1938. Tellingly, in that film Andy Hardy dates Lana Turner, while Judy Garland is the girl next door.

And then there was the studio chief, Louis B. Mayer, who referred to Judy as his "little hunchback." How could she not feel insecure?

[music: Monaco & McCarthy, "You Made Me Love You (I Didn't Want to Do It)."]

The year 1939 was a pivotal year in the career of Judy Garland. She appeared in two of the biggest films of that year, and I'm going to talk about both of them, beginning with the higher-grossing one, yes, I'm talking about *Babes in Arms*, directed by Busby Berkeley. Once again, she appeared opposite Mickey Rooney.

This film is notable for its success and for its popularization of the trope of two kids who put on a show to raise money for some worthy cause. This was the first of four films the pair would make that employed this plot device. Even today, the sentence "Hey, let's put on a show!" evokes that old trope, whether you've ever seen Mickey Rooney and Judy Garland together or not.

In fact, the website *TV Tropes* has a page dedicated to "Hey, Let's Put on a Show," and lists many other films that use it, including *The Blues Brothers*, *The Full Monty*, and *Be Kind, Rewind*. Also TV shows like *The Brady Bunch*, which dipped into this particular well multiple times, along with *Are You Being Served?* and *Parks and Recreation*, among others.

And then there was that other film.

I already talked about American author L. Frank Baum and his most important book, the 1900 children's novel titled *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz*. Do I need to summarize the story? Dorothy is a farm girl from Kansas. She and her dog Toto are blown by a tornado into the fantastic Land of Oz, where she learns that she can only return home with the aid of the Wizard of Oz, who offers his help on the condition that she first kill the Wicked Witch of the West. Oh yeah, there's

also a living scarecrow, a tin man, and a cowardly lion. *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* has to be considered the best-known American fantasy novel.

The book was hugely popular from the moment it was published. Its popularity was further enhanced by a 1902 musical theatre production with a shortened title that dropped the adjective. The show departed considerably from the book. In the show, Dorothy and her new friends help the rightful ruler of Oz regain his throne from the Wizard-usurper. After the counter-coup succeeds, the restored king imprisons Dorothy and her friends as enemies of the state. That's gratitude for you. Happily, they are freed by the Good Witch of the North. The show is also notable because it gave Dorothy a last name: Gale. In the novel, only her first name is given.

The success of the novel and the show persuaded Baum to write a sequel, which was also made into a show, with much less success. Baum went on to write and publish a dozen more Oz novels before his death in 1919. Afterward came a few dozen more sequels by other writers, because it's a fantasy novel. Of course there are sequels.

In 1925, a feature-length silent film version was released, also with the shorter title: *The Wizard of Oz*. The film also made drastic changes to the plot. The critics liked it, but the Poverty Row studio that produced it went bankrupt and the film was judged a failure.

Fast forward twelve years. Now, in 1937, films have sound and color, sometimes, and Walt Disney has just set a box-office record with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, thus proving there was a market for feature film adaptations of fairy tales. Isn't *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* one of the best-selling fairy tales of the age? True, the earlier film adaptation of Oz was a failure, but the books and the stage show made tons of money. And nothing draws a Hollywood executive's attention like the magic words "box-office record." MGM acquired the rights to the book and announced a live-action adaptation of the beloved story.

Disney was an upstart. MGM was the biggest studio in town. *Snow White* had been a cartoon. Imagine what MGM could produce in live action if it pulled out all the stops.

That was the thinking. It took a while, and eleven writers, to get a satisfactory script. This version would hew more closely to the novel than any previous adaptation, but there was concern that the sophisticated filmgoers of 1939 would not accept a straight-up fairy tale, so the film would adopt the same framing device used in the 1925 film: the main story would be revealed at the end of the film to be a dream.

Vaudeville comedian Bert Lahr was cast as the Cowardly Lion, after the producers dropped the idea of using a real lion. Lahr contributed a number of ad libs to the film, some of which disrupted shooting when the other cast members broke out laughing at him.

Singer/dancers Buddy Ebsen and Ray Bolger were cast as the Scarecrow and the Tin Man respectively, but Bolger badly wanted to play the Scarecrow, so the producers switched their

roles. Unfortunately for Ebsen, who had the right build to be a great Scarecrow, he became seriously ill two weeks into the shoot from inhaling the aluminum dust makeup they were applying to his face. He had to be hospitalized and was taken off the production. The studio announced it was because Ebsen was allergic to the makeup, which was only true in the sense that any of us would be “allergic” to inhaling fine particles of metal. They replaced Ebsen with vaudeville performer Jack Haley, who was not told why Ebsen had left the role, and they replaced the aluminum dust makeup with greasepaint that had aluminum dust mixed into it, so that it stayed on his face instead of migrating into his lungs.

After comedians Ed Wynn and W.C. Fields both declined the role of the Wizard, the studio put one of its contract players, Frank Morgan, into the role. Academy-award-winning actress Gale Sondergaard was tapped to play the Wicked Witch of the West. The character was originally conceived as sly and slinky and wearing a black sequined dress, a look similar to the Evil Queen in the Disney *Snow White* film, but when the producers decided to go with a more traditional witch look, with a black hat, green skin, a wart, and so on, Sondergaard abandoned the part, thinking it would not be good for her career. MGM replaced her with another one of their contract players named Margaret Hamilton. Fun fact: Hamilton also played Judy’s antagonist in *Babes in Arms*.

And of course, Judy Garland was cast in the lead role, as Dorothy Gale. There are stories that both Shirley Temple and Deanna Durbin were considered for the role. Shirley Temple was the right age, but it’s hard to imagine her belting out “Over the Rainbow.” Other stories say that no one but Garland was ever seriously considered.

The film was a complicated project. The sets were complicated, the costumes were complicated, and the bright Technicolor look of the film demanded lots of hot lights, meaning everyone was sweating hard.

Shirley Temple was closer to the right age to play Dorothy, who is prepubescent. Judy Garland was sixteen. To make her look younger, they put her in a blue gingham dress meant to conceal her breasts, which were also strapped down. She wore a corset and was put on a strict diet to keep her slim. They gave her amphetamines (they called them “pep pills” back then) to keep her alert and perky throughout the long and grueling shoot. Garland later recalled being groped and members of the crew teasing her about her breasts.

Richard Thorpe was originally chosen to direct the film, but after two weeks of shooting and the Buddy Ebsen disaster, the producers took him off the project. George Cukor took over in the interim and made some helpful changes, including encouraging Judy to adopt a more natural acting style. Finally, Victor Fleming was assigned to the film. As you know, Fleming also directed *Gone with the Wind* that year and won an Academy Award for that film. He was not nominated for *The Wizard of Oz*, likely only because of the other film.

The stories of Judy Garland and this film are inextricably intertwined, along with the film's best known song, "Over the Rainbow," which has to count as one of the most popular songs of the twentieth century. What is the second best known song from the movie? "Ding, Dong, the Witch Is Dead," probably. Several songs were cut from the film when it ran too long, but surprisingly, "Over the Rainbow" was almost one of them. Dorothy sings the song early in the film, while still in Kansas, and some in the studio felt the Kansas part of the story was dragging and wanted to see the film get to Munchkinland sooner. Happily, they kept the song, and the rest is history.

The early scenes in Kansas were filmed in black and white and then given a sepia tone. In one of the film's many iconic moments, sepia-toned Dorothy opens the front door of her sepia-toned house, revealing the vivid colors of the Land of Oz outside. Dorothy steps through the doorway and now she is in color too, although the house is still sepia.

The producers considered using special effects to produce this sequence, but it proved easier to create with practical effects. The inside of the house was painted sepia, and Judy Garland's double, dressed in a sepia gingham dress, opens the door and moves aside, and the real Judy Garland, dressed in color, steps through.

On the other side of that door, Oz was depicted in vivid colors. The Technicolor people must have loved it. The loud colors were meant to evoke a sense of fantasy. This transition scene has led to a widespread belief that *The Wizard of Oz* was the first color motion picture, but if you've been listening to this podcast, you already know that isn't true.

I could spend all day talking about this film, but odds are you've already seen it. *The Wizard of Oz* is believed to have been seen by more people than any other film in history and may be the most influential film in history. The American Film Institute put it at number six on its list of the hundred greatest American films. And there are some well-known bits of dialogue that are repeated even by those who have never seen the film, such as "There's no place like home," or "I'll get you, my pretty—and your little dog, too!" or especially, "Toto, I have a feeling we're not in Kansas anymore."

The Wizard of Oz was popular with critics and audiences alike, but MGM had spent a great deal of money making the film, and then promoting it. It sold lots of tickets, but most of them were half-price children's tickets, which held down revenues and the film lost money, at least on its initial release. It was nominated for four Academy Awards, including Best Picture, and won two: for Best Original Score and Best Original Song for "Over the Rainbow."

I already told you that back in 1934, the Academy created a special Juvenile Award, offered occasionally to outstanding film performers under the age of 18. The award is in the form of a miniature statuette, half as tall as the regular Oscar. That first award went to Shirley Temple. In 1938, the Academy gave Juvenile Awards to Deanna Durbin and Mickey Rooney, and in 1939 to Judy Garland, for her performances in *Babes in Arms* and *The Wizard of Oz*.

By that year, Judy was in a relationship with bandleader Artie Shaw and was heartbroken in 1940 when he eloped with Lana Turner. She then began a relationship with 30-year-old composer and orchestra leader David Rose. Judy turned 18 in June 1940, and on that day, David Rose proposed to her. But the wedding would have to wait because he was already married to another singer and film actress, Martha Raye. After they divorced, Rose married Judy in 1941, but even after the wedding, Judy's mother and the studio disapproved of the relationship, fearing it would tarnish her image. When Judy became pregnant with Rose's child, they insisted she get an abortion. The couple divorced in 1944.

Judy Garland continued to make films for MGM in the Forties, now playing adult roles. Her most notable film of this period is 1944's *Meet Me in St. Louis*, which is about the 1904 St. Louis World's Fair. Very-long-time listeners will recall that I mentioned this film when I talked about the fair, back in episode 26.

This was an important moment in her life and her career. She finally got to play a leading lady and also sing, since it was a musical. Two songs from that film became standards: "The Trolley Song" and "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas." MGM assigned Vincente Minnelli to direct, and Minnelli supervised her costuming and makeup to give her that leading lady look the studio said she didn't have. Judy was so pleased with the results that she insisted on keeping the same makeup artist in her subsequent films, and she married Minnelli. They had a child together in 1946, a daughter named Liza.

In 1947, while she was filming *The Pirate*, she had what in those days they called a nervous breakdown and attempted suicide. She spent two weeks in a psychiatric hospital but was able to return afterward and finish shooting the film, but it proved to be her first film since *The Wizard of Oz* to lose money. The studio blamed Judy for her erratic behavior and dredged up the old claim that she just wasn't a leading lady type. Her film career began to suffer. She habitually arrived late on set and was uncooperative. Directors complained to the executives. She attempted suicide a second time. In 1950, MGM let her go.

Hollywood thought she was unemployable, but she could still sing. Garland had an amazing singing voice. She was a contralto, meaning she sang in the lowest register for women. She could sing powerfully, but her voice always had a velvety quality and a bore a little tinge of vulnerability. Her singing seemed effortless, as if it were just another form of talking.

Knowing she was out of work and needed the money, Bing Crosby invited her to make a guest appearance on his radio show, but when the moment came, she was afraid to come out on stage and face the studio audience. It was that same insecurity that had haunted her since adolescence. Crosby told the audience, "She needs our love." Garland hesitantly stepped out on stage and the audience went wild.

Her radio performances led to a second career as a singer. This was the post-big band era when the solo singer was in style, and it was the perfect moment for Judy Garland. She toured the US and Europe, performing before cheering crowds in sold-out venues.

Here is the paradox of Judy Garland: Publicly, she was talented but unpretentious, still very much the girl next door, and the public loved her for it. Privately, she struggled with anxiety, depression, drug and alcohol dependency, thoughts of suicide, and that ever-present insecurity. Yes, the audience loved her today, but what about tomorrow?

Her emotional struggles were public knowledge. Her audiences tried to boost her spirits by cheering and applauding ever more loudly, hoping to convince her to set her insecurities aside. But she never could.

In 1951, she divorced Minnelli. In 1952, she married her manager, Sidney Luft. They had two children together, Lorna and Joey.

In 1953, she made her Hollywood comeback with a film she and Sidney produced themselves at Warner Brothers. It was a remake of the 1937 film *A Star Is Born*, which was itself based on a 1932 film called *What Price Hollywood?* The 1937 film is a tragedy about a veteran film star who helps a young up-and-comer get her start in Hollywood. They fall in love, but even as her career blossoms, his career spirals downward into alcoholism and misery.

Unlike the earlier films, which were straight dramas, this remake would be a musical and a vehicle for Judy Garland. Playwright Moss Hart wrote the script and George Cukor directed. Veteran English actor James Mason would play her tragic mentor. Cukor wanted Cary Grant for the role, but he declined.

The film was released in 1954, and it was a smash. It was also three hours long, which the theaters didn't like, so the studio cut it down to two-and-a-half hours, removing two songs and some crucial scenes. Cukor described the edited version as "painful."

Despite its popularity, the film lost money, because it had been so expensive to make. Mason and Garland won Golden Globes for Best Actor and Best Actress. The film was nominated for six Academy Awards, but didn't win any of them. Judy didn't even get the Oscar for Best Actress, although she had been widely believed to be a shoo-in for the award. Groucho Marx sent her a telegram calling it "the biggest robbery since Brink's," which was a reference to the highly publicized Brink's robbery in 1950.

A Star Is Born was re-remade in 1976, directed by Frank Pierson and distributed by Warner Brothers. This version starred Barbra Streisand and Kris Kristofferson. The film was re-re-remade in 2018 (Don't ever change, Hollywood), this time directed by Bradley Cooper and distributed by Warner Brothers. This version starred Cooper and Lady Gaga.

Afterward, Garland made some more films, sang on stage and on tour, and made frequent television appearances. She and Luft divorced in 1963. She died in 1969 from an accidental overdose of barbiturates. She was 47 years old.

Even before her death, Judy Garland became a “gay icon” in the LGBTQ community, especially gay men, and largely because of her role in *The Wizard of Oz*. A number of reasons for this have been proposed, including the metaphor of Dorothy escaping a dreary rural life for a more colorful and cosmopolitan environment, the character’s unhesitating acceptance of the outcast scarecrow, tin man, and especially the cowardly lion, who codes as a stereotypical gay man, as well as a general tendency to read the film as camp. This affection for Judy Garland and for the film was so common that in the bad old days of homophobia, the term “Friend of Dorothy” became a coded term for a gay man.

At the risk of getting ahead of myself here, I have to tell you that as I prepared this episode, I was struck by the parallels between the life stories of Judy Garland and Michael Jackson. (I suppose I’m going to have to do an episode about Michael Jackson someday, huh? Somewhere around 625, I think.) Both of them were from the Midwest, both were natural talents with no formal training, both had parents who themselves had been entertainers, pushed their children into the same line of work, and kept a tight rein on their careers. Both got their start as the youngest member of a singing group of siblings. Despite their young ages, both of them sang lead and stood out in the group and as they grew up, went on to hugely popular solo careers. Both of them were painfully anxious and self-conscious about their looks. (Although to my eye, both of them were pretty attractive.) Both of them performed songs for adult audiences, even when they were children. (None of that “Good Ship Lollipop” stuff.) Both had difficult childhoods and struggled with personal demons. Both of them died too soon from accidental drug overdoses, Garland at 47, Jackson at 50.

In fact, if you add together all the singers I’ve talked about today, including Michael Jackson, they have a collective average age at death of 47, with Judy Garland right at the mean. Sad for them, and sad for us. Think of all the great music we never got to hear.

We’ll have to stop there for today. I thank you for listening and I’d like to thank Antonio and Seyni for their kind donations, and thank you to Chad for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Antonio and Seyni and Chad help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone always, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you’d like to become a patron or make a donation, you are most welcome; just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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go. While you're there, you can leave a comment and let me know what you thought about today's show.

I've been thinking about doing a question-and-answer episode, in which I would answer questions from you, my listeners. It would depend on whether I had enough listeners who had enough questions to fill up an episode, so let's find out. If you have a question for me that you'd like to hear me answer on the podcast, send it to the email address, historyofthetwentiethcentury@gmail.com. Also please let me know if and how you'd like to be named if I use your question, and let's see what happens.

Next week is a bye week for the podcast, but I hope you'll join me in two weeks' time, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we look in on developments in the Pacific Theater. Bloody Tarawa, in two weeks' time, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. Audiences and critics loved *The Wizard of Oz* when it was released in 1939, but I'm sure Louis B. Mayer didn't love that it ended its release over a million dollars in the red.

But MGM re-released the film on its tenth anniversary in 1949, and it earned enough the second time around to put the project in the black at last. The studio released it again in 1955; for this release the sequences set in Kansas were shown in straight-up black-and-white, rather than the earlier sepia tone. Those sequences would remain in black-and-white until the film's fiftieth-anniversary release on home videocassette in 1989.

In 1956, the film was broadcast on television for the first time, over the CBS network. Beginning in 1959, *The Wizard of Oz* was shown on American TV annually, usually on CBS or NBC. These yearly broadcasts were always presented as special events, were heavily promoted, drew large audiences, and were very profitable for the networks and the studio. This tradition ended in 1991 after home video became common.

I well remember these broadcasts from my childhood, and so does Mrs. History of the Twentieth Century, but not for the reasons you might think. We both recall being cajoled—practically forced—to watch the film with our parents, who repeatedly assured us it was wonderful and we would love it. I'd bet that scene was repeated in millions of American households over the years.

So she and I grudgingly watched it to satisfy our parents, and...didn't love it. Parental endorsement is the kiss of death for music, TV, movies, or any other form of entertainment, I suppose. My kids certainly thought so, and in general, setting expectations too high is bound to lead to disappointment, especially since we were watching it in black and white in those days.

But setting aside the manner in which the film was introduced to me, I have reservations about showing children a film about a child who is sucked away from her home and family by a tornado, who then finds herself in a bizarre, exotic land she doesn't understand, pursued by a

witch and her flying monkeys, who also threaten her pet dog, only to learn that she won't be allowed to go home until she kills the witch, which happens only because of the wildest stroke of luck, and then discovers the guy who sent her on that mission was just a con artist trying to get rid of her. This just doesn't seem a very child friendly story to me, and I wonder if you have to be an adult truly to enjoy this film.

In 1975, a new musical adaptation of *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* opened on Broadway. It was titled *The Wiz: The Super Soul Musical "Wonderful Wizard of Oz,"* and featured an African-American cast, led by 17-year-old Stephanie Mills as Dorothy, and with new songs and music. The plot of the musical is very close to the book: Dorothy is a girl living in Kansas who gets caught up in a tornado, etc. It won seven Tony Awards that year, including Best Musical.

The stage musical was adapted into a 1978 musical film, directed by Sidney Lumet and distributed by Universal Pictures. It starred Diana Ross as Dorothy. She was 33 years old at the time. (And they thought Judy Garland was too old for the part!) As you'd expect, casting Diana Ross required significant changes to the story, which was moved to Harlem, and the Land of Oz was depicted as a fantasy version of Manhattan. The film was a critical and commercial failure, although Wikipedia says it's now a cult classic. Pfft! Wikipedia calls every failed movie a "cult classic."

Still, I must confess I kind of like it. It includes many strange creative choices, beginning with the casting of Diana Ross, but it also gives you Lena Horne as Glinda the Good Witch, Nipsey Russell as the Tin Man, and Mabel King as The Wicked Witch of the West, who blows the roof off the house with her song "No Bad News." I could watch that all day.

And if that isn't enough, get this: they cast as the Scarecrow Michael Jackson, in what would become his only feature film appearance. The film is worth watching for Michael's performances alone, especially in his two songs, "You Can't Win" and "Ease on Down the Road," which became the musical's most popular song.

I happen to like "Ease on Down the Road," and I like it better than I like "We're Off to See the Wizard." So sue me.

[music: Closing War Theme]