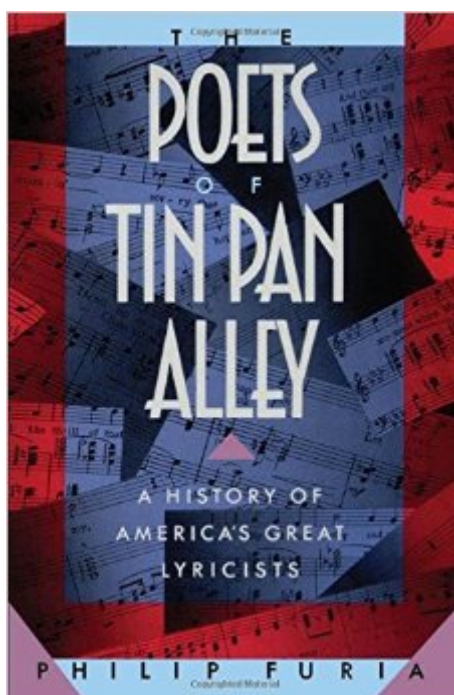


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The Poets Of Tin Pan Alley: A History Of America's Great Lyricists (Oxford Paperbacks)



Synopsis

From the turn of the century to the 1960s, the songwriters of Tin Pan Alley dominated American music. Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, George and Ira Gershwin, Rodgers and Hart--even today these giants remain household names, their musicals regularly revived, their methods and styles analyzed and imitated, and their songs the bedrock of jazz and cabaret. In *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley* Philip Furia offers a unique new perspective on these great songwriters, showing how their poetic lyrics were as important as their brilliant music in shaping a golden age of American popular song. Furia writes with great perception and understanding as he explores the deft rhymes, inventive imagery, and witty solutions these songwriters used to breathe new life into rigidly established genres. He devotes full chapters to all the greats, including Irving Berlin, Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Oscar Hammerstein II, Howard Dietz, E.Y. Harburg, Dorothy Fields, Leo Robin, and Johnny Mercer. Furia also offers a comprehensive survey of other lyricists who wrote for the sheet-music industry, Broadway, Hollywood, and Harlem nightclub revues. This was the era that produced *The New Yorker*, Don Marquis, Dorothy Parker, and E.B. White--and Furia places the lyrics firmly in this fascinating historical context. In these pages, the lyrics emerge as an important element of American modernism, as the lyricists, like the great modernist poets, took the American vernacular and made it sing.

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Customer Reviews

Before you begin this book go to Wikipedia and look up the name [Alec Wilder](#). Wilder was a

successful songwriter (I'll Be Around), a New York wit and author of the definitive book, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950*. Knowing his resume is vital because you'll be hearing from him a lot in the coming pages—33 times in 281 pages. You'll also read a great deal about slangy, vernacular lyrics, driving melodies, the greatness of Fred Astaire, the banality of Hollywood music (though there is a generally appreciative chapter on Hollywood songs), the integrated musical, rhyme schemes, ragging and diphthongs. Phillip Furia's respectful, if ultimately frustrated, conceit in *Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists* is to take an admiring, academic survey of lyric writers from the 1920s and 1930s golden era of popular songwriting—those songs now called standards. (Although the academic part mainly consists of Furia, an English professor and Fulbright scholar, writing obsessively about grammar, the off-rhyme and parts of speech.) The failure of the conceit is not a complex one: he runs out of steam—or rather, lyricists. After chapters on the genius Irving Berlin, Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin and Cole Porter, he simply doesn't have anyone worthy of detailed examination. (Furia is strangely and angrily dismissive of Cole Porter. Porter, who is generally considered, with Ira Gershwin, to epitomize the kind of witty, sparkling songs Furia venerates, is scorned like someone who refused to pay off on a football bet.) Running into a diminishing bank of writers, Furia proceeds as best he can. A chapter devoted to a songwriter (Oscar Hammerstein) whose talents don't fit the conceit. Several chapters are split between two lyricists.

I have to wonder if the impressive endorsements on the back cover (by Sammy Cahn, Steve Allen, Michael Feinstein) are from musical celebrities who actually read the book. The author deserves praise for bringing concentrated focus to and careful analysis of the lyrics of America's best wordsmiths, but this is not a book that seduces the reader into staying with it for extended stretches. There's historical context, learned analysis of prosody with lots of concise examples, and pithy scholarly prose. But when all is said and done, the chapters devoted to individual lyricists, as well as the book as a whole, are quite bloodless. I don't sense any clear thesis, any driving passion, even any strong personal preferences from the author. The author's justification for such a book—that composers of melody are given credit at the expense of the lyricist—strikes me as a bit of a straw man. How many listeners can immediately associate a familiar popular standard with either its composer or lyricist? Also, the analysis of prosody and technique often overshadows consideration of the thematic integrity, or meaning, of a song. Moreover, the analyses pay too little heed to melody and harmony to make a persuasive case for the poetic power of the lyrics themselves. Finally, with

song lyrics how can you separate the dancer from the dance? Were it not for Billie Holiday, Mabel Mercer and, above all, Frank Sinatra, most of these songs would be long forgotten. Certainly some consideration of the actual performance of the lyrics would seem requisite to any demonstration of their continuing vitality and importance. Most of the above challenges are met by a book to which the author frequently alludes--Gerald Mast's "Can't Help Singin'".

Philip Furia offers a wonderful blend of historical fact and thoughtful analysis in this discussion of the development of American popular music in the first half of the previous century. Although he devotes separate chapters to such icons as Irving Berlin, Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, and others, I'll focus here on his analysis of how and why our music evolved as it did, especially in the period between the two world wars. The music was written to be marketed by publishing houses on a specific street in New York that came to be called Tin Pan Alley (thanks to the racket escaping from open windows). Although the publishers' only goal was to make money, Furia shows how lyricists nonetheless found room for fun and creativity. The century started with a popular music largely written with grammatically proper (and thus pompous?) lyrics. Over the years it became a people's music employing ethnic idioms, street slang, and everyday cliches. To cite just one of many examples, the phrase "ain't got a barrel of money" illustrates the newly acceptable diction and also the social background that haunts or bolsters it. Technology also put its mark on our music. With the advent of the phonograph and the radio, which enabled music to be heard privately, our lyricists imagined a persona Furia calls the solitary lover, an early example being the lonely soliloquy of Berlin's Fools Fall in Love. And when large audiences gathered in auditoriums to hear music, the presentation shifted from the disjointed "review" to the musical drama. Now lyrics had to be "in character" and had also to advance a plot.

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