



# Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot: The Formative Years, 1907-1914

*Charles Hamm*

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Irving Berlin remains a central figure in American music, a lyricist/composer whose songs are loved all over the world. His first piece, "Marie from Sunny Italy," was written in 1907, and his "Alexander's Ragtime Band" attracted more public and media attention than any other song of its decade. In later years Berlin wrote such classics as "God Bless America," "Blue Skies," "Always," "Cheek to Cheek," and the holiday favorites "White Christmas" and "Easter Parade." Jerome Kern, his fellow songwriter, commented that "Irving Berlin is American music."

In *Irving Berlin: The Formative Years*, Charles Hamm traces the early years of this most famous and distinctive American songwriter. Beginning with Berlin's immigrant roots--he came to New York in 1893 from Russia--Hamm shows how the young Berlin quickly revealed the talent for music and lyrics that was to mark his entire career. Berlin first wrote for the vaudeville stage, turning out songs that drew on the various ethnic cultures of the city. These pieces, with their Jewish, Italian, German, Irish, and Black protagonists singing in appropriate dialects, reflected the urban mix of New York's melting pot. Berlin drew on various musical styles, especially ragtime, for such songs as "Alexander's Ragtime Band," and Hamm devotes an entire chapter to the song and its success. The book also details Berlin's early efforts to write for the Broadway musical stage, culminating in 1914 with his first musical comedy, *Watch Your Step*, featuring the popular dance team, Vernon and Irene Castle. A great hit on Broadway and in London, the show was a key piece in the Americanization of the musical comedy. Blessed with prodigious ambition and energy, Berlin wrote at least 4 or 5 new songs a week, many of which were discarded. He nevertheless published 190 songs between 1907 and 1914, an astonishing number considering that when Berlin arrived in America, he knew not a single word of English. As one writer reported, "there is scarcely a waking moment when Berlin is not engaged either in teaching his songs to a vaudeville player, or composing new ones."

Early in his career, Irving Berlin brilliantly exploited the musical trends and influences of the day. Hamm shows how Berlin emerged from the vital and complex social and cultural scene of New York to begin his rise as America's foremost songwriter.



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