

Singin' in the Rain (1952) Donen & Kelly

P Michell, 2023

*Wonderful music, terrific acting, comedic script – what more does one want in a movie!
A treat for the eyes and ears!*

Set in 1927 during the transition from silent to sound films. During the 'new' talking pictures Hollywood. Don Lockwood (Kelly) has risen to become a famous swashbuckler in silent movies. [Note early pastiche in the film.] His leading lady Lina Lamont (Hagen) has a one-way love for him. Lockwood's 'cohort in crime' is Cosmo Brown (O'Connor). Kathy Selden (Reynolds) has to secretly voice the leading actress in the new sound film. Eventually all is revealed and a 'new star is born'!

As well as being the foil [pun] of Gene Kelly (in real life too), O'Connor's 'Cosmo' has some of the best lines!

SIR is one of the greatest achievements of the musical film genre due to its exploration of the relationship of music to plot. Musical numbers advance the film and the understanding of the characters. Development of the movie musical was to take musical numbers away from the stage and make them part of everyday. (SIR starts the film on stage and ends with 'real' life numbers. Though the title number is confusing.)

This is explored here:

<https://filmmusicnotes.com/love-and-music-in-singin-in-the-rain/>

[See Analysis for ET take on the 70th anniversary of the film in 2022.]

Memorable for many musical numbers – most famous being the title number with Kelly in puddles and O'Connor's 'Make 'em Laugh'. However, the other numbers do not lag at all in this fast paced movie – 'Good Morning' and 'You Were meant for Me', 'Moses Supposes'. Interestingly the film pauses with The 'Broadway Rhythm'. Musical numbers come quickly and are interspersed with zany and zappy dialogue! Suave Kelly versus Down to Earth O'Connor.

A true measure of its influence is how often it is referenced in other movies- including A Clockwork Orange.

Singin' in the Rain – The stage Musical – was a huge success about twenty years ago.

It was shot for a cost of \$2.5 million (about \$.5 million over-budget), was basically ignored by film critics when released and treated with indifference (with box-office of \$7.7 worldwide). It received only two Academy Award nominations - Best Supporting Actress (Jean Hagen), and Best Musical Score (Lennie Hayton) and didn't win any awards. The film's musical score Oscar nomination lost to Alfred Newman's score for *With a Song in My Heart*.

The film has been continuously re-discovered for some thirty years. Soon after release by the French critics; then influential critic Pauline Kael in late 1950s, TV screenings, then again by university students in the 1960s and after the release of *That's Entertainment* (1974). It is often chosen as one of the all-time top ten American films, and generally considered Hollywood's greatest and finest screen musical. Great care was made to authenticate the costumes, the sound studio set, and other historical details in the film.

Creative Personnel

Arthur Freed – Producer / Lyricist (52 / 22 credits)

Hugely influential on the Hollywood Musical genre.

American lyricist and a Hollywood film producer. He won the [Academy Award for Best Picture](#) twice, in 1951 for *An American in Paris* and in 1958 for *Gigi*. Both films were musicals, and both were directed by [Vincente Minnelli](#). In addition, he produced the film *Singin' in the Rain*, the soundtrack for which primarily consisted of songs he co-wrote earlier in his career.

From the late 1930s to the early 1960s, producer Arthur Freed produced more than forty musicals for MGM. The creative forces at the studio in the Freed Unit - composed of Freed, Vincente Minnelli, Stanley Donen, and actor/choreographer Gene Kelly - also collaborated together to produce such gems as *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944), *The Pirate* (1948), *On the Town* (1949), Best Picture Oscar-winner a year earlier with director Vincente Minnelli - *An American in Paris* (1951), *Royal Wedding* (1951), *Seven Brides for Seven Brothers* (1954), and *Gigi* (1958).

Shirley Temple, late in life, accused Freed of exposing himself and thus left MGM after one picture.

Like the character of Cosmo Brown, producer [Arthur Freed](#) was once employed as a mood-music pianist who played on movie sets during the silent film era.

“Thoreau said most of us lead lives of quiet desperation. Pictures should make you feel better, not worse.”

Comden & Green – Scriptwriters (16 / 15 credits)

Their 60-year collaboration was such that many believed Betty Comden and Adolph Green, whose musicals won five Tony Awards, were married. Instead, the beautiful music they made together graced the stage and screen, and included the classic Broadway musical "On the Town" and the film "Singin' in the Rain." On Broadway, Comden and Green (the billing was always alphabetical) worked most successfully with composers Leonard Bernstein, Jule Styne and Cy Coleman. The duo wrote lyrics and often the books for more than a dozen shows, many of them built around such stars as Rosalind Russell, Judy Holliday, Phil Silvers, Carol Burnett and Lauren Bacall. Among their Tonys, three were for best musical for their shows "Wonderful Town," "Hallelujah, Baby!" and "Applause." The duo received the Kennedy Center honors in 1991.

"It's a kind of radar," Comden once said of her partnership with Green. "We don't divide the work up, taking different scenes. We sit in the same room always. I used to write things down in shorthand. I now sit at the typewriter. Adolph paces more. A lot of people don't believe this, but at the end of the day we usually don't remember who thought up what."

The time frame of Comden's and Green's script, the Roaring 20s Era of flappers, was mostly determined by the fact that lyricist Freed (and songwriter Nacio Herb Brown) had written their extensive library of songs in their early careers during the 1920s and 1930s, when Hollywood was transitioning to talkies. The musical comedy's story, then, would be best suited around that theme. Except for two songs, all of the musical arrangements in the film to be showcased were composed by Freed and Brown for different Hollywood films before Freed became a producer.

[The title song was originally created by lyricist Arthur Freed and composer Nacio Herb Brown for MGM's *Hollywood Revue of 1929* (1929). The general storyline of the film was derived from *Once in a Lifetime* (1932), a hilarious adaptation of the Moss Hart-George S. Kaufman play also set during the time of panic surrounding Hollywood's transition to talkies.]

The screenwriters bought a house in Hollywood from a former silent film star who lost his wealth when the innovation of sound film killed his career. This was part of the inspiration for the film.

Stanely Donen – Co-Director

While working on Broadway, as an assistant choreographer in 1941, he met and befriended the actor [Gene Kelly](#), Kelly being the brash, extrovert and energetic side of the burgeoning partnership, Donen the more refined and relaxed. Three years later, the two men renewed their collaboration in Hollywood and did much to reinvigorate the musical genre. For the next decade, they worked side-by-side as choreographers and co-directors (a relationship Donen described as 'wonderful' but 'also trying at times'), linked to MGM's [Arthur Freed](#) unit. Between them, they directed classic musicals like [On the Town \(1949\)](#) and [Singin' in the Rain \(1952\)](#) and co-wrote the original story for [Take Me Out to the Ball Game \(1949\)](#). Freed gave artists like Kelly and Donen free rein to express their creative flair. Later made *Two for the Road* (1967) and *Charade* (1963) – the best film Alfred Hitchcock never directed!

If we remade [Singin' in the Rain \(1952\)](#) today, when [Gene Kelly](#) sings in the rain, I think he'd be looking around to make sure he wasn't going to get mugged. For me directing is like having sex: when it's good, it's very good; but when it's bad, it's still good.

Music – Nacio Herb Brown (26 credits)

At least 30 published songs for Broadway and Hollywood not including later TV music – Hopplalong Cassidy.

Mexican. Began in Hollywood in 1920, then worked at MGM from 1928 often with Arthur Freed. His music abounds in the film mostly from the twenties and thirties.

Harold Rossen – Cinematographer (155 credits)

Famous for his B&W and Technicolor work inc Asphalt Jungle, Wizard of Oz, SIR, Burning of Atlanta for Gone with the Wind, Trolley Song from Meet me in St Louis.

Donald O'Connor – Cosmo Brown (88 credits)

Born into a vaudeville family, O'Connor was the youthful figure cutting a rug in several Universal musicals of the 1940s. Popular actor specialising in musicals and later Francis the Talking Mule. With collapse of studio system in late 1950s he worked in TV – 'Donald O'Connor Show' (1954-1960).

Cosmo performs a wacky but memorable sequence, an amusing, acrobatic, highly energetic *tour-de-force* number, entitled "Make 'Em Laugh."

Allegedly did not enjoy working with [Gene Kelly](#), because he found him to be rather a tyrant on set.

Debbie Reynolds – Cathy Seldon (88 credits)

Was Miss Burbank, third MGM film. Reynolds wasn't a dancer until she was selected to be [Gene Kelly](#)'s partner in [Singin' in the Rain \(1952\)](#). Not yet twenty, she was a quick learner. Twelve years later, it seemed like she had been around forever. Most of her early film work was in MGM musicals, as perky, wholesome young women. She continued to use her dancing skills with stage work. Developed a huge Hollywood costume museum. (Now partly dispersed.)

She died only one day after the death of her daughter [Carrie Fisher](#) [Star Wars].

Quotes

Film is full of sarcastically funny lines from Comden & Green. Very much part of its appeal! Here's a small selection often using Donald O'Connor's wonderfully timed delivery.

[Cosmo Brown](#): Lina. She can't act, she can't sing, she can't dance. A triple threat.

[*Don Lockwood is being mobbed by several fans on the street*]

[Don Lockwood](#): [*desperately*] Hey, Cos! Do something! Call me a cab!

[Cosmo Brown](#): OK, you're a cab

[Don Lockwood](#): [*unimpressed*] Thanks a lot!

Cosmo: Talking pictures, that means I'm out of a job. At last I can start suffering and write that symphony.

[R.F. Simpson](#): You're not out of job, we're putting you in as head of our new music department.

[Cosmo Brown](#): Oh, thanks, R.F.! At last I can stop suffering and write that symphony.

[Rod](#): Lina, you're a beautiful woman. Audiences think you've got a voice to match. The studio's gotta keep their stars from looking ridiculous at any cost.

[Cosmo Brown](#): Nobody's got that much money.

Trivia

The following shows how important small things can come to create the whole!

SIR suggests that every studio started making Talkies after [The Jazz Singer \(1927\)](#) was released, but even the major studios balked at the idea. At the most, studios would release two Talkies a year, but they still released them also as Silents, as most cinemas were not equipped for Talkie films. Talkies were believed to be just a fad. The last Silent film was made in 1936, ten years after The Jazz Singer came out.

This film was well received by theatergoers but recalled from Lowe's Theaters by the spring of 1952, so as to not compete with the reissue of [An American in Paris \(1951\)](#), which also starred [Gene Kelly](#). It was commonplace, at that time, for a film to have a second run after winning an Academy Award, as it did for Best Picture.

The rain number was put in because of the film title. The public would feel cheated if there was no dancing in rain! Milk or ink was mixed with the rain to make it more visual.

In the looping sequence, Kathy Selden ([Debbie Reynolds](#)) is seen dubbing the dialogue for Lina Lamont ([Jean Hagen](#)) because Lina's voice is shrill and screechy. However, it's not Reynolds who is speaking, it's [Jean Hagen](#) herself, who actually had a beautiful deep, rich voice. So you have [Jean Hagen](#) dubbing [Debbie Reynolds](#) dubbing [Jean Hagen](#). And when Debbie is supposedly dubbing Jean's singing of "Would You?" the voice you hear singing actually belongs to [Betty Noyes](#), who had a much richer singing voice than Debbie.

The script was written after the songs, and so the writers had to generate a plot into which the songs would fit.

The last shot of the "Good Morning" number, with Don, Kathy, and Cosmo falling over the couch, took 40 takes to shoot.

The film rang up a final price tag of \$2,540,800, \$157,000 of which went to [Walter Plunkett](#)'s costumes alone. Although the final price overshot MGM's

budget by \$665,000, the studio quickly realized the wisdom of its investment when the film returned a \$7.7-million profit upon its initial release.

The "Make 'em Laugh" sequence was created because [Gene Kelly](#) felt that [Donald O'Connor](#) needed a solo number. As O'Connor noted in an interview, "Gene didn't have a clue as to the kind of number it was meant to be." ("Supposedly" it was suppose to be "The Wedding of the Painted Doll", though it was moved to Scene 7.) The two of them brainstormed ideas in the rehearsal room, and came up with a compendium of gags and "shtick" that O'Connor had done for years, some of which he had performed in vaudeville. O'Connor recalled, "Every time I got a new idea or remembered something that had worked well for me in the past, Gene wrote it down and, bit by bit, the entire number was constructed."

The role of Cosmo was written with [Oscar Levant](#) in mind, but was eventually given to [Donald O'Connor](#).

Before this film, [Cyd Charisse](#) had appeared in films as a "dance specialty" or as a supporting player since her arrival at MGM in 1944. Her torrid performance as the [Louise Brooks](#)-like vamp in the "Broadway Ballet" was so revelatory that producer Arthur Freed was moved to elevate her to star status. Her next film was [The Band Wagon \(1953\)](#), in which she co-starred with [Fred Astaire](#).

Filming of the "Crazy Veil" section of the "Broadway Ballet" had to be stopped for several hours after it was discovered that [Cyd Charisse](#)'s pubic hair was visible through her costume. When the problem was finally fixed, the film's costume designer [Walter Plunkett](#) apparently said, "It's okay, guys, we've finally got Cyd's crotch licked."

The role of the ditzy movie diva Lina Lamont was written with [Judy Holliday](#) in mind. Holliday was a close friend of [Betty Comden](#) and [Adolph Green](#), and they even modeled the character on routines they had worked up with Holliday back when they were part of a satirical group called The Revuers in New York. Timing was everything, however, and the idea of casting Holliday was vetoed after she hit it big in [Born Yesterday \(1950\)](#). Everyone figured she'd be uninterested in the supporting part but, as it turned out, [Jean Hagen](#), Holliday's understudy on Broadway for "Born Yesterday", got the part. Additionally, both Holliday and Hagen had worked together in [Adam's Rib \(1949\)](#) both in key supporting roles, Hagen playing a woman involved with Judy's husband. Hagen's speech in that film was similar in "pitch" to what she later exhibited as Lina Lamont .

[Arthur Freed](#)'s song "Make 'Em Laugh" bore a striking similarity to [Cole Porter](#)'s "Be a Clown" from the producer's [The Pirate \(1948\)](#). although no one ever accused him of plagiarism.

A favorite film of French auteurs [François Truffaut](#) and [Alain Resnais](#).

Analysis

Gene Kelly Shares Backstory of 'Singin' in the Rain' Number That Broke Hollywood's Musical Clichés (Flashback)

The legendary song and dance man opened up to Entertainment Tonight about filming the musical's iconic number.

Joe Bergren, 2022.

Singin' in the Rain is considered a cinema classic, due in part to Gene Kelly's iconic song and dance performance of the movie's titular musical number. And 70 years later, imagery from the scene continues to be a visual shorthand for Old Hollywood at its best.

Kelly opened up to ET's Leonard Maltin about filming the memorable sequence in 1994, two years before his death at age 83. When stacked up against his many notable on-screen tap dances, such as *Thousands Cheer*, *The Pirate* and *Anchors Aweigh* to name a few, the actor said the 1952 movie's title number didn't present a challenge.

"It was an easy number, dance-wise. It was a scene," Kelly explained. "It had a beginning, a middle, and an end."

While he may not have broken a sweat from the choreography, an oft noted anecdote claims Kelly was running a fever on the set. But decades later, he believed the scene's camera operator "had the toughest part" behind the scenes, as they were responsible for back-lighting the rain to ensure precipitation would show up onscreen.

As Kelly recalled, he approached the performance by tapping into his inner child.

"The whole thing had to be done like a child in a state of euphoria," he said. "His mother says, 'Don't jump in the puddles.' And we all wanted to do that all our lives. The guy was so much in love, he did it."

In a movie full of tributes and homages to Hollywood's early years, Kelly also wanted to transcend well-known musical tropes. One such trademark he cited was characters breaking into songs with little to no organic segues or gradual buildup. With 'Singin' in the Rain,' Kelly described how they "sneaked into" the sequence and "broke that old cliché" after Don gives Kathy a goodnight kiss.

"I came out. It was raining. And I looked at the rain and sent the car home with the chauffeur. And I started to get wet. And I started to hum. And, finally, I came into singing," he said (Kelly also co-directed *Singin' in the Rain* with his *On the Town* collaborator, Stanley Donen).

As the movie celebrates its 70th anniversary this week, Kelly remains an icon decades later and the gold standard for today's high-profile triple-threats. *Dancing With the Stars* pro Derek Hough says **he often asks himself**, "What would Gene do in this moment?..." Justin Timberlake **paid tribute to the late actor** at the Academy's Centennial Tribute to Gene Kelly in 2012. "Make no mistake. This remarkable, remarkable presence remains so vivid in the world of film and dance, especially for someone like me," Timberlake said. The 'Suit and Tie' singer went as far as to boldly refer to Kelly's 'Singin' in the Rain' performance as "the single most iconic dance number of all time."

And in a time of *Mank*, *La La Land* and **Damien Chazelle's** upcoming *Babylon*, Hollywood might never tire of celebrating its days of yore. Even Kelly's personal contributions to cinema are on track to be honored by way of **Chris Evans, who's set to play the man himself on the big screen**. The movie, which is still in development, is about a 12-year-old boy who works on the MGM lot in 1952, and creates an imagined friendship with Kelly, who is working on his next film (it should be noted that while *Singin' in the Rain* hasn't been officially confirmed to be part of the story, the project takes place in the same year it hit theaters).

While speaking with ET in 1986, O'Connor shared his estimation as to why *Singin' in the Rain* became a classic. "It's because of the effort that was put into it. That comes across on the screen," the *Francis* star said. "They had somebody looking over this picture. They really did, because it came together beautifully. It was well thought out and it worked."

According to Kelly's co-director, there's no single formulaic explanation for the movie's enduring popularity and timeless qualities.

"You can't set out to make something that's gonna be great," Donen told ET in 1986. "You just do your job and whatever happens, happens."

But when asked why multigenerational audiences continue loving the Hollywood spoof, he did make a point to observe, "It makes them laugh."

Reviews

Roger Ebert (1999)

There is no movie musical more fun than "Singin' in the Rain," and few that remain as fresh over the years. Its originality is all the more startling if you reflect that only one of its songs was written new for the film, that the producers plundered MGM's storage vaults for sets and props, and that the movie was originally ranked below "[An American in Paris](#)," which won a best picture Oscar. The verdict of the years knows better than Oscar: "Singin' in the Rain" is a transcendent experience, and no one who loves movies can afford to miss it.

The film is above all lighthearted and happy. The three stars--[Gene Kelly](#), Donald [O'Connor](#) and 19-year-old Debbie Reynolds--must have rehearsed endlessly for their dance numbers, which involve alarming acrobatics, but in performance they're giddy with joy. Kelly's soaking-wet "Singin' in the Rain" dance number is "the single most memorable dance number on film," [Peter Wollen](#) wrote in a British Film Institute monograph. I'd call it a tie with Donald O'Connor's breathtaking "Make 'em Laugh" number, in which he manhandles himself like a cartoon character.

Kelly and O'Connor were established stars when the film was made in 1952. Debbie Reynolds was a newcomer with five previous smaller roles, and this was her big break. She has to keep up with two veteran hoofers, and does; note the determination on her pert little face as she takes giant strides when they all march toward a couch in the "Good Morning" number.

"Singin' in the Rain" pulses with life; in a movie about making movies, you can sense the joy they had making this one. It was co-directed by [Stanley Donen](#), then only 28, and Kelly, who supervised the choreography. Donen got an honorary Oscar in 1998, and stole the show by singing "Cheek to Cheek" while dancing with his statuette. He started in movies at 17, in 1941, as an assistant to Kelly, and they collaborated on "On the Town" (1949) when he was only 25. His other credits include "Funny Face" and "Seven Brides for Seven Brothers."

One of this movie's pleasures is that it's really about something. Of course it's about romance, as most musicals are, but it's also about the film industry in a period of dangerous transition. The movie simplifies the changeover from silents to talkies, but doesn't falsify it. Yes, cameras were housed in soundproof booths, and microphones were hidden almost in plain view. And, yes, preview audiences did laugh when they first heard the voices of some famous stars; "Garbo Talks!" the ads promised, but her co-star, John Gilbert, would have been better off keeping his mouth shut. The movie opens and closes at sneak previews, has sequences on sound stages and in dubbing studios, and kids the way the studios manufactured romances between their stars.

When producer [Arthur Freed](#) and writers Betty Comdon and [Adolph Green](#) were assigned to the project at MGM, their instructions were to recycle a group of songs the studio already owned, most of them written by Freed himself, with Nacio Herb Brown. Comdon and Green noted that the songs came from the period when silent films were giving way to sound, and they decided to make a musical about the birth of the talkies. That led to the character of Lina Lamont ([Jean Hagen](#)), the blond bombshell with the voice like fingernails on a blackboard.

Hagen in fact had a perfectly acceptable voice, which everyone in Hollywood knew; maybe that helped her win an Oscar nomination for best supporting actress. ("Singin' " was also nominated for its score, but won neither Oscar--a slow start for a film that placed 10th on the American Film Institute list of 100 great films, and was voted the

fourth greatest film of all time in the Sight & Sound poll.) She plays a caricatured dumb blond, who believes she's in love with her leading man, Don Lockwood (Kelly), because she read it in a fan magazine. She gets some of the funniest lines ("What do they think I am? Dumb or something? Why, I make more money than Calvin Coolidge put together!").

Kelly and O'Connor had dancing styles that were more robust and acrobatic than the grandmaster, [Fred Astaire](#). O'Connor's "Make 'em Laugh" number remains one of the most amazing dance sequences ever filmed -- a lot of it in longer takes. He wrestles with a dummy, runs up walls and does backflips, tosses his body around like a rag doll, turns cartwheels on the floor, runs into a brick wall and a lumber plank, and crashes through a backdrop.

Kelly was the mastermind behind the final form of the "Singin' in the Rain" number, according to Wollen's study. The original screenplay placed it later in the film and assigned it to all three stars (who can be seen singing it together under the opening titles). Kelly snagged it for a solo and moved it up to the point right after he and young Kathy Selden (Reynolds) realize they're falling in love. That explains the dance: He doesn't mind getting wet, because he's besotted with romance. Kelly liked to design dances that grew out of the props and locations at hand. He dances with the umbrella, swings from a lamppost, has one foot on the curb and the other in the gutter, and in the scene's high point, simply jumps up and down in a rain puddle.

Other dance numbers also use real props. Kelly and O'Connor, taking elocution lessons from a voice teacher, to "Moses Supposes" while balancing on tabletops and chairs (it was the only song written specifically for the movie). "Good Morning" uses the kitchen and living areas of Lockwood's house (ironically, a set built for a John Gilbert movie). Early in the film, Kelly climbs a trolley and leaps into Kathy's convertible. Outtakes of the leap show Kelly missing the car on one attempt and landing in the street.

The story line is suspended at the two-thirds mark for the movie's set piece, "Broadway Ballet," an elaborate fantasy dance number starring Kelly and [Cyd Charisse](#). It's explained as a number Kelly is pitching to the studio, about a gawky kid who arrives on Broadway with a big dream ("Gotta Dance!"), and clashes with a gangster's leggy girlfriend. MGM musicals liked to stop the show for big production numbers, but it's possible to enjoy "Broadway Ballet" and still wonder if it's really needed; it stops the headlong energy dead in its tracks for something more formal and considered.

The climax ingeniously uses strategies that the movie has already planted, to shoot down the dim Lina and celebrate fresh-faced Kathy. After a preview audience cheers Lina's new film (her voice dubbed by Kathy), she's trapped into singing onstage. Kathy reluctantly agrees to sing into a backstage mike while Lina mouths the words, and then her two friends join the studio boss in raising the curtain so the audience sees the trick. Kathy flees down the aisle--but then, in one of the great romantic moments in the movies, she's held in foreground closeup while Lockwood, onstage, cries out, "Ladies and gentlemen, stop that girl! That girl running up the aisle! That's the girl whose voice you

heard and loved tonight! She's the real star of the picture--Kathy Selden!" It's corny, but it's perfect.

The magic of "Singin' in the Rain" lives on, but the Hollywood musical didn't learn from its example. Instead of original, made-for-the-movies musicals like this one (and "An American in Paris," and "[The Band Wagon](#)"), Hollywood started recycling pre-sold Broadway hits. That didn't work, because Broadway was aiming for an older audience (many of its hits were showcases for ageless female legends). Most of the good modern musicals have drawn directly from new music, as "[A Hard Day's Night](#)," "[Saturday Night Fever](#)" and "Pink Floyd the Wall" did. Meanwhile, "Singin' in the Rain" remains one of the few movies to live up to its advertising. "What a glorious feeling!" the posters said. It was the simple truth.