

Famous New Yorker Harold Arlen

Harold Arlen wrote the music for what many consider the greatest American pop song of the 20th century. His own life story was an American myth come to life.

Harold Arlen was born Hyman Arluck in Buffalo on February 15, 1905. Like the Jazz Singer of the first movie musical, Hyman was a cantor's son who preferred American jazz to Jewish sacred music. At age 16, he dropped out of high school to play piano in silent movie theaters and local jazz bands.

Hyman joined the Buffalodians, a successful dance band. They toured the Northeast, playing from Cleveland to New York City. He published his first song in 1924 and made his first recording with the Buffalodians in 1926. His talent inspired Fletcher Henderson, the band leader at New York's famous Roseland dance club, to hire Hyman to arrange songs for him.

Hyman Arluck wanted to be a jazz singer. Changing his name – “Arlen” was a blend of Arluck and Orlin, his mother's maiden name – Harold joined the Arnold Johnson Band as a vocalist. He later sang as a solo act, but proved more successful as a songwriter. While filling in for Henderson as a rehearsal pianist for the Broadway show *Great Day!* Arlen impressed the producers with his musical improvisations. They teamed him with lyricist Ted Koehler to put words to a tune he had improvised. The song, “Get Happy,” premiered in the 1930 *Nine-Fifteen Revue* and was Harold Arlen's first hit.

Koehler was the first of many lyricists who put words to Arlen's music. They wrote songs together for Harlem's legendary Cotton Club. Many of those songs, including “Stormy Weather” and “I've Got the World on a String,” remain popular today. Arlen's most important writing partner was E. Y. “Yip” Harburg. Arlen and Harburg eventually went to Hollywood to write songs for the movies. Their biggest project was an unlikely choice for jazz musicians, a movie version of L. Frank Baum's fantasy *The Wizard of Oz*.

Arlen and Harburg had two months to write the movie's songs. They quickly produced comic tunes like “Ding! Dong! The Witch is Dead!” and “If I Only Had a Brain,” but Arlen felt that the film needed an emotional ballad for star Judy Garland. After a sudden inspiration while riding in a car, he persuaded a skeptical Harburg that “Over the Rainbow” was an appropriate song for Dorothy, the little girl played by Garland. It was harder for Arlen to persuade the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studio that the song didn't slow the movie down. When the studio cut the song from the picture after a sneak preview, Arlen struggled to get it reinstated.

“Over the Rainbow” earned Arlen and Harburg an Academy Award for the Best Original Song of 1939. Generations of singers have kept the song popular ever since. It was named the #1 movie song of all time by the American Film Institute and the top song of the 20th century by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Recording Industry Association of America. Harold Arlen would create more hit songs with other collaborators until his death on April 23, 1986, but his place in the history of American popular music was already secure.



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Buffalo, located in Erie County, sits on the east shore of Lake Erie at the beginning of the Niagara River, which flows northward over Niagara Falls into Lake Ontario.

To listen to Harold Arlen's music go online to www.allmusic.com/search/all/harold+Arlen. This is one of a series of Famous New Yorker profiles written by Kevin Gilbert for the NYNPA-Newspaper In Education. All rights reserved 2013.