

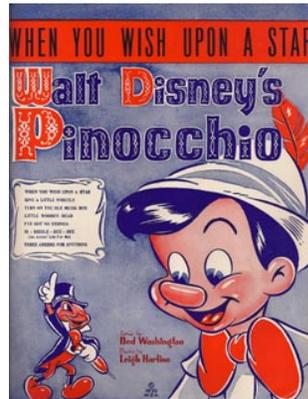
# “When You Wish Upon a Star”—Cliff Edwards (recorded 1938, released 1940)

Added to the National Registry: 2009

Essay by Cary O'Dell



*Cliff Edwards*



*Early sheet music*

Of the spectacularly impressive oeuvre of songs that makes up the Disney catalog (especially today in its post- Elton John era), few are as well-remembered or as beloved as “When You Wish Upon a Star.” It is the Disney company’s official theme song. And though it has been recorded by dozens and dozens of artists from Judy Collins to Olivia Newton-John, Linda Ronstadt, Julie Andrews, Josh Groban, Barbara Cook, N\*SYNC, Patti LaBelle, Louis Armstrong, and even Gene Simmons of KISS, it is the original by Cliff Edwards—subtle and unassuming—that seems to endure.

“When You Wish” was written by Leigh Harline with lyrics by Ned Washington for Disney’s 1940 animated classic “Pinocchio.” Harline (1907-1969), a former music director for an LA radio station, began working for Disney in the 1930s, composing music for the company’s “Silly Symphonies.” Later, he would co-write some of Disney’s best known, most cherished songs including “Whistle While You Work,” “Heigh-Ho,” and “Some Day My Prince Will Come.” After leaving Disney, Harline would go on to write scores for such films as “The Bachelor and the Bobby-Soxer” with Shirley Temple and “Monkey Business” with Marilyn Monroe.

Lyricist Ned Washington (1901-1976) began his career in vaudeville and on Tin Pan Alley before moving to Hollywood in 1934. There he would write scores for such films as “Dumbo,” “The Greatest Show on Earth” and “Miss Sadie Thompson.” Some of his most famous compositions include “I Don’t Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You” and the theme from “High Noon.”

Singer and entertainer Cliff Edwards was born in 1895 in Hannibal, Missouri. He too began in vaudeville and earned his nickname, Ukulele Ike, for his proficiency with the instrument. Edwards would make his first recordings in 1919, and would go on to record some of the top hits of the era including “Ja-Da,” “Hard Hearted Hannah,” “Toot Toot Toostie Goodbye,” “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love,” and “California, Here I Come.” On Broadway, he starred in productions of “Lady Be Good” (with Fred and Adele Astaire), “Sunny” and the “Ziegfeld Follies.”

For Edwards, his recording of “California, Here I Come” was prophetic as “Ike” would eventually relocate to the West Coast. He made his film debut in “The Hollywood Revue of 1929” where he sang his rendition of “Singin’ in the Rain.” Other, mostly forgettable, films followed, though Edwards occasionally got the chance to appear in some “A”-level pictures including “His Girl Friday” and even “Gone With the Wind,” where he was featured as a wounded soldier.

It was his work for Disney though that would give him immortality. In 1940, he was hired by Walt and company to voice the character of Jiminy Cricket, the top-hatted cute little bug with the umbrella, in the animated “Pinocchio.” Edwards was also to sing that film’s lovely, memorable theme song, “When You Wish Upon a Star.” It would go on to win the Oscar that year for Best Song from a motion picture; it was the Disney company’s first win in that category. (Harline and Washington would also win for Best Score for “Pinocchio” that year.)

As memorable as the film and Pinocchio was, it was the character of Jiminy Cricket who seemed to be the film’s break out star. Not only does his (Edwards’s) voice conclude the film but Jiminy, unlike many other Disney characters who were film specific, would return in other works. Cricket would go on to appear in feature films like “Fun and Fancy Free,” shorts like “I’m No Fool,” and make numerous appearances on TV’s “Mickey Mouse Club.”

Along with continuing to voice Jiminy, Cliff Edwards would also appear as the Black Crow in Disney’s big screen “Dumbo,” singing the song “When I See an Elephant Fly.” Along with some additional film appearances, Edwards would briefly have his own TV show over CBS in 1949.

Later life for Edwards, however, was not kind. Three marriages and three divorces along with a spend-thrift nature and drug and alcohol problems greatly affected him. His final years were spent living in a home for indigent actors. When he died in 1971, he was a charity case at a Hollywood hospital. Various show business relief funds paid for his burial while the Disney Corporation, in gratitude to him, purchased his grave marker.

Today, Cliff Edwards has achieved an odd, shadowy sort of fame: while his voice is universally known, his name is a footnote, if not forgotten all together.

Maybe, in some ways, he was too good in his impersonation of that little animated insect. Edwards’s voice fit so well into the persona of Jiminy Cricket that separating one from the other is too hard to fathom. It too severely breaks the dream that exists between animator and audience.

Interestingly, compared to many of the singers who have sung “When You Wish” since, Edwards’s voice is quite limited. His range is minor and he can never truly sustain a note, though he does do a nice falsetto near its conclusion. Yet, for all of Edwards’s general vocal short-comings, there are few other versions of “When You Wish” that can compare to his in sheer heart-tugging effectiveness. Even the addition of a rather schmaltzy back-up chorus chiming in about halfway through the number cannot diminish the quiet, soft-stated beauty of Edwards’s rendition.

Like much of the music on the National Registry, to which Edwards’s “When You Wish Upon a Star” was added in 2009, it is not just the artistic power of the original recording which makes it worthy of remembrance. It is also the importance and power since assigned to the song by listeners, young and old, who infuse it with their own memories of childhood, theme park evenings and early afternoon matinees.

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