

# *Down Argentine Way*

By Carla Arton

In 1939, musical-comedy actress Betty Grable was called away from the hit Broadway show, “DuBary Was a Lady,” in order to play the lead in the film “Down Argentine Way” opposite the charismatic baritone, Don Ameche. Alice Faye, 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox’s top leading lady at the time, had taken ill and could no longer commit to the role. While Betty Grable had already appeared in over 50 films and shorts since the age of 13, “Down Argentine Way” would finally become Grable’s ticket to international stardom.

Directed by Irving Cummings (“Curly Top”), the film follows the typical boy meets girl romance commonly found in musical comedies of the period. A wealthy American debutante with a love of horse racing, Glenda Crawford (Grable), meets the son of an Argentinian race horse breeder, Ricardo Quintana (Ameche), and arranges to buy one of his horses. Ricardo begins to fall for Glenda until he realizes she is the daughter of his father’s sworn enemy. When he backs out of the sale and retreats to Buenos Aires, Glenda, accompanied by her aunt (Charlotte Greenwood), follows Ricardo and wins both his devotion and father’s approval. Latin rhythms and rich Technicolor saturate the film with musical numbers by Grable, Carmen Miranda (in her first screen appearance), Ameche, Greenwood (with her signature high kicks), and the great Nicholas Brothers. While the story is fairly typical, the film is historically significant on a number of levels. Firstly, the film made international stars of Betty Grable and Brazilian bombshell Carmen Miranda. Additionally, it represented a notable example of Hollywood’s contribution to the United States’ Good Neighbor Policy with Latin America. Furthermore, “Down Argentine Way” is a precursor to the formulaic light hearted musicals produced during the 1940s that would help keep up the spirits of the American public during World War II. As with Grable’s wartime films, “Down Argentine Way” provides frivolous escapism through music, dancing, Technicolor, and, when Betty was on screen, a sassy “girl next door.”

Betty Grable has been largely forgotten by contemporary culture largely due to another blonde icon, Marilyn Monroe, who redefined female sexuality of the 1950s. However, between 1943 and 1950 Grable was the highest paid celebrity in Hollywood and among the top ten box office stars (#1 in 1943). Her romances with Artie Shaw and George Raft, marriages to Jackie Coogan and Harry James, and her daughters’ births were followed closely and cele-



*Sportsman Don Ameche woos debutante Betty Grable. Courtesy Library of Congress Collection.*

brated in fan magazines and entertainment columns. Additionally, after the United States entered the war in 1941, Grable became the number one pin-up for American GIs because of an iconic pose photographer Frank Powolny took of her in a bathing suit looking over her shoulder and showing off her famous legs (insured as a studio publicity stunt by Lloyds of London for one million dollars). It became one of the most famous images of World War II, with over two million copies sent overseas to maintain morale and remind the men what they were fighting for. Before Monroe, Betty Grable was America’s sex icon. Hugh Hefner was inspired to start “Playboy Magazine” because of his love for Betty Grable and other pin-ups of the 1940s. Hefner felt her spunkiness was part of why she was so popular during WWII; she embodied the perception of what a woman should be during the war, self-reliant. As with “Down Argentine Way,” Betty Grable’s subsequent roles were all sharp, sexy, and self-reliant gals that could make it on their own but, when offered, preferred domesticity and commitment from their leading men.

“Down Argentine Way” also represents a historical snapshot of the United States’ ‘Good Neighbor Policy’ adopted by Hollywood to build a stronger relationship with South America as a way of saving their dwindling foreign distribution market due to the war in Europe.

The film is one of many films Hollywood put out during this period that consciously incorporated Latin themes, characters, and destinations. Using the

magic of the movies the film takes pains to showcase the beauty of Argentina and the commonalities of cultures through a shared love of horse racing, night clubs, and music. However, its universal message of love having no borders is undermined by the film's numerous negative Latin stereotypes. This includes portraying the locals as buffoons who speak in broken English, gigolos, or taxi drivers who take frequent siestas. By 1941, film distributors in South America joined in protest, urging Hollywood to stop production of 'good will' films until they learned more about the differing cultures and appointed a Latin-American expert to the Hays Office. Hollywood didn't understand that South America wasn't a monolithic entity. It needed to be treated with more nuance and sensitivity to its complex geography and customs.

In addition to being a snapshot of the 'Good Neighbor' film productions, "Down Argentine Way" introduced Carmen Miranda to international audiences. She was Brazil's biggest star at the time and would become a household name around the world, with references to her fruit hats still perpetuating in pop culture today. Interestingly, Miranda's appearance in the film was in the form of musical inserts. At the time Miranda was performing at a New York nightclub following her successful performance in "The Streets of Paris" on Broadway. In order to quickly capitalize on her popularity in Latin America the studio decided to film her songs at the nightclub and insert them throughout the film as if the characters were seeing her act at a nightclub in Buenos Aires. Her three numbers ("Bambú, Bambú," "Mamãe Eu Quero," and "South American Way") are likely the most authentic representation of her musical style within a Hollywood film, as she sings in her native

Portuguese and is simply performing her nightclub act. Later films with Carmen Miranda cast as supporting characters played up her fashion and Latin *otherness* to the point where she became a caricature of herself, as in her famous number "The Lady with the Tutti Frutti Hat," from 1943's "The Gang's All Here."

Although Latin audiences found films like "Down Argentine Way" to be an inauthentic representation of their varying cultures it was considered a box office success in America, grossing \$2 million in domestic sales. This paved the way for further 'Good Neighbor' films to be made and for Betty Grable and Carmen Miranda to become international sensations throughout the war years.

"Down Argentine Way" was 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox's number one musical hit of 1940.

*The views expressed in these essays are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.*

*Carla Arton holds an MA in Film Studies with Archiving from the University of East Anglia and currently works as a Recorded Sound Processing Technician at the Library of Congress She is also a contributing author for the ARSC Guide to Audio Preservation.*