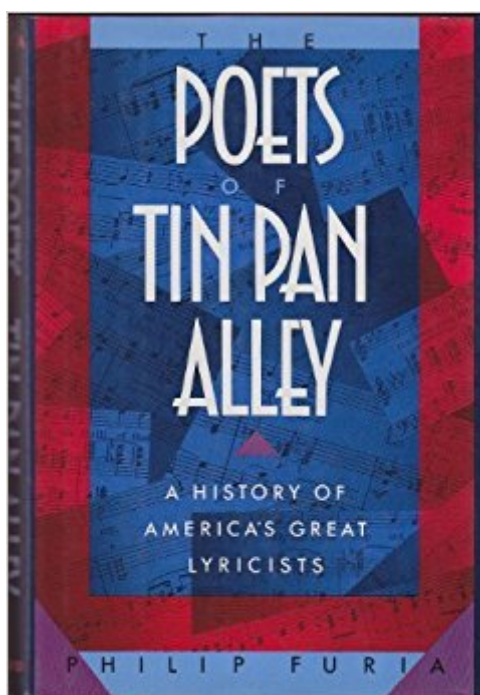


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The Poets Of Tin Pan Alley: A History Of America's Great Lyricists



Synopsis

From the turn of the century to the 1960s, the songwriters of Tin Pan Alley dominated American music. Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, George and Ira Gershwin, Rodgers and Hart--even today these giants remain household names, their musicals regularly revived, their methods and styles analyzed and imitated, and their songs the bedrock of jazz and cabaret. In *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley* Philip Furia offers a unique new perspective on these great songwriters, showing how their poetic lyrics were as important as their brilliant music in shaping a golden age of American popular song. Furia writes with great perception and understanding as he explores the deft rhymes, inventive imagery, and witty solutions these songwriters used to breathe new life into rigidly established genres. He devotes full chapters to all the greats, including Irving Berlin, Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Oscar Hammerstein II, Howard Dietz and E.Y. Harburg, Dorothy Fields and Leo Robin, and Johnny Mercer. Furia also offers a comprehensive survey of other lyricists who wrote for the sheet-music industry, Broadway, Hollywood, and Harlem nightclub revues. This was the era that produced *The New Yorker*, Don Marquis, Dorothy Parker, and E.B. White--and Furia places the lyrics firmly in this fascinating historical context. In these pages, the lyrics emerge as an important element of American modernism, as the lyricists, like the great modernist poets, took the American vernacular and made it sing.

Book Information

Hardcover: 336 pages

Publisher: Oxford University Press (October 11, 1990)

Language: English

ISBN-10: 0195064089

ISBN-13: 978-0195064087

Product Dimensions: 5.9 x 1.2 x 8.6 inches

Shipping Weight: 1.4 pounds

Average Customer Review: 3.9 out of 5 stars 17 customer reviews

Best Sellers Rank: #338,745 in Books (See Top 100 in Books) #81 in Books > Arts &

Photography > Music > Biographies > Jazz #99 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music >

Biographies > Rhythm & Blues #388 in Books > Arts & Photography > Music > Musical Genres > Jazz

Customer Reviews

America's greatest tunes were composed by George Gershwin, Jerome Kern and Richard Rodgers,

among others, but, as this popular/critical survey demonstrates, those who wrote the words for these songs were equally important figures. Furia, a University of Minnesota professor of English, perceptively assesses the styles and careers of such masters of light verse as Ira Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein, Lorenz Hart, Howard Dietz, Yip Harburg and Al Dubin, and of two--Irving Berlin and Cole Porter--who were proficient in both words and music. He concludes with an anomaly, the country boy of Savannah, Johnny Mercer, whose blend of earthiness and elegant urbanity made him one of the few lyricists who could skillfully set to words the jazz melodies of Harold Arlen, Hoagy Carmichael and Duke Ellington. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Readers who can hum "Puttin' on the Ritz" or "Anything Goes" and who know the musicals Show Boat or Oklahoma will appreciate Furia's study of the lyrics of the "great standards." These lyrics, he argues, contributed almost as much as the melodies to a "golden age" of popular song, spanning the 1920s to the 1950s. Irving Berlin, Ira Gershwin, and Cole Porter are among those whose work is examined, but because Furia tries to survey so many writers, we get only hasty glances at each, and the prose tends to bog down in laborious analyses of rhyme scheme, alliteration, and assonance, making this read like a Ph.D. dissertation.- Paul Baker, CUNA, Inc., Madison, Wis. Copyright 1990 Reed Business Information, Inc.

Before you begin this book go to Wikipedia and look up the name Alec Wilder. Wilder was a successful songwriter (I'll Be Around), a New York wit and author of the definitive book, American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950. Knowing his resume is vital because you'll be hearing from him a lot in the coming pages--33 times in 281 pages. You'll also read a great deal about slangy, vernacular lyrics, driving melodies, the greatness of Fred Astaire, the banality of Hollywood music (though there is a generally appreciative chapter on Hollywood songs), the integrated musical, rhyme schemes, ragging and diphthongs. Phillip Furia's respectful, if ultimately frustrated, conceit in Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists is to take an admiring, academic survey of lyric writers from the 1920s and 1930s golden era of popular songwriting--those songs now called standards. (Although the academic part mainly consists of Furia, an English professor and Fulbright scholar, writing obsessively about grammar, the off-rhyme and parts of speech.) The failure of the conceit is not a complex one: he runs out of steam--or rather, lyricists. After chapters on the genius Irving Berlin, Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin and Cole Porter, he

simply doesn't have anyone worthy of detailed examination. (Furia is strangely and angrily dismissive of Cole Porter. Porter, who is generally considered, with Ira Gershwin, to epitomize the kind of witty, sparkling songs Furia venerates, is scorned like someone who refused to pay off on a football bet.) Running into a diminishing bank of writers, Furia proceeds as best he can. A chapter devoted to a songwriter (Oscar Hammerstein) whose talents don't fit the conceit. Several chapters are split between two lyricists. There is a mostly admiring chapter on writers working in Hollywood. Another is devoted to jazz songs (here again, Furia is snidely dismissive of their efforts, leaving the reader to wonder why he bothered to write it.) And a final chapter praising Johnny Mercer. In the end, *Poets of Tin Pan Alley* is a respectable failure. Furia's love for the music is obvious. He knows the historical background and is generally lucid in discussing it. But his handling of the lyrics themselves redefines *Poets of Tin Pan Alley* as he rambles endlessly about grammatical minutia and half-rhyme syllables. It's an irritating slog through brilliant songs and it dooms the book to a life on the back shelf of a library.

Philip Furia offers a wonderful blend of historical fact and thoughtful analysis in this discussion of the development of American popular music in the first half of the previous century. Although he devotes separate chapters to such icons as Irving Berlin, Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, and others, I'll focus here on his analysis of how and why our music evolved as it did, especially in the period between the two world wars. The music was written to be marketed by publishing houses on a specific street in New York that came to be called Tin Pan Alley (thanks to the racket escaping from open windows). Although the publishers' only goal was to make money, Furia shows how lyricists nonetheless found room for fun and creativity. The century started with a popular music largely written with grammatically proper (and thus pompous?) lyrics. Over the years it became a people's music employing ethnic idioms, street slang, and everyday cliches. To cite just one of many examples, the phrase "ain't got a barrel of money" illustrates the newly acceptable diction and also the social background that haunts or bolsters it. Technology also put its mark on our music. With the advent of the phonograph and the radio, which enabled music to be heard privately, our lyricists imagined a persona Furia calls the solitary lover, an early example being the lonely soliloquy of Berlin's *Fools Fall in Love*. And when large audiences gathered in auditoriums to hear music, the presentation shifted from the disjointed "review" to the musical drama. Now lyrics had to be "in character" and had also to advance a plot. A touching example is when Annie first sings a song full of childlike, shoot 'em up energy--Annie and her gun--but later a song full of the misgivings of a young woman experiencing sexual awakening and yearning--Annie gets her heart. And finally, for

this review, Furia is an expert analyst of how lyricists dealt with the problems of adapting the rhythms of language to those of music, the best illustrations coming from "ragtime," a style in which rhythms and diction were both "ragged" (messed with or deconstructed) in mutually supporting ways. In tracing these and other currents that formed our music, Furia creates a fascinating picture of how the music became us, and maybe how we became it. As Oscar Hammerstein put it, The Song is You.

Lyricists seem generally relegated to second fiddle behind the composer. But a tune does not become a song until the lyricist has done his/her work on it. Many songs achieved greatness because of their melody, but just as many achieved greatness because of their words. I already knew this was a wonderful book because I found it in my local library. Feminine rhymes? Off rhymes? Dummy lyrics? I got half way through it and decided I wanted to own it myself. Finding Forrester's Books is a bookseller that meticulously describes every minute defect their eagle eyes perceive in an otherwise perfect book, and then when the book arrives you can't find those defects yourself, they're so insignificant. "Jacket showing some shopwear"?? Where? The book is pristine as far as I can see. I'm affirmatively looking for this bookseller from now on.

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