Gene Lees
Jazzletter

P.O. Box 240
Ojai, Calif.
93024-0240

August 1993 Vol. 12 No. 8

Salute to a Squirrel

I wrote my first tentative lyrics when I was about twenty-two, gradually getting more serious about this work, though nothing of mine was recorded until I was thirty-four. I have written and analyzed songs during all that time, but only recently did I suddenly grasp what it is that a song does to us.

Slow-motion cinematography retards an action to the point where you can examine what otherwise you cannot see, whether the patterns a stone makes falling into water or the movements of a hummingbird's wing. In movies, this can be used to heighten emotional effect, whether a love scene or a stabbing. The pornographers of violence, indeed, having discovered the principle — probably derived from Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch,* in which I believe it was first employed — use it so much that it has become a cliche.

A song slows an emotional event in such a way that you experience it far more deeply than you could at the speed of speech. Much of the emotion is coming from the music, but nonetheless the words are given heightened and powerful effect by coming to you very slowly. If the words and music have a comparable depth, the effect can be profoundly moving. In a scene in *The Russia House,* Sean Connery says to Michel Pfeiffer: "You're my only country now." Imagine how much more powerful it would be if it were in a song. I adore the short stories of the British writer V.S. Pritchett, which manage to be tender without being saccharine and endlessly surprising without being mannered. But Alan and Marilyn Bergman in *Where Do You Start?* and Dave Frishberg in *You Are There* (music by Johnny Mandel in both cases) achieve the same sort of effect Pritchett does and do it in about one minute. It is an act of the imagination to write such a song; it is also an act of the imagination to hear it receptively: and lofted by the music, the emotional effect is overwhelming.

But the composers, as Johnny Mercer well recognized, not without bitterness, always get the credit; the lyricist is overlooked. Stephen Sondheim's name was little known when he was "only" the lyricist of *West Side Story.* His name had no public recognition until he became reputed as a composer.

Lyricists relish a story about Dorothy Hammerstein, the wife of Oscar Hammerstein II. Supposedly somebody at a formal dinner said something about Richard Rodgers writing *Some Enchanted Evening,* prompting Mrs. Hammerstein to say sweetly, "Oh no. Mr. Rodgers didn't write *Some Enchanted Evening.* Mr. Rodgers," she said, singing the phrase, "wrote dum-de-dum-de-dum-dee. My husband wrote *Some Enchanted Evening.*" Other versions of the story have it that the song in question was *Old Man River,* which Hammerstein wrote with Jerome Kern. Neither Kern nor Rodgers was famous for graciousness to the lyricists without whom they would have been nothing.

That is a further humiliation with which the lyricist abides: his relegation by the composer to a lower station. "You're right about that," Peggy Lee, herself an excellent lyricist, said to me recently. "I never thought about it. How is it that whenever I show a lyric to a composer, I always feel as if I'm auditioning?"

This is because composers always believe they know more about words — they can talk, can't they? — than lyricists do about music. They're wrong. Good lyricists know, whether by learning or intuition or both, a lot more about music than composers do about lyrics. They hear the words in music better than composers hear the music in words. Yip Harburg, Ira Gershwin, Larry Hart, Alan Jay Lerner, and Johnny Mercer were adamant about wanting the music written first. Even Cole Porter, who wrote words and music, would find his title, develop the music out of it, then finish the lyric.

If you write lyrics first (Alec Wilder was always trying to get me to do that, which is why Alec and I never wrote a song together), you find that your composer doesn't really know how to set them to strong emotional effect. He will solve the problem by resorting to something resembling recitativo. The melodies will not soar and sing. Knowing how inept composers usually are at analyzing the rhythms and inflections of language, I have even resorted to writing them in musical notation on score paper. It still didn't work. Furthermore, I was put in the uncomfortable position of not wanting to tell the composer his work just wouldn't do. Mercer tried working that way a few times. "I lost some good lyrics that way," he told me. Yip Harburg told a mutual friend, Larry Orenstein, that whenever he tried writing lyrics first, they came out kind of corny. The reason is simple: you must set up a pattern of some kind to match the second eight with the first eight. You will end up writing metric poetry at best, doggerel at worst.

There have been occasional exceptions among composers. Alan Jay Lerner tried to write a musical with Richard Rodgers, but Rodgers' notorious impatience with lyricists exploded when Alan would get hung up on a lyric. He and Lerner parted in rancor with vague mutterings about a law suit, though it never materialized. Rodgers went on to write a musical with his own undistinguished lyrics, proving beyond refutation that Larry Hart and Oscar Hammerstein knew much more about music than he did about lyrics. So did Alan Lerner, himself a pianist and, when he occasionally chose to show it, a quite good singer.

After the collapse of the relationship with Rodgers, Lerner approached the inventive and lyrical Burton Lane about working with him on the project. The result was *On a Clear Day You Can See Forever,* a bad musical (and worse movie) that nonetheless contained some good songs. Lane told me that there was only one lyric he liked from those Alan had written when he was working with Rodgers. He set it to music. The result is that marvelous song *Come Back to Me.* So there are occasional exceptions. Very occasional. (If you listen to a lot of the talky songs of Edith Piaf, you know the words were written first, which is why the melodies are so bad.)

If Burton Lane is too often overlooked, it surely is in part because of a prickly temperament that at times caused tension

not only with Lerner (and Lerner was himself no minor generator of tension) but with the easy-going Yip Harburg as well. (He was notorious for being late.)

Back in the 1960s, when I was living in New York, I was asked by the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation to do a series of radio documentaries on various songwriters I admired. Some of them, of course, were already gone, but I did do interviews with a number of those who were still available. One of these was Mitchell Parish, whose body of work, while small, contains one of the most breath-taking lyrics in the English language, *Stardust*. What a piece of writing that is! The aesthetic application of Gresham's law was already at work, and rock and roll was taking over, turning its listeners into an a-historical generation. Parish was outraged by it. I wanted to talk about his youth in New York City, about his associations with such composers as Hoagy Carmichael. I wanted to hear his reminiscences about walking around Tin Pan Alley on a summer day when the music then being born was coming out the open windows. He kept returning to his anger.

I interviewed Arthur Schwartz, an elegant man and one of the most elegant composers of that whole glorious era, and Harry Warren.

I interviewed Johnny Mercer, of course. If Yip Harburg was, as he said, his mentor, Johnny certainly was one of mine, and a few years before had become a good friend. We always talked about lyrics. Johnny urged me to do a broadcast on Harold Arlen. I told him I didn't know Arlen, and had heard that he lived in melancholy and seclusion after the death of his wife, Anya. Johnny said that was just the reason he wanted me to interview him: he thought it would be good for Arlen to come out of his isolation to talk to me. He called Harold and I spent several hours with him in his apartment on Central Park West. The tape of that interview, and the show I edited out of it, have long since been lost: the CBC is careless about its archives.

Arlen or Mercer suggested that I interview Yip Harburg, who lived a few blocks up Central Park West from Harold. One or the other called him, and I spent time with him, too. And the tape of that interview is also lost. Although he didn't whimper about it, Harburg suffered, like other lyricists, from being overlooked. His name was known only to nuts like me who were mad about lyrics and knew how good he was.

In a 1970 history called *Broadway*, the critic Brooks Atkinson wrote, "Harold Arlen's *Bloomer Girl*, full of comedy and nostalgia, and Burton Lane's *Finian's Rainbow*, full of political satire and comic caprice, helped to redeem Broadway from drudgery."

Both shows were essentially Harburg's, as his son Ernie, a social psychologist and epidemiologist at the University of Michigan, points out in a new book called *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz: Yip Harburg, Lyricist* (University of Michigan Press, 1993). The book is co-written with Harold Meyerson, who is executive editor and political columnist for the L.A. Weekly. "With," they write, "all due respect for the prodigious musical achievements of Arlen and Lane, Atkinson's assessment refers largely to Yip, who not only coauthored *Finian*'s book (with Fred Saidy) but directed *Bloomer Girl*, and for *both* shows conceived the theme, wrote the lyrics, provided the politics, the satire, the caprice, the comedy, and was their guiding spirit. Indeed . . . Yip was, after Oscar Hammerstein II one of the key figures in the transformation of the Broadway musical revues into the musical plays of the '40s and '50s and thereafter."

Harburg helped initiate the Lyrics and Lyricists series, in which lyricists talk about their craft, at the 92nd Street YMHA in New York City, and in 1980 was its first featured speaker. He asked: "Why the anonymity of the lyricist as against the recognition of the composer?" and then examined what he called "the genesis of this small injustice."

Harburg clearly believed, as I do, that music preceded speech. I have noticed, both in languages I understand and languages I don't, that certain intervals are common to them, falling thirds and fourths, the first inversion of the major triad (a rising sixth falling a major third to the tonic has a peculiarly playful quality and turns up in children's songs), all of them conveying emotion: resignation, anger, amusement, caution. The melodies of laughter and anger are international, which is one reason I have never been able to accept serialism. I think music has inherent, not conditioned, emotional content.

Harburg continued, "It was eons before man . . . began to invent language. Man could growl and grunt and groan, yodel and sing. When he dragged his Neanderthal bride over the threshold of his cave his larynx was able to warble a cadenza of joy long before he could say, 'Baby, it's cold outside.' This perhaps explains why people today can hum a tune, but can't remember the words.

"Music, which is an extension of our emotions, comes naturally. It is the vested interest of the heart, a very ancient organ. The word must be worked at and memorized, for it is the vested interest of the frontal lobe, a rather recent development . . . .

"(The) magic in song happens only when the words give destination and meaning to the music and the music gives wings to the words. Together as a song they go places you've never been before.

"The reason is obvious — words make you think thoughts. Music makes you feel a feeling. But a song can make you feel a thought. That's the great advantage. To feel the thought. You rarely feel a thought with just dialogue itself. And that's why song is the most powerful weapon there is. It's poignant and you can teach more through song and you can rouse more through song than all the prose in the world or all the poems.

"Songs have been the not-so-secret weapon behind every

fight for freedom, every struggle against injustice and bigotry: *The Marseillaise, The Battle Hymn of the Republic, We Shall Overcome*, and many more. Give me the makers of the songs of a nation and I care not who makes the laws."

Aside from the fact that it doesn't fully make sense, that last sentence is a paraphrased plagiarism. Perhaps Harburg wasn't able to trace it to the source. The exact quote, which I spent a great deal of time tracking down, is: "Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who makes its laws." It is from an essay on government published in 1703 by the Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher. Harburg might have commented, as I have, that rock-and-roll was the primary cause of the drug epidemic in which America is now drowning. But Harburg did know the darker implications of the power of song, for he said in that lecture:

"A song can degrade your culture; debase your language. It can pollute your air and poison your tastes or it can clear your thoughts, refurbish your spirit. It is the pulse of a nation's heart. A fever chart of its health . . . .

"I do not wish to intimate that the lyric writer is a more evolved creator than the composer. The composer is merely luckier; he works in a medium in which the appeal is directly to the emotions. The lyric writer must hurdle the mind to reach the heart." Or as I have said, he must implant a thought that instantly arouses an emotion. He doesn't so much hurdle the mind, which implies its circumvention, as use it to cause feeling. But the thought in words must be understood if it is to move the emotions; music does it directly. What they have in common is that they are, unlike architecture and painting and sculpture, temporal and incorporeal arts. They occur in time and are instantly gone, leaving eddies of emotion and thought behind.

"The greatest romance in the life of a lyricist is when the right words meet the right notes," Harburg said at the YMHA. "Maria Aeons, the celebrated soprano, was warned by her father, the great Garcia, for whom Mozart wrote the part of Don Juan, that you cannot sing a lie and stay on pitch. I almost believe this."

Harburg's crowning achievement was the movie *The Wizard of Oz*, but among the hundreds of millions of people who know its songs, few realize that its lyrics are by Harburg. Ironically, several MGM executives tried to delete *Over the Rainbow*, its finest song and one of the best-loved of all songs.

The Meyerson-Harburg book makes note that Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein II, Howard Dietz, Harry Ruby, and Irving Caesar were all born in New York City to Jewish parents in 1895 and '96. Composer Jay Gorney, Yip's first collaborator, was also born in 1896, but in Bialystok, Russia, though his family moved to Detroit when he was ten. He graduated from the University of Michigan in 1917. George Gershwin was born in New York just a little later: in 1898. Hart, Hammerstein, and Dietz all went to Columbia College. So did Richard Rodgers, born in New York in 1902, and Arthur Schwartz, also born in New York.

Meyerson and Harburg write that what they call the class of '95-'96, in company with a few others, invented and set the standards of lyrics in what came to be considered an original American art form, the musical comedy. The hypothesis holds if the list is expanded to include a few persons born a little later and not necessarily in New York: Dorothy Fields, whom I consider a major lyricist, was born in New Jersey in 1905. Cole Porter was born in Peru, Indiana, a little earlier than that distinguished group: 1891. Frank Loesser, eventually a composer as well as an outstanding lyricist, was born in New York in 1910. Johnny Mercer was born in Savannah, Georgia, in 1909, and in any case, did much of his best work for movies, not Broadway. Johnny always felt that his seven Broadway musicals were not really successful.

The hypothesis that the musical is an original American art form is dubious: the lineage goes back to European operetta and far beyond that to Greek drama. "We all," Mercer used to say, meaning the American lyricists, "come from Gilbert." The only truly American art form is jazz, and that too has roots elsewhere. But that a small group of Jewish males born in the same city in a twenty-four-month span, along with a few others including Mercer and Porter and one woman, Dorothy Fields, created the most brilliant body of lyrics in the history of the English language is indisputable. There is nothing in England to compare to it.

Irving Berlin, a major figure of American music, was born in Russia. Meyerson and Harburg note that his work, in the early years, "was New York to the core, but it was not yet theater song — defining, instead, the upper limit of what vaudeville and revue could do." Berlin learned to write for theater but was never adept at it. He was a creature of Tin Pan Alley more than a theater man. The major formative figure was Larry Hart. Hammerstein and Harburg rank close to him in influence.

Harburg was a polemical lyricist, building songs and musicals around his deeply felt liberalism. He early aroused the ire of Republicans with his song *Brother Can You Spare a Dime?*, which he said some of them tried to get barred from radio. It was too late: the song was a hit and doubtless contributed at least in a small way to the first election of F.D.R.

He was born Irwin Hochberg April 8, 1896, on the Lower East Side, the youngest of his parents' four living children; six others died. His parents worked in a garment sweatshop, as did so many other immigrant Jews. I remember Yip telling me that the Gershwins were not poor. He said, "At least they could afford a piano. I remember the day they hauled it up the face of their building." I daresay it was Yip who first made me realize that the rags-to-Broadway-riches myth is nonsense. Berlin too was born poor, but every other major Broadway composer and

lyricist of that era was born at least to comfort and most of them to wealth. Excepting Mercer, all of them were college educated, including Harburg.

Cole Porter was educated at Yale, inherited millions, and married millions more. Lorenz Hart's home always had servants, and he was educated at Weingart's Institute and the Columbia Grammar School, after which he went to Columbia College, where he met Richard Rodgers, the son of a physician and a wealthy mother. Hart spoke German and began his career translating German operettas. Arthur Schwartz was the son of a lawyer and graduated Phi Beta Kappa from New York University with a B.A. and LL.D. Then he took a master's degree at Columbia and practiced law for several years. Like Harburg and Cole Porter, he didn't take up professional songwriting until his late twenties. Jerome Kern, the son of a wealthy businessman, was educated at the New York College of Music and in Germany at the Heidelberg Conservatory. Oscar Hammerstein II came from a wealthy theatrical family. Vernon Duke, one of Harburg's collaborators, was born in Russia, a direct descendant of the kings of Georgia. He was trained at the Kiev Conservatory. Lyricist John LaTouche was educated at the Richmond Academy of Arts and Sciences, and he too went to Columbia College. Lyricist Harold Rome graduated from the Yale University school of architecture. Vincent Youmans' father was a wealthy hatter. Youmans had a private school education and then graduated from the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale. Hoagy Carmichael held a law degree from Indiana University. Mercer was born wealthy, though his father lost his money in the 1929 crash. Alan Jay Lerner was from the family that founded the Lerner stores and he went to Choate with John F. Kennedy and then Harvard. Dorothy Fields was the daughter of the celebrated comedian Lew Fields and had all the theatrical doors open to her. Composer Burton Lane, with whom Yip wrote *Finian's Rainbow*, was the son of a successful New York real estate man. Lyricist Harold Adamson attended the University of Kansas and Harvard. Harold Arlen may not have been born wealthy, but his father was a famous cantor.

The Broadway musical theater has always been the plaything of the rich. Its songs are of the rich, by the rich, and for the rich. That Harburg alone in his crowd was not born to comfort goes far to explain his compassion for the common man and the deep difference between his work and that of every other Broadway lyricist. Alan Jay Lerner's occasional attempts to write musicals of social conscience, including the one he did with Kurt Weill, the abortive *Love Life* (1948), are awkward and embarrassing: Lerner knew nothing of poverty or poor people, being a consummate snob, for all his affectations of social conscience. I think the superficiality of Lerner's liberalism could be seen in an incident that occurred in a taxi that was reported in Leonard Lyons' column in 1959. Since Lerner himself was the only possible source of the story, he was obviously proud of it. When a cab driver disputed the route they should take, he said to Lerner, "I'm as good as you." Lerner said, "No, you're not. I'm younger, more talented, more successful, fulfilling greater responsibilities. Go up Park." That alone suggests why Lerner was unable to bring off *Love Life*.

Harburg's shows have a bite and urgency that Lerner could not attain and the others on Broadway never even aspired to. Consider Porter's *You're the Top, I Get a Kick Out of You, You're Sensational, Miss Otis Regrets, Anything Goes*, and *Why Shouldn't I?*, to *Harburg's Happiness Is Just a Thing Called Joe*, written for the movie *Cabin in the Sky*. "Although the cabin's gloomy and the table's bare . . . " Cole Porter could never even have imagined such a line, nor any of the lines in *Brother Can You Spare a Dime* and *The Eagle and Me*. His *Down in the Depths (on the Ninetieth Floor)* contains the line, if I can recall it correctly, "even the janitor's wife has a perfectly good love life." Note that "even the janitor's wife . . . . " That tells you what his social attitudes were. Compare it to Lerner's quip to the cab driver.

A statement Yip made years later suggests that he met Ira Gershwin when they were both attending Townsend Harris Hall, which combined high school and college. But Edward Jablonski, in *Happy with the Blues*, his biography of Harold Arlen (Doubleday, New York, 1961), says "Attending Townsend Harris Hall at the same time was Ira Gershwin, a neighborhood friend," which suggests they already knew each other. That is the impression I garnered from Yip in his reminiscence about watching the piano go up the face of their building. In any event, Yip and Ira remained friends for life. They wrote for their high school paper and, at City College of New York, started a column in the campus paper, and studied classical verse forms. Ira dropped out of CCNY, but Yip stayed, desperately wanting the security of a degree. That parting of the ways is more than a little symbolic of what separated him from all other Broadway lyricists. Graduating from CCNY in 1917, he took a job as a manager for the Swift meat-packing people in Uruguay, staying there two years. On returning to New York, backed by money from a friend, he went into the electrical appliance business. He liked writing light verse but never gave a thought to making a living from it. He couldn't take the chance. If he failed, there was no mattress of money for him to fall on.

I heard all sorts of stories about where he got the name Yip. Since he was often called Yipper, it was suggested that the name evoked a terrier quality in his personality. I saw no such quality in him; he was a gentle sort of man, warm and accessible, with a genuine interest in the people he met. According to Edward Jablonski and others, the name was derived from the Yiddish word *yipsl*, meaning squirrel. When Yip married a Boston girl named Alice Richmond, he changed his name from Irwin Hochberg to Edgar Y. Harburg. The Y was for Yip, and from then on it was his real name, not a nickname.

By October 1929 he was worth about a quarter of a million dollars, a substantial fortune at the time. Very soon he was broke, his business destroyed by the crash. He was deeply in debt. Yip told me, and told many other people too, that he had mixed feelings about the Depression: he was horrified by it. But it gave him freedom. It got him out of business.

There are two versions of how Yip began writing songs with his first partner, Jay Gorney. Edward Jablonski wrote in *Happy with the Blues* that Gorney had read some of Yip's light verse in Franklin P. Adams' *Conning Tower* column. Yip, however, said he talked to his friend Ira Gershwin about his desire to try his hand at song lyrics, and Ira recommended that he team up with Gorney. Possibly both stories are true. Gorney had been writing songs with the brilliant Howard Dietz. But Dietz had just formed a partnership with Arthur Schwartz, a relationship that would produce *Dancing in the Dark, High and Low, I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan, Something to Remember You By, New Sun in the Sky, I Love Louisa, Louisiana Hayride, A Shine on Your Shoes, If There Is Someone Lovelier than You, You and the Night and the Music, By Myself, Haunted Heart, Triplets*, and *Poor Little Rhode Island* — not to mention *Smokin' Reefers*.

Johnny Green and Harburg got a hit song: *I'm Yours*. Then in 1932, in the depths of the Depression, Gorney and Harburg wrote a show called *Americana* whose theme was the Forgotten Man, the working man, the immigrants who had believed in the American dream only to see it betrayed by runaway capitalism. For that show, in that age when young men shuttled back and forth across the country on freight trains and once-proud men stood on street corners with outstretched hands, they wrote a song that would haunt America then and for a long time afterwards. Its lines are still chilling:

Once I built a railroad,
Made it run,
Made it race against time.
Once I built a railroad;
Now it's done.
Brother, can you spare a dime?

Yip's next partner was the aristocratic Vernon Duke, with whom he wrote *April in Paris, What Is There to Say?*, and *I Like the Likes of You*. In 1933, he wrote *It's Only a Paper Moon* with Harold Arlen, beginning one of the most important professional relationships of his life. They would write *Fun to Be Fooled, You're a Builder Upper, Let's Take a Walk Around the Block, Last Night When We Were Young*, and *Down with Love*.

But the Depression was drying up the musicals of Broadway. Its best lyricists and composers were being lured out to Hollywood to write for the movies, among them Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, Harry Warren, the Gershwins, Jerome Kern, and Arlen and Harburg. Under a year's contract to Warner Bros. Harold and Yip wrote songs for three films, none of them particularly memorable.

Then came *The Wizard of Oz* at MGM. Yip proved to have a talent for fantasy, and the project was perfect for him. He was given a great deal of latitude and authority by the film's producer, Arthur Freed, who was responsible for some of the finest musicals MGM ever made, including, later on, *An American in Paris* and *Singin' in the Rain*. *The Wizard of Oz* is the first great integrated film musical, and Harburg was responsible for its unity, since he wrote (without screen credit) the dialogue that fits the songs so beautifully into the picture. *Over the Rainbow* may be his greatest lyric, but the whole score, music and lyrics equally, is a stunning piece of work. I was eleven when I saw it for the first time, in the fall of 1939. I was in Grade Eight. I began memorizing its lyrics immediately. I know them in whole or in part to this day. Such is the power of song.

The early days of World War II saw a change in Yip's personal life. Jay Gorney and his wife Edelaine were divorced. Yip married Edelaine, known to friends as Eddy. He would spend the rest of his life with her, and raise Jay Gorney's son Rod. If there was any sort of strain between Yip and Gorney at the time, it faded, for they wrote together again later.

After *The Wizard of Oz*, Yip returned to Broadway to write a show with Burton Lane, a vehicle for Al Jolson that included *There's a Great Day Coming Manana*, another of his satiric political commentaries. He wrote a musical film called *Cairo* with Arthur Schwartz and, with Jerome Kern, a Deanna Durbin film called *Can't Help Singing*. He and Harold Arlen worked on *Cabin in the Sky*, a film with an all-black cast that seemed to round up every black performer Hollywood could find, from Duke Ellington to Rex Ingram, Mantan Moreland, and Steppin Fetchit. The movie industry had nowhere near the pool of great black actors that it does today, and many of the performances are embarrassing. But nothing is as embarrassing as the script, with Eddie (Rochester) Anderson as a ne'er-do-well shiftless gambler, Ethel Walters as his long-suffering wife, and Lena Horne as the seductress. It is so awful, so drenched in racial stereotypes, that it exerts a certain morbid fascination. Its redeeming features are the singing of Ethel Waters and one of the three songs Arlen and Harburg contributed to it: *Happiness Is Just a Thing Called Joe*, in which Harburg demonstrated his leftist ability to imagine himself in someone else's shoes, not exactly a common quality of conservatives, in or out of the arts.

Yip's next musical, *Bloomer Girl* (1944), with Harold Arlen, set in the days of the hoop skirt, treats the issues of war and peace and black and female equality, with analogies to World War II. *Evelina* and *Right as the Rain* derive from that show. But the most powerful song of the show is the one assigned to Pompey, the runaway slave of the story: *The Eagle and Me*. It was and remains a plea for freedom and the individual rights of

all men. It's a marvelous song which, later, Lena Horne recorded in a passionate personal version.

In November of that year, Yip participated in a national election-eve broadcast in support of Roosevelt's third-term presidential bid. For that show he wrote *Don't Look Now, Mr. Dewey (But Your Record's Showing)*, and another intense plea for racial equality, *Free and Equal Blues*. Roosevelt made a short speech as part of the broadcast. Yip later stated that the gentle Harold Arlen said that "he thought I was too involved in politics all the time and that it was polluting the stage. The stage was not a pulpit, not a place for 'propaganda', which he called it. I called it education; he called it propaganda." Burton Lane would make the same objection.

Yet it was with Lane that Harburg would write his best musical and most effective social commentary: *Finian's Rainbow*. It is about an Irishman named Finian who believes gold actually grows in America, steals a crock of it from a leprechaun named Og, leaves for America and in the state of Missitucky encounters a racist (whom Harburg modeled on Senator Theodore Bilbo and Congressman John Rankin), whom an accidental wish turns black, causing him to discover the horrors of what he has always preached. Og has followed Finian to America, and all turns out well for everyone: there was no malice in Yip's work. Og was played by David Wayne. His understudy was Larry Orenstein, who had played trumpet and sung with Paul Whiteman, Shep Fields, and Ray Noble (under the name Larry Neill). He also was Yip's assistant on the production and, on occasion, played the role of Og himself.

Larry, who lives now in Los Angeles, says that for all its complex plot lines, "It was a beautiful show, beautifully done." And it contained some marvelous Arlen-Harburg songs: *How Are Things in Glocca Morra?, If This Isn't Love*, the exquisite and somewhat neglected *Look to the Rainbow, Old Devil Moon*, and *When I'm Not Near the Girl I Love*, as well as a satiric assault on materialism: *When the Idle Poor Become the Idle Rich*. The last of these is almost clairvoyant: it foresees and makes mock of the explosion of post-war American consumerism.

Meyerson and Harburg thus describe *Finian's Rainbow*:

"To the liberal egalitarianism of *Bloomer Girl, Finian* subtly but clearly appends in fable form an assault on capitalism. The show is that rarity of American popular culture, a social critique that goes beyond the standard populist assault on wealth and class inequities. *Finian* is a work of socialist analysis in the form of the American musical — something that no one else ever really attempted, let alone realized."

In a song called *The Begat* Harburg takes yet another swipe at a favorite shibboleth, the Republican party, in a line about the D.A.R. and the Babbitt and bourgeoisie "who begat the misbegotten G.O.P." With his patriotism and faith in the United States, he had had no way of foreseeing HUAC and Senator Joseph McCarthy, who would exact the G.O.P.'s revenge.

The blacklist began in 1947, when the Hollywood studios announced that ten "unfriendly witnesses" before the House UnAmerican Activities Committee would not work again in the movies. The toll in pain and ruined careers is inestimable; it has been often recounted. But the black list killed J. Edward Bromberg, and I think it killed Larry Parks, a sensitive gentleman whom I knew fairly well. The size of the blacklist grew. And Yip, who was working on an MGM musical version of *Huckleberry Finn* with Burton Lane, was dropped after three songs. Yip wrote an almost pathetic letter to MGM's lawyer, saying:

"I am a Franklin Delano Roosevelt Democrat, believing firmly in everything he stood for. As a firm, almost fanatical believer in democracy, as a proud American, and as the writer of the lyric *God's Country*, I am outraged by the suggestion that somehow I am connected with, believe in, or am sympathetic with Communist or totalitarian philosophy."

Ah, but he had written those anti-Republican lyrics; forget the anti-Stalinism of *God's Country*. The elephant has a long memory.

But there was no blacklist on Broadway. Yip could write shows. His next was *Flahooley* (a collaboration with Sammy Fain), a parable set in a toy factory and satirizing the political witch hunts then terrorizing America, capitalism, consumerism, and atomic energy. It was full of topical references, including one to Alger Hiss. One song is titled *You Too Can Be a Puppet*. The show opened early in 1951. With the Korean War under way, not everyone reacted well to a show that was critical of America's industrial power, and it was attacked by those two great thinkers Dorothy Kilgallen and Ed Sullivan. Under this kind of assault it failed.

All the while Yip was being passed over for one movie after another, including the Judy Garland version of *A Star Is Born*. MGM refused to film *Finian's Rainbow*.

Yip undertook yet another musical with Harold Arlen, that was eventually titled *Jamaica*. It was compromised from the beginning. It was to have starred Harry Belafonte, who had proved adept at calypso and the kind of pidgin English Harburg planned for the show, a commentary on American life refracted through a view from the islands. Yip got there before Bob Marley. But Belafonte had to undergo throat surgery, and the show was tailored for Lena Horne, which altered its perspective. It still contained songs such as *Hooray for de Yankee Dollar* and *Leave de Atom Alone*, but it was not as effective as it might have been with Belafonte. *Three Monkeys in a Mango Tree* object to being considered relatives to a creature as destructive as man. The show was a success, but only as a star turn for Lena Horne.

It was Yip's last major musical. Nor would he ever write another important movie, for although the black list was gone, so were the great MGM musicals whose era he and Harold Arlen had initiated. Warner Bros. filmed a version of *Finian's Rainbow*, with Fred Astaire, but Yip had little to do with it and

hated it. He wrote a musical called *Darling of the Day* with Jule Styne. It closed in three weeks.

In 1968 Yip wrote a show about the children's crusade of the thirteenth century, *What a Day for a Miracle,* with music by Larry Orenstein and Jeff Alexander. Again, he was using another time as a reflection on our own. It was ahead of its time — written by Jews, it raised the unacceptable hypothesis that Arabs could be decent people — and it never reached Broadway.

After that, Yip's professional activities were desultory. He watched the rise of the Bob Dylan generation of songwriters, so many of them pontificating on politics, their work informed by a smug and pompous moral superiority. None of them had Yip's leavening of wit, nor for that matter his literacy and his deep knowledge of poetry, history, and economics. He hated the illiteracy of their work.

An actress friend of mine called one day to say, "I'm thinking of driving up to Ojai for a day. I'd like you to meet Bob Dylan."

"Why?" I said.

I have never met him. I have never liked his work. My standards of comparison were Johnny Mercer, Howard Dietz, and Yip Harburg. When it came to political commentary in the form of the lyric, no one in America has ever touched Yip, and the only one in the English language who ever did was William S. Gilbert.

The news reports, on that March day in 1981, said that Yip had died in a head-on car crash in Brentwood, one of the wealthy suburbs of Los Angeles. According to the book by Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg, Yip was dead of a coronary before the collision. His car drifted slowly into the oncoming lane and hit another car head on. No one in the other car was hurt. Yip was not quite 85.

There are interesting analyses of Harburg's lyrics and shows in the Meyerson-Harburg book. In the end there are too many of them, and nothing makes duller reading than descriptions of the plots of musical comedies. Every major musical that Harburg wrote is subject to this relentless exegesis. The writers take note that lyrics are meant to be heard in the context of music, not read on paper, and then present endless quantities of them. It's not so bad when you know the tunes they belong to, but much of the rest of the time, it doesn't work.

They refer to *What Is There to Say?* as a "precisely crafted ballad". Not precisely enough. For the sake of a rhyme, Harburg commits a cardinal sin of lyric writing: he starts a word with the consonant that ends the one before it. To rhyme "moment" he writes "contentment and home meant just you." This forces a singer to pause a little between "home" and "meant" to separate the labial liquid consonants. And "just" is a word lyricists throw in to cover eighth notes for which they can find no other solution.

In *Last Night When We Were Young,* again for the sake of a rhyme, he puts the word "clung" on the climactic high note of the song; it's an odd and ungainly sound in that exposed position. Even Frank Sinatra had to strain to make it, and he had two good octaves, from F to F, when he recorded it.

The authors say, describing *April in Paris*, "The last stanza, musically and lyrically, is a piece of astonishing virtuosity . . . . Yip moves the lyric in . . . bold fashion. 'Whom can I run to?' begins with the shock of correct grammar . . . . " Edward Jablonski also admired the line, writing in his biography of Harold Arlen, "Harburg is constantly concerned, not only with the idea of the song, but also with its proper grammatical wording (*April in Paris*, for example, contains the line: "Whom shall I run to?)"

Meyerson and Harburg quote it as "Whom can I run to," but "shall" or can" is a small detail. It still isn't a good line.

If purity is the goal, then it should be "To whom can I run?" Leslie Bricusse and Anthony Newley had no hesitation about writing *Who Can I Turn To?*, a much more natural line. Case endings have all but disappeared from the English language, their function having been taken over by prepositions, and the sooner we get rid of the archaic *whom*, the better. Fowler writes of a phrase such as "Who did you hear that from?" that "No further defence than 'colloquial' is necessary." James R. Sledd, the distinguished structural linguist at the University of Chicago, said "whom" should never be used in conversation and anyone answering a telephone "To whom am I speaking?" was instantly revealed as a pedant.

"Whom can I run to?" is a serious flaw in the lyric: it's a shock, all right: the shock of self-conscious affectation.

The lyric as a whole is not good. The title derives from a reference to Browning's poem *Home Thoughts from Abroad*, written in Italy:

Oh to be in England,
Now that April's there,
And whoever wakes in England
Sees, some morning, unaware,
That the lowest boughs and the brushwood sheaf
Round the elm-tree bole are in tiny leaf,
While the chaffinch sings on the orchard bough
In England — now!

Dorothy Parker is purported to have quipped, "Oh to be in Paris, now that April's here." And Vernon Duke derived the title from the remark.

I don't know whether Parker had ever been in Paris at that time, but Harburg hadn't, or he would have known (and Vernon Duke certainly did) that April is not the best time to be there. It can be gray and drizzling. Charles Aznavour wrote a song called *J'aime Paris au mois de Mai* — I like Paris in the month

of May — and I translated it for him as *Paris Is at Her Best in May*. The chestnuts blossom not in April but in May. I don't know what is meant by "holiday tables." Are they covered in bunting for Bastille Day? But that's on July 14, not in April. I find the line "This is a feeling no one can ever reprise" precious at very least. It has a technical meaning, in poetry or in music: to return to an original theme, but is hardly a part of normal speech. I do not know why the character in the song never knew the charm of spring, and I don't know what meeting it face to face means. I don't know why his heart couldn't sing. I'm sorry he never knew a warm embrace, even apparently from his mother, until he encountered April in Paris. As for whom he can run to, who does he want to run to? And what will he or she do for him if he finds out and gets there? It's a lyric that crumbles on rational examination, reminding one of something Talullah Bankhead is said to have said of a play she walked out on, "There's less to this than meets the eye."

Harburg has a bad habit of repeating words, phrases, and entire lines of lyric when he should be searching for other and better words: "I only know, I only know," and "This love, this love must go on" in *Right as the Rain. I Got a Song* is loaded with these repeats. Many more examples could be cited.

He also has a habit, which Ira Gershwin shared, of inverting sentence orders or putting adjectives after nouns for the sake of rhyme, as in Gershwin's "the north pole I have charted" in *I Can't Get Started*. Gershwin was guilty of a number of lyrical sins; *My Ship* is just not a good lyric, though many singers are drawn to it for its arty pretensions. "If the ship I sing" is an awful line.

By presenting so many quotations of the Harburg lyrics, Meyerson and Harburg reveal the flaws in his work as well as its virtues. They sink it under a burden of reverence, saying for example of *April in Paris* that it "begins almost as a French symbolist song, Yip playing Mallarme to Duke's Debussy." You'd think at times that they aspire to the level of Northrop Frye explaining Blake in *Fearful Symmetry*. It is critical overkill, overwrought analysis rather like much French writing about American movies and jazz.

Harburg was not, to me at least, the consummate technician his friend Howard Dietz was. There is never anything distorted or affected in the rhymes of Howard Dietz. They arrive at surprise without ever being strained, including that rhyme in the release of *That's Entertainment* when he describes *Hamlet* as a play "where a ghost and a prince meet and everybody ends in mincemeat." And when you think he could not possibly surpass that, he writes in the next release that it might be a play "simply teaming with sex. / A gay divorcee is pursuing her ex. / It could be Oedipus Rex, where a man kills his father / and causes a lot of bother." That lyric is astonishing, and seemingly effortless. It is three brilliant choruses in length; Arthur Schwartz told me Dietz wrote it in an hour. Further, though Deitz was terribly witty, at the other end of his range he was capable of rich love lyrics, such as *You and the Night and the Music*, that exceed (again, to my taste) anything to be found in Harburg, although the latter did some lovely things such as *More and More*, written with Jerome Kern.

Mercer never was guilty of the technical lapses that are to be found in Harburg and Gershwin. And Johnny had more range than any lyricist. His work is infused with an unaffected poeticism that undoubtedly derives from the south, with its mixture of Celtic rapture with words and allusive African circumlocution. But then, Alan Jay Lerner considered Mercer the greatest of all American lyricists, and I concur. Indeed I consider him the greatest lyricist in the English language.

But Johnny was never the master theatrical craftsman Harburg was. His was a more personal kind of statement.

Nonetheless, whatever weaknesses he had as a lyricist, Harburg was one of my heroes, and he still is.

The Meyerson-Harburg book for all its analyses gives us no sense of the man. It says curtly that his first marriage ended in divorce in 1932. It mentions the marriage to Edelaine Gorney almost casually, but tells us nothing about that marriage or for that matter the earlier marriage to Ernie's mother. Perhaps the subject is too painful for the author. Conspicuously, the writers do not even acknowledge the existence of Rod Gorney, who grew up in Harburg's home and is now a highly-respected psychiatrist at UCLA, active in the civil rights movement.

In *L'ame des poetes* (The Soul of Poets) Charles Trenet tells us what songwriting is all about. To paraphrase in English, the song says that long after the poets have disappeared, their songs still run in the streets. The crowd sings them, a little distractedly, ignorant of the name of the author, never knowing for whom his heart was beating.

This book does not tell you for whom Yip's heart beating.

I quoted the Trenet line to Larry Orenstein. In 1938 Larry was appearing as Wintergreen in a UCLA student production of *Of Thee I Sing*, with Ira Gershwin and his wife and Yip Harburg in the audience. Larry and Harburg met during World War II, and after the war Larry became Yip's protegee and, at times, assistant. In later years Larry had a distinguished career in advertising.

Larry said, "Yip's heart beat for many people and many causes. He had an instinct for the common man and for the needs of all humanity. He had the ability to identify with everyone's yearnings. He cut through all the traditional bonds of color and classes and creeds and he did it with his favorite weapon, humor.

"Yip preferred to attack not with a dagger but with doggerel. His was not a bleeding heart. It was a laughing heart."

Copyright 1993 by Gene Lees