

NWCR557

Irving Berlin Songs

Performed by Francis Thorne



1. Top Hat, White Tie and Tails (2:15)
2. Remember (4:12)
3. This Year's Kisses (2:24)
4. Isn't This a Lovely Day (3:27)
5. Everybody Step (2:27)
6. Change Partners (4:58)
7. There's No Business Like Show Business (3:05)
8. When That Midnight Choo-choo Leaves
for Alabam' (3:31)
9. No Strings (3:24)
10. Slumming On Park Avenue (3:22)
11. Soft Lights and Sweet Music (3:25)
12. They Say It's Wonderful (3:10)
13. I'll See You in C-U-B-A (3:00)
14. Always (3:16)
15. How Deep Is the Ocean (4:00)
16. Society Bear (3:27)
17. I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket (2:44)
18. I Used To Be Color Blind (3:33)

Francis Thorne, piano and voice Jack Six, double bass

Total Playing Time: 60:49

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Notes

“The American Franz Schubert”—George Gershwin

“He is the best all-around, over-all song writer America has ever had”—Alec Wilder

The two earliest songs on the album date from 1912 and are characteristic of Berlin's absorption of the ragtime style of the period and its transformation into a vehicle for broad popular consumption. “When That Midnight Choo-choo Leaves for Alabam'” is a typical nostalgia-for-home ditty. “Society Bear” is a Lower East Side kid's vision of how the richest of the rich cavort at their social functions. It was a spin-off from a dance craze, the “Grizzly Bear,” in which couples were closely entwined in the then-trendy reaction to the more stately dances of the Edwardian period. Both of these numbers have a delightful period charm, and Jack Six and I tried to capture the ricky-tricky two-beat style of the era.

In a decidedly lyrical vein, Berlin composed “Always” to express his joy at falling in love with and marrying Ellin Mackay in the mid-1920s. The unexpected modulation up a major third in the second strain of the chorus has made this song a perennial favorite of jazz musicians. We have treated it as a jazz waltz.

One of Irving Berlin's outstanding achievements was his ability to translate a current event into a hit song. In 1920, in recognition of the onset of prohibition, he penned “I'll See You in C-U-B-A,” a delightfully suggested alternative to speakeasies under the newly-enacted “dry laws.”

When Rodgers and Hammerstein planned, as producers, to present a musical based on Annie Oakley, they brought Jerome Kern to New York from Hollywood to discuss the terms. Kern's sudden death during these 1945 negotiations

brought an immediate invitation to Irving Berlin to take over the assignment. Reportedly inhibited by the idea of replacing the composer he most considered his legitimate peer, he requested a week to consider. This week was spent in a hotel in Atlantic City in isolation. He returned with “They Say It's Wonderful” and “There's No Business Like Show Business” in his valise, and the rest is history. Incidentally, Ethel Merman, the star of *Annie Get Your Gun*, was often quoted as saying that Irving Berlin made a lady of her with the former song after her many years of roughhouse comedienne roles.

Two of Berlin's most delicately beautiful ballads are included. “Soft Lights and Sweet Music” from the political satire *Face the Music* of 1932, has a verse of incomparable loveliness. The final peroration in the chorus takes the melody from the lowest to the highest range of the song in one stunning arc. This song is a fine example of what can be achieved in 32 measures. The other, perhaps my favorite of all Berlin songs, is “How Deep Is the Ocean.” I remember buying the Paul Whiteman record of this song, vocal refrain by Jack Fulton, when I was ten years old. I love it as much today as I did then. I once used it as an example of the perfect coordination of harmonic structure and melodic simplicity in my Juilliard classes. An unusual feature of the song is that it is all in the form of a question, and yet it makes a very strong statement.

The first, and perhaps only, time a theater was built in America especially for a composer of popular songs occurred in 1921, with the Music Box Theatre. A now-legendary series of *Music Box Reviews* was presented, in the first of which appeared the dance number “Everybody Step,” a song which retains a flavor of ragtime and which is a real “swinger” in

this genre. My introduction to this song was through a Chick Webb Orchestra recording with Ella Fitzgerald in the 1930s. There was an Alice Faye musical movie in the late 1930s, *On the Avenue*, with a great Irving Berlin score. We have included both "This Year's Kisses" and "Slumming on Park Avenue" from this picture. Both tunes were popularized by big bands; the first by Benny Goodman and the second by Ray Noble.

During the middle 1930s, RKO Radio Pictures commissioned Berlin to write the first full, original score to be composed for the dance team of Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, *Top Hat*. All six songs in this film were hits, and three are included on this album: "No Strings," "Isn't This a Lovely Day," and "Top Hat, White Tie and Tails." The title song has long been considered the quintessential Astaire song, memorable for his shooting down, one by one, a line of chorus men with his cane and a series of tap paradiddles.

The film that immediately followed *Top Hat*, in 1936, was *Follow the Fleet*. I've chosen "I'm Putting All My Eggs in One Basket" from this show because it combines a medium swinging quality with a strong melody and an interesting harmonic progression in the release.

Berlin continued to write for Astaire and Rogers, and the 1938 film *Carefree* had two lovely, understated gems in its score. "Change Partners" is another tune that appeals to jazz musicians because of its sudden key change in the release, up a minor third. The sensitive and haunting "I Used to be Color Blind" has a tenderness in both words and music that typifies Berlin's endearing quality, the power and grace that can be derived from utter directness of expression.

Berlin has penned a series of slow waltzes that started in 1912 when he wrote "When I Lost You," an elegy for his first wife, who died of tuberculosis shortly after their honeymoon in Cuba. This is the first instance of Berlin eschewing the novelty song and reaching deep into his creative resources for a more expressive statement. I have included another perfect song in this genre, a mid-twenties beauty called "Remember." I wanted to perform this one unaccompanied because of its wistful sorrow, and made a conscious attempt to create the effect of a nocturne in words and accompaniment. The verse

is to be particularly observed inasmuch as it is not often performed and is almost a song in itself. The final line of the chorus, "you forgot to remember," still carries an emotional punch for me after well over fifty years of playing it.

Irving Berlin covers the broadest range of sentiments and styles of all the great American popular song innovators, from the most simple to the most sophisticated. Always his own lyricist, the marriage of words to music is seamless and convincing. As a troubadour of our century, Irving Berlin achieves immortality through impeccable craftsmanship and directness of expression, combined with an ear that has been attuned to his environment with breathtaking sensitivity. How could one disagree with Jerome Kern, who once said, "Irving Berlin is American music."

—Francis Thorne

Francis Thorne played jazz piano at Manhattan's Hickory House in the mid-1950s as a protégé of Duke Ellington. He also had extended engagements at Julius Monk's Upstairs at the Downstairs, Goldies New York and at Ruby's Cafe in Florence, Italy. After two years of private study with David Diamond, Thorne devoted his primary energies to writing concert music. He has been executive director of the Walter F. Naumburg Foundation, the Lenox Arts Center/Music Theatre Group and the American Composers Alliance. He was co-founder of the American Composers Orchestra, which he still serves as president. His compositions are featured on CRI216, 258, 397, 459, and 552. In addition to singing and playing the piano, Mr. Thorne made the arrangements for the performances on this recording. Also available on CRI is "Porter on My Mind," Thorne's recordings of songs by Cole Porter.

Bassist **Jack Six** has performed with the Dave Brubeck Quartet, the big bands of Tommy Dorsey, Woody Herman, Stan Kenton and Gerry Mulligan, as well as in his own Jack Six Orchestra. He also plays the piano and trumpet, and has arranged for many jazz groups and big bands. His television appearances have included the shows of Ed Sullivan, Merv Griffin, and Gary Moore. He has placed in the top ten of the International Downbeat Poll for bassists for ten years.

Production Notes

Produced by Carter Harman

Recorded at Greene Street Studio by Michael Riesman

Digitally re-mastered by Robert Wolff at Sony Music Studios, NYC.

All selections published by Irving Berlin Music Corp. (ASCAP)

Managing Director: Joseph R. Dalton.

Funding for this original recording was provided in part by generous donations from Peter R. Kermani and the Edward and Ethlyn A. Chase Fund, in Community Funds.

This compact disc was made possible through the generous support of Paul Underwood.