

### **FRED ASTAIRE:** *class, execution, and perfection personified*

The essay offers a retrospective of the highlights of the dancer's career. In addition a financial report of Top Hat is included at the end of the essay. 8 pages long.

## **Fred Astaire: class, execution, and perfection personified**

The year is 1935, when Top Hat was released and the industries of music, film and dance are at a peak like they've never been before. The reason for this is their combined effect; music provided the sound, dance visualised the music, and film provided a wide spread exposure and a financial outlet to feed the industry all the way down to the "clubs".

The period from 1927-mid fifties saw an explosion of musical talents like no other era in history. Among these new talents were the not so new faces of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers as they had thrived on Broadway for many years before their film career. The peak of their nine-film career occurred with the release of Top Hat on September 6, 1935. To understand their success we must first understand the dynamics of both the music and film industry. Then we must look at Fred Astaire and his contribution to the Hollywood musicals. Only then will the understanding of Top Hat's historical context fall into place.

Fred Astaire was fortunate to be part of an explosion of talent in both the film and music history that was caused by consistency. Consistency means that the artist of those days produced many films and recorded many songs each and every year. For example Fred Astaire made 16 films between 1933-43, Mickey Rooney made 46 films between 1927-37 and Busby Berkley made 26 films between 1930-40. Similarly Glenn Miller recorded 216 songs between 1938-1942 (which is the equivalence of 18 albums by today's standard), Irving Berlin wrote 71 songs between 1927-31, 53 between 1932-36 and an average of 10 songs every year after that. Therefore an artist's stardom lasted much longer in addition to the abundance of new faces which arrived each year. This essentially caused a saturation of talent like no other time in history, which has come to be known as the "golden era".

Fred Astaire's grace, career achievements, and ability to withstand the test of time are unmatched to this day. Fred Astaire's career began at the age of four in 1903 with his sister Adele and has remained consistent well into his seventies. Fred Astaire has been acknowledged as being the greatest dancer that ever lived and the singer to have introduced the most hit songs written by great composers. Astaire is also hailed as being the dancer who started the greatest dance craze in history and the person that taught the camera how to film dance. Astaire also holds the title of being part of the greatest dance team both on Broadway and in film.

Fred and Adele got their big break in 1917 with Over the Top making \$250/week for the team. Then their salaries went from \$350 for the Passing Show of 1918 to \$1,250/week for For Goodness Sake. Their careers were marked with such hits as Lady Be Good 1924 & 1926, Funny Face 1928, and The BandWagon 1931.

However in 1931 upon completing *The Bandwagon* Adele would leave the partnership to marry Lord Charles Cavendish. Fred missed Adele because audiences could notice Fred as if he were looking back stage to see whether Adele was there.

After all the big attraction during Fred's stage career was Adele and not Fred. This explains why many thought that Fred without Adele was like Laurel without Hardy. In fact this scenario haunted Astaire once again in 1939 when his partnership with Ginger ended. The break up with Adele caused Fred to be very apprehensive towards teaming up with any single partner for a long period of time to avoid a career-ending situation from reoccurring. Astaire did in fact resist a partnership with Ginger Rogers because he found her to be too earthy to be teamed up with him.

Fred Astaire's image developed over time with his on screen persona being self-created. He borrowed the elegance and style of Britain's aristocracy and America's wealthy, experiences from Vaudeville, and the racetrack. In fact the Astaires got better acquainted with the aristocracy after the Prince of Wales saw *Stop Flirting* ten times and invited the Astaires to join him for supper. The Duke of York, Prince George and others members of the royal family attended the show and became better acquainted with Fred and Adele. Fred's Top Hat and Tails were first worn during the musical *Smiles* November 18, 1930. However it was a flop, but remains important because it provides a record of exactly when the costume was first worn. Furthermore a number in the Broadway musical called *Say Young Man of Manhattan* became the inspiration of which the idea of the Top Hat White Tie and Tails number in *Top Hat* originated from. *Smiles* was also responsible for putting Astaire out of work giving him just enough time to make a historic meeting when he was asked to help choreograph a number in "*Girl Crazy*" starring a young Ginger Rogers.

Fred Astaire also benefited from being the great composer's preferred performer when it came down to introducing their new songs. In fact Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, and Jerome Kern have admitted that they would prefer to have Astaire sing their songs more than anyone else. The result was that Astaire introduced more hit songs written by great composers than any other artist in history. Furthermore Astaire was also the artist to have the most songs written especially for him by great composers. Astaire as a dancer was in a class of his own. Astaire had an outlaw style concerned only with the way to photograph his numbers. Astaire disliked the way he looked in films, which led him to want to control every technical aspect around the choreography.

Astaire's style was composed of a combination of ballroom, tap, and ballet. Astaire disliked routines that were strictly ballet but admits that ballet enabled him to cover ground and get off the floor. Astaire went as far as to do his movements turned in, rather than the ballet turned out positions purposely to avoid being caught up in the ballet trap. Furthermore Astaire knew that hoofing, being concerned only with your waist down, was not enough to grab the audience's favour, and knowing very well that he was no hooper. Astaire's style was lifted and influenced by ballet even though he disliked routines strictly composed of ballet. Astaire dominated all of his partners with the exception of one, Eleanor Powell who was in a league of her own. My theory on this statement is that Astaire was predominating in his film career because his years with Adele left him in the back seat where he always got second billing. Therefore Astaire was determined to be number one in his film career.

Astaire believed that it was essential for dance to maintain its continuity if it was to be successful at all. To do this Astaire quickly found out that he would have to

control the way his choreographies were edited, filmed, as well as the way the music was arranged. He also succeeded in making the numbers an intricate part of the story finding them a place within the narrative to give his choreographies more life. To achieve this Astaire controlled every aspect concerning the technical side to the filming of his numbers. Astaire controlled the camera work and the editing of all his numbers, and did all the choreographing of which only Roberta credits him for his choreography.

Astaire even controlled the composition of his music, to a certain extent because he often got the songs before they were composed. Being a musician himself Astaire could take full advantage in adapting the music around his choreographies and in fact sometimes changed the music to suit his steps. In filming of the numbers Astaire believed in shooting full body and shooting in long takes which maintained a pervasive theatricality throughout. Astaire would fit songs and dances into the action of the films which integrated musical with backstage musical and helped numbers flow naturally with the film's narrative and sometimes provided a show within the film. Astaire believed that dance had to have continuity and therefore worked to have the least amount of cuts as possible in his numbers. In fact most of the Astaire and Rogers duets were shot with very few takes with three cameras at eye level, on the right, left and centre, which allowed him to pick the best version. His numbers were always in the following manner; medium shot for the song and full figure long shot when the dance starts.

Astaire prepared numbers eight or nine months before the shooting began and requested an extra six weeks of rehearsals, which lasted from 9-6 at night. Astaire choreographed the numbers, showed them to Hermas Pan, who played Ginger's role, then Pan would be Astaire and showed them to Ginger. The Astaire model as the above shows is me, myself and I and with good reason. Of 212 musical numbers, 133 were fully developed routines with 75 of them as being near masterpieces.

In conclusion Top Hat was to establish a new norm in the Hollywood musical as well as a new king that still, today, stands untouchable by far. Fred Astaire's perfection is personified in this film. His partnership with Ginger Rogers provides the right blend of sophistication and sex appeal. Astaire gives Rogers the sophistication and Rogers gives Astaire the sex appeal. They convey what was to become known as romantic love. No kissing! Rogers resists Astaire until he starts dancing and then falls into his trance. There was to be no kissing and as a result a dance craze developed across the United States because Astaire and Rogers portrayed this so-called romantic love so subtly. I won't review the film or tell you what it's all about, see it for yourself and you, be the judge. Fred Astaire survived through the break up with his sister Adele, survived the Break up with Rogers, and even out danced Gene Kelly, who just recently passed away (1912-1996), who ended his musical career in 1957 where as Astaire lasted into 1960. Yes, all this after Fred's classic screen test, "can't sing, can't act, can dance a little, and balding".

### **Financial analysis of Top Hat**

Top Hat broke all records at radio music city hall when it opened on August 16, 1935 where it made \$134,800 for first week which was \$24,000 more than any other film in any period of time. It established a new record as well for a three-week period at \$350,000. Top Hat cost \$620,000 to make it and grossed 3 million making more money than any film released in 35 next to Mutiny on the Bounty. Irving Berlin, on his part, established a new record for the number of weeks for a song to remain in

the charts as well as making all of his five songs hits. This is ironic because Irving Berlin could not read or write music. He had a specially built piano that transposed keys automatically, and yet wrote 2,000 songs in his career.

The salary for Astaire increased dramatically for this film who before was making \$1,500 a week with a three week guarantee with a possibility of signing for four years with a weekly increase of \$500 per week per year. This however changed with Top Hat because Astaire, along with Berlin was receiving 10 % of the profits of the film.

Critics were raving as the New York Daily news included "Top Hat" as an all time best with Birth of a Nation and Broken Blossoms. Top Hat was also acknowledged as being Astaire's best role ever written for a movie. Furthermore Cheek to Cheek has become the team's most famous dance. Ironically Top Hat was one of the few movies in which Astaire danced in every number in the film.

by Pierre Hobson