

“Come Down Ma Evenin’ Star”--Lillian Russell (1912)

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Essay by Chris Enss (guest post)*



Lillian Russell

When actors and Broadway producers Joe Weber and Lew Fields debuted their burlesque show “Twirly Whirly” in the fall of 1902, New York critics unanimously panned the production. An article in the September 12, 1902, edition of the “St. Louis Post” noted that “in the opinion of the theatrical reviewers at large, the piece itself showed how little real wit it takes to amuse the public.”

The only bright spot in the program was a ragtime song sung by the celebrated actress and singer Lillian Russell. According to the December 19, 1902, edition of the “Kansas City Daily Gazette,” “L. Russell’s stunning beauty and glorious delivery of a brilliant piece entitled ‘Come Down Ma Evenin’ Star’ was the one and only highlight in ‘Twirly Whirly.’” Written by composer and conductor John Stromberg, the sentimental ballad would become stage queen Lillian Russell’s signature tune.

Stromberg was a well-respected songwriter who had created several popular works for Weber and Fields’ productions. Born in Canada in 1853, Stromberg often collaborated on his songs with lyricist Edgar Smith. Although Stromberg penned “Come Down Ma Evenin’ Star” specifically for Lillian, he resisted handing the song over to her because he didn’t believe it was good enough. He had promised to write Lillian the “prettiest song she ever sang” and was consumed with doubt over the finished product.

In early July 1902, John Stromberg was found dead at his home in Freeport, New York. The official cause of death was ruled as paralysis of the heart, following a long attack of rheumatism. Friends and colleagues knew the exceptional agony Stromberg suffered as a result of his rheumatism and were saddened to learn the real reason he had died was because he’d taken a fatal dose of insecticide to stop the pain once and for all.

When Stromberg’s body was discovered, the sheet music for “Come Down Ma Evenin’ Star” was found in the pocket of the suit he was wearing.

Lillian Russell was the theater's leading musical comedy prima donna in the 1890s. She had played in many of the Gilbert and Sullivan operettas and had received tremendous acclaim both abroad and in America. Her beauty and voice had drawn innumerable admirers who showered her with jewels. Although she thought Stromberg was an exceptional talent, she worried her fans would not be pleased with her singing a ballad. The song "Come Down Ma Evenin' Star" would be a significant change in her style.

When the curtain rose on "Twirly Whirly" and Lillian took her place center stage, the audience erupted with applause before she even uttered a note. When the excitement died down, she sang "Come Down Ma Evenin' Star" with the feeling of an opera aria, displaying deep and personal emotion to the public before her. At the conclusion of the song, the audience cheered and clapped approvingly. Lillian's anxieties were at last relieved. A review of her performance in the mid-September edition of the "Daily Mirror" reported that "Miss Russell made a decided hit with 'Come Down Ma Evenin' Star.'"

Lillian would sing Stromberg's final song often in her future years. She noted in her memoirs that each time she sang the song she would see John in his last, painful hours finishing the manuscript just for her. "I always thought of Honey Stromberg whenever I sang that song," she wrote. "And, strange to say, no one ever sang it in public but me."

In a final tribute to Stromberg, Weber and Fields, led by Lillian, staged a benefit for Stromberg's widow. It netted more than \$6,000.

In 1912, Lillian recorded her rendition of "Come Down Ma Evenin' Star." It was the only recording she ever made.

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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.