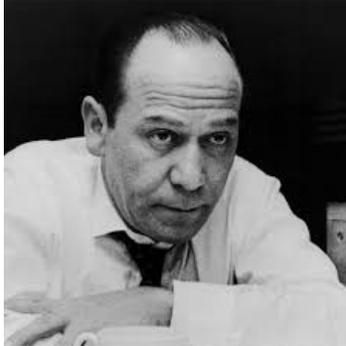


“Guys & Dolls” (Original cast recording) (1950)

Named to the National Registry: 2004

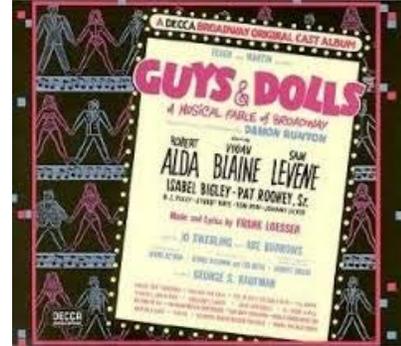
Essay by Laurence Maslon (guest post)*



Frank Loesser



Original label



Original album cover

Given that Frank Loesser’s second big hit featured a show girl stranded at the altar fourteen times, it seems fitting that his first Broadway score was a “bridesmaid” in the original cast album department.

When Loesser found himself back on Broadway in 1948 (he had earlier contributed to a failed revue in 1936), he brought with him a reputation as one of the foremost songwriters of the Hollywood studio system. Initially contributing only lyrics to his films, he evolved into the poet laureate of the American home front during the Second World War, with songs patriotic (“Rodger Young,” “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition”), playful (“They’re Either Too Young or Too Old”), or poignant (“I Don’t Want to Walk Without You”). He contributed to the war effort in even more significant ways by volunteering for the Army Air Corps. After the war, he turned his attention to composing music to his witty, avuncular lyrics; it was a perfect match.

In the wake of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s tremendous success with the narrative musical form in the mid-1940s, a viable book musical on Broadway became the Holy Grail for such accomplished Hollywood tunesmiths as Harold Arlen, Johnny Mercer, Sammy Cahn, Jule Styne, and Loesser himself. Producers Cy Feuer and Ernest Martin offered him the chance to come back east and work with fabled director/writer George Abbott on an adaptation of the classic British farce “Charley’s Aunt.” “Where’s Charley?” was a smash hit in 1948, running 792 performances, and, thereafter, Loesser devoted the rest of his career almost exclusively to writing for the stage.

What Loesser did not get from his Broadway triumph was an original cast album. A nearly year-long strike by the American Federation of Musicians kept “Where’s Charley?” out of the recording studio, although its star, Ray Bolger, recorded two songs from the score for Decca in 1949. (That same year, a cover recording of the show’s “My Darling, My Darling,” sung by Gordon MacRae and Jo Stafford, was a number one hit for Capitol.) Loesser would have to wait until the very beginning of 1951 to get his own hit cast album.

From the starting gate, the smart money was on “Guys & Dolls.” The entire concept was “based on a story and characters by Damon Runyon” (as it says, contractually—although it’s a shade short of the truth). Runyon was a beloved journalist and raconteur of the Theater District. Beginning in 1929, he wrote a series of nearly 80 short stories centered on various gamblers, petty crooks, athletes, showgirls, and law enforcement officials who inhabited Broadway and the upper blocks of the West 40s. The stories were quite popular and frequently reprinted and anthologized. Feuer and Martin optioned the material in 1949; Loesser said “yes” to their job offer in one phone call.

Hiring a librettist proved more complicated; the producers went through nearly a dozen potential candidates; they were contractually required to acknowledge screenwriter Jo Swerling, even though next to nothing of his contributions made it into the final product. Frustrated at the pace of the adaptation, Loesser began writing songs inspired by the characters independent of a plot, and by the time Feuer and Martin had hired radio comedy writer Abe Burrows (a high school chum of Feuer’s from Brooklyn) as the final librettist, Loesser had written most of the score. With the addition of famed comic dramatist George S. Kaufman as director, and Michael Kidd as choreographer, the show (now called “Guys & Dolls: A Musical Fable of Broadway”) was ready to go into production in the late summer of 1950.

Kaufman presided over an intense series of rewrites in his Bucks County country home and Loesser and Burrows were able to integrate more of the book into the score, as they, well, burrowed deeper into the Runyon source material. The main plot of “Guys & Dolls” was largely based on the short story “The Idyll of Sarah Brown,” but the travails of Nathan Detroit and his fiancée of long-standing, Miss Adelaide, are borrowed from another Runyon story, “Pick a Winner,” where the characters are called Hot Horse Herbie and Miss Cutie Singleton. Their comic escapades were the perfect complement to the romantic jousting of Sarah and Sky Masterson—in many ways, this double pairing was the most satisfying rendition of the romantic/comic plot trope in Broadway’s Golden Age.

After an arduous audition process in the fall of 1950, where Kaufman and the producers ran many casting calls to find the various crapshooters and petty gangsters, an extended tryout period began in Philadelphia on October 14, 1950. The show lost one song, “Traveling Light,” and gained another, “The Oldest Established.” A favorite song of Loesser’s, written before the libretto was finished, titled “Fugue for Tinhorns,” seemed incongruous with the evolving storyline, until it was simply placed toward the beginning of the musical, where it admirably set up the tone and style of the piece. “Guys & Dolls” opened at the 46th Street Theatre on November 24, 1950 and ran 1,194 performances, winning five Tony Awards, including Best Musical.

The cast album was recorded on December 3, 1950 and released by Decca on January 8, 1951. Decca had done very well with Broadway original cast albums—the groundbreaking “Oklahoma!” was theirs, as was “Carousel” and “Lost in the Stars”—and would no doubt have been the first choice for “Where’s Charley?” The studio was lucky in that “Guys & Dolls” had been so rapturously received by the New York critics and audiences; they had little marquee value from the “Hit Parade” perspective. Robert Alda had been a singer in burlesque and a Hollywood fixture since 1945, when he played

George Gershwin in “Rhapsody in Blue,” but he had no recording history. Neither had Isabel Bigley, who had played Laurey in the West End “Oklahoma!,” nor had Vivian Blaine, who was a supporting player in a variety of Hollywood musicals, but had never recorded a single. Poor Sam Levene, as Nathan Detroit, didn’t even come close to that—he could barely bark out “Happy Birthday” at his audition for Loesser. It’s hard to think of a more beloved character in the musical theater canon who has so little to sing in the show itself.

Nevertheless, the Decca album of “Guys & Dolls” reached number one among pop music albums during the week of March 17th, the first cast album since 1949’s “South Pacific” to do so. The 42-minute-length recording was perfect for capturing all of Loesser’s ebullient and raffish songs. As tradition (and technology) had it back then, the recording was less generous to the dance music in the show. The “Opening” (as the Broadway program has it; it’s better known as “Runyonland”) is an extremely curtailed version of Kidd’s inventive street ballet; the dance music for “Havana” and “The Crap Game Dance” don’t appear at all. A brief reprise of “Adelaide’s Lament” is also dropped for the recording. Of all the great standards from the show—“If I Were a Bell,” “Luck Be A Lady,” “I’ve Never Been in Love Before”—only one song broke into the pop charts as a single in its day: “A Bushel and a Peck.” In fact, Adelaide’s Hot Box number was recorded by Perry Como and Betty Hutton (as a duet) before the show even opened and zoomed up the charts in the fall of 1950. It was soon joined by covers by Margaret Whiting and Jimmy Wakely, in another duet, as well as renditions by the Andrew Sisters and Doris Day—making it one of the most popular songs of 1950.

When “Guys & Dolls” was filmed in 1955, it finally starred someone who could sell records: Frank Sinatra. Ironically, he was cast not as Sky Masterson, but as Nathan Detroit, who had only half a song in the original score. (The part of Sky went, of course, to Marlon Brando; Sinatra, stung to the core, referred to Brando as “Mumbles” for the rest of his career.) Loesser went back to the piano and gave Sinatra a new solo, “Adelaide” (and he was placed prominently in the title number, “Guys & Dolls”). Strangely—but this is Hollywood, after all—the smash hit song “A Bushel and a Peck” was replaced in the film by the far inferior “Pet Me, Poppa.”

Sinatra would get his revenge, of a kind, in 1963, when he produced and starred (more or less) in an extraordinary quartet of albums devoted to Broadway shows, the Reprise Musical Repertory Theater. One of the featured scores was “Guys & Dolls” and featured Sinatra singing a half-dozen songs from the show (along with Bing Crosby and Dean Martin), notably “Luck Be a Lady.” It would become highly associated with Sinatra ever after, appearing frequently in his concerts and recordings throughout his career.

Frank Loesser’s achievement on “Guys & Dolls” has come up double-sixes for performers and audiences alike for decades, making it one of the luckiest musicals in Broadway history.

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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.