

## study guide

### contents

The Play

Meet Irving Berlin

Tin Pan Alley: A Hub  
of American  
Music

Artists of the Past

An American Timeline

## the play

As a piano with one sour note passes from owner to owner, it takes the audience on a musical journey through American history. Beginning in a music store at the turn of the 20th century, surviving two World Wars, and ending in the rehearsal hall of a summer stock theater company, the piano travels through 70 years of life, love, fear, identity and patriotism.

The piano's – and America's – story is told through the music of Irving Berlin. With such songs as "God Bless America," "There's No Business Like Show Business" and "White Christmas," *I Love a Piano* celebrates the music of a man who defined American music.

music and lyrics by Irving Berlin  
conceived and written by  
Ray Roderick and Michael Berkeley  
directed and choreographed by Ray Roderick  
January 29 through February 15, 2009  
at the Lincoln Theatre

# i love a piano

*"I love to hear somebody play  
Upon a piano  
A grand piano  
It simply carries me away."  
– "I Love a Piano," Irving Berlin*



# meet Irving Berlin



Irving Berlin is one of the most legendary songwriters in American history. Born on May 11, 1888, in current-day Belarus, Berlin immigrated with his Jewish family to the United States in 1893. After his father died in 1896, Berlin began working odd jobs on the streets of New York City. Eventually he became a singing waiter in a café in Chinatown. There, Berlin collaborated with a pianist and wrote the lyrics to his very first song.

Berlin had to teach himself to play the piano and never learned how to read music beyond a very basic level. However, Berlin composed over 800 published and 400 unpublished songs. He wrote 17 film **scores** and 21 Broadway scores, including *White Christmas* and *Annie Get Your Gun*.

His song "Alexander's Ragtime Band," written in 1911, launched his career as a star of Tin Pan Alley (see article). Some of Berlin's most famous songs include "God Bless America," "White Christmas," "Anything You Can Do" and "There's No Business Like Show Business."

Berlin died on September 22, 1989, at the age of 101.

**score** – the music for a movie or theatrical production

# Quick Fact

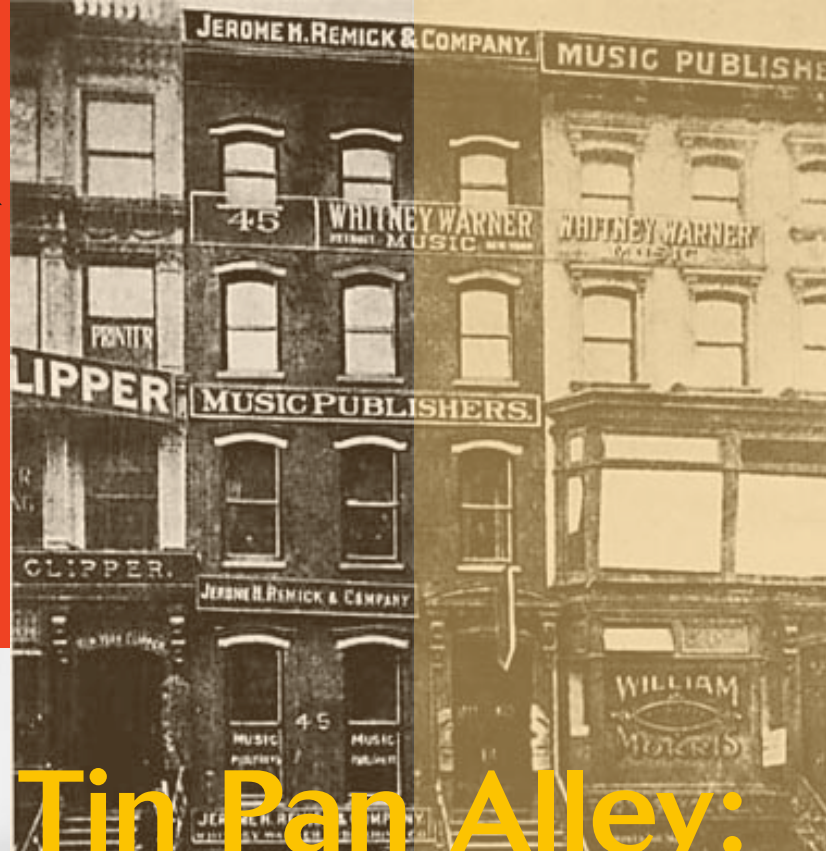
Irving Berlin's real name was Israel Beilin. His first song was mistakenly credited to "I. Berlin." He did not like his real name for a songwriter, so he kept the new name.



Smithsonian Institution Collections, National Museum of American History, Behring Center

Irving Berlin's piano (pictured) is on display in the Smithsonian at the National Museum of American History. This upright transposing piano was made in 1940 by Weser Brothers, New York, for Irving Berlin (1888-1989). Like many Tin Pan Alley pianists, Berlin was self-taught, preferring to play on the black keys. "The key of C," he once said, "is for people who study music." The transposing mechanism shifted the keyboard to allow him to stay on the black keys but produce music in other keys.

**a!** **Activity:** Irving Berlin's music characterized America in his time. What music, in style and content, depicts life in modern America? Compile a list of songs and artists that paint a picture of American life today.



## Tin Pan Alley: A Hub of American Music

Tin Pan Alley was a group of five row houses in New York City where music publishers and songwriters set up shop from the 1890s through the 1950s. It was considered the heart of the American songwriting industry.

While the origins of the name "Tin Pan Alley" are unclear, one popular theory holds that it was a negative reference to the sound of many pianos playing different tunes in a very small area, making a noise similar to many tin pans being beat on at the same time.

Tin Pan Alley started as a home for executives, music publishers and songwriters (including Irving Berlin) but evolved into a place for performers as well. Song hawkers — pianists and singers who made their living by demonstrating songs to promote the sale of sheet music — also took up shop in Tin Pan Alley.

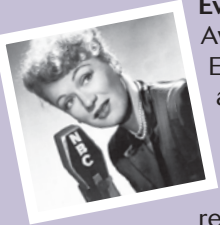
## The Fate of Tin Pan Alley

The historic buildings that composed Tin Pan Alley were put up for sale in October 2008. Preservationists fear the buildings could be demolished to make way for condos.

**a!** **Activity** – *I Love a Piano* is a celebration and preservation of musical and American history. Think about your city. What parts of your city and culture should be preserved for future generations? Write a letter to your future grandchild describing why they should consider these things national treasures.

# artists of the past

In the same way *I Love a Piano* is a timeline of American history, it is also a scrapbook of famous American entertainers.



**Eve Arden**, an Academy Award-nominated and Emmy-winning actress, appeared on Broadway, in films, and on television in a career that spanned almost 60 years. She is remembered for her dry and sardonic wit, glamorous sophistication and comic timing.



**June Allison** often appeared in musical comedy roles and is remembered for her fresh-faced optimism, pageboy haircut and girl-next-door image, and bold yet honest comments.



**Judy Garland**, the legendary actress and singer, starred in over 25 films, such as *The Wizard of Oz* and *Judgment at Nuremberg*.



**Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers** are the greatest dance duo in the history of American movies. Their dance partnership lasted for six years and nine films between 1933 and 1939, and they reunited ten years later to do a tenth and final film together. Their dances, choreographed principally by Astaire, combined dance movements from ballroom dancing, vaudeville, soft shoe, tap dancing and ballet. Irving Berlin wrote the music for three of their films: *Top Hat* (1935), *Follow the Fleet* (1936) and *Carefree* (1938).

## An American Timeline

Through song and dance, *I Love a Piano* presents significant moments in American history. It also depicts the changes in dance, fashion, language and values over time. Find a more complete timeline at "Sub/Text: Your Virtual Dramaturg" on the Arena Stage website.

### The Roaring '20s



The Roaring '20s describes the financial prosperity, cultural and technological advancements, and carefree spirit in the United States from 1920 to 1929. Mass production launched massive consumerism, including the purchase of over 15 million of Henry Ford's Model T cars. Writers like F. Scott Fitzgerald and Ernest Hemingway and musicians like Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong created some of their greatest work.

Radios, dance music and movies were wildly popular, and young people enjoyed more social freedom than ever before.

### Prohibition & Speakeasies



Between 1920 and 1933, the sale, manufacture and transportation of alcohol were nationally banned by the 18th Amendment to the Constitution. This was called Prohibition. Though Americans had varied opinions on Prohibition, the 18th Amendment passed largely because of the prominence and popularity of moral and political temperance groups. Temperance groups, which had a strong female membership, argued that people should abstain from things that were harmful. Because of the correlation between alcohol consumption and domestic violence, and the financial strain that alcohol could put on working class households, moral temperance groups saw alcohol as an evil that should be abolished in society.

Many found their way around this restriction at local speakeasies. A speakeasy was a place that sold alcohol in secret during Prohibition. The term originates from how bartenders told their patrons to behave when ordering alcohol; to avoid arousing suspicion, customers were told to "speak easy." Speakeasies often covered their alcohol business with elaborate acts/novelties, including food and live music. Prohibition ended when the 21st Amendment, which repealed the 18th Amendment, was ratified on December 3, 1933.

continued on back...

## The Great Depression



and went without basic necessities.

The 1930s were a period of great uncertainty in the United States. Most of the turmoil stemmed from the stock market crash and ensuing economic crisis America faced, which we now call the Great Depression. Between 1929 and 1932, the average family's annual income dropped 40 percent: from \$2,300 to \$1,500. Many people were unemployed

## World War II



World War II was a time of great patriotism in America. Young men enlisted in the armed services, fighting in the Pacific and Europe. Those on the home front (at home) supported the war effort by raising money and conserving important materials – like metal, gasoline and sugar – through **rationing**. Some women went to work in factories, keeping the country running. Others entertained the troops and kept spirits up by performing in **USO shows**.

**ration** – to restrict the amount people can have of an item that is in short supply  
**USO show** - free, live entertainment, often by celebrities, for America's Armed Forces; sponsored by United Service Organizations

## "God Bless America"

With the world on the brink of war in 1938, Irving Berlin revised and released his patriotic song "God Bless America." Berlin did not accept any royalties (payment) for this song, which became known as the unofficial national anthem.

*"A patriotic song is an emotion and you must not embarrass an audience with it or they will hate your guts."* – Irving Berlin

## Additional Resources

### Books

*Irving Berlin: A Daughter's Memoir* by Mary Ellen Barrett & Irving Berlin

### Music

*Irving Berlin 100th Anniversary Collection*

### Multimedia

*Biography – Irving Berlin: An American Song* – A&E DVD Archives

*Annie Get Your Gun* – Warner Home Video

*White Christmas* – Paramount

*Top Hat* – Turner Home Entertainment

### Museums

Irving Berlin artifacts can be found at:

The National Museum of American History

The Library of Congress

## Sub/Text

For links and research related to Arena Stage productions, compiled by Arena Stage **dramaturgs**, please visit **Sub/Text: Your Virtual Dramaturg** at [www.arenastage.org/season/08-09/sub-text/](http://www.arenastage.org/season/08-09/sub-text/).

**dramaturg**– a theater specialist who does research for productions and represents the intentions of the playwright

## Helpful Hints for Theater Audiences

As an audience member at the theater, YOU are part of the show! Just as you see and hear the actors onstage, they can see and hear you in the audience. To help the performers do their best, please remember the following:

Arrive at least 30 minutes early.

Visit the restroom before the show starts.

Before the show begins, turn off your cell phone, watch alarms, pagers, and other electronic devices. If anything rings by accident, shut it off immediately.

Save food and drinks for the lobby. There is no eating or drinking inside the theater.

Walk to and from your seat - no running in the theater!

Do not talk, whisper, sing, or hum.

Keep your feet on the floor, not on the seat in front of you.

Avoid getting up during a show because it distracts your neighbors and the performers. If you must leave, wait for a scene change, then exit quietly and quickly.

Performers appreciate enthusiastic applause rather than whistling or shouting.

Cameras and videotape are prohibited because they are distracting to the performers.

**Enjoy the show!**



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Visit [www.arenastage.org](http://www.arenastage.org) for more information on Arena Stage productions and educational opportunities.