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Irving Berlin Songs Rouse Patriotic Fervor, Touch Hearts

by Daniel Gewertz

In the weeks after Sept. 11, our national spirit was lightened by a surprising cultural hero: a small, Russian Jewish immigrant from Siberia named Israel Baline, better known by his showbiz name, Irving Berlin.

"God Bless America" is but one song among 1,500 he composed in a 60-year career. But, like his "White Christmas" and "Easter Parade," it's a song that seems as timeless as a folk song and as emotionally riveting as an anthem.

"Because of his life experiences, Berlin was able to bridge so many different segments of American culture: old world, new world, military, civilian, downtown, uptown, Tin Pan Alley, Broadway and Hollywood," said Will McMillan.

"He was Jewish. His immigrant dad was a part-time cantor. But he also became the husband of a wealthy Irish-American society gal," said McMillan. "His songs became windows into these different worlds."

McMillan is presenting a performance/lecture on Berlin at the Cambridge Center for Adult Education at 10:30 a.m. Thursday, along with pianist Henry Schniewind and singer Bobbi Carrey.

"They feel so personal to those who sing them. Rudy Vallee sang Berlin's 'Say it Isn't So' on his radio show in hopes that his estranged wife would come back to him," said Carrey.

Boston is blessed with several Berlin experts on its cabaret scene.

The veteran duo Lynne Jackson & Mike Palter recently released "Irving Berlin's America," a stylish, live album. In a startling coincidence, the CD was named, and its American flag cover printed, before the events of Sept. 11. It's a witty, elegantly sung and arranged work, with jazz underpinning.

The duo of Benjamin Sears and Bradford Conner has released the third of seven projected albums chronicling Berlin's composing life. "She's So Beautiful" takes up the Ziegfeld Follies era of 1910-1927. In addition to well-known songs such as "A Pretty Girl is Like a Melody" and "Blue Skies," there are a dozen quaint obscurities.

Cannily reviving the jaunty vaudeville and sentimental light-opera styles that existed in the ragtime era, Sears and Conner are exhaustive researchers. As part of their fieldwork they contacted ex-Ziegfeld chorus girl Doris Eaton, 97, who danced the Berlin hit song "Mandy" in the 1919 Follies. Next week Sears and Conner will give a Berlin lecture at the Society for American Music, in Lexington, Ky.

"Berlin had an amazing ability to reinvent himself as the styles changed, starting in 1907 when he was a 19-year-old singing waiter and he published an ethnic song called 'Marie From Sunny Italy,'" said Sears.

With witty gems as "Puttin' On The Ritz," "Top Hat," and "Cheek to Cheek," Berlin could match the Gershwin Brothers for urbane polish. But it's his simple, emotional heart-grabbers — songs that can be sung by everyone — that are his truest legacy.

"What he achieved so brilliantly was distilling a sentiment down to its purest essence," said Conner. "Whoever sings them, those songs take on their own meaning. They're like folk songs. You can't even remember when you learned them."

"'God Bless America' and 'White Christmas' go right for the heart and stay there," Sears said.

"'God Bless America' was written during World War I, when Berlin was a soldier, stationed on Long Island. But it wasn't sung in public until 1938, a fearful time like today, when, as the introductory verse says, storm clouds were gathering overseas."

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