For an artist so synonymous with dance, Fred Astaire is also certainly associated with a wide selection of musical standards—"Cheek to Cheek," "Top Hat," "Funny Face" and "Night and Day," to name just a few. And for a man forever partnered with Ginger Rogers within popular culture, Astaire got his first taste of stardom while still teamed with his talented elder sister and longtime stage co-star, Adele.

Both natural-born dancers with unbelievable technique and an innate sense of rhythm, the Astaires began performing as a brother-sister team in vaudeville in the 1900’s. Eventually, they worked their way up to the Orpheum Circuit. Filling their act with songs, sibling teasing and, of course, dance, the duo first appeared on Broadway, in the show "Over the Top," in 1917.

Meanwhile, though the brothers Gershwin, George and Ira, were each having some individual success as Tin Pan Alley tunesmiths in the early 1920’s, they achieved their greatest success when they teamed up together for the Broadway stage and wrote the musical “Lady, Be Good” in 1924.

Along with composing that show’s long-enduring title tune, the Gerswhins also wrote “Fascinating Rhythm,” a bouncy duet that Fred and Adele would perform in the show in New York and in London’s West End. They would commit it to record, on Columbia, with George Gershwin on piano, in 1926. This recording was named to the Library of Congress’ National Registry in 2004.

As was typical of the time, the revue that “Fascinating Rhythm” sprang from was light on plot—a talented brother and sister are short on cash but that doesn’t keep them from the occasional song and a dance! Luckily, the music and the onstage performances were buoyant enough to keep the show aloft and pleasing to audiences.

How “Fascinating Rhythm” was worked into the show is illustrative of “Lady’s” feather-weight story. It is early in the second act, and the leads (Fred and Adele) are having an argument. Co-star Cliff Edwards strolls into the scene singing the song and accompanying himself on his famous ukulele. Soon, overtaken by the mood and the music, the Astaires cease their quarrel and join in:
Fascinating rhythm,
You’ve got me on the go!
Fascinating rhythm,
I’m all a-quiver.

In his 1959 autobiography, Fred Astaire recounted the close relationship between dance and song that “Fascinating Rhythm” had at its origins:

[In the number], Adele and I were stuck for an exit step…. George happened to drop by and I asked him to look at the routine. He went to the piano…. We went through all but the last step before the proposed exit and George said, “Now travel—travel with that one.”

I stopped to ask what he meant and he jumped up from the piano and demonstrated what he visualized. He wanted us to continue doing the last step, which started center stage, and sustain it as we traveled to the side, continuing until we were out of sight….

It was the perfect answer to our problem….

Others concurred. Critic Alexander Woollcott once wrote, "I do not know whether Gershwin was born into this world to write rhythms for Fred Astaire's feet or whether Fred Astaire was born into this world to show how the Gershwin music should really be danced."

As slight as this Broadway fare was, it was quickly embraced by audiences and critics alike. The “New York Herald-Tribune” intoned in its review:

Fred and Adele we salute you! Last night at the Liberty Theatre this young couple appeared about 8:30 o’clock and from an audience sophisticated and over-threatred received a cordial greeting. At 8:45 they were applauded enthusiastically and when, at 9:15, they sang and danced “Fascinating Rhythm’ the callous Broadwayites cheered them as if their favorite half-back had planted the ball between the goal post after an 80-yard run. Seldom has it been our pleasure to witness so heartfelt, spontaneous and so deserved a tribute.

Thanks to such glowing reviews, its charming leads, other numbers like “Hang On To Me,” and a reprise of the Astaires’ then signature dance, the run-around, “Lady Be Good” ran on Broadway for 330 performances. Afterward, the Astaires took the show on the road with a 10-city tour and then took it to London.

Their recording of “Fascinating Rhythm” was a hit as well. Featuring Gershwin’s lively playing on the piano, Fred and Adele’s record is disarming in its simplicity and its vintage charm is only enhanced by the aural scratches typical of recordings at that time. Fred takes the first verse, singing in the capable but limited way that would later endear him to generations of moviegoers. Adele takes on the second two-line verse warbling with a startlingly high soprano. After that, it’s the two voices simultaneously for the rest of the song, including its chorus and reprise. The result of the dual vocal is a robust and rollicking treatment.

Lyrically “Fascinating Rhythm” tells the playful story of possession by music:

Got a little rhythm, a rhythm, a rhythm
That pit-apats through my brain;
So darn persistent
That day isn’t distant
When it’ll drive me insane…
What a mess you’re making!
The neighbors want to know
Why I’m always shaking
Just like a flivver

As a song it prefigures a subgenre of other songs which also speak of music being nearly menacing in its omnipresence and catchy-ness -- “I Hear a Symphony,” “The Rhythm is Gonna Get You,” “Conga,” Kate Bush’s film tribute in music, “The Red Shoes,” and innumerable “can’t stop dancing” ditties from the disco era.

Ironically, Fred and Adele were not the first to record “Fascinating Rhythm.” “Lady Be Good” co-star Cliff Edwards, better known as Ukulele Ike, and later famous for debuting “When You Wish Upon a Star,” recorded “Rhythm” in 1925. But the hit the Astaires had with it one year later eclipsed his earlier version.

Since the Astaires’ debut of it in the mid 1920’s, “Fascinating Rhythm” has become a standard, beloved by dancers and singers alike. Eleanor Powell tapped up a storm to it in the 1941 movie “Lady Be Good” (which bore little relation to the stage musical it shared a title with) and Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Mel Torme, Dianne Reeves, Judy Garland, Petula Clark, Michael Feinstein, Buddy Rich, Tommy Steele, and Vic Damone, among others, have all covered it (though almost never as a duet like Fred and Adele did it). One of the rarest renditions of the song is from 1949 by Tony Bennett back when he was still being billed as Joe Bari. Meanwhile, British singer/pianist Jamie Cullum slowed the tune down, even slower than Sarah V., for a bluesy 2005 version. Perhaps the song’s most interesting use (or re-use) was it being sampled by the band Deep Purple for their 1974 hard rocking hit “Burn.” “Burn” has since gone on to be covered by W.A.S.P., Riot and other heavy metal acts, giving “Fascinating Rhythm” a fascinating afterlife surely never imagined by the Gerswhins or the Astaires.