

“My Man” and “Second Hand Rose”--Fanny Brice (1921)

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Essay by Eddie Shapiro (guest post)*



Fanny Brice

Fanny Brice (1891-1951) was a massive star of her day. Comparisons to today’s artists are somewhat flawed, simply because stardom was different then, before the advent of television and (for much of Brice’s career) movies. Think of Beyonce’s far-reaching popularity, Madonna’s longevity, Carol Burnett’s rubber-faced comedy, Joan Rivers’ embrace of ethnicity and Barbra Streisand’s perfectionism and poise. If you were going to theaters 100 years ago, you saw her as one of the all-time-great headliners of the “Ziegfeld Follies” and other Broadway shows, as well as a staple on the vaudeville circuit. To the next generation, for nearly 20 years, she was hugely popular as the adorably devilish toddler Baby Snooks on the radio. And a generation later, 13 years after her death, she was portrayed on Broadway in the 1964 smash hit, “Funny Girl,” in a career-making performance by Barbra Streisand. Streisand also recorded several of Brice’s songs and starred in the 1968 film adaptation of “Funny Girl” and its 1975 sequel, “Funny Lady,” giving Brice a splashy if not especially accurate currency.

Brice came from humble, Jewish, New York City beginnings, the daughter of immigrants who ran saloons. She was, first and foremost, a singular comedienne, but she could also simply stand still and deliver a searing torch song. She was known to call everyone “kid” and famously swore like a sailor, but also lived a life of style and refinement. She paid a great deal of attention to fashion and grooming, and always sported perfectly manicured hands. She could be brutally blunt but was also known to be exceptionally kind. She may have played a lot of schleps, but Brice was a mensch.

Brice introduced her two biggest hits, “Second Hand Rose” and “My Man,” in the same show, “Ziegfeld Follies of 1921.” That year’s edition of the “Follies” has been called one of its absolute bests and was dominated by Brice’s many contributions. Though the “Follies” did not name stars above the title, she was the primary reason for the success of the 1921 edition and received a massive salary to prove it. The two songs, though hugely successful on their own, together exemplify the sheer range that Brice commanded.

The first, written for Brice by Grant Clarke and James F. Hanley, is pure schtick. Brice, using her trademark, Yiddish accent, sings of being the daughter of a second-hand shopkeeper. “It’s no wonder that I feel abused/ I never get a thing that ain’t been used!,” she sighs plaintively, giving voice to the women of the lower east side where she grew up. It’s hard to imagine a popular song (or performer) today putting on such a heavy dialect, even for a novelty number, without being labeled culturally insensitive for trading in stereotype. But the song only works with the accent and inflections Brice brought to it. “Even Jackie Cohen, he’s the man I adore/Had the

nerve to tell me he'd been married before.” If “nerve” isn’t “noyv,” and “before” isn’t “beefaw,” the song loses its essence. The song hit number six on the “Billboard” charts (and number 32 with Streisand’s homage recording 43 years later) and was a staple in Brice’s repertoire for the rest of her career.

“My Man” was something altogether different. The song, first performed in France, is by Maurice Yvain with French lyrics by Jacques-Charles and Albert Willemetz. The English lyrics, written for the “Follies,” are by Channing Pollack. Like Jerome Kern, P.G. Wodehouse and Oscar Hammerstein’s “Bill” from “Showboat” in 1927, the song is one of total devotion to a lover, despite his less than stellar traits (although in the case of “My Man,” the subject is actually abusive while Bill is merely unremarkable). Brice, who was then married to the gangster and gambler Nicky Arnstein, always sang the song holding her left arm with her right and only with her eyes closed, perhaps to distance herself from it. (Arnstein disliked the song; while he did philander, he did not, reportedly, hit. He ultimately blamed the song for breaking them up. “He’s nuts,” responded Brice.) On stage, Brice performed it mournfully, leaning on a lamppost, costumed in a ripped dress and dirty face, as if she’d seen her share of life’s underbelly. The recording, devoid of any setting or context, still aches with pathos. Streisand’s version, which builds to stratospheric belting, helped win her an Academy Award, but in Brice’s hands, the song is understated, halting and matter of fact. While Streisand’s vocals evoke a strength that suggests she had agency, that her devotion is totally her own choice, Brice is a victim, stuck in a relationship we’d now call co-dependent and dysfunctional. Streisand’s rendition brought on goosebumps, Brice’s brought tears. It is that simple version that was number one on the charts and won Brice a posthumous Grammy Hall of Fame Award.

In addition to Streisand’s recording, “My Man” has been covered by Billie Holiday, Peggy Lee, Diana Ross, Whitney Houston, and even Lea Michele on “Glee.”

The two songs (released together in 1922) became Brice’s signatures. She reprised them in the 1928 film, “My Man,” which is now, sadly, lost.

It’s been said that the magic that Fanny Brice brought to the stage was never adequately captured. The ways in which she played to an audience and they, in turn, fed her, needed to be experienced live to fully appreciate her gifts. (Even though Baby Snooks was performed on radio, there was a studio audience, providing that give and take). But these two iconic, essential recordings give us at least some inkling of the unique qualities that made Fanny Brice a legend.

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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.