

# “Ten Cents a Dance”—Ruth Etting (1930)

Added to the National Registry: 2011

Essay by Charles O. Lloyd (guest post)\*



*Original label*

*Ruth Etting*

With night falling on the Roaring 20s, Ruth Etting cut “Ten Cents a Dance” on March 4, 1930, and it was named to the National Recording Registry in 2011. This Rodgers-Hart collaboration buries the 20s flapper myth and unveils the new Depression-era woman.

Only by chance did Etting first sing the song in Florence Ziegfeld’s “Simple Simon” on February 18, 1930. Finishing Ruth Selwyn’s ill-fated “Nine-Fifteen Revue,” Etting received a frantic call from friend and benefactor Florenz Ziegfeld, the legendary Broadway producer. Singer Lee Morse showed up drunk the first night, ruining a beautiful song Rodgers and Hart had composed for her. Ziegfeld now needed Etting to save the show that he was trying out in Boston.

After she arrived, Rodgers, Hart, and Etting discovered to their chagrin that “Ten Cents a Dance” as written for Morse had too great a musical range for Etting’s voice. They spent an entire night together, rewriting the song. The show arrived to accolades on Broadway for Ziegfeld and its show-saving singer. With this success, critics noted that in one week, Ruth Etting had introduced two outstanding songs, Harold Arlen’s intricately syncopated “Get Happy” in the failed Selwyn show and “Ten Cents a Dance” in Ziegfeld’s hit—both destined to become classics.

In the early 1930s, Etting had reached the pinnacle of her Broadway career, making her quiet prairie origins seem like an exotic nowhere. Born the granddaughter of a prominent David City, Nebraska, mill owner in 1897, Etting started her career in Chicago. After designing costumes for a prominent dinner club during WWI, she quickly advanced from the chorus line to featured singer. She married Moe Snyder (“the Gimp”), a brutish man who initially helped her career so much that soon she was singing in the best clubs and even on radio (the invention about to revolutionize show business as well as her own career). After Etting sang for Paul Whiteman at his New York club’s opening, Irving Berlin, composing for Flo Ziegfeld’s new “Follies,” insisted that she sing his songs. Trusting Berlin implicitly, Ziegfeld signed Etting without even an audition. Her success with Ziegfeld continued with “Whoopee,” a well-received Eddie Cantor vehicle in which Etting sang her second big hit, “Love Me or Leave Me.” Barely

surviving the 1929 crash, Ziegfeld produced his last “Follies” in 1931, in which Etting revived Nora Bayes’ “Shine On, Harvest Moon,” and made it her own new theme song.

During the 1930s, Etting became an outstanding recording star (over 200 sides survive), appeared in several full-length films, starred in almost forty short subjects, and was voted most popular female radio vocalist several years running. After a 1938 scandal where her ex-husband Snyder shot her second husband Myrl Alderman, Etting stopped performing. In the late ‘40s, she made an unsuccessful radio return with her orchestra director-arranger husband Alderman. In 1955, Jimmy Cagney and Doris Day starred in MGM’s film of her life, “Love Me or Leave Me.” It was a critical and box office success despite its woeful inaccuracies. Ruth Etting died at Colorado Springs in 1978.

For Lorenz Hart and Richard Rodgers, whose careers were soaring, “Ten Cents a Dance” became an immediate hit. On the recording Etting’s accompaniment sparkles with jazz stars: Mannie Klein, a highly regarded jazz trumpeter, the incomparable Benny Goodman on clarinet, and composer-performer Rube Bloom on piano. Hart’s lyrics reveal the daily trials of a taxi dancer (a woman men pay to dance with) at the Palace Ballroom where she’s a “lady teacher,” a “beautiful hostess, you know.” Her dance partners form a scary diversity who all have one thing in common, their ability to fray her physically and mentally: “pansies,” “rough guys,” “tough guys”; and, in a double-time section that forms a bridge, she sounds as if she’s reciting an old nursery rhyme, “butchers, and barbers, and rats from the harbor,” “fighters, and sailors, and bowlegged tailors.” The band bashes her from seven to midnight—drums, saxophones, eardrum-breaking trumpets, instruments that bawl in response to Ruth’s complaints. Customers tear her gowns, crush her toes, and wear holes in her stockings. She makes her nightly plea: “All you need is a ticket! Come on, big boy, ten cents a dance.” Etting, famous for her torch songs, puts tears in the last chorus’ ending words.

Etting’s plaintive rendition evoked pathos in listeners that demanded more. Two films based on the song resulted. Lionel Barrymore directed a young Barbara Stanwyck in a film by the same name completed in October 1930. Stanwyck plays a hard-boiled taxi dancer who finds a longed-for romance with an ordinary working man and leaves the business only to suffer betrayal. Earlier, in August 1930, Warner Brothers-Vitaphone released a short subject, called “Roseland,” starring Etting herself who plays a taxi dancer fighting off a masher boyfriend in order to fall for a Wall Street executive. Thus Etting fulfills the audience’s early Depression daydreams.

The taxi dancer Etting sings into being reveals the demise of the 1920s flapper and puts in her place a realistic vision of working girl independence. The slender, flat-chested, boyish, drinking and smoking caricature of feminine freedom called “the flapper” prevailed for most of the 20s. Yet, songs like “You’re Nobody’s Sweetheart Now” (Kahn-Erdman-Meyers-Schoebel 1924, recorded by Paul Whiteman three times) and “Glad Rag Doll” (Daugherty-Ager-Yellen, recorded by Etting in 1929) already painted a lonely picture of a flapper whose own stylish elegance belied unhappy displacement from the world she grew up in—a glad rag doll, “not the kind they choose to grow old and gray with.”

By 1930, the Great Depression is knocking at the door. In “Ten Cents a Dance,” Etting’s taxi dancer prefigures the hard times to come and replaces the out-of-date flapper with the working

woman. She's just as self-reliant as her predecessor, yet already jaded. This new creation manufactures romance as a business, the kind you buy for a dime. Everything comes at a price—out of necessity, in her “chilly hall room,” she's independent and alone. This taxi dancer may complain, but at least she has a job.

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\*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.