

The music of the *Music Box Revues*

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The Music of the *Music Box Revues*

Larry Bomback

On 22 September 1921, a quaint, little establishment located on West 45th Street opened its doors to the theatre-consuming public. Like the Wagner *Festspielhaus* across the ocean in Bayreuth, the one-million dollar Music Box Theatre was built as the outlet for the works, specifically the revue shows, of a single composer—the Russian-Jewish immigrant, Irving Berlin.¹

Revue, a type of musical theater imported from France, were big business on Broadway during the first decades of the twentieth century. Even

* My deepest appreciation is extended to the Baisley Powell Elebash Foundation for funding a research trip to Washington, D.C. I would also like to thank Stephanie Poxon and the rest of the staff at the music division of the Library of Congress for their help in obtaining and reproducing archival material.

¹ In an attempt to further emphasize his commitment to Berlin, co-owner Sam Harris, a producer by trade, originally intended to name the building “Irving Berlin’s Music Box Theatre,” although that proposal was swiftly rejected by the ever-modest composer himself, who remarked that such a decision would have resulted in “too much Berlin.” This was probably a wise move considering that the original promise of devoting the theatre entirely to Berlin’s music was not upheld for very long. The *Earl Carroll Vanities* played the Music Box Theatre in the fall of 1924, and after the final *Music Box Revue* closed in 1925, Harris and Berlin began renting out the establishment to other revue shows at first, and then eventually to general bookings. See “The Music Box to Open” *New York Times*, 12 September 1921, 20; Unknown author, “Dancing Mothers’ has novel climax” *New York Times*, 12 August 1924; and Edward Jablonski, *Irving Berlin: American Troubadour* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999), p. 94.

though there were revue shows in New York dating back to the 1890s, Florenz Ziegfeld popularized the exciting format in 1907 when he staged his first of many annual *Follies*. Music contained in these *Follies* was essentially an amalgam of recent songs written by popular composers. Berlin, in fact, had been writing individual songs for Ziegfeld as early as 1916, and composed much of the music for the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1920*. Thus, by the time Berlin started penning his first *Music Box Revue*, he certainly felt comfortable working in the genre. Nevertheless, Berlin and co-owner Sam Harris made a concerted effort to differentiate their new revue from contemporaneous endeavors conducted by Ziegfeld, Lee and Jacob Schubert (*The Passing Show*), George White (*Scandals*), and a host of other producers. By exploiting the particular dimensions of the Music Box Theatre, deemphasizing the focus on nudity, and most importantly, creating shows centered around music, Berlin and Harris succeeded in raising the caliber of the revue show genre to a higher artistic level.

With its 1000-seat capacity, the Music Box Theatre seems miniscule compared to the New Amsterdam Theatre, where the majority of the *Follies* played, and Harris and Berlin used this feature to their advantage. The intimate feel of the Music Box made for a more intellectual revue with a smaller cast and frequent interaction between the audience and the people on stage.² Granted, the first *Music Box Revue* still cost a fortune to produce. Its nearly \$200,000 price tag was comparable to a Ziegfeld production,

² Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Theatre* (New York, Oxford University Press, 1978), p. 365.

but instead of that money being spent on huge chorus lines of scantily-clad women and high-profile stars, gorgeous scenery and elaborate costumes made up the bulk of the bill. In fact, many a critic remarked that the inaugural *Music Box Revue* was a classier show than the *Follies*, *Scandals*, and especially the Schubert productions, precisely because it did not rely on cheap effects and leggy women in order to sell tickets.³ Instead, the *Music Box Revue* relied on a great score. Unlike any other prior revue show, the music itself was at the forefront of the *Music Box Revues*, and in no way was this better evidenced than by Harris's insistence on having all the songs (words and music) written by a single person, an unprecedented decision. Maintaining the highest artistic standards and assuming a worldly audience, Berlin wrote self-referential songs about musical topics such as dancing, singing, nineteenth-century music, ragtime, jazz and opera. One overseas critic, who saw the first revue when it toured in London, noted that the songs were "far above the average for revue stuff,"⁴ no doubt in part because of their lyrical content. The

³ An anonymous press clipping, "Berlin Cleans Up the Music Box," found at the Library of Congress notes: "Without the least desire to lessen the crowd's interest in it, I am impelled to remark that I remember it as the cleanest and most fully clothed of any of the newer flesh and wit shows. There are powdered backs to be seen and thighs aplenty. But there is little or no nudity in the modern sense. The humor, too, has been pretty thoroughly disinfected." A later reviewer claims that "He [Berlin] had dared to clothe a revue." (From an anonymous press clipping entitled, "The Play: The Music Box is wound up for the Season," and dated 2 December 1924).

⁴ Unknown author, "London Notes" *New York Times*, 20 May 1923, X:1

songs clearly superseded the comedic elements and the choreography, and although in terms of general staging there was nothing particularly innovative about these revues, the fact that they were propelled forward by their songs justifies why they must be recognized as indispensable components in any study looking at American musical theater developments.

Yet despite their importance, little research has been devoted to any aspect of the *Music Box Revues*, as indicated by several RILM search combinations that all yield zero results. Only one monograph, Marilyn Jane Plotkins's unpublished dissertation, *Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, and the Spectacular Revue: the theatrical context of revue songs from 1910-1937*, actually devotes more than a few pages to these four shows. Allen Forte and David Carson Berry have analyzed some of the revue songs, but questions of historiography have not been a major focus of their writings. The many biographies of Irving Berlin and general musical theater textbooks contain much regurgitated information, and my archival research proves that such information is not always entirely accurate, especially with regards to which songs were actually heard in the revues.

Of course, it is no easy task compiling a definitive list of songs from really any musical theater event prior to 1930, and the *Music Box Revues* are no exception. Many of the songs are unpublished and the lead sheets have yet to be uncovered, so that we are left with lists of titles. In addition, some songs were presented only a few times before they were eventually cut due to time constraints or replaced because of poor reception. Finally, many new songs were added to the revues once the shows went on

tour. The inventories that I have compiled (please refer to the appendices at the end of this article) include all songs that were explicitly published as being featured in one of the four revues, unpublished and lost songs that are mentioned at least once in programs, press clippings, or other primary source documents, as well as any added songs that were performed when the revues traveled. Taken together, the complete list is staggeringly large, and while probably still incomplete, it is by far the most comprehensive one to date.⁵

Those familiar with Berlin's *oeuvre* will notice from the appendices that several songs featured in the revues would go on to become timeless classics that continue to be performed and recorded today, including "All Alone," "What'll I Do?," and "Say It with Music" (plate 1). Sung by newcomers Wilda Bennett and Paul Frawley in the original production, "Say It with Music," a song that lyrically required at least an elementary knowledge of nineteenth-century classical music, was singled out by virtually every critic as a showstopper. Such was its popularity that it would later serve as the theme for the entire series.⁶

⁵ I have deliberately left out purely instrumental music used as accompaniment for the *corps de ballet* scenes because much of it was not written by Berlin.

⁶ Sigmund Spaeth, *A History of Popular Music in America*, 11th ed. (New York: Random House, 1967), p. 430; and, Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, p. 365. This notion of "saying something with music" is supported by evidence from the original manuscript of the first revue, where we observe recitative-like dialogues between characters contained within many of the larger song numbers. Unfortunately, the manuscript scores of the second, third and fourth revues have not yet been located, but I would imagine, owing to the fact that

Considering the sheer number of songs that were lyrically about music, this unexpected hit could not have been more apropos. More than half the songs in the first show were about singing or dancing including, “Everybody Step,” a jazz dance number in the vein of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” sung in close harmony by the Brox Sisters, “They Call It Dancing,” a song spoof of the dance marathons that were so popular at that time, “Dancing the Seasons Away,” and “Tell Me with a Melody.” While Ziegfeld had Rudolph Friml and Victor Herbert tunes in his *Follies of 1921*, none of the songs from that show were nearly as popular with the general public as the many hits from the *Music Box Revue*.⁷

“Say It with Music” was the official theme of the entire series, and based on the knowledge that the general layout of the skits was pretty much the same from season to season, that this quasi-operatic practice was upheld in the later revues.

⁷ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, p. 365; and Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Revue* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 82

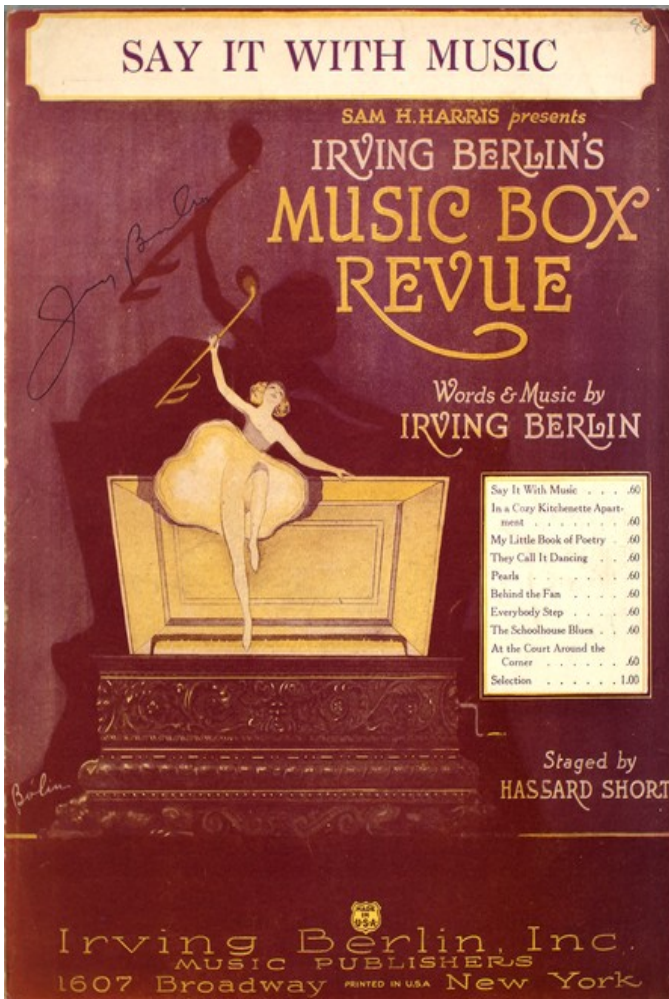


Plate 1 Cover page for “Say It with Music” (1921). Notice the Music Box Theatre logo. This same insignia appears on all published sheet music that includes an indication about being featured in a *Music Box Revue*.

Say It With Music

3

Words and Music by
IRVING BERLIN*Moderato con espressione*

The piano introduction is in 4/4 time, featuring a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The melody begins with a series of chords and eighth notes, leading to a more melodic line. A 'rall.' marking is placed over the final few notes of the introduction.

(*Over*) Mu - sic is a lang - uage lov - ers un - der - stand,
(*Over*) There's a ten - der mes - sage Deep down in my heart,

The vocal line consists of two lines of lyrics. The piano accompaniment continues from the introduction, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand playing a steady bass line.

Mel - o - dy and ro - mance wan - der hand in hand;
Some - thing you should know But how am I to start;

The vocal line consists of two lines of lyrics. The piano accompaniment continues, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand playing a steady bass line.

Cu - pid nev - er falls as sis - ted by a band,
Sen - ti - men - tal speech es Nev - er could im - part,

The vocal line consists of two lines of lyrics. The piano accompaniment continues, with the right hand playing chords and the left hand playing a steady bass line.

Arranged by
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4

So if you have some - thing sweet to tell her:
Just ex - act - ly what I want to tell you:

REFRAIN

Say it with mu - sic, Beau -

ti - ful mu - sic; Some - how they'd

rath - er be kissed — To the strains of Clo - pin or Liszt.

p. mf dolce e legato

mf molto marc.

mere.

Say It With Music. 3

5

A mel - o - dy mel - low

p dolce e legato

played on a cel - lo, Helps

mis - ter · Cu - pid a - long — So say it with a beau - ti - ful song.

1 2

f

Say It With Music . 3

Songs that were not so strong melodically were bolstered by exquisite wardrobes and creative set design. Still, even in these larger chorus numbers, the clothes worn were far from skimpy. On the contrary, they were rather cumbersome. For example, in “Eight Notes,”⁸ (plate 2) yet another song with a musical theme, the chorus girls appeared in musical iconography outfits, and in the “Dining Out” sketch, which contained the two songs “Dining Out” and “In a Cozy Kitchenette Apartment,” the girls were dressed up in life-size food and place setting costumes. “The Legend of the Pearls” featured the chorus girls each wearing a giant pearl and set up against a black backdrop, simulating a necklace in a jewelry shop window.

⁸ In apparent homage to Gilbert and Sullivan, Berlin opens this song with the line, “Eight little notes are we.” Later in the same tune, he uses *solfege* syllables to create a melody, four decades before Rodgers and Hammerstein applied the concept in *The Sound of Music*.



Plate 2 A 33-year-old Berlin and the “Eight Notes.” Notice the staves on the dresses.

Berlin appeared on stage twice during the revue, singing and dancing to his own music. He was in the “Eight Notes” sketch early on in the program, and made another cameo near the end of the show during “The Irving Berlin Interview” number in which the chorus girls asked the composer to reveal his songwriting secrets, and which featured a snippet of his most lucrative composition of 1921, “All By Myself.” According to Percy Hammond’s review, this number elicited the loudest applause on opening

night.⁹ Performing, of course, was nothing new to Berlin. He had been a singing waiter on the Lower East Side for years before finally gaining recognition as a songwriter, and even made several live recordings during the 1910s. Furthermore, Berlin would often tour his new songs around New York hotspots in order to gauge audience reactions before eventually seeking their publication. In fact, he did just that with “Say It with Music.” While it was written specifically for the show, unlike “All by Myself,” or “At the Court Around the Corner,” part of the reason for the success of the song is that it had been paraded around the city for months before the show opened, not only by the composer accompanying himself on the piano, but by the many dance bands who had already made arrangements of the tune and were performing it in social halls.¹⁰

The first revue temporarily closed on 22 June 1922 so that Berlin could begin preparations for the second revue. During the summer, a touring company took the original show across the country as well as to London.¹¹ The revue would return to the Music Box

⁹ Percy Hammond, “The New Play: The Music Box is dedicated to folly by a costly review [*sic*] whose author is Irving Berlin,” *New York Tribune*, 23 September 1921.

¹⁰ Jablonski, p. 95.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 97. Berlin probably did not go on tour with the revue. In fact, the “Irving Berlin Interview” song was eliminated by the time the show came back to Broadway, replaced with an interview of an anonymous actor named “The Tenor.” Based on songs that I found having had appeared in the later *Music Box Revues*, I also suspect that when the shows went on tour, songs from other composers were occasionally incorporated into the score. The “keep it Berlin” rule appears to have been limited only to the Music Box Theatre.

in August with some new music including the song, “The Flipper and the Flapper.” Counting the tours, the first revue played for 54 weeks, grossing \$1.5 million.

Several critics complained that the first revue was not very funny, and considering the sheer length of the show—all the revues, in fact, hovered around the four hour mark—they understandably had hoped for a higher level of humor. This problem was fixed in the second revue when Charlotte Greenwood and the comedic pair of Bobby Clark and Paul McCullough were added to the cast. While Clark and McCullough did sing in one number, “Three Cheers for the Red, White, and Blue,” they were there primarily for comic relief. Greenwood, on the other hand, did sing a great deal, injecting much humor into her three big numbers, “Too Many Boys,” “I’m Looking for a Daddy Long Legs,” and the show-stopping “Pack Up Your Sins and Go to the Devil.”¹² The latter song, along with “Lady of the Evening,” “Crinoline Days,” and “Some Sunny Day” (a song written earlier in the year which was not featured in the revue, as far I am aware, although a snippet may very well have been interpolated during one of the larger numbers), were Berlin’s biggest moneymakers from 1922.¹³

While the interjection of a cruder brand of humor may have watered-down the show, there was one musical number in particular that suggests Berlin

¹² “Pack Up Your Sins and Go to the Devil” was the focus of a major lawsuit filed against Berlin by an unknown composer who claimed to have had written the song first. See Jablonski, p. 99, for the complete story.

¹³ Spaeth, p. 435.

was still attempting to maintain a respectable level of artistry by gearing his music towards a fairly-cultured audience. To fully appreciate “My Diamond Horseshoe of Girls,” one needed to be quite familiar with opera, which has always been considered a very high art form. Like the opera medley in Berlin’s first musical, *Watch Your Step* (1914) the setting for the “Diamond Horseshoe” number was the Metropolitan Opera House, and, indeed, many of the same famous arias ragged in that medley were quoted from once again in this song.¹⁴ John Steel, whom Berlin had essentially stolen from Ziegfeld, and a chorus of women burlesquing popular operatic heroines (Tosca, Carmen, Marguerite, Isolde, Butterfly, Manon, Mimi, Aida, and Thais) performed this hilarious number to enthusiastic cheers.

¹⁴ “My Diamond Horseshoe of Girls,” was actually Berlin’s fourth foray into the world of opera medleys. In his second musical, *Stop! Look! Listen!* (1915), the finale to Act II contained an opera medley entitled the “Ragtime Melodrama.” On his first such endeavor, see Larry Hamberlin’s, “National Identity in Snyder and Berlin’s ‘That Opera Rag,’” *American Music* 22 (Fall 2004), pp. 380-406.

Diamond Horse-Shoe

3

By IRVING BERLIN

Met-ro-pol-i-tan nights bring to me mem-o-ries dear

vol-ees clear— Keep ring-ing in my ear

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4

Met-ro-pol-i-tan girls with their sweet mus-i-cal themes

Haunt my dreams— and ev-'ry night it seems—

CHORUS

I see a horse-shoe set with dia-monds— a dia-mond

p.mf

horse-shoe set with girls— and ev-'ry love-ly maid-en I

Diamond Horse Shoe 3

Detailed description: This is a page of sheet music for the song 'Diamond Horse Shoe'. It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The music is in 2/4 time and the key signature has one sharp (F#). The score is divided into several systems. The first system contains the first line of the vocal melody and its piano accompaniment. The second system contains the second line of the vocal melody and its piano accompaniment. The third system is labeled 'CHORUS' and contains the first line of the chorus vocal melody and piano accompaniment. The fourth system contains the second line of the chorus vocal melody and piano accompaniment. The piano accompaniment consists of a right-hand part with chords and a left-hand part with a simple bass line. The lyrics are printed below the vocal lines. The page number '4' is in the top left corner, and the title 'Diamond Horse Shoe 3' is at the bottom left.

5

see is call - ing to me with a sweet mel - o - dy I hear them

say - ing it with mus - ic — Un - til each trag - ic, tale un -

furls and my heart is lad - en with love for each maid - en, in my

dia - mond horse - shoe of girls. — I see a girls. —

Diamond Horse Shoe 3

Plate 3 This verse and chorus served as an intro to the parade of opera divas. Notice the “Say It with Music” lyric on the third page.

With a wealth of memorable comic tunes, the *Second Annual Music Box Revue* grossed over a million dollars, playing for 46 weeks.¹⁵ The highly-respectable 330-performance success of this revue instilled in Berlin and Harris enough confidence to decide to open the third revue with no trial runs on the road.¹⁶ This was probably not the best idea since the score to the third revue proved to be the weakest one thus far, and despite Stephen Rathbum's glowing appraisal in the *New York Sun-Globe*, deeming it a "a revue that has no rival,"¹⁷ there really was only song from the premier performance that proved to be a memorable hit and a significant money generator. This was the delightful "An Orange Grove in California," during which the audience members were sprayed with orange scent.¹⁸

The comedic angle of the third revue certainly lived up to its predecessor though, with George S. Kaufman, who would later pen the side-splitting book to the Pulitzer-Prize winning musical *Of Thee I Sing* (1931), contributing to many of the sketches.¹⁹ There was also another opera parody. Berlin expanded the already-hysterical hit song, "Yes! We Have No

¹⁵ Bordman, *American Musical Theatre*, p. 374-5.

¹⁶ John Corbin, "The Play" *New York Times*, 12 September 1923, 14.

¹⁷ As quoted in an untitled advertisement, *New York Times*, 20 January 1924, X: 3.

¹⁸ Grace Moore, who had been training in France to become an opera singer when Berlin discovered her and convinced her to join his company, sang this particular number. Jablonski, p. 98.

¹⁹ *Of Thee I Sing* would eventually save the Music Box Theatre from going bankrupt during the Depression.

Bananas” (1923) written by Frank Silver and Irving Cohn, into a number billed as the “Opera Sextette,” by interpolating the melodies of operatic favorites within the song’s catchy chorus.

There's a fruit store on our street, It's run by a Greek; And he keeps good things to eat, But
 you should hear him speak. When you ask him a - ny-thing, ne - ver an - swers no,
 He just yes - es you to death, And as he takes your dough, he tells you: Yes! we have no ba -
 -na - nas! _____ We have no ba - na - nas to - day! _____ We've
 broad beans like bun-ions, ca - bah - ges and hun-ions, And all kind of fruit, and
 say, _____ We have an old fa - shioned to - mah - to, _____ A nice Jer - sey po - tah -
 -to, _____ But yes we have no ba - na - nas! We have no ba - na -
 -nas To - day! _____

Plate 4 Melody to “Yes, We Have No Bananas!” by Frank Silver and Irving Cohn

But with five opera medleys over the course of a decade, the concept was fast losing its novelty, and indeed, this would turn out to be his last opera medley. Comedy alone simply could not save this show, and Berlin soon felt the need to include his

recently-completed waltz, “What’ll I Do?” Sung by Grace Moore and John Steel, this gorgeous yet heart-wrenching ballad served as a testament to the enticing power of Berlin’s music, and it was primarily responsible for keeping the show afloat for so long.²⁰ The *Third Annual Music Box Revue* totaled a noteworthy 273 performances, although this was a significant downgrade from the first revue, and by the time the tours began, the question of whether or not to even put on a fourth revue was certainly in the minds of the theater owners. When Berlin and Harris turned the Music Box Theatre over to Earl Carroll and his *Vanities* in September 1924, a rumor was circulated among the press that Berlin’s series of revues was going to close after only three seasons. The rumor proved false, and the only reason the theater was temporarily rented out was that the duo needed more time to fix pre-production problems in the fourth revue. Since the show would not be able to open until at least the end of November, there was no reason to keep the theater dark for two months when the raunchy *Vanities* could generate some much-needed income.²¹

Many critics believed that the fourth revue was as good as the first one, if not better, although some noted that the format of the show was falling into similar patterns.²² Several songs were recycled from the earlier revues including “Behind the Fan,” “In the Shade of a Sheltering Tree,” “At the Court

²⁰ Bordman, *American Musical Revue*, p. 381.

²¹ Unknown author, “Dancing Mothers Has Novel Climax” *New York Times*, 12 August 1924, 12.

²² Unknown author, “Music Box Revue Filled With Beauty” *New York Times*, 2 February 1924, 23.

Around The Corner,” “Everybody Step,” “Legend of the Pearls,” and “My Little Book Of Poetry,” and while I have not found any programs or reviews to confirm this, according to New York Public Library records, they were all supposedly republished as having appeared in “Irving Berlin’s *Fourth Annual Music Box Revue*.” Of course, there were many original tunes as well, and one reviewer declared that “several of Mr. Berlin’s numbers, if not all of them, will be sweeping the land before long.”²³ Edward Miller remarked that the show contained “several numbers even more tuneful than you will ordinarily find at the Music Box,”²⁴ and Alexander Woollcott of the *Evening Sun* deemed the production a “masterpiece...[T]he best revue which these senses have experienced in ten years of playgoing on Broadway.”²⁵

Many of these glowing statements were given rather hastily though. Indeed, critical reception and popular reception seems to have differed most with regards to this revue, and Don Gillette may have been the only critic to actually have recognized this. He observed on opening night that the *Fourth Annual Music Box Revue* was “like a journey through Fairyland, and it has already revealed so many wonders that it may exhaust itself prematurely. That is the disadvantage of presenting something that can’t be bettered. Strangely enough, the *Music Box Revue* in all its glory did not elicit one round of real hearty

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Edward A. Miller, “Across Broadway Footlights,” *Official Metropolitan Guide*, 12 December 1924, 25.

²⁵ As quoted in an untitled advertisement, *New York Times*, 3 December 1924, 24.

applause on the occasion of this review.”²⁶ Heywood Broun also noticed an apparent lack of hit songs. While he thoroughly enjoyed “Tokio Blues,” he did not think that “this time there are many [tunes] which will be heard around the world.”²⁷

Favorites from the fourth revue included “Tell Her in the Springtime,” which was “worthy of inclusion in a popular opera” according to one reviewer,²⁸ and “In the Shade of a Sheltering Tree” which Gilbert Gabriel believed stood an excellent chance of soon “being on the piano racks from here to Honolulu.”²⁹ But the most frequently singled-out song from the opening night reviews was “The Call of the South,” with its interpolation and manipulation of the melody to “Way down upon the Sewanee River.”³⁰ Along with “Bandanna Ball,” “The Call of the South” comprised the memorable Finale to Act I, whereby, through a combination of make-up preparation and lighting effects, the all-white cast was able to change to blackface before the audience’s very eyes.³¹

²⁶ Don Carle Gillette, unknown article title, *Variety*, 2 December 1924. This quote seems to imply that revues would frequently change their song lineups.

²⁷ Heywood Broun, “At the Music Box Theatre: ‘The Music Box Revue,’” *New York World*, 2 December 1924.

²⁸ Unknown author, “Music Box Revue: Irving Berlin’s Fourth Production is Beautiful Show,” *New York Mirror*, 2 December 1924.

²⁹ Gilbert W. Gabriel, “The Music Box Revue: Fourth Annual Heaping of Scenic Splendors and Irving Berlin’s Coaxing Melodies,” *New York Telegram*, 2 December 1924, 24.

³⁰ E.W. Osborn, “Review of the *Music Box Revue*,” *Evening World*, 2 December 1924.

³¹ Fred MacIsaac, “Music Box Auspiciously Inaugurated,” unknown paper, 2 December 1924.

With fewer and fewer original songs about musical topics, the *de facto* theme of the series was giving way to dated minstrelsy conventions and other forms of lowbrow humor. It seemed almost as if Berlin and Harris had abandoned their artistic vision by the fourth revue. Responding to poor attendance, Berlin, for the second straight year, decided to add another ballad guaranteed to generate positive reception, the beautiful waltz, “All Alone.”³² “All Alone” certainly helped to draw in crowds, further proof of Berlin’s musical capabilities, but the fourth revue still signaled the death-knell of the series. It lasted 186 performances, continuing a progressively downward spiral ever since the highly successful premier of the original *Music Box Revue* in 1921. By 1925, Berlin had become convinced that putting on a revue was “considerably less lucrative than song writing and approximately fifty times as arduous,”³³ and this sentiment was shared by his fellow impresarios. By the mid-1920s, revues in general were becoming *passé*. George White was forced to discontinue the *Scandals* after the 1924 season, and while Ziegfeld continued to produce the *Follies* for a few more years, they were no longer the cash crop that they once were.³⁴

Talk of resurrecting the *Music Box Revues* went on for decades. There were rumors of a fifth revue planned for the spring of 1926, but these soon died

³² While “All Alone” was not originally intended to be featured in the fourth revue, shortly after it was written in 1924, it did appear in a Newark, New Jersey touring production of the third revue.

³³ Unknown author, “Gossip of the Rialto,” 19 April 1925, X:1.

³⁴ Jablonksi, p. 99.

down.³⁵ In 1935, it was reported that a whole new series of *Music Box Revues* would soon return to Broadway, but again, the plans seem to have been abandoned.³⁶ A new *Music Box Revue* was penned in 1938, yet never made it to stage, and in 1957, there was to be a televised *Music Box Spectacular* in the style of the old revues that would feature many of the original songs, but studio gatekeepers prevented its production.

Today, it is rare for a theater company to stage a complete performance of any single revue. More common are “greatest hits” versions of the show. For example, in April 2005 at the Longy School of Music in Boston, the American Classics troupe³⁷ made a compilation *Music Box Revue* that incorporated skits and songs from all four revues and used only a piano accompaniment. The problem is not that the individual shows are themselves dated; on the contrary, they are rather timeless. What is challenging is figuring out exactly how these numbers were all put together into one cohesive unit. The song lists that I have amassed represent the first steps in solving this problem. Still, it is impossible that a single performance contained all the songs in any one of the lists. There was mixing and matching, and adding and cutting, and the next task will involve

³⁵ Unknown author, “Harris to Produce Eleven New Plays” *New York Times*, 17 August 1925, 15

³⁶ Unknown author, “News of the Stage” *New York Times* 17 June 1935, 20

³⁷ American Classics mounts productions of musicals from the first half of the twentieth century. To hear the troupe’s interpretations of some of the *Music Box Revue* songs, please visit the following website: <<http://www.amclass.org/mbr.html>>

locating the many missing manuscripts that contain the storylines, dialogue, and precise location of the songs within each skit. In shows like these, there is no definitive *Urtext* because song order and song selection were constantly changing. I suspect that once we discover the necessary manuscripts and other documents indicating later script alterations, we will finally learn which songs were sung when and by whom. I am also sure that such material will provide titles to other lost musical gems.

At this point, there is certainly no excuse for the first revue not to be staged in its entirety. The original manuscript for the first *Music Box Revue* with rough orchestrations and dialogue has been located at the Library of Congress, and several libraries possess copies of the opening night program. Using both resources, a fairly-authentic performance could well be mounted and is definitely overdue. But much work still needs to be done in order to provide all four *Music Box Revues* with a proper and deserved place in American musical theater history. Berlin and Harris deserve recognition for their desire and successful attempt at being different, for their insistence on raising the intellectual level of the revue show as a genre, for essentially laying the groundwork for later revue shows that contained tighter storylines, and most importantly, for indirectly spawning the recent revival of the revue show format, now featuring works of a single composer (i.e. *Ain't Misbehavin'*, 1978, Fats Waller; *Crazy for You*, 1992, George Gershwin; *A Grand Night for Singing*, 1993, Rodgers and Hammerstein; *Smoky Joe's Café*, 1995, Lieber and Stoller; *Lennon*, 2005, John Lennon). The current trend of devoting a revue to a single

composer is not a recent phenomenon, as this paper made clear at the outset, and we have Irving Berlin and his artistic ambition to thank for this.

Appendix 1Songs featured in the *Music Box Revue 1921-1922*

Title (alternate titles)	Comments
At the Court Around the Corner	Not specifically written for the show; Published as a <i>Music Box Revue</i> song
Behind the Fan	Published as a <i>Music Box Revue</i> song
Dancing the Seasons Away (Dance Your Troubles Away; Dance of the Seasons)	
Dining Out	Also the name of an entire sketch that included “In a Cozy Kitchenette Apartment”
Eight Little Notes	From the manuscript; part of the “Opening Chorus” number
Everybody Step	Served as the Finale to Act I; Published as a <i>Music Box Revue</i> song
Fair Exchange (The Court Room)	From the manuscript
The Flipper and the Flapper	From the touring company production
I’m a Dumb-Bell (I’m a Dumbbell; I am a Dumbbell; I am a Dumbbell)	Published as a <i>Music Box Revue</i> song
In a Cozy Kitchenette Apartment	Published as a <i>Music Box Revue</i> song
The Irving Berlin Interview	An interview conducted in song by the “Eight Notes” (chorus girls); Contained a snippet of “All By Myself” (1921); Interview set up the Finale to Act II which recycled the more popular themes from throughout the

	evening
The Legend of the Pearls	Published as a <i>Music Box Revue</i> song
My Ben Ali Haggin Girl	
My Little Book of Poetry	Published as a <i>Music Box Revue</i> song
Opening Chorus	From the manuscript
A Play without a Bedroom	From the touring company production
Say It with Music	Served as the theme of the entire series; Published as a <i>Music Box Revue</i> song
The Schoolhouse Blues	Published as a <i>Music Box Revue</i> song
Tell Me with a Melody	From the manuscript; appeared in the London production
They Call It Dancing	Published as a <i>Music Box Revue</i> song
We Work While You Sleep	From the manuscript; part of the “Opening Chorus” number

Appendix 2

Songs featured in the *Music Box Revue 1922-1923*

Title (alternate titles)	Comments
Bring on the Pepper (Bring on the Red Pepper)	Published as a <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Crinoline Days	Published as a <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Dance Your Troubles Away	Was also featured in the first revue
Dancing Honeymoon (Take a Little Wife)	Published as a <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
I'm Looking for a Daddy Long Legs (Daddy Long Legs)	Published as a <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Lady of the Evening	Published as a <i>Second Annual</i>

	<i>Music Box Revue</i> song
The Little Red Lacquer Cage	Not specifically written for the show; Published as a <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Mont Martre (Montmartre)	Published as a <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
My Diamond Horseshoe of Girls (Diamond Horse-shoe)	Published as a <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> song; “Diamond Horseshoes” was the name of a song written by Billy Rose and Con Conrad; Berlin’s version from the show portrayed nine famous operatic heroines being burlesqued.
Pack Up Your Sins and Go to the Devil	Published as a <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Porcelain Maid	Published as a <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Three Cheers for the Red, White, and Blue	Published as a <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Too Many Boys	
Too Many Girls	May very well have contained the same music as “Too Many Boys”
Will She Come from the East? (Will She Come from the East, North, West, or South?)	Published as a <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> song

Appendix 3

Songs featured in the *Music Box Revue 1923-1924*

Title (alternate titles)	Comments
All Alone	From a touring production at the Schubert Theatre in Newark, NJ
Climbing Up the Scale	Published as a <i>Third Annual</i>

	<i>Music Box Revue</i> song
Dance	
Jazz No. (Jazz Number)	
Learn to Do the Strut	Published as a <i>Third Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Little Butterfly	Published as a <i>Third Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Maid of Mesh	Published as a <i>Third Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
One Girl	Published as a <i>Third Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Only a Rose	Lyrics by Brian Hooker and Music by Rudolph Friml; From the musical <i>The Vagabond King</i> (opening night: 21 September 1925); Found with the Library of Congress materials for the <i>Third Annual Music Box Revue</i>
An Orange Grove in California	Published as a <i>Third Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Song of the Vagabonds	Lyrics by Brian Hooker and Music by Rudolph Friml; From the musical <i>The Vagabond King</i> (opening night: 21 September 1925); Found with the Library of Congress materials for the <i>Third Annual Music Box Revue</i>
Tell Me a Bedtime Story	Published as a <i>Third Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Too Many Sweethearts	Not specifically written for the show
Venetian Isle	Published in 1925; Found with the Library of Congress materials for the <i>Third Annual Music Box Revue</i>

The Waltz of Long Ago	Found with the Library of Congress materials for the <i>Third Annual Music Box Revue</i> ; Version that appeared in the show featured an interpolation of Strauss's "Blue Danube" Waltz
What'll I Do?	Not specifically written for the show; Later interpolation; Published as a <i>Third Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
When You Walked Out (When You Walked Out Someone Else Walked Right In)	Not specifically written for the show
Yes! We Have No Bananas (Opera Parody; Opera Sextette; Bananas)	<p>"Yes! We Have No Bananas" was originally a song of musical nonsense written by Frank Silver and Irving Cohn. The title comes from the purported utterance of an actual Greek fruit-dealer. The song is an absurd mix of positive and negative statements; Berlin enlarged the song into an operatic parody that burlesqued the following arias:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) "Triumphal March" from <i>Aida</i> 2) "Chi Mi Frena?" from <i>Lucia di Lammermoor</i> 3) "Bella Figlia Dell'Amore" from <i>Rigoletto</i> 4) "Belle Nuit (O, Nuit D'Amore) from <i>Contes D'Hoffman</i> 5) "Ah Che La Morte Ognora" from <i>Il Trovatore</i> 6) "Anvil Chorus" from <i>Il Trovatore</i>

	7) “Hallelujah Chorus” from <i>Messiah</i> By and large, these were the same segments spoofed in the “Diamond Horseshoe” from the <i>Second Annual Music Box Revue</i> and a few were also ragged in the “Opera Medley” from Berlin’s first musical, <i>Watch Your Step</i> (1914)
Your Hat and My Hat	

Appendix 4

Songs featured in the *Music Box Revue* 1924-1925

Title (alternate titles)	Comments
Alice in Wonderland (Come Along with Alice)	Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
All Alone	Not specifically written for the show; Later interpolation; Did appear in a touring version of the third revue; Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
At the Court Around the Corner	Republished as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Bandana Ball (Bandanna Ball; Bandanna Roll; Grand Bandana Ball)	Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Behind the Fan	Republished as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
The Call of the South	Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song; Part of the Finale to Act I; Contained the special effect of changing the all-white cast into blackface before the audience’s very eyes

Come Back to Little Old New York (Come Back to Greenwich Village; Catskill Mountain Scene)	From the touring company productions at the Forrest Theatre and the Ohio Theatre; Perhaps an “answer song” to “Where Is My Little Old New York?”
A Couple of Senseless Censors	
Don't Send Me Back (Don't Send Me Back To Petrograd)	Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Don't Wait Too Long	From the touring company productions at the Forrest Theatre and the Ohio Theatre
Everybody Step	Republished as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
The Happy New Year Blues	Not specifically written for the show
I Want to Be a Ballet Dancer (I Want to Dance My Troubles Away; I Want to Jazz My Troubles Away)	
In the Shade of Sheltering Tree	Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
The Legend of the Pearls	Republished as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Listening	Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Moving Picture Baby	
My Little Book of Poetry	Republished as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Nature's Child	From the touring company productions at the Forrest Theatre and the Ohio Theatre
Polly from Hollywood (Polly of Hollywood)	From the touring company production at the Forrest Theatre; Compositional rights attributed to B.G. De Sylva and James F. Hanley;

	Published as having been introduced in <i>Irving Berlin's Fourth Annual Music Box Revue 1925</i>
Rock-a-Bye Baby	Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Russian Art	From the touring company productions at the Forrest Theatre and the Ohio Theatre
Sixteen, Sweet Sixteen	
Tell Her in the Springtime (Call Me in the Springtime; Tell Me in the Springtime)	Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Tokio Blues	Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Unlucky in Love	Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song
Where Is My Little Old New York?	Published as a <i>Fourth Annual Music Box Revue</i> song; Served as the Opener to Act I
Who	
Wildcats (Wild Cats)	

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http://www.irvingberlin.com/irving_berlin/

Abstract

Revue, a type of musical theater imported from France, were big business on Broadway during the first decades of the twentieth century. Florenz Ziegfeld popularized the exciting format in 1907, when he staged his first of what would be many annual *Follies*. Music contained in these *Follies* was essentially an amalgam of recent songs written by popular composers.

Irving Berlin, in fact, had been writing individual songs for Ziegfeld as early as 1916, and composed much of the music for the *Ziegfeld Follies of 1920*. Thus, by the time Berlin started penning his first *Music Box Revue* in 1921, he certainly felt comfortable working in the genre. Nevertheless, Berlin and co-owner Sam Harris made a concerted effort to differentiate their new revue from contemporaneous endeavors conducted by Ziegfeld, The Schubert Brothers, George White, and a host of other producers. By taking advantage of the intimate dimensions of the Music Box Theatre, deemphasizing the focus on nudity, and, most importantly, creating shows centered around music, Berlin and Harris succeeded in raising the caliber of the revue genre to a higher artistic level.