“Puttin’ on the Ritz”—Harry Richman (1929)

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Harry Richman

Irving Berlin was expanding his horizons. The preeminent American songwriter had already conquered Tin Pan Alley, churning out hits such as “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” (1911), “I Love a Piano” (1915), “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody” (1919), and “What’ll I Do” (1924). Berlin’s music publishing business was making money hand over fist. His Music Box Theater, still in operation at 239 West 45th Street in New York’s theater district, opened in 1921. It served primarily as an outlet for his continuing, prodigious output. Now Berlin wanted to conquer the movies as well.

Berlin, born Israel Beilin in Russia, immigrated to America with his family at the age of five, in 1893. He grew up in poverty on the Lower East Side, and went to work at age 13 after the death of his father. Self-taught, though musically illiterate, he composed obsessively (creating some 1,500 songs over a 60-year career), relying on transcriptionists and orchestrators to get his notes on paper. Through discipline, effort, and sheer force of will, he hammered out hit after hit--cheery comic songs, stirring patriotic songs, sincere ballads--simple, heartfelt, catchy melodies all.

He was there at the very beginning of sound film. Al Jolson sings Berlin’s “Blue Skies” during the groundbreaking “The Jazz Singer” (1927). Three Berlin songs could be seen and heard in the Marx Brothers’ debut film “The Cocoanuts” (1929). Now the composer, normally loathe to leave Manhattan, went West to Hollywood to oversee a movie vehicle featuring his music--1929’s “Puttin’ on the Ritz.”

The title song was one Berlin wrote three years previously. Long before the digital era’s multiple-platform release strategies sprouted, the music industry was already hip. “Puttin’ on the Ritz” would, in rapid succession, be featured in a film, released on recordings, and published in sheet music form. The movie was panned and quickly faded; the song endured.

Harry Richman was the first singer to be identified with the song, although he was not the first to commit it to record (that distinction goes to Lew Conrad, who recorded it with Leo Reisman and his Orchestra a few months prior to Richman's version).

Like Berlin, Richman was another assimilated Jewish American and musical autodidact. Born Henry Reichman, Jr., in Cincinnati in 1895, he started working at age 10, playing piano in a saloon with a screen around him to hide how young he was. Heading to New York, he got his big break as an accompanist for such established stars as Mae West and Nora Bayes. He became a valued singer on radio, and served as a prominent master of ceremonies at New York stages and nightclubs. The apogee of his career was introducing "Puttin' on the Ritz" to the public.

"Puttin' on the Ritz" is a snappy, upbeat number, with a propulsive stutter-step beat. The title phrase, a synonym for dressing up and going out on the town, is taken from the reputation of the hotel chain of the same name, founded in Paris in 1898, and noted for its rich décor and its service to high-end customers in Europe and America.

It's possible to watch faded copies of the film and, in the "Ritz" number, Richman embodies the perfect style for the song. He's in black tie, top hat, and tails, with brilliantined hair, sporting a nasal, fruity baritone topped by a slight lisp. His delivery is corny--broad, jaunty but stiff, almost italicized. He's Mr. Monopoly's rakehell nephew. Richman was one of the last generation of pre-amplification popular singers like Jolson and Eddie Cantor; someone who was used to making themselves heard and understood all the way to the back row. All would later have to learn how to resize their performances to fit the more intimate dynamics of radio and electric recording.

The moviemakers were proud to let it be known that the title sequence in "Puttin' on the Ritz" was the first in film to feature both blacks and whites onstage; sadly, a close examination of the sequence shows that while there is a white chorus and a black chorus, the two never share the stage at the same time—an on-set segregation.

Likewise, the original lyrics for the song are highly problematic, as they are those of what was termed a "coon song." These tunes cast African Americans as stereotyped and denigrated sources of amusement, and were popular in white American culture from the 1880s through the 1930s. The song's lyrics imagine impoverished, pretentious African Americans literally "aping" their supposed betters:

Have you seen the well-to-do
Up on Lenox Avenue
On that famous thoroughfare
With their noses in the air
High hats and arrowed collars
White spats and fifteen dollars
Spending every dime
On a wonderful time
If you're blue and you don't know where to go to
Why don't you go where Harlem flits

Puttin' on the Ritz
Spangled gowns upon a bevy of high browns
From down the levee, all misfits
Puttin' on the Ritz
That's where each and every Lulu Bell goes
Every Thursday evening with her swell beaus
Rubbing elbows
Come with me and we'll attend their jubilee
And see them spend their last two bits
Puttin' on the Ritz

This set of lyrics stayed with the song until 1946 (Clark Gable delivers a brave but awful performance of it, complete with straw boater, cane, and chorus girls, in the 1939 film "Idiot's Delight"). By then, the cultural climate no longer tolerated such words, and Berlin rewrote them for Fred Astaire, who delivered the new version in the film "Blue Skies":

Have you seen the well-to-do
Up and down Park Avenue?
On that famous thoroughfare
With their noses in the air
High hats and arrow collars,
White spats and lots of dollars,
Spending every dime
For a wonderful time.
If you're blue and you don't where to go to
Why don't you go where fashion sits?
Puttin' on the Ritz.
Different types who wear a day coat
Pants with stripes and cut-a-way coats,
Perfect fits . . .
Puttin' on the Ritz.
Dressed up like a million-dollar trouper
Tryin' hard to look like Gary Cooper
Super duper!
Come let's mix where Rockefellers walk with sticks or um-ber-ellas
In their mitts . . .
Puttin' on the Ritz

With the new lyrics, the song enjoyed a revival, dozens of new cover versions, and a niche in the culture it still occupies. Whether as a memorable punch line in Mel Brooks' "*Young Frankenstein"* (1974) or as an unlikely synth-pop hit for Taco in 1982, it's not going anywhere anytime soon.

Brad Weismann is a cultural historian, writer, and journalist. His work can be found in such publications as "Senses of Cinema" and "Film International," and in the newly- published

compendium "100 Years of Soviet Cinema." His new book "Lost in the Dark: A World History of Horror Film" is due out in 2020.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.