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Review of Philip Furia, *Irving Berlin: A Life In Song*.  
New York: Schirmer Books, 1998

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### [0] Introduction

[0.1] It is not difficult to find books and articles--often of a very scholarly bent--devoted to the most renowned popular songwriters of the first half of the twentieth century: Arlen, Berlin, Gershwin, Kern, Porter, Rodgers, et al. Not only journalistic biographers but also musicologists have focused their energies on these artists who, according to Allen Forte, composed "the American 'Lieder' of a particularly rich period in popular music."<sup>(1)</sup> For many musicians, however, a frustrating irony has been that the subject generally addressed the least has been the very thing that induced interest in these figures: their music. Finding sources that elucidate aspects of their personal or professional lives, or concentrate on their business successes and the commercial attainments of their songs, is not difficult. Finding essays that examine the actual products of their talent is a more formidable task.

[0.2] Irving Berlin (1888-1989) has certainly received his share of treatments of the former types: book-length biographies (of varying qualities) have been authored by Laurence Bergreen, Mary Ellin Barrett (Berlin's novelist daughter), Michael Freedland, Edward Jablonski, Ian Whitcomb, and Alexander Woollcott (Berlin's associate from the Algonquin Round Table).<sup>(2)</sup> He has also been the subject of numerous erudite studies by the musicologist Charles Hamm, including a monograph devoted to his early years as a songwriter.<sup>(3)</sup> Published analyses of his songs, however, have been much less common--a rather regrettable state of affairs for a person Cole Porter declared to be "the greatest song-writer of all time."<sup>(4)</sup> Alec Wilder, himself a songwriter and composer, provided cogent verbal commentary on numerous Berlin songs in a chapter of his 1972 book;<sup>(5)</sup> Allen Forte engaged in much

more intricate analyses of a half-dozen songs in his 1995 volume on the repertory; (6) and I have focused on certain associations between the large-scale melodic line and the lyrics, in select songs, in a journal article. (7) Otherwise, not much has been done. Thus, the appearance of a book that promises to provide "new information on how [Berlin's] songs were created," and to "delineat[e] a 'life in song'," causes the interested musician to take notice. (8)

[0.3] Such a book appeared in late 1998, written by Philip Furia, a Professor of English who had previously established a specialization in the repertory's lyrics through two books, *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists* (which, naturally, included a chapter on Berlin), and *Ira Gershwin: The Art of the Lyricist*. (9) The book under review, *Irving Berlin: A Life in Song*, is in part a standard chronological narrative of the songwriter's life. The main text is divided into twelve chapters, each of which draws its title from that of a Berlin song (or, in one case, a phrase from a song)--a somewhat hackneyed device that did not seem particularly ingenious when Freedland employed it (using some of the same titles) a quarter-century earlier. The purely biographical information is enhanced, however, by Furia's work at the Irving Berlin Archive at the Library of Congress, from which he derived some materials not included in other biographies; and also from presumed suggestions by Berlin's daughters, Mary Ellen Barrett and Linda Emmet, who are credited with giving "the manuscript a very careful and helpful reading" (p. ix). Also incorporated into each chapter are Furia's examinations of select songs. Some of these are quite brief, and even the longer interpretations probe the lyrics much more than the notes (as would be expected from a writer of Furia's background). Still, his insights about lyrics are often revelatory; they elucidate features of specific songs, as well as general mannerisms, that might pass without comment in more "music-theoretical" investigations. Moreover, as advertised, he does provide contextual details about the creation and evolution of many songs, and these certainly reinforce the theme that Berlin's was "a life [spent] in song."

[0.4] I have divided my critique of Furia's efforts into four sections: the first considers his handling of biographical and historical details; the second his analyses of Berlin's lyrics; the third his "purely musical" observations; and the fourth the "songography" which concludes the book.

## [1] Biographical and historical details

[1.1] Furia's survey covers the span of Berlin's life, from the events leading up to the 1893 voyage of the *S.S. Rhynland*, which brought his family to New York; to his increasing triumphs as a writer of popular hits and stage and film songs; to the waning years of his career, which witnessed some successes (e.g., *Call Me Madam* and the 1966 revival of *Annie Get Your Gun*) but several failures (e.g., *Miss Liberty* and *Mr. President*); and then to his virtual reclusion and death at age 101. Coming after so many other biographies, the general timeline as well as many of the details presented by Furia will be very familiar to the Berlin aficionado. Nonetheless, in addition to the author's pleasing writing style, there are two attributes that cause the current book to stand apart. First, regarding various facets of Berlin's career, Furia provides additional context that has been ignored, or treated less completely, in some prior biographies. Second, he is able to impart some new information through his research at the Berlin Archive.

[1.2] As for the enriched historical context Furia provides, perhaps it is most evident when he turns to Berlin's work as a songwriter in the emerging world of sound movies, beginning in the late 1920s (chapter 7). He delivers more than just requisite facts about the birth of the industry, he also explains differences between the uses of songs in films and in musicals and operas; how film studios came to commandeer many Tin Pan Alley publishing firms, once they realized the extra profits and publicity music could provide; and particular ways in which studios would place invested commercial objectives over artistic ones, where music was concerned (as when they would adapt successful Broadway shows, only to discard the songs that made them popular, and insert new ones for which they owned the rights). Also addressed is the public's early disenchantment with film musicals--in the days after their enthusiastic introduction but before their impending golden era--and how it impacted projects with which Berlin and other songwriters were involved. Later in his narrative (in chapter 9), Furia returns to the subject, once the rebirth of the film musical is underway, and explains the emergence of *Top Hat* (1935), the Art Deco classic with Berlin's songs and

Astaire's and Rogers' dancing, as well as *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (1938), the "first film ever to carry a songwriter's name above the title and ahead of any other name in the credits" (p. 186). Many Berlin biographers have addressed the machinations of Hollywood, but few have done it in as illuminating a fashion as Furia.

[1.2] Another topic that receives heightened attention is the evolution of the modern American musical stage comedy. Furia discusses its emergence in the Princess Theatre shows of Jerome Kern, Guy Bolton, and P.G. Wodehouse; and it is against this backdrop that we come to understand the implications of Berlin's decision to continue with less dramatically "integrated" revues, of a type more familiar to him. The topic resurfaces frequently, as with the consideration of Berlin's *As Thousands Cheer* (1933), which infused the review format with an innovative cohesion by relating its sketches to the various sections of a newspaper--having headlines and photographs "come to life," as it were. The book's penultimate chapter rounds off the topic with a focus on *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946), a musical which allowed songs to grow out of character development and dramatic exigency, but which still managed to "produc[e] more hit songs than any Broadway show before or since," with "virtually every song [becoming] an independent success" (p. 229).

[1.3] As for Furia's archive research, the results are generally woven invisibly into the text, although two applications stand out: his use of many informative quotations "taken from newspaper clippings in Irving Berlin's scrapbooks" (p. 285), including from "undated and unidentified" articles of sufficient obscurity to have escaped the attention of prior biographers; and his consultation of lyrics manuscripts, which enable him to trace the evolution of certain songs. I will return to the latter topic when lyrics analysis is addressed. Regarding his presentation of information from archive "clippings," my only criticism is that sometimes Furia is too willing to allow quotations from these sources to stand on their own, when clarification or at least informed interpretation seems to be in order. A prime example arises when "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1911) is addressed. For years it was reported in Berlin biographies that the song originated as a piano march--an instrumental composition sans lyrics. However, more recently, Charles Hamm argued that the song version actually came first, and only later was adapted into an instrumental two-step. Supporting evidence includes not only the facts of the copyright dates (the instrumental version was copyrighted a half-year *after* the song), but also the structure of the piano version, which is peculiar when compared to most marches and rags, and suggests an adaptation of an earlier song. [\(10\)](#) Furia, in his discussion, asserts the older view (that a piano version was written first), with no suggestion in the main text that such an opinion has been challenged. In the endnotes, he acknowledges Hamm's conclusion (a product of "formidable" scholarship, he admits), but Furia counters that he has found "several interviews where Berlin himself states that [the song] was first an instrumental" (p. 288). These quotations are assimilated into the main text, and give rhetorical weight to Furia's claims about the sequence of composition. However, by never addressing the inconsistencies between Hamm's research and Berlin's own remarks--by never even acknowledging such a discrepancy exists, except in an endnote which, like all others, is fairly well concealed (there are no superscripted numbers in the main text, instead one has to find notes "in reverse," in the back of the book, through citations keyed to specific page numbers and quotations)--Furia has left the matter frustratingly unresolved.

[1.4] Excepting the above complaint, Furia's handling of general historical and biographical matters is done quite well. Nonetheless, there is one problem that will disturb the more discriminating popular-music scholar, and it concerns a lack of prudence when determining the "hit" status of a song. For example, Furia offers these summary remarks at the beginning of his book: "More than half--451--of Berlin's [copyrighted] songs became hits, and 282 of these reached that coveted circle of the 'Top Ten.' More amazing still is that 35 of his songs reached the pinnacle of the 'Number One' most popular song of their day" (p. 2). The problem with the assertion is simply that "hit lists," as we think of them today, did not exist for much of Berlin's career. Beginning in 1935 (nearly three decades after Berlin's first song), *Your Hit Parade* was broadcast on radio (and later on television); it offered a national survey, with chart positions based on various factors including sales of records and sheet music (although its evolving rankings formula was never clearly articulated). Thus, from 1935 onward, one can at least say that a song was number *X* according to that particular source. For songs released beforehand, however, there is no consistent way to derive such a ranking. *Variety* and other publications may provide *ad hoc* sales figures, or print very

specific charts (for example, of record sales by a given company in a given market), but they offer nothing that would enable one to say, so generally, that a song was "number X" nationally. True, some books have tried to conjure numbers for songs of these earlier periods--e.g., Joel Whitburn's *Pop Memories 1890-1954*. [\(11\)](#) There is much misinformation to be found in books like this, however, which fabricate single-number chart positions; rankings often are based on sources that may have reported company-biased or only regional information, and, in extreme cases, information may be merely anecdotal. I have no idea where Furia found all 451 of his chart rankings, as he never volunteers the information (a scholarly lapse in itself); but if he found them in a book like Whitburn's, then he (and others interested in similar research) should ponder a detailed critique of Whitburn's methodological shortcomings, issued by Tim Brooks. [\(12\)](#)

[1.5] To compound the problem, even when Furia specifically refers to rankings on *Your Hit Parade*, his statements can be misleading. For example, he remarks that "You're Just In Love" "topped *Your Hit Parade* for weeks" (p. 247). In lieu of any other information, most people would surely interpret "topped" literally, and assume that the song was perched at no. 1 for a period. But, in fact, it rose no higher than no. 3 during its thirteen weeks among the ten weekly entries of early 1951. [\(13\)](#) Finally, other statements about chart successes seem curiously chosen, even if they are not entirely wrong. For example, to illustrate the popularity of Berlin's songs from the movie *Top Hat* (1935), Furia notes that "By September 1935, three of Berlin's songs--'Cheek to Cheek,' 'Top Hat,' and 'Isn't This a Lovely Day?'--held the first, second, and fourth spot, respectively, on *Your Hit Parade*" (p. 179). These rankings are accurate (although they are actually from the broadcast of 5 October). But I find it mystifying that he failed to cite the more impressive feat: that, the prior week (28 September), all five Berlin songs from this single film were among *Your Hit Parade*'s fifteen entries, with "Cheek to Cheek" spending the first of its five consecutive weeks at no. 1. (The two additional songs were "No Strings" and "The Piccolino.")

## [2] Lyrics analysis

[2.1] On the very first page of the main text, Furia reminds the reader that songwriting "is only partly a musical art; it is also an art of words, the two arts of music and poetry coalescing to produce a third, where word and sound, syllable and note, verbal phrase and musical cadence must be in accord" (p. 1). Or, as Berlin said of his ability to write both words and music (something that most period songwriters did not do): "I sacrifice one for the other. If I have a melody I want to use, I plug away at the lyrics until I make them fit the best parts of my music and vice versa" (p. 37). Despite these sentiments, Furia's handling of the components of a song are usually not so egalitarian. Given his prior writings, it will come as no surprise that he devotes his energies more to the lyrics when analyzing songs--and indeed, his best original contributions are tendered from this perspective. He generally takes one of four approaches:

[2.2] First, he often engages in analytic commentary about Berlin's uses of vowels and rhymes--the lyric analyst's analogue to the attention music theorists lavish on motives or intervals. For example, Furia describes "Say It With Music" (1921) as starting "with a cellolike strain that deftly matches long a and u vowels to lush whole notes: Say----it with mu----sic [rest] / Beau----tiful mu----sic [rest]." He emphasizes also the internal rhymes woven into the same song, as with the phrase "A me/lo/dy me/low played on the ce/llo . . . he/lps Mister Cupid a/long" (p. 91). Other categories of rhymes that receive attention include "feminine" ones, i.e., "two-syllable rhymes where the last syllable is unaccented," as in "bo/net . . . upon it," in "Easter Parade" (1933; see p. 159). A compendium of insights is provided in Furia's comments on the lyrics of "Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1911); he points out Berlin's intentional distortion of syllabic emphasis which forces certain rhymes; the "packed rhymes and alliteration" of certain phrases; and the way Berlin fits "syncopated music with jagged rhymes and fragmented but perfectly conversational syntax" (see pp. 42-43). Through his dissections and reconnections of words and phrases, Furia shows the ingeniousness of Berlin's lyrics, which elsewhere have been too readily dismissed as less artistic than those of Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, and certain other contemporaries.

[2.3] Second, Furia often supports his assertions about Berlin's lyric writing through information on how particular lyrics evolved. For example, to demonstrate how intent Berlin could be on finding

the most appropriate words for his songs, Furia recounts the story of how Berlin "sweated to find" the perfect keyword for "My Wife's Gone to the Country" (1909). It came in the simple shout "Hurrah!," but as Berlin himself is quoted as explaining, that elusive word "gave the whole idea of the song in one quick wallop. It gave the singer a chance to hoot with sheer joy. It invited the roomful to join in the hilarious shout. It everlastingly put the catch line over" (p. 31). In other instances, Furia nicely illuminates lyrics through the broader context he provides. A case in point is "I Used to Be Color Blind" (1938), from the film *Carefree* (see pp. 187-88). Furia points out that the song was originally to have been part of a dream sequence, in which the "reality" of black-and-white film would give way to a "dreamy" Technicolor sequence. Ultimately, everything was shot in black-and-white, but the proposed shift in film type had prompted Berlin to write a song that couched love in terms of a prismatic epiphany. His original lyrics included the phrase: "I never could see the green in the grass, the gold in the moon, the blue in the skies." He found the phrasing to be "redundant and negative," however, so revised it to: "I used to be color blind, / But I met you and now I find / There's green in the grass, / There's gold in the moon, / There's blue in the skies." The new phrasing conveys, much more positively, the transforming effects of love. Moreover, it reveals the "subtle intricacies of artistry" that lay beneath the "seeming naturalness of [Berlin's] blend of words and music."

[2.4] Third, Furia's studies lead to general conclusions about Berlin's lyric writing. One theme to which he occasionally returns is Berlin's "characteristic knack of refracting the big historical picture through the lens of the particular individual" (p. 78). For instance, during the First World War, which witnessed songs of such sweeping conviction as George M. Cohan's "Over There," Berlin offered more personal fare, e.g., "They Were All Out of Step But Jim" (1918), in which a proud mother watches her son march off to war, and excuses (as only a mother could) the fact that he is marching to a different rhythm than the rest; and "Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning" (1918), in which the protagonist sings of the agony of reveille, and his plan of revenge against the bugler, in a manner humorously familiar to all soldiers of the time (of which Berlin himself was one). On a more serious subject, in "Supper Time" (1933) Berlin managed to personalize the savage injustice of lynching, by presenting "the anguished lament of the victim's wife, who must now attend to the prosaic task of feeding her children and telling them their father is dead" (see pp. 155-58). Rather than engaging in overt moralizing or politically pointed language, "the lyric focuses poignantly on the predicament of the mother and wife as she forces herself to start her daily routine."

[2.5] Another general insight tendered by Furia is that Berlin's writing for the *film* musical, with its microphoned sound reproduction, actually changed his vowel usages, and thus the very sound of his lyrics. "When writing for a performer who would sing a song on stage, a songwriter had to supply long notes and open vowels so the singer . . . could project a song to the back of the balcony. With microphones and prerecording, however, . . . Berlin could concentrate on [a singer's] ability to enunciate syllables and follow the trickiest rhythms. Using shorter vowels and clipped consonants," performers who were singing could sound more like themselves talking (p. 174). One of many illustrations offered is "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails" (1935), written for the film *Top Hat*, with its "marvelously clipped phrases" such as "I'm dudein' up my shirt front, / Puttin' in the shirt studs, / Polishin' my nails." "Cheek to Cheek," from the same film, provides another example with its opening word, "Heaven. . . ." By beginning with this evocative word, with its "not so singable short and long closed e's and aspirating [h]," Berlin gives "the song a breathless immediacy" (p. 175). Furia reminds us that "[s]ongwriters who wrote primarily for the stage, such as Rodgers and Hammerstein, would never enjoy such freedom. Hammerstein fretted, for example, over ending a song, for dramatic reasons, with the unsingable line, 'all the rest is talk'" (p. 174).

[2.6] Fourth and finally, Furia makes intriguing connections between Berlin and various literary figures, some of which are not initially apparent, though all are adequately supported by his commentary. Consider his coupling of Berlin and the eighteenth-century satirist, Alexander Pope (p. 96). Furia explains that Berlin actually had an "abiding interest" in Pope's poetry, no doubt fostered by Berlin's friendship with Algonquin writers like Dorothy Parker and George S. Kaufman. He asserts that

[Berlin] felt a special affinity for Pope's lifelong dedication to the "lean, compact heroic couplets"--the most constrictive of poetic forms. Pope's ability

to compress his observations on politics, manners, and art within the confines of ten syllables parallels Berlin's devotion to the restrictions of the thirty-two bar chorus. Like the formula of the popular song, the couplet demanded ingenuity on the part of the poet in placing accent and pause, in avoiding banality of syntax and rhyme, and in achieving natural, even colloquial, expression within this most rigid of poetic forms. . . .

Just as Berlin thought that Pope "would have made a brilliant lyric writer," Berlin himself tried his hand at writing couplets. Moreover,

Berlin would also have admired Pope as the most commercially successful of English poets, one who was alert to the shifting fashions of his time, to developments in the publishing business, and changes in copyright laws. Like Irving Berlin, "Pope became his own publisher, managed his rights with care, manipulated the booksellers, and planned his own career. . . . [He wrote] the most accomplished poems of his age, arrange[d] for their publication at the most advantageous juncture, and harvest[ed] the returns carefully" (pp. 96-97, partly quoting Pat Rogers).

[2.7] Although Furia's engagement with lyrics is, in the main, perhaps the most commendable trait of his book, occasionally his interpretations tend toward the peculiar. For example, in order to demonstrate how much Berlin improved as a lyricist over the years, Furia goes out of his way to emphasize the ineptness of his first lyrics, for "Marie from Sunny Italy" (1907). After some critical remarks about the song's forced rhymes and syllabic padding (none of which I will dispute), Furia claims that "[a] more serious flaw . . . is that Berlin does not adapt his lyric to the structure of the music" (p. 21). He points out that the music is in a verse-refrain pattern, and explains that, "[t]raditionally, the verse was where the lyricist told a story, while the chorus consisted of a brief lyrical exclamation." He adds that the music (not written by Berlin, in this case) fully emphasizes these sectional differences: the composer used "a Cuban habanera rhythm in the verse, coupled with a minor-mode melody, to give it an ethnic flavor, while in the chorus he used a more American 'pop' melody and a rhythm derived from ragtime."<sup>(14)</sup> According to Furia, however, Berlin's lyrics ignore the form; they are "all of a piece, an extended plea by the lover for his Marie that ignores the musical contrast between verse and chorus. [. . .] Berlin evinces little grasp of the musical divisions of the song." At the risk of sounding like Berlin's arch-defender, I believe that Furia has missed an important separation built into the lyrics. The verse is all about a summons: the protagonist is waiting for his true love to appear; he is standing on the street, pleading for her to "raise [the] window," to "come out tonight" and meet him under the "summer moon." He wishes to sing a "serenade" to her, and he has brought his "mandolin" for accompaniment. In contrast, the refrain is precisely the song that he sings to her. The lyric in no way "ignores the musical contrast between verse and chorus," but instead is predicated upon them; the two parts are not, together, "an extended plea by the lover," but rather the verse offers the plea, and the refrain is the promised song (or, more colloquially, the "payoff"). In sum, Berlin seems to have "grasp[ed] . . . the musical divisions of the song" quite competently.

[2.8] A more striking example of dubious interpretation is found in Furia's remarks about the refrain of "Blue Skies" (1926). I will begin by reminding the reader that the song is in AABA form, with each A section beginning in minor and turning, at its very end, to the relative major. In contrast, the B section (or bridge) is in the relative major throughout--although mode mixture rears its head, and melodic  $\hat{b}6$  is harmonized by the minor subdominant. The A sections tend toward longer note values, while the B section accelerates the pace rhythmically. Finally, despite touches of minor, all sections are somewhat positive lyrically, with the A sections speaking of "blue skies smiling at me" and "bluebirds singing a song." The B section, with its affirmation of the major mode and more-animated rhythms, intensifies the emotion with lines like "never saw the sun shining so bright." In the ending section, all seems right with the world, as the protagonist pronounces: "Blue days, all of them gone. Nothing but blue skies from now on." (Incidentally, all of this positiveness seems quite in line with Furia's assertion that the song was written "to celebrate the birth of [Berlin's] first daughter" [p. 121].)

[2.9] Given the prior description (which, naturally, is of my own not-so-neutral design), I cannot fathom Furia's own, greatly contrasting interpretation. He writes, about the bridge:

[T]his eight-bar strain brings out the latent sadness of the song, sounded in the minor[-]key beginning of each of the A-sections and hidden in the underside of the meaning of "blue." Here, those grayer meanings emerge with the preponderance of negative terms--"nothing," "nothing," "never," "never"--even the neutral "noticing" seems negative with its initial syllable.

The emphasis on participles--"shining," "going," "noticing"--draws "nothing" into its orbit and hints that the singer's present happiness may only be fleeting, as does the melancholy chromatic note on the word "shining." The note of mutability, at the song's emotional pivot, turns the joyous "blue" of "blue skies" and "blue birds" into the "blue" of the blues as the bridge turns into the final A-section:

Blue days--all of them gone--nothing but blue skies from now on.

Unlike "blue skies" and "blue birds," these last "blue days" are the departed days of sadness, but the preceding recognition that "when you're in love" the days go "hurrying by" also hints that despondent times can return. While the song ends on a note of affirmation, the lingering rhyme on "gone" underscores that melancholy awareness (pp. 122-23).

[2.10] That Furia interprets the old platitude about time flying when you're having fun (or, in this case, when experiencing the joys of love) in such a pessimistic manner is enough of a stretch, but he even manages to single out the final word of "Blue days, all of them *gone*" in order to reinforce the alleged "melancholy awareness" of the protagonist! (What must Berlin's first daughter--the inspiration for the song and a reader of Furia's manuscript--have thought of such a negative explanation?) Obviously, artistic interpretations can vary widely; but to whatever extent it is possible for a song's changes in rhythm, mode, and lyrics to suggest some meanings more than others, I believe my interpretation to be more supportable than his.

### [3] Musical observations

[3.1] Having surveyed Furia's generally superb manner of investigating lyrics, as well as some of the fine details of his biographical exegesis, we come now to the only consistently maladroit portions of his book: those that occur when the author turns to specifically musical matters. Given his interest in song analysis, I suppose he felt that a focus only on lyrics--the subject of his more circumscribed prior writings--would be inequitable. Yet, in expanding his discourse beyond his demonstrated expertise, he introduces numerous misleading and even incorrect musical assertions. Ironically, had Furia eschewed purely musical commentary altogether, his approach to song analysis might have been criticized as one-sided, but at least his book would have been devoid of its most disappointing feature. Indeed, it is a precarious property. When musicians read Furia's musical description of a song unknown to them, they may either form questionable or incorrect opinions about the song's details or general structure, or (at best) may be confused about what Furia is trying to communicate. [\(15\)](#) As a warning to potential readers of the book, and as an illustration of how far astray an otherwise exemplary writer can wander when his usual jurisdiction is exceeded, I offer the examples below.

[3.2] First, a general attribute of Berlin's songwriting which Furia manages to exaggerate, is that, "[t]hroughout his long life, he was content to struggle with the rigors of the thirty-two bar formula . . ." (p. 1). Furia reiterates the strictures of the formal scheme over and over, as if chanting some sort of numeric mantra:

". . . while remaining in the thirty-two bar song format" (p. 68);

". . . Berlin's devotion to the restrictions of the thirty-two bar chorus" (p. 96).

"Berlin . . . was content to face, each day of his creative life, the rigors of the thirty-two bar formula" (p. 96);

". . . within the confines of the standard thirty-bar [sic!] chorus" (p. 121);

". . . the thirty-two bar format of popular song" (p. 146).

The problem, of course, is that although Berlin (and other period songwriters) did tend to fall back on an ingrained thirty-two bar, AABA or ABAB template, there were many other patterns employed. To see how non-rigid Berlin could be, consider "I'm Sorry for Myself," from the film *Second Fiddle* (1939), published as an eighteen-measure song that might best be segmented according to the phrasing 4+4+10 (with the final melody note held for four bars). Its principal motivic material infuses all phrases, such that a letter-scheme representation would be difficult.

[3.3] Furia does recognize that formal deviations occur, although his examples often suggest naivete about other relevant musical aspects. For instance, regarding "Cheek to Cheek" (1935), from the film *Top Hat*, Furia opines that Berlin "compensates for the lack of a verse by writing a chorus more than twice the length of the normal thirty-two bars" (p. 175). This is literally true, and certainly the song's internal patter-like section does expand the form. One cannot dismiss, however, the fact that much of the song's "extra length" is an attribute of notation, and thus something about which Berlin, who reportedly could not read or write music, would have been unaware. That is, as written, the quarter note carries the beat in the song; its familiar opening phrase (of sixteen measures) is written in long note values, including several notes that are held for five beats. It could have been notated as eight measures, however, with the eighth note carrying the beat. Indeed, its opening (sixteen-bar) phrase presents 39 syllables of lyrics, which is not far afield from the number of syllables fitted to some eight-bar phrases. <sup>(16)</sup> The point is, "Cheek to Cheek" is "twice the length" of other songs not due to the perception of rhythms and phrasing, but due largely to a notated measure count--something of which Berlin would have been oblivious. A more striking case of form expansion could have been made if Furia had only looked to another song from the same film: "The Piccolino," which has a truly arresting, 98-measure design, which might be diagrammed A12 A'12 B16 A12 C9 C'9 C"10 A"12+6.

[3.4] An understanding of form is clearly not Furia's forte, as evidenced further by his remarks about "The Girl on the Magazine Cover" (1915). Furia says that here Berlin used the unusual "ABCD pattern, where each of the four eight-bar sections introduces a new melodic phrase, making the song as constantly fascinating as the American girl it celebrates" (p. 76). I suspect that he derived his formal description from Wilder, who declared the same scheme; <sup>(17)</sup> if so, one might not blame Furia from trusting a writer who was himself a songwriter. Still, the ABCD description fails to capture the fact that the refrain's initial two, eight-bar phrases are exactly alike except for their endings; thus AA'BC is much more apt, making the form of the song similar to other Berlin fare, such as "Because I Love You" (1926). <sup>(18)</sup> One might also take issue with Furia's somewhat homely manner of connecting the music with the topic of the lyrics, by calling the form "as constantly fascinating as the American girl it celebrates." As an alternative interpretation, I might point out that Berlin's frequent use of an accented-beat neighboring-note motive (given as a quarter note followed by a half note) ties everything together melodically, making one segment of the song similar to most others, just as social trends mandate that any given cover girl shares traits with most others. (In fact, Furia had just discussed some of the common period images of women, as found on the covers of *Vogue* and other magazines, making my comparison perhaps more apt than his.) Of course, it is not difficult to construct fanciful metaphors which associate text and tones; but sometimes a more expressly musical description can better capture the way a song directs a listener's attention. To wit, regarding "The Girl on the Magazine Cover," instead of claiming that listener interest is maintained due to the introduction of "new" material (which, after all, could be merely desultory in an amateur songwriter's hands), I would point out that a listener may well be carried purposefully through the two ending sections because of their large-scale melodic arch, which rises to D5 (^5) at the end of the B section, and then gradually falls to G4 (^1) at the end of the (concluding) C section.



[3.5] Several of Furia's problematic statements result from an imprecise application of terms. An example is his reference to a "key change" in "You're Laughing at Me" (1937). In fact, the bridge of the song simply has four bars of bIII. The chord is not tonicized; instead, these measures hover on that single accompanying harmony, with appropriate melodic alterations, before heading to the dominant chord in preparation for a repeat of the initial section. In even the most immediate of contexts, there is no "key change" here. Another example comes in Furia's reference to a striking feature of "Lady of the Evening" (1922). He explains that "Berlin introduces a minor seventh interval which, played against a major chord gives a 'sprinkle of theatrical mystery' to the phrase" (p. 98, partly quoting Wilder). Mentally combining a major triad and a minor seventh, a musician is likely to wonder: "what's so 'mysterious' about a dominant-seventh chord?" Of course, what Furia does not reveal is that it is a special dominant-seventh sonority: the one derived from adding (in a major key) melodic  $\text{^b7}$  to the tonic triad. This sonority--used for its color and not for its function as V7 of IV--is not uncommon in the repertory, and here it certainly imparts a non-Western veneer to a song that speaks of "fold[ing] . . . tents just like the Arabs. . . ." The affect would have been clearer had Furia quoted Wilder's comments more fully, as the latter actually wrote that this particular minor-seventh interval "gives a *modal* quality to this passage" and thus a "sprinkle of theatrical mystery." [\(19\)](#)

[3.6] Other statements may suggest questionable relations due to Furia's sometimes inappropriate bias toward musical notation (much as we saw with "Cheek to Cheek," above). I will close with two additional examples:

[3.7] Regarding Berlin's "Dorando" (1909), Furia writes of a melody that "was surprisingly intricate with shifting meters and tonalities" (p. 27). The description might cause one to imagine quite a different song than what actually exists. By its "shifting tonality," Furia means only that the verse is in D minor, and the refrain is largely in the relative major, F (with an inner shift back to D minor). Passing between keys related in this fashion is quite fluid, and, given that Berlin was actually dictating the song's melody and not its harmonies to an arranger (as Furia indicates), perhaps he was not even aware of implicit modal shifts within the refrain. [\(20\)](#) By "shifting meters," Furia means the change between a 4/4 verse and a 6/8 refrain. However, the extent to which these meters differ is blurred by the rhythms: the 4/4 section makes extensive use of the dotted-eighth/sixteenth rhythm, which of course is often played with a triplet feel in popular music; thus, the transition to the 6/8 section, with its extensive use of the quarter/eighth pattern, almost passes without notice. As before, Furia has fixated a bit too much on the notation, rather than the sound, of the song.

[3.8] Finally, consider Furia's description of "Try It On Your Piano," in which the protagonist tells a pianist, who claims to "have found a new way to make love," to try it on his piano, but not on her! She adds the dismissal: "B or I flat, C or Y flat / Try it hon' but not in my flat." The pun on the two meanings of "flat"--a musical alteration and an apartment--is shrewd. Furia, however, claims that it is "the first of [Berlin's] many musical and lyrical 'puns'" as "the final word 'flat' actually falls on a flatted note" (p. 37). Once again, Furia focuses too much on a notational aspect that might not have been recognized by Berlin. Perhaps Berlin did identify the sound of "blue notes" as being "flat"--who can say? But that is irrelevant, as this "flat" note arises as a descending, chromatic passing tone, of which there were three others in the verse, including one which occurred on the very same notes. In no instance but this one did the passing tone happen to accompany the word "flat" (or a synonym).

## [4] Songography

[4.1] At the end of the book (pp. 267-83) is an "Irving Berlin Songography," compiled not by Furia, but by Ken Bloom, author of several song reference books. [\(21\)](#) Bloom provides a chronological listing (1907-77) that divides entries, under each year, into "show songs" and "pop songs," the former including songs for stage and film productions, the latter including essentially everything else. The list encompasses roughly 850 copyrighted entries, although there are some redundancies, as when songs were interpolated into more than one show (e.g., "Oh, That Beautiful Rag" appears under two

shows in 1910). Given that Bloom's list contains fewer than 850 unique entries, and that Furia claims in the main text that Berlin registered 899 songs for copyright (p. 2), one wonders about these "missing" songs. What are they, and why are they not listed? The number of omitted songs may be even larger than Furia suggests, for a similar song catalogue by Steven Suskin had nearly 930 copyrighted entries, including unpublished songs (which Bloom also seems to list) as well as song parodies and songs later revised (which Bloom seems to list as well, though perhaps not as completely). [\(22\)](#) The lack of consistency in cataloguing (and counting) Berlin's songs is nothing new; it has been an unfortunate malady of Berlin scholarship for some time. Furia makes matters worse, however, when he repeats the exaggerated claim that Berlin actually "wrote thousands of songs" (p. 2)--most, therefore, being non-copyrighted. Such a number has never been substantiated. In fact, Berlin seems to have copyrighted most of what he ever wrote (even private songs for his grandchildren!), and while some (especially early) songs may have been lost--Hamm has documented about a hundred of these [\(23\)](#)--it is simply unbelievable that thousands of songs are missing.

[4.2] Setting aside its apparent incompleteness, Bloom's songography suffers also from a lack of denotations that would have been useful to the reader. For example, a person consulting the inventory for practical research purposes would have been better served if Bloom had indicated, perhaps with a simple asterisk, which of the songs were unpublished (and there are several of these); and also, with a different symbol, which songs had been already cited on his list, so that later interpolations would be more readily identifiable. True, Bloom usually lists songs only once, and not again, under later shows which also used them; e.g., for the movie *Alexander's Ragtime Band* (1938), he lists only three new songs written for the film, not the many older ones that were also incorporated (such as the title song). But, alas, he is not consistent, and thus "Easter Parade," from the 1933 stage show, *As Thousands Cheer*, is included also under the 1942 film *Holiday Inn*. One unaware of its true provenance might therefore come to believe that it was written for the latter film.

[4.3] Having mentioned *Holiday Inn*, a final discrepancy should be noted: under this film's heading, the song "Say It With Firecrackers" is denoted "(inst.)," presumably meaning "instrumental," i.e., "a song without words." But lyrics were sung in the film: the AABA song is delivered (diegetically) by an on-stage assemblage of costumed chorus women and men, who end it with the lines: "Don't need any long speeches / Or shouts of 'Hooray!' / No words can say as much as / Firecrackers can say."

[4.4] In sum, despite Bloom's excellent work elsewhere, his contribution here falls short of other Berlin song indices, in terms of utility: Suskin's is more complete; and (of those appended to other Berlin biographies) Jablonski's, while slightly shorter, is better annotated. [\(24\)](#)

## [5] Conclusion

[5.1] Overall, Furia's book is a welcome addition to the literature on Berlin, especially notable for its contributions to the study of his lyrics (and, more generally, to the study of Berlin as a lyric writer), but also for the historically informed narrative which supports its biographical details. Its glaring defect is in its expressly musical commentary; and although, strictly speaking, this represents a small portion of the whole, it takes on additional significance given the relatively few sources which have addressed Berlin's songs in musical terms. Eventually, those interested in Berlin's songs will have recourse to this volume, and they may leave the encounter with some odd (or even incorrect) impressions. But they and others will also walk away with a far greater appreciation of the craft of lyric writing, a better understanding of the evolution of film and stage musicals, and other positive residues of a nicely crafted biography of one of the most significant songwriters of the twentieth century.

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2. Mary Ellin Barrett, *Irving Berlin: A Daughter's Memoir* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994); Laurence Bergreen, *As Thousands Cheer: The Life of Irving Berlin* (New York: Penguin Books, 1990); Michael Freedland, *Irving Berlin* (New York: Stein and Day, 1974); Edward Jablonski, *Irving Berlin: American Troubadour* (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1999); Ian Whitcomb, *Irving Berlin and Ragtime America* (New York: Limelight Editions, 1988); Alexander Woollcott, *The Story of Irving Berlin* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1925).

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3. Charles Hamm, *Irving Berlin: Songs from the Melting Pot* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997).

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4. Freedland, *Irving Berlin*, 156.

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5. Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972).

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6. Forte, *The American Popular Ballad*.

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7. David Carson Berry, "Dynamic Introductions: The Affective Role of Melodic Ascent and Other Linear Devices in Selected Song Verses of Irving Berlin," *Integral* 13 (forthcoming).

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8. Quotations from the back flap of the dust jacket of the book under review.

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9. Philip Furia, *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990); idem, *Ira Gershwin: The Art of the Lyricist* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

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10. See Hamm, *Irving Berlin*, chapter 3 (especially pp. 112-17).

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11. Joel Whitburn, *Pop Memories 1890-1954* (Menomonee Falls, Wis.: Record Research Inc., 1986).

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12. Tim Brooks, [review of Whitburn book], *ARSC [Association for Recorded Sound Collections] Journal* 21/1 (1990): 134-41.

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13. A compilation and index of the weekly lists is found in John R. Williams, *This Was "Your Hit Parade"* (Rockland, Maine: Courier-Gazette, 1973).

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14. Furia actually overstates the modal contrast: in the verse, only the first eight bars are in minor; the remaining twenty bars are in the relative major.

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15. Regarding his musical qualifications, in the prefatory Acknowledgements, Furia admits that his initial musical insights were only "rudimentary," and he thanks Graham Wood, his "research assistant at the University of Minnesota," for helping to refine them (p. ix). (Wood is even given a "with the assistance of . . ." credit on the inside title page, under Furia's name.) As a writer on music himself, Wood has demonstrated his own expertise in the repertory in "The Development of Song Forms in the Broadway and Hollywood Musicals of Richard Rodgers, 1919- 1943" (Ph.D. dissertation, Univ. of Minnesota, 2000). Thus, the mistakes and misleading statements made by Furia--some of which will be detailed forthwith--suggest that Wood, whatever the nature of his earlier input, had little editorial authority over the final manuscript.

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16. Consider, for example, the eight-bar phrase that begins the refrain of "Heat Wave" (1933): 31 syllables are assigned to a melody in which the eighth note receives more weight.

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17. Wilder, *American Popular Song*, 98.

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18. Furia is more on the mark when, on p. 95, he ascribes the ABCD form to the refrain of "Lazy" (1924); despite its elaboration of a few basic contour motives, it does superficially conform to such a letter scheme.

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19. Wilder, 102, emphasis mine.

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20. It seems clear, however, that he was intuitively aware of the key change (to F major) as he approached the refrain, because he introduced  $\#4$  of F, in preparation for an arrival on V of F, at the verse ending.

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21. See Bloom, *Hollywood Song: The Complete Film and Musical Companion*, 2nd ed., 3 vols. (New York: Facts on File, 1995); *American Song: The Complete Musical Theatre Companion, 1877-1995*, 2nd ed., 2 vols. (New York: Schirmer/Prentice-Hall, 1996); and *Tin Pan Alley: The Complete Popular Song Companion*, 3 vols. (New York: Facts on File, 1996).

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22. Steven Suskin, *Berlin, Kern, Rogers, Hart, and Hammerstein: A Complete Song Catalogue* (Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland, 1990).

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23. See Appendix 2 of Hamm, *Irving Berlin*.

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24. See Appendix 1 (pp. 335-62) of Jablonski, *Irving Berlin: American Troubadour*.

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