

# “They Didn’t Believe Me”—Harry Macdonough and Alice Green (1915)

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Essay by James Randall (guest post)\*



*Original label*

“They Didn’t Believe Me” is the earliest of Jerome Kern’s many well-known songs to become a popular standard. Sheet music sales exceeded two million copies and it’s been recorded by hundreds of artists. Like many of the best tunes, it holds up well under a variety of stylistic interpretations. Singers as diverse as Jeanette MacDonald, Frank Sinatra, Dinah Washington, Leontyne Price, and, more recently, Elvis Costello, have all contributed distinct recordings. While some listeners will likely recognize the song from its many lush, down-tempo interpretations, this early version commemorated by the National Recording Registry captures the period flavor and dance-craze origins of the original.

Jerome Kern wrote “They Didn’t Believe Me” for an American production of a British musical comedy, Paul Rubens’ “The Girl from Utah” (1914). By this point, Kern had already been writing songs for over a decade, many of them intended as contributions to “Americanize” Broadway productions of British and European musicals and operetta. “They Didn’t Believe Me” became the break-out hit of the show. As is frequently noted, one of its distinctive qualities is its melding of American and European influences. On the American side, Kern capitalized on rhythms associated with the modern dancing craze of the early 1910s, which spawned a zoo full of so-called “animal dances,” including the grizzly bear, the turkey trot, and the most long-lived of the dances--the foxtrot. In this early instance of a foxtrot ballad, Kern combined the longer, lyrical lines associated with the waltz-duets of operetta with the 4/4, jaunty rhythms associated with the earliest foxtrots. This mash-up of a more European, operetta-like melody over American born dance rhythms would become a signature element of Kern’s later style, most memorably in romantic duets of a similar nature, like “Make Believe” from Kern’s best-known musical, “Show Boat.” The pattern also established a model for show songs by other great contributors to the American songbook, including George Gershwin and Richard Rodgers.

As engaging as the melody is, credit for the song's success must also be attributed to its lyric, penned by the Irish-American writer Michael Elder Rourke. Rourke wrote this and dozens of other period tunes under the name Herbert Reynolds. The flirty, conversational style of the verse actively captures the casual speech of the day: "*Got the cutest little way/Like to watch you all the day.*" It's almost impossible to read these lines, too, without hearing the syncopated rhythm of the song's melody, which jumps out after the downbeat like the well-known ragtime songs of Irving Berlin. The lyric for the chorus, while more expansively romantic and lyrical than that of the verse, still avoids the poetic pretense of many operetta lyrics of the time. The title phrase "They didn't believe me" and its subsequent repetition, "They'll never believe me," also captured a kind of "us-against-the-world" sentiment that aligned well with American identity and modern romance, which teased the possibility of romantic connections transcending older boundaries of social class. The syncopations of the verse are subtly carried forward in the romantic chorus, but in a softer, rhythmically slower pace. The musical durations of the words are longer, allowing the arching melody to float over the bar-to-bar accents of the foxtrot accompaniment. It's worth noting, too, that Kern and Reynolds both defer melodic and lyrical resolution until the very end of the chorus. It's not until then that we hear the tonic note of the key on the downbeat of a bar, which provides both romantic and musical closure. That this resolution occurs on the word "me" is also particularly satisfying, contrasting as it does with earlier repetitions of "They" and "They'll," and accentuating notions of independence and exceptionalism, both qualities that have deep resonance in American popular culture.

The singers featured on the LC Registry recording are Harry Macdonough and Alice Green, both popular recording artists of the 1910s for Victor Records. As was fairly common, both performed under stage names. Canadian by birth, Harry Macdonough (John Scantlebury Macdonald) was one of the great popular tenors of the first two decades of the 20th century. He recorded hundreds of tunes for Victor and several that remain in the American songbook--"Shine On, Harvest Moon," "On the Banks of the Wabash, Far Away," and "Down by the Old Mill Stream." A voice already associated with nostalgic themes, his was a perfect one to imbue "They Didn't Believe Me" with a sense of longing and meaning, themes that were particularly on the minds of Americans with the outbreak of WWI. Alice Green (nee Olive Kline) was a versatile American soprano who recorded in styles ranging from opera, to church music, to pop. Apart from her interpretation of "They Didn't Believe Me," she's best known for her recording of "Hello Frisco" (also from 1915), a topical number that explored the romantic possibilities enabled by the new technology of trans-continental phone service.

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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.