

DOROTHY FIELDS

1905 - 1974

One of the Guys

When I mention Dorothy Fields' name on stage, I usually get a blank look from the patrons in the night club, perhaps a little polite applause. Then I start to bring up just a few of her over 400 titles: "**I Can't Give You Anything But Love**" "**On the Sunny Side of the Street**" "**Pick Yourself Up**", "**The Way You Look Tonight**" "**Hey Big Spender**" and I'm greeted by a powerful wave of applause and happy recognition.

"It's hard slave labor. Ask anyone who writes... it's slave labor and I love it." Dorothy Fields, ***An Evening with Dorothy Fields***

Dorothy Fields was born in 1905 into the New York home of the well known vaudeville comic actor and producer, Lew Fields. Although her mother hoped to elevate her children beyond a life in show business, 3 out of 4 of her children ended up in the theatre. Her brother Herb in particular was a gifted wordsmith and was constantly recruiting talented friends (Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart) to join him in creating a song, a show, a revue. This world of young songsmiths proved irresistible to a shy but lyrically clever girl like Dorothy. She would lend an idea for a lyric, show, line so often that she was considered one of the guys, a role she enjoyed all of her life.

Richard Rodgers introduced Dorothy to fellow writer J. Fred Coots, and together they began writing. Eventually they caught the attention of publisher Jack Mills, for whom they hammered out song after song, often under extreme deadline to capitalize on a news headline. At Mills she started working with Jimmy McHugh, a happy partnership that led to songwriting gold: "**I Can't Give You Anything But Love**". This little song 'premiered' on three different occasions, yanked twice by producers who called it 'puerile, sickly' and "lousy". When it finally caught on, it sold over three million units of sheet music.

Her partnership with McHugh continued to strike big with "**On the Sunny Side of the Street**", "**Don't Blame Me**", "**Exactly Like You**", "**I'm in the Mood for Love**".

She had a style of lyric writing that was breezy, colloquial, as easily spoken as sung, easy on the singer's tongue. Using the everyday details of life, she could describe lofty emotions in a down to earth way that never betrayed how many hours she labored to make it sound effortless. Sammy Cahn, Steven Sondheim and Sheldon Harnick have all admiringly referred to various lyrics written by Dorothy Fields as 'perfect'.

After moving to Hollywood to write for the major studios, she was paired with Jerome Kern, which began a working friendship marked by great mutual respect and admiration. **“Lovely to Look At” “Cuban Love Song”, “Bojangles of Harlem”**. The pinnacle of this partnership was perhaps marked by the Astaire/Rogers movie “Swing Time”. For this one film alone, Fields and Kern wrote **“Pick Yourself Up”, “A Fine Romance”** and **“The Way You Look Tonight”** which won them both an Oscar.

As for **“The Way You Look Tonight”**, which has been enjoying a re-popularization of late, Dorothy Fields declared: *"The first time Jerry played that melody for me I had to leave the room because I started to cry. The release absolutely killed me. I couldn't stop, it was so beautiful."*

They're Playing Our Song, Max Wilk

Dorothy responded by giving us a lyric perfectly wed to the melody: touching, lilting and timeless.

Missing the vibrancy of Broadway, Dorothy moved back to New York in the early 1940's. She married again during this time and had two children, while teaming up with her brother Herb to write the books and librettos for many stage shows, including three Cole Porter vehicles and two for Ethel Merman (*Something for the Boys* and *Mexican Hayride*). Loving the playwright role and the thrill of Broadway production, she hit upon the notion to write a vehicle for Ms. Merman as gun-toting Annie Oakley – Jerome Kern was supposed to write the music and re-unite Dorothy with her favorite composer, but sadly, Kern died just before work began. Irving Berlin ably jumped to the task, with Dorothy and Herb co-writing the book *Annie Get Your Gun*.

In the 60's she was tempted back to Broadway by pianist and composer Cy Coleman, with whom she wrote *Sweet Charity*, a show which added two more remarkable feathers in her songwriting cap **“If My Friends Could See Me Now”** and **“Hey Big Spender”**.

ASCAP's president Stanley Adams said that “the Dorothy Fields catalogue was the most important and significant of any woman writer”... not just by virtue of the size and the scope of her catalogue but by the fact that over the years the songs have remained unflaggingly popular.

When interviewed by Henry Kane for his book *How To Write A Song*, she was asked why there weren't more women songwriters. Her reply was “I do *not* think that men have more talent” but noted that women often have to tend a home and raise a family, so that they simply don't have the time it takes to give it “the push needed, the going out

and mixing” all so important in the basically self-employed career of music. One must always be looking for the next show, song, idea or collaborator. Dorothy Fields was known to be impeccably dressed, stylish and groomed, while chain smoking and knocking down a few from her flask throughout the day. Perhaps growing up surrounded by inventive, talented men made her figure out how to navigate the ‘boys club’ while having her own life. Wife, sister, playwright, librettist and unforgettable lyricist, she not only married her talent to her personal life, she made it ‘a fine romance’.

Sources:

On the Sunny Side of the Street: The Life and Lyrics of Dorothy Fields, Deborah Grace Winer, Schirmer Books, 1997

They’re Playing Our Song: Conversations with America’s Classic Songwriters, Max Wilk, Delacorte Publishing, 1973

Re-writes: A Memoir, Neil Simon, Simon and Schuster, 1996

A superb website, painstakingly researched: www.dorothyfields.co.uk

An Evening with Dorothy Fields (CD) DRG label, 1972. This is a must listen experience for Dorothy Fields fans. Ms. Fields holds forth for an hour, telling us about her life, and how certain songs came to be. With performances of her songs by a small Broadway cast. www.pbs.org/dorothyfields

Suggested Listening:

Where to start? So many jazz vocalists have performed outstanding renditions of Dorothy Fields lyrics...I’m just going to have to limit myself to a few outstanding suggestions.

‘**A Fine Romance**’ – Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong

“**The Way You Look Tonight**” - Frank Sinatra (classic arrangement), Tony Bennett (gorgeous ballad), Madeline Peyroux, Michael Buble. But don’t pass up the chance to listen to Fred Astaire sing this song, in his all so human, beseeching voice.

“**I Won’t Dance**”- Peggy Lee, ***Mink Jazz*** LP

“**Make the Man Love Me**”- Dinah Washington

“I’m in the Mood For Love” – Although it abandoned the Dorothy Fields lyric, you must, of course, listen to James Moody’s instrumental version of this song, and then the vocalese section written later by Eddie Jefferson, with lyrics to fit Moody’s superb tenor solo. When King Pleasure released it just that way under the title “Moody’s Mood for Love” (with Blossom Dearie singing along) , co-author Jimmy McHugh sued him for copyright infringement. They agreed to split all proceeds. “Moody’s Mood for Love” genuinely started something new in jazz and has been recorded by countless artists, including George Benson, Queen Latifah, Aretha Franklin, Tito Puente and Van Morrison.

“He Had Refinement” - (*A Tree Goes in Brooklyn*) Check out the acerbic Elaine Stritch singing this very funny and clever song on you tube.
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=sRK6vIPjK4Q>