

# INTRODUCTION

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Marguerite Chabrol  
& Pierre-Olivier Toulza

Translated from the French by Tresi Murphy.

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More than any other classical Hollywood genre, the musical depended heavily on the presence of and, at times, the number of stars in the cast, thus becoming the epitome of the Hollywood system. For example, in 1930s series such as *The Big Broadcast* (1932-1938) from Paramount, and *Broadway Melody* (1935-1940) from MGM, studios tried to stand out from the competition by emphasizing their extensive roster of stars and their respective specialties.

These stars represented a distinct group. While some were “chosen,” and their images built from the ground up, stars of musicals were, above all, cast for their specific dancing or singing skills. Some mastered a number of techniques (tap dancing, ballet, acrobatic dance, and ballroom dancing in the case of Eleanor Powell),<sup>1</sup> or, on the contrary, excelled in one discipline (ballet for Cyd Charisse). It was rare for someone to have no specific expertise at all that could be recognized by audiences and sold by the studio’s publicity machine, and a number of stars were both singers and dancers: Fred Astaire and Gene Kelly were not dubbed when they sang with Judy Garland, who in turn, performed complex choreographies alongside experienced dancers. On the other hand, Marilyn Monroe’s lack of preparation has been acknowledged by a number of sources and Darryl F. Zanuck was initially reluctant to cast her in *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes* (Howard Hawks, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1953).<sup>2</sup> But thanks to intensive training, and the specific adaptation of musical numbers to her aptitudes and limitations, Monroe became a veritable film musical star, capable of executing Jack Cole’s astutely adapted choreography and of singing a number of songs herself, even though she was dubbed in part by Marni Nixon, notably on “Diamonds Are a Girl’s Best Friend” (CLIP 1). At the time, musical performance skills were such an integral part of the genre that even stars who were without skills were obliged to compensate for their failings in order to maintain any longevity in the business.

Marilyn Monroe’s popularity and her canonical beauty made her the archetype of the Hollywood star as opposed to a musical star, much more than her talent

<sup>1</sup> Adrienne L. McLean, “Putting ‘Em Down Like a Man: Eleanor Powell and the Spectacle of Competence,” in *Hetero: Queering Representations of Straightness*, ed. Sean Griffin (Albany: SUNY Press, 2009), 92.

<sup>2</sup> George Custen, *Twentieth Century’s Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 327.

as a dancer or a singer. On the other hand, specific skills enabled stars with atypical physical appearances to stand out (Frank Sinatra,<sup>3</sup> Danny Kaye<sup>4</sup>), to the extent that even some of the genre's biggest stars were exempt from the standards of traditional Hollywood glamour (Fred Astaire,<sup>5</sup> Judy Garland<sup>6</sup>). While the musical tended to attract mass audiences, it also became a space where cultural issues were negotiated in song and dance due to the way the genre shifted Hollywood gender norms, represented race and ethnicity, appealed to select audiences, notably gay and lesbian,<sup>7</sup> and instigated a dialogue between lowbrow art and highbrow art.

### PERSONA, NARRATIVE AND NUMBERS

Taking skill into account distinguishes the study of musical stars from the usual analyses carried out in the field of star studies.<sup>8</sup> While Hollywood genres are often assessed for how stock narratives and recurring set pieces were deployed to underline the talents of a given star, the musical emphasized the spectacular without necessarily including narrative justification. In fact, the genre provided inherent tensions that shift the way the persona worked. As Richard Dyer tells us about Judy Garland,<sup>9</sup> the characters in musicals were rarely used to promote the star's qualities as the narrative was often merely a pretext for the musical numbers that highlighted their specialties. In *Meet Me in St. Louis* (Vincente Minnelli, MGM, 1944) for example,

<sup>3</sup> Karen McNally, "Sailors and Kissing Bandits: The Challenging Spectacle of Frank Sinatra at MGM," in *The Sound of Musicals*, ed. Steven Cohan (London: BFI, 2010), 93–103.

<sup>4</sup> Scott Balcerzak, *Buffoon Men: Classic Hollywood Comedians and Queered Masculinity* (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 2013).

<sup>5</sup> Steven Cohan, "'Feminizing' the Song-and-Dance Man: Fred Astaire and the Spectacle of Masculinity in the Hollywood Musical," in *Screening the Male: Exploring Masculinities in Hollywood Cinema*, ed. Steven Cohan and Ina Rae Hark (London and New York: Routledge, 1993), 46–69.

<sup>6</sup> Adrienne L. McLean, "Feeling and the Filmed Body: Judy Garland and the Kinesics of Suffering," *Film Quarterly* 55:3 (2002): 2–15.

<sup>7</sup> Richard Dyer, "Judy Garland and Gay Men," in *Heavenly Bodies: Film Stars and Society* (London: Macmillan, 1987), 141–194. Brett Farmer, "Julie Andrews Made Me Gay," *Camera Obscura* 65 22:2 (2007): 144–53. Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2002).

<sup>8</sup> Richard Dyer, *Stars* (London: British Film Institute, 1979).

<sup>9</sup> Dyer, "Garland and Gay Men," 156–160.

Garland's specific emotional intensity is depicted in numbers such as "The Boy Next Door" (CLIP 2).

As such, we propose an approach to Hollywood musicals based on the musical numbers themselves and on individual performances. Of course, various archetypal narratives were elaborated around the image of the stars in question, for example children (Shirley Temple), adolescents from teen musicals (Deanna Durbin, the Mickey Rooney-Judy Garland tandem), or stars with personae that were strongly linked to the entertainment industry in certain backstage films that played on the duality of their image on and off stage.<sup>10</sup> Nevertheless, in general, dancing and singing skills imposed many bespoke narratives: Some defined so many variations of the genre, for example the "album" movie for singers that depended on the performance of one unique personality. *A Star Is Born* (George Cukor, Warner Bros., 1954) indeed has a narrative that depicts Judy Garland's persona, but it is also a recital by the star, based notably on her live concert experience. We could also mention *Jailhouse Rock* (Richard Thorpe, MGM, 1957) and Elvis Presley's rock musicals.<sup>11</sup> The story is relegated to second place to such an extent that musical numbers pop up in very different genres, where certain stars even exported their quintessential acts (Marilyn Monroe to the Western, Cyd Charisse and Rita Hayworth to the film noir). Indeed, it is by analyzing the performances that we can better discern the way in which the show scene depicts their persona: The "identity-based" numbers, centered around the characteristics of a star, are attractions that are essential to the genre, just as much as the "big" production numbers that involve dancing prowess and high production values.

### ESTABLISHED STARS AND FEATURED PERFORMERS

In parallel fashion, the performers of these numbers were generally designated as "stars" by the film industry, even though in reality their status was quite varied. There are a number of individuals, from Judy Garland to Gene Kelly, who combined the attributes of the Hollywood

<sup>10</sup> Allison Robbins, "Doubled Selves: Eleanor Powell and the MGM Backstage Musical, 1935–37," *Journal of the Society for American Music* 7:1 (2013): 65–93.

<sup>11</sup> See Landon Palmer, "'And introducing Elvis Presley': Industrial Convergence and Stardom in the Rock 'n' Roll Movies," *MSM* 9:2 (2015): 177–190.

movie star with those of a film musical star. Less well-known performers often fell into the category of “niche” stars, with less complex personae and more specific talents. With its own hierarchy, the musical broadened the categories of the star system. From an economic point of view, there was a huge disparity between the few highly paid stars and the others. For the early Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films, the difference was glaring. Up until *Top Hat* (Mark Sandrich, RKO, 1935), only Astaire was considered to be a star in financial terms and the production budgeted a salary of \$40,000 for him, while Ginger Rogers was paid a paltry \$7,000!<sup>12</sup> In *The Gay Divorcee* (Mark Sandrich, RKO, 1934), she was paid slightly less than Edward Everett Horton who couldn't even sing or dance. The inherent sexism of the system does not fully explain the pay gap. (Actually at the time, certain big female stars like Greta Garbo were paid a fortune.) There was also the fact that Astaire had more numbers than Rogers and was considered to be a virtuoso.

While celebrities like Fred Astaire, Alice Faye or Kathryn Grayson were stars and soloists combined, there were, on the one hand, certain musical stars who had relatively few solo numbers, such as Ginger Rogers, and, on the other, so-called supporting performers (Vera-Ellen, Ann Miller <sup>[CLIP 3]</sup>) whose numerous solos were essential, and who each had their own “star turns.” The range of specialty performers, those cast systematically for a specific skill, had varied profiles. Some were major stars (the swimmer Esther Williams, who defined the sub-genre of aquatic ballet all on her own), but, at the opposite end of the spectrum, numerous artists, often forgotten today, gained true recognition at the time (Charlotte Greenwood, Virginia O'Brien <sup>[CLIP 4]</sup>), some even appearing on screen as themselves (José Iturbi). A good number of these featured performers were considered by the studios to be a guarantee of success, and were showcased in one or many big numbers that could, at times, temporarily stop the show. They were not “stars” in symbolic or economic terms – they were not given top billing – but the promotional material included them in the list of stars, as depicted for example in the promise of “30 stars” [see the inside cover of this book] to be seen in *Thousands Cheer* (George Sidney, MGM, 1943). Limiting screen time whetted the public's appetite and a number of the personalities who made fleeting appearances

<sup>12</sup> Estimated budget for *Top Hat*, box P57. *Gay Divorcee*, box P50. UCLA/RKO.

in films (for example Xavier Cugat in a number of MGM musicals in the 1940s <sup>[CLIP 5]</sup>), in fact represented a major draw and possessed real star appeal. Many of these performers had major careers outside of the movie industry, having acquired their notoriety in other media like the stage or the radio, and came with a previously established popularity on which Hollywood relied (Ethel Waters from Harlem's Cotton Club and Broadway, Fanny Brice in the *Ziegfeld Follies* and subsequently on the radio). In brief, screen time is not a reliable indicator of the impact of such performers, due to the way their performances echoed others, broadcast through other channels.

### SINGULARITIES AND ARCHETYPES

Nevertheless, as always in Hollywood, singularity did not mean radical originality. While typecasting was rife in the film industry in general, musical numbers confronted their performers with other archetypes, often those of the world of entertainment with which the identity of each character connected. Hence, musical numbers were a place where cultural, ideological and artistic negotiation took place. Behind the persona and style of each star was a (more or less) hidden game of homage, re-appropriation, rivalry or parody. On the one hand, the palimpsest was at the heart of many numbers, following a long tradition of reciprocal imitation between actors. The effect of the performances often came from a dialectic between mimicry and the artist's own original expression. On the other hand, rivalry was an important component of the genre, all the more so as the songs were sometimes covers and the public could remember previous versions by other performers. Hence, “Heat Wave” in *There's No Business Like Show Business* (Walter Lang, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1954) was presented as the symbolic theft by the younger Marilyn Monroe of the song that Ethel Merman had already performed in *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (Henry King, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1938) <sup>[CLIPS 6 & 7]</sup>. A number of appearances of stars relied on a competition-based structure that was more pronounced than elsewhere in Hollywood, in particular the singling out of a solo artist within an ensemble performance such as Ginger Rogers in “We're in the Money” in *Gold Diggers of 1933* (Mervyn LeRoy, Warner Bros., 1933) <sup>[CLIP 8]</sup>. Other numbers did not hesitate to relegate a major star to the status of mere diegetic audience member

to reveal their level of fascination with the prowess of the performer, but also to show them having their limelight stolen.

The creation of numbers for one star or another brought other constraints into play. While some performers were given a free hand to create their own routines, studios retained control in terms of artistic direction, preconceptions about given stars' personae, and the technical side of the production process in terms of sound and pictures. There were a number of striking differences in status between those who mastered the technical ins and outs of their performances (Fred Astaire)<sup>13</sup> and those who were caught up in a dialectical relationship with the producers, going from compromise, to actual submission, to downright pressure (Lena Horne).<sup>14</sup> This was notably the case for singers who had to negotiate technical issues and dubbing, especially when the studio insisted on another voice. Some of the greatest stars of the period faced this reality: Audrey Hepburn in *My Fair Lady* (George Cukor, Warner Bros., 1964), for example, as well as the cast of *Carmen Jones* (Otto Preminger, Carlyle Productions, 1954), where Harry Belafonte and Dorothy Dandridge were obliged to accept being dubbed by white singers' voices deemed to be more operatic.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, individual numbers came up against the genre's larger history and many careers bore the brunt of changes in performance styles. In the post-war years, changes in choreography led to the increased popularity of ballet as opposed to tap and ballroom dancing, and from the 1960s onwards, the importance of singing outstripped that of dancing to radically upset the hierarchy of musical stars. From the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the decline of the genre brought the question of performance skills back to the table. A number of films were dominated by singers who often were not professional dancers (Doris Day, Julie Andrews, Barbra Streisand)<sup>16</sup> and the advent of "non-singing" stars singing anyway (Marlon Brando, Rex Harrison).

<sup>13</sup> Todd Decker, *Music Makes Me: Fred Astaire and Jazz* (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2011).

<sup>14</sup> Shane Vogel, "Lena Horne's Impersona," *Camera Obscura* 67 23:1 (2008): 11-45. Richard Dyer, *In the Space of a Song: The Uses of Song in Film* (London and New York: Routledge, 2012), chapter 6, "Singing Prettily: Lena Horne in Hollywood," 114-144.

<sup>15</sup> Jeffrey Paul Smith, "Black Faces, White Voices: The Politics of Dubbing in *Carmen Jones*," *The Velvet Light Trap* 51 (2003): 29-42.

<sup>16</sup> Dyer, *Space of a Song*, 98-99.

In the classical era, skill, numbers and intermediality all worked together, inviting further analysis of the place of film musical stars from angles not generally considered in star studies. In addition, our approach combines different disciplinary perspectives: cinema, music and dance. In the first part of the book we will deal with the paradoxes of a performance that was mediatized by the technical conditions of actual film staging and the construction of "technological" bodies. Due to the technical and economic constraints of shooting and distributing a movie, the act of performance was constantly positioned within a dialectic between "authenticity" and reconstruction. Musical numbers at times hid their necessary mediation by insisting on the effects of presence. At other times, they played with it reflexively by postulating that the film audience was fully aware of the editing process (editing, dubbing, special effects, broadcasting, etc.).

We already knew that Fred Astaire was one of the world's greatest "sound editors," as he dubbed the sound of his own tap dancing in post. But his perfectionism covered all aspects of his performance and Todd Decker shows the extent to which Astaire developed a specific process for each medium in which he worked, in a context where cinema is doubtless the one furthest removed from live performance. The star's body never revealed the slightest sign of effort, thus becoming a sort of "cyborg" in the collective unconscious that owed its status as much to the way he mastered technologies as it did to his own virtuosity.

When studying the conditions in which sound recording took place in the 1930s, Allison Robbins examines the hesitation to introduce playback as the norm given that stars wished to retain their own musical expressiveness. In her analysis of their resistance to the playback option that was pushed by the studios, Robbins characterizes the intimate numbers made possible through the use of technology. Despite work on the sound in post, true forms of live presence in singing remained possible and retained a radio feel, far removed from the powerful voices of Broadway.

Even though the level of technical manipulation was often extensive, and some stars had someone else's voice dubbed over theirs, individual star's characteristics did not necessarily disappear. Marguerite Chabrol comes to this conclusion about Rita Hayworth's singing performances, which were systematically dubbed. The construction of an

illusion that relied on the star's dancing skills and the optimization of mono sound diffusion meant that the technical aspect did not completely nullify performativity.

The second part is given over to racial and ethnic issues. Racial segregation, in Hollywood like everywhere else, worked in favor of white stars. At MGM, Lena Horne was the exception (she was, with Benny Carter, the only African-American among the 30 or so stars in the cast of *Thousands Cheer*). However, despite her seven-year contract and the broadening of possibilities for black artists during the war, she was offered very few leading roles. The studios and the industry censorship practices, such as the Production Code, drastically limited narrative possibilities, notably through the banning of inter-racial romance. As a result, it was only as part of specialty numbers or in musicals with only African-American casts like *Stormy Weather* (Andrew Stone, Twentieth Century-Fox, 1943, <sup>[CLIP 9]</sup>) that the roles of stars like Lena Horne and Bill Robinson were really developed. Nevertheless, the reputation of certain artists allowed the musical to create spaces where they could be present, if not free, within the system. This was notably the case for singers (Ethel Waters) and for certain dancers (Bill Robinson) whose appeal to audiences was less specific than we might expect, and was recognized by Hollywood as such, even though their relative absence in terms of narrative made it possible to edit out their numbers in certain Southern states. The powerful attraction provided by African-American performers must not preclude the fact that only a handful of artists known throughout the United States were actually featured in films, and that white stars never had to worry about competition from their black counterparts, who were at times more talented but were relegated to numbers that did not always do justice to their talent. Karen McNally analyses the exceptional numbers by the Nicholas Brothers, showing how their spectacular style allowed them to take center stage in a way that precluded the idea they were merely guest stars. Thanks to their talent, their numbers took precedence over the narrative sequences and proposed a celebration of American entertainment that contested the supremacy of white stars as well as white musical forms and choreography.

The ethnic and national origins of stars also interacted with their skills. The sporting triumphs of the ice-skater Sonja Henie explain why Twentieth Century-Fox took an interest in her, given that the studio almost always made the star play young Scandinavian girls whose foreign aspect could be domesticated thanks to a performance style that associated whiteness and the cult of fitness.<sup>17</sup> Certain Latina actresses such as Dolores Del Rio managed to become stars by riding the wave of popularity of Latin American dancing and music, or thanks to the geopolitical context of the war years. The ethnicity of certain stars, attenuated to a greater or lesser extent, nevertheless remained essential in the exotic numbers that blended the authenticity of the contribution from a foreign culture with the alteration or at times extreme simplification of the imported rhythms and dances – in particular the “tropical” music of the so-called “King of Rhumba,” Xavier Cugat. At the end of the period, the differences between performances employing “racial and ethnic masks” – melodies, “complex rhythms that suggested a particular ethnic origin,”<sup>18</sup> dances, make-up –, for example the contrasts between Rita Moreno and Natalie Wood in *West Side Story* (Jerome Robbins & Robert Wise, Mirish Corp. & Seven Arts, 1961), prove the enduring power of these performance categories, despite any musical or choreographic changes that may have occurred.

Pierre-Olivier Toulza shows how the advent of Technicolor allowed Carmen Miranda on the one hand, to create the exotic and racialized spectacle of her numbers, and on the other, to underline the specific traits of her performance. In fact, the Brazilian star patiently created her own shows, on screen and on the stages of theatres and nightclubs, fully relying on the specific contribution that color made to her numbers.

Finally, performances were deeply imbued with black and Latin cultures, from dance to musical and singing traditions and techniques. When analyzing two numbers by white stars in blackface (Fred Astaire and Eleanor Powell) heavily influenced by Bill Robinson, Robynn Stilwell examines the appropriation that forms the basis of many numbers, but

<sup>17</sup> Diane Negra, *Off-White Hollywood: American Culture and Ethnic Female Stardom* (London: Routledge, 2002), 84–90.

<sup>18</sup> Todd Decker, “Race, Ethnicity, Performance,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris and Stacy Wolf (Oxford and New York: OUP, 2011), 198.