

Richard Rodgers at 100

By Jim Linz

Shortly before the world went crazy celebrating the 25th anniversary of the death of Elvis Presley, a far more significant anniversary—the 100th birthday of composer Richard Rodgers—passed virtually unnoticed.

Growing up in the 1950s, one could not avoid knowing Rodgers and Hammerstein for their “older” musicals—*Carousel*, *Oklahoma*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I*—were staples at Gaithersburg’s Shady Grove Dinner Theatre while their newer works—*Flower Drum Song* and *The Sound of Music*—appeared at the National Theatre.

It was not until the 1960s, however, that I became aware of Richard Rodgers’ earlier, and in my opinion, best work. My favorite vocal group at the time—The Mamas and the Papas—had just released a new album, including a solo—*Sing for Your Supper*—by Washingtonian Mama Cass Elliot. It was written in 1938 by Rodgers and Hart.

As Mama Cass set out on her own, she continued to include Rodgers and Hart tunes—including the 1927 *My Heart Stood Still*—in her repertoire. My admiration for both Mama Cass and Richard Rodgers continued to grow.

Richard Rodgers was born June 28, 1902 in New York City. At age 16, he was introduced to lyricist Lorenz Hart by a mutual acquaintance and the two quickly collaborated on songs for an amateur club show. By 1920, Rodgers and Hart were writing for Broadway, London, and Hollywood, although initially with limited success.

Their break came in 1925 when the *Garrick Gaieties* opened on Broadway for a one-week run and closed after 200 performances. During the 1920s Rodgers and Hart wrote the music and lyrics for an average of two new shows every season, including *Poor Little Ritz Girl*, *Dearest Enemy*, *Peggy-Ann*, *A Connecticut Yankee*, and *Chee-Chee*.

They turned their attention to Hollywood in the early 1930s, writing the scores for such films as *Love Me Tonight* starring Maurice Chevalier, *Hallelujah, I’m a Bum* starring Al Jolson, and *The Phantom President* starring George M. Cohan. In addition to the title song, *Love Me Tonight* contains one of my all time favorite Rodgers and Hart tunes—*Isn’t It Romantic*.

In one of the more unusual collaborations, Rodgers and Hart wrote the score for an MGM musical called *I Married An Angel* only to have MGM drop the project. Rodgers and Hart converted the score into a successful 1938 Broadway play and then sold the film rights to the musical back to MGM.

Rodgers and Hart returned to New York in 1934 to collaborate on the circus extravaganza *Jumbo*. What followed was a series of smash hits on Broadway—*On Your Toes* (1936), *Babes in Arms* (1937), *I'd Rather be Right* (1937), *I Married an Angel* (1938), *The Boys From Syracuse* (1938), *Too Many Girls* (1939), *Higher and Higher* (1940), *Pal Joey* (1940), and *By Jupiter* (1942).

Lorenz Hart's increasing personal problems led Rodgers to a collaboration with a new lyricist—Oscar Hammerstein II—in 1943 even as he continued to work with Hart on a revival of *A Connecticut Yankee*. Hart died just 5 days after the premiere.

Rodgers' first effort with Hammerstein—*Oklahoma*—was a smash. Thus began what most view as the most successful partnership in the history of the Broadway musical. *Oklahoma* was followed by *Carousel* (1945), *Allegro* (1947), *South Pacific* (1949), *The King and I* (1951), *Me and Juliet* (1953), *Pipe Dream* (1955), *Flower Drum Song* (1958), and *The Sound of Music* (1959). They also wrote the musical score for the movie *State Fair* (1945) and the TV musical *Cinderella* (1957).

Together, Rodgers and Hammerstein won 34 Tony awards, 15 Academy Awards, two Pulitzer Prizes, two Grammy Awards, and two Emmy Awards. They were selected as among the 20 most influential artists of the 20th century.

Rodgers continued to compose after Hammerstein's death in 1960, working with a number of lyricists, including Steven Sondheim (*Do I Hear a Waltz?*) and Martin Charnin (*Two by Two; I Remember Mama*). His first solo effort—*No Strings*—won Rodgers Tony Awards for both his music and lyrics.

Among Rodgers most memorable scores was that to the 1952 television documentary, *Victory at Sea*.

Richard Rodgers died December 30, 1979 at the age of 77. In 1990, Broadway's 46th Street Theatre was renamed the Richard Rodgers Theatre. Its lobby houses a permanent exhibit honoring Rodgers contributions.