Sally Helm: HISTORY This Week. December 8, 1914. I'm Sally Helm.

Audience members pass beneath the grand entrance of the New Amsterdam theater, near New York City's Times Square. They're there to see a musical. Or really, it’s better described as a musical revue. The modern musical, with characters breaking into song to push the story forward—that doesn't really exist yet. This show is called "Watch Your Step," and what it’s about is not really the point.

The star of the show is the songs. Which are written by an up and coming twenty-six-year-old known for his sheet music and records. But this is his first full-length revue. A LOT is riding it. A hit show could help set him up for a long career in show business. The songwriter’s name … is Irving Berlin.

The songs in Watch Your Step show off his signature style. Wit. Simplicity. Mostly up-tempo. But one of them reveals a musical sophistication that this audience hasn’t heard before – at least in a popular song. It starts out as a slow, nostalgic number.

_Simple Melody Archival:_ Won’t you play a simple melody…

Sally Helm: But then… another singer starts singing a whole different song. About how the first song is kind of a drag.

_Simple Melody Archival:_ I don't care for your long-haired musicians with the glassy melodies, they're all full of highbrow ambitions, but the music doesn't please…

Sally Helm: And then...seamlessly...the two singers start singing their songs… together…

_Simple Melody Archival:_ Oh, you musical game and set you a dream and won't you play me rag…

Sally Helm: It is a feat of musical composition.

At the end of the show, the audience is roaring their approval. Someone yells out "composer! composer!" And Irving Berlin steps onto the stage. He looks small up there. He gives a brief, modest speech. He’s not out to hog the spotlight … but it’s clear to the audience that a new artistic force has arrived.
Years later, after countless rounds of applause, the great Jerome Kern will render a ringing verdict on his fellow composer’s accomplishments: “Berlin has no place in American music,” he says. Irving Berlin “is American music.”

Today: If Irving Berlin is American music… then we need to know, who was Irving Berlin? And how did he utterly transform American songwriting?

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: One afternoon years ago, Katherine Swett was browsing a rare bookstore in Manhattan. Swett is now an English teacher. But that day, what catches her eye is a piece of sheet music.

Katherine Swett: I'm pretty sure it was this song called Homesick. And Christmas was a big deal in our family, and you always had to have presents for everyone. And what do you get your grandfather who has everything and who's so old?

Sally Helm: Swett’s very old grandfather was Irving Berlin. And the song she found, "Homesick” – he wrote it.

Katherine Swett: And I thought, ‘okay, I'll give him this.’ And in his thank you note, he said, ‘Thank you so much. This was so great. This was a song I don't remember writing.’

Sally Helm: He wrote so many that some of them just slipped his mind.

Katherine Swett: I mean, of course. Do you remember every podcast you've done? I mean, do I remember every poem I've written? No. There are things you forget.

Sally Helm: You know, I think I do remember every podcast that I’ve done. But I have not done fifteen hundred of them. That is how many pieces of music Irving Berlin wrote in his lifetime. It helped that he lived to the age of 101. And that also means that he was around for the first nearly 30 years of Swett's life. She remembers him well.

Katherine Swett: He was a highly energetic man. Like into his eighties, he only had a little bit of gray hair, and he just couldn’t sit still. I remember him popping up from the dinner table. He was a real night owl.

Sally Helm: On some of those late nights, Swett says, she’d be up with her friends. And her grandfather would drop in to say hello.

Katherine Swett: He had a chair he would sit in because he was an old man. So, there's a particular hard highchair. And he would, come and hang out with us asking us about the music we were listening to. He was curious about popular music, especially in the sixties.
and seventies, like, he was very interested by The Beatles because I think he saw them as in some way continuing on in that popular songwriting tradition.

James Kaplan: Everybody from Lennon and McCartney to Olivia Rodrigo and beyond, either consciously or unconsciously, is being influenced by Berlin.


James Kaplan: What do I mean by that? They're being influenced by simplicity, by repetition, by catchiness, by melodies and lyrics that grab the listener and hold on and won't let go.

Sally Helm: Berlin shapes pop music to this day. And the music that shaped him—it’s a far cry from Lennon and McCartney and Rodrigo. His life as a songwriter really begins when he’s a young teenager living on New York City’s Lower East side.

James Kaplan: You could hear “hirdie girdies”, you could hear player pianos, you could hear buskers on the street. Music was constantly in the air on the Lower East Side.

Sally Helm: Back then, Irving Berlin is Izzy Balene. His parents had immigrated to the US from Russia when he was young. And he shared a musical talent with his father—his dad was a cantor, someone who led the songs at Jewish services. But when Izzy is thirteen, his father dies. The family is thrown into poverty. And Izzy starts to feel that he’s got to do something. He doesn’t want to be just another mouth to feed.

James Kaplan: The 14-year-old Izzy Baline felt himself such a financial drag on this family that was desperately struggling just to have food on the table. That he did this unbelievable thing. He left. He left his family’s home, left the apartment, and went out on the street on the Bowery to try and scrape together a living, mainly at first by busking on the street.

Sally Helm: Busking. He's literally singing on street corners, or in saloons, hoping for tips. Then one day, in what's now Chinatown, he finds himself in a bar called the Pelham Cafe.

James Kaplan: And it is merry chaos inside the bar. It is packed with all male patrons. There's saw dust on the floor. The saw dust is full of spilled beer and the men are having a jolly old time, listening to a singing waiter. And little Izzy age 14 thinks, ‘Well, I could do this.’ And he manages to convince the owner and very quickly shows that not only is he a terrific singing waiter, but he has this unique gift to take the popular songs of the day and invent dirty lyrics.

Sally Helm: This is not what the other singing waiters are doing. They’re just singing what everyone is singing in those days. And the most well-known songs of the day aren’t all that deep.
They’re trivial little ditties. They tend towards melodrama. So that’s what’s mostly playing in the Pelham Cafe.

**James Kaplan:** The pianist in the bar would strike up one of the popular songs of the day, maybe only a bird in a gilded cage.

**Only a Bird in a Gilded Cage Archival:** The ball room was filled with fashion's throne it shone with a thousand...

**James Kaplan:** Sappy, way over sentimental. And this is why Izzy loved making up dirty lyrics.

**Sally Helm:** Right, it cuts through all that kind of—

**James Kaplan:** It cuts through. And you can just imagine that the oiled-up patrons of this bar, well into their cups, filled with beer, loved it.

**Sally Helm:** Izzy is funny. He’s making things up on the spot and getting instant feedback. Tips, or no tips. But he’s not yet writing songs of his own. Just improvising dirtier versions of what’s already out there.

That changes when the pianist at a competing bar publishes a song that becomes a big hit. Suddenly, the Pelham is losing customers.

**James Kaplan:** So, the owner of the Pelham Cafe, says to his piano player, and to his brilliant young singing waiter, Izzy Baline, ‘You're so clever. Why don't you write a song?’

**Sally Helm:** That first song is... nothing special. But it’s remembered for the way he signs the sheet music: I. Berlin.

**James Kaplan:** All the immigrants in those days wanted to be as American as possible and as unimmigrant-like as possible. So, he becomes Izzy Berlin. And then in very short order, Irving Berlin.

**Sally Helm:** To get their song published, Berlin and the pianist have to go uptown. Almost all the sheet music publishers are on one block in Manhattan, 28th Street between fifth and sixth avenues. It’s lined with brownstones – brownstones filled with piano players. Making up new songs. It’s known as "Tin Pan Alley."

**James Kaplan** When you're out on the street what you heard was sheer chaos. Its musical chaos. They called it Tin Pan Alley because it sounded like a hundred people banging tin pans at the same time.
Sally Helm: Right, because in one room it might sound like a song taking form but out on the street it's like all these piano lines are crossing. You just can't make head or tails of it I imagine—

James Kaplan: It's crazy, it's crazy.

Sally Helm: The sheet music publishers on Tin Pan Alley are churning out 25,000 new songs a year. For people to buy and play on their upright pianos, or for musicians to sing on stage.

Berlin and the pianist shop their song around. And...someone wants it! They make the sale! Though, it doesn’t change their fortunes much. That year, their royalties are a whopping 75 cents. Still. It’s encouraging. So, Berlin keeps writing … and he starts to get better.

In 1909, he bundles up some satirical lyrics he’d written and takes them to a Tin Pan Alley publisher. No music, just lyrics. But the publisher asks:

James Kaplan: ‘I suppose you have a tune to this thing?’ Berlin has nothing like a tune to this thing, but he says, ‘Of course I do.’ And so, he's shepherded into one of the enclosures in the office where there's a piano, and a pianist. And Berlin proceeds to sing this melody that he's making up right on the spot.

Sally Helm: Wow.

It's sort of like improvising a song at the Pelham—but instead of a drunken audience and a sawdust covered floor, it’s basically a job interview. At a serious music publishing company. And Berlin nails it.

The publisher not only buys his song. He hires Berlin to write songs. Soon enough, Berlin is being paid to add to the daily cacophony of Tin Pan Alley. Though...he’s not banging the piano keys himself. Because, though this Lower East Side prodigy has risen higher faster than he ever expected...there is still one big thing he can’t do.

James Kaplan: He can't write music; he can't read music. He can't play the piano. And so, the way he worked was with what was called, a musical secretary. There would be somebody who knew how to play the piano and knew how to write music and read music sitting at the piano. Berlin would stand next to the piano, and he would sing the tune he had in mind. And the piano player would write down the notes and write down the harmony on a staff sheet and a song would emerge. To which Berlin would then, affix lyrics. it was an odd method, but it was a method that he depended on.

Sally Helm: He depends on it to the tune of $25 a week. He also gets royalties from his published songs. Conditions have changed for the kid who left home at age 14 to busk for spare change. He’s now a young man with a good job doing what he loves.
James Kaplan: So here he is at age 21, 22, he's got some money. He reconnected of course with his mother and brothers and sisters. And he's doing well enough that he finds himself able to take a winter vacation in the winter of 1910, 1911, he's gonna go down to Florida.

Sally Helm: Florida. Where else? He goes to Penn Station to catch a train. He’s got a few hours to kill. And he realizes he’s not far from Tin Pan Alley. Why not head over there and start working on a song that will profoundly change the course of his life?

Of course, Berlin doesn’t know that’s what he’s doing. All he knows is...

James Kaplan: He had a tune kicking around his head and a couple of lyrics. So, he went back to the office instead of having to sit in the waiting room of Penn Station, found one of the piano players and sang the tune.

Sally Helm: The pianist jots down the musical notes. Berlin scribbles out the lyrics.

James Kaplan: And then not thinking much more about it, he went back to Penn Station uptown and got on a train, went to Florida and had a nice vacation.

Sally Helm: That song he’d tossed off while killing time? It is about to become a sensation.

James Kaplan: Not only a huge hit for Berlin himself, but a history changing piece of music.

Sally Helm: The song is called Alexander’s Ragtime Band. Ragtime was really popular in 1911. It was a style of music that had originated with Black American musicians, people like Scott Joplin. Berlin was a fan, but in this case, he hadn’t actually composed a ragtime tune himself. He’d written about ragtime.

James Kaplan: Alexander's Ragtime Band, it's not a rag time. It's more like a march.

Sally Helm: The song is really an ode to ragtime. Telling people, you better listen up. We're doing things differently here in America. We've got this great art form.

James Kaplan: As Berlin himself said, the first words of the chorus:

*Alexander’s Ragtime Band Archival*: Come on and hear. Come on and hear, Alexander’s ragtime band.

James Kaplan: Come on and hear. He is calling on his audience, the audience out there in America, in England, and across Europe, to get with the American century, with the snap, crackle, and pop of American culture.
**Alexander’s Ragtime Band Archival:** He can play the bugle call like you never heard before...

**James Kaplan:** Not fusty old European culture, but American culture, which is all about speed and vigor and this song became an instant hit, selling like crazy all across America. And then the sheet music and the discs traveled across the Atlantic, and suddenly, this was the real beginning of the American century.

**Sally Helm:** Soon after the song is released, Variety magazine calls it "the musical sensation of the decade"... and this in 1911. The decade has only just begun!

**James Kaplan:** Bessie Smith's great recording of Alexander's Ragtime Band, gives me goosebumps even just to talk about Bessie Smith singing that song.

**Alexander’s Ragtime Band Archival:** ...played in ragtime come on and hear...

**James Kaplan:** It's all just so infectious. The tune is infectious. The lyric is infectious.

**Alexander’s Ragtime Band Archival:** Listen to the bugle call...

**James Kaplan:** America is infectious, and Berlin himself is infectious.

**Sally Helm:** Berlin is even invited to perform at a theater in London.

**James Kaplan:** They're paying him a half a million dollars, to sail across the Atlantic and to sing Alexander's Ragtime Band.

**Sally Helm:** You mean a half a million dollars in dollars of *those* days?

**James Kaplan:** Correct. A half a million dollars—

**Sally Helm:** Oh my gosh.

**James Kaplan:** Yeah, he sails across the Atlantic. And this is, I should say, this is a guy who is perpetually anxious. He had what he called songwriter's stomach. His stomach was always churning. He never really, truly believed in the success he had or that anything would be a success. But he sails across the Atlantic and takes the train from Southampton to London and takes a horse drawn cab, from the train station and gets out of the horse drawn cab and there is a news-kid on the street selling his papers and whistling Alexander's Ragtime Band.

**Sally Helm:** Wow. It must have just been surreal.
James Kaplan: Surreal. Surreal.

Sally Helm: And he’s only getting started. What is surreal in this moment … will come to seem normal.

[AD BREAK]

Sally Helm: It’s 1912. Alexander's Ragtime Band has sold two million copies. And its composer, Irving Berlin, has just gotten married—to the singer Dorothy Goetz. The two of them travel to Cuba for their honeymoon. There’s a photo of them on the deck of an ocean liner: he’s dapper in a Homburg hat and stylish winter coat; she’s wrapped in fur. Neither can seem to stop smiling. It’s a glorious chapter in the life of Irving Berlin. And… it’s about to end. The couple arrives in Cuba during an outbreak of typhoid. Goetz contracts a bad case, which sends them quickly back to New York. She sees the best doctors … but continues to decline. And in July, she dies. Just six months into their marriage.

Berlin is plunged into mourning. And into his first artistic crisis. He tries to write what he's feeling but he can’t capture it. At least at first. Then gradually, over time, his grief becomes words. If life with his wife had been full of sunshine and roses, now:

When I Lost You Archival: The sunshine has fled. The roses were dead. Sweetheart when I lost you...

Sally Helm: “The roses were dead” the lyrics say. He titles the song, “When I Lost You.”

Laurence Maslon is a professor at NYU, an expert on American musical theater. He says, “When I Lost You” is Berlin’s first meaningful ballad.

Laurence Maslon: I've referred to it as a haiku of grief because it's so simple and it's so short, that any elaboration of it would detract from it.

When I Lost You Archival: I lost the gladness that turned into sadness when I lost you...

Laurence Maslon: It wasn't highfalutin language; he was expressing things with a particular sensibility that everyone could relate to. So, I think that was his genius to write things that millions of Americans felt, but only he could articulate.

Sally Helm: Berlin’s breakthrough at the Pelham Cafe was to cut through the sentimental songs of the day with something funny. But now, his lyrics are going much deeper. They’re drawing on raw emotion. Maslon says, contrast “When I Lost You” with another popular song at the time
about loss. It was called "Hello Central, Give Me Heaven." About a little girl making a long-distance call to her mom, who’s died.

**Hello Central, Give Me Heaven Archival:** Hello central, give me heaven, for my mother’s there...

**Laurence Maslon:** And it sold really well. It made a lot of people cry. But it's as phony as a $3 bill. I mean, it's a completely sentimental, phony conceit for a song.

**Sally Helm:** But Berlin’s grief-stricken ballad?

**Laurence Maslon:** It doesn't feel like a gimmick, it doesn't seem like it's written because some guy woke up that morning and said, I got a great idea. He was writing from the heart so; Berlin's major contribution is to start to write songs that are more timeless.

**Sally Helm:** Berlin starts working again. He’s still using the tricks he discovered as a young man: writing songs that are simple. Catchy. Direct. But in the service of deep feeling. And his career is taking off.

He writes that revue, “Watch Your Step.” It premieres uptown, in this growing theater district called Broadway. And features his first famous double song. Two songs sung together. One is funny and upbeat. The other is more sincere. The two impulses that he’s beginning to combine. Variety reviews the show…and gives it a rave. The magazine describes Irving Berlin as a “one of the greatest lyric writers America has ever produced."

This would be the perfect moment for Irving Berlin to take the next step in his career. To create Broadway as we know it. But that’s not what happens because it’s now that he gets a consequential letter. James Kaplan tells us; America has entered the first World War. And Irving Berlin, a newly naturalized citizen, is drafted.

**Sally Helm:** What does that mean for him? How does he find being a soldier?

**James Kaplan:** He hates it. He's a wealthy young bachelor, living in a fancy apartment with a maid and a butler. And suddenly he finds himself in Camp Upton, in Yaphank, Long Island. Having to go to sleep in a barracks with 500 other guys and be awakened every morning by a bugle call Revel at 5:00 AM and it's just totally intolerable.

**Sally Helm:** This is a guy who's used to staying up writing late into the night. Lucky for Berlin, his base commander is trying to raise money for a new rec center. He asks Berlin to write a musical revue, as a fundraiser. Berlin says, “Sure. IF I can sleep in as late as I want.”

**James Kaplan:** And the commander says, ‘Done deal.’ And so Berlin writes this revue. It's a funny show, satirical show about the army, called Yip Yip, Yaphank.
**Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning Archival:** I've been a soldier quite a while, and I would like to state, the life is simply wonderful. The army food is great.

**James Kaplan:** And the centerpiece of the show is this song “Oh, how I hate to get up in the morning.”

**Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning Archival:** Someday I'm going to murder the bugler, someday day they're going to find him dead.

**Sally Helm:** [laughs] He really draws from experience there of what he felt in the army.

**Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning Archival:** For the hardest blow of all is to hear the bugle call. You gotta get up. You gotta get up. You gotta get up this morning.

**Katherine Swett:** And as my mother always said, “Oh, how I hate to get up in the morning” was the family theme song.

**Sally Helm:** Berlin's granddaughter, Katherine Swett, again. She loves that song by her grandfather.

**Katherine Swett:** I've always liked his funny songs. It's true. But I think when I was a teenager, I loved the sappy ones. The torch songs because I was a teenager and full of angst.

**Sally Helm:** Many of Berlin’s torch songs are written for Swett’s grandmother, Berlin’s second wife, Ellin MacKay. He meets her after the first world war, in 1924. And they fall in love. She’s a fiction writer from a wealthy Catholic family. While they’re courting, Berlin writes loves songs for MacKay.

**Katherine Swett:** I was discussing a book with my students, and they were talking about sort of gender stereotypes, and they said that the stereotype of the person who moons over love is a woman.

**Sally Helm:** Hmm.

**Katherine Swett:** And for me, because my grandfather wrote all those songs, I thought of men as mooning.

**Sally Helm:** Hm.

**Katherine Swett:** And, you know, bearing torches. I think I knew that no; you know, men fall in love. Men have their hearts broken. He had written songs for my grandmother.
Sally Helm: Was he romantic, do you think, like in knowing him?

Katherine Swett: I heard it in the songs. I mean, does any teenager think an old man is romantic?

Sally Helm: Of course not.

Katherine Swett: But they were loving.

Sally Helm: McKay’s father disapproves of her relationship with the Jewish songwriter. When the couple marries, he disowns her. But nevertheless: things are looking up for Irving Berlin. He owns his own Broadway theater now. His annual revues are packing the house and drawing praise from critics. And then, James Kaplan tells us…things change once again.

James Kaplan: A couple of things happen, in quick succession after he marries Ellen MacKay. The couple have a son, Irving Berlin Jr. who dies at three months old from crib death.

Sally Helm: Oh my God.

James Kaplan: On Christmas Day, by the way, 1928. It's an unspeakable tragedy. The following year is 1929. And in the stock market crash of October 1929, Berlin loses everything he has. $5 million in 1929 dollars.

Sally Helm: That’s almost 90 million dollars today.

James Kaplan: The depression. The loss of his son. These are two very hard blows.

Sally Helm: And a third blow, a professional one: Berlin’s first movie project is a total failure. Nearly all the songs are cut. Berlin sinks into sadness … and his second bout of writer’s block.

James Kaplan: He suffers this dry spell. It's the onset of the depression that is to plague him throughout his life. And it really began here when he found himself for the first two or three years of the decade, unable to come up with anything.

Sally Helm: Until, that is, he starts working with a brilliant young playwright named Moss Hart. In 1932, he and Berlin hit on an idea for an innovative revue. They call it, "As Thousands Cheer."

James Kaplan: The gimmick of this revue is that the show is a newspaper. Instead of acts, or discreet songs throughout the show, it has a sports section, financial section, a news section, a comic section and Berlin writes clever songs to go with the section of the show.
Sally Helm: There’s an advice column. A society gossip section. A weather section.


Sally Helm: Act Two starts with a lighthearted sketch. Everyone's in good spirits.

James Kaplan: And immediately after the sketch, a newspaper headline descends from the upper regions of the stage. In gigantic black type it reads “Unknown Negro lynched by angry mob.”

Sally Helm: Ethel Waters, an acclaimed Harlem performer, walks on stage. It's the first time a Black performer is starring alongside white actors in a Broadway show.

James Kaplan: And she's singing this great song, this powerful song, this amazing song that Irving Berlin has written called Suppertime.

Suppertime Archival: Kids will soon be yellin’ for their supper time.

James Kaplan: And the gist of the song is that her husband is not coming home from supper because he has been lynched.

Suppertime Archival: How’ll I keep explainin’ when they ask me where he's gone?

James Kaplan: And the audience is just sitting there dead silent with their mouths open, listening to this song, having to look at this headline. And at the end of the show, a lot of people are outraged. A review is written in the New Yorker magazine, condemning this number by Ethel Waters, this brilliant song.

Sally Helm: Condemning it in what terms? What do people object to?

James Kaplan: The song was criticized on the absolutely spurious grounds of being in bad taste. Though lynchings were, decried in many quarters. White people didn't want to know about them.

Sally Helm: It's Berlin's first time taking a serious political stand in his art. Over the decades, he’s evolved from saloon songs to comic songs to ballads of heartbreak. And now he’s writing to capture an American tragedy.

James Kaplan: He understood that it was important to cry out about what was wrong with the world.
Sally Helm: A world that grows even worse as World War II approaches. Berlin gets a call from the manager of popular radio singer Kate Smith, asking if he has any patriotic songs she can perform. So, he pulls out a tucked-away piece of music from his suitcase. A song written when he was a soldier. He gives it to Smith.

James Kaplan: And she sang it, on the premier episode of her radio show in the fall of 1938, which happened just days after Kristallnacht in Germany.

God Bless America Archival: God bless America. Land that I love.

James Kaplan: God Bless America becomes an instant, huge hit, such a huge hit that many Americans call for it to become the new national anthem. At the same time, it also becomes a gigantic cause of contention. The wave of antisemitism across America seizes on this song written by this immigrant Jew and asks what right this immigrant Jew has to write a song called God Bless America.

Sally Helm: The song may have started its public life as a point of controversy … but it’s grown into a classic. Berlin’s granddaughter Katherine Swett told us, of all the songs he wrote, he called God Bless America his favorite.

Katherine Swett: I think he's that generation of immigrants that he really believed in this country and though I don't think he was particularly naive about the problems here, I think he was a very strong patriot.

Sally Helm: After writing God Bless America, Irving Berlin, originally Izzy Balene, the Jewish immigrant from Russia and the Lower East Side, does something just as remarkable: he writes an iconic Christmas song.

White Christmas Archival: I'm dreaming of a White Christmas...

Sally Helm: The lyrics to ‘White Christmas’ are both tender and melancholy. They evoke the beauty of the holiday… as sung by someone far from home. Longing to return.

Katherine Swett: That's just part of his music, right? The lyrics and the melodies are often in conflict.

Sally Helm: Mm-hmm. Mm-hmm.

Katherine Swett: It’s part of the richness.

White Christmas Archival: Just like the ones I used to know...

James Kaplan: It's a song of great simplicity, of pure nostalgia, of strong visual images.
"White Christmas Archival: Where the treetops glisten..."

**James Kaplan:** It's a song of extremely infectious melody and Bing Crosby's recording of White Christmas is sent overseas to soldiers and sailors in Europe and in the South Pacific and becomes this sort of talisman, for terrified and homesick young soldiers and sailors who are thousands of miles from home. And for all the families that are missing their sons and relatives who are overseas and in great peril.

**Sally Helm:** Listen carefully, and you might even hear a tinge of the sadness that Berlin himself connected to Christmas, the day his infant son died. But for all that…

**James Kaplan:** It becomes a standard and becomes the biggest selling record of all time.

**Sally Helm:** Popular taste would eventually pass him by, as it does to even great artists. But not before he wrote the hit Broadway musical, “Annie Get Your Gun.” And the musical scores for tons of Hollywood movies. He did it in the way he’d always done with deceptively simple lyrics and pleasing repetition...in the voice of ordinary people dealing with pain and joy and everything in between. James Kaplan says it’s this approach that opened the way for the countless artists who’ve followed him.

**James Kaplan:** If you're writing songs and you're doing those things and garnering an audience, you have Irving Berlin to thank because he's the guy who, who really started it all.

[CREDITS]

**Sally Helm:** Thanks for listening to History This Week. For more moments throughout history that are also worth watching, check your local TV listings to find out what's on the History Channel today.

If you want to get in touch, please shoot us an email at our email address, HistoryThisWeek@History.com, or you can leave us a voicemail: 212-351-0410.

Thanks to our guests: James Kaplan, author of *Irving Berlin: New York Genius*; Laurence Maslon, arts professor at NYU’s Tisch School of the Arts and host of the radio show, *Broadway to Main Street*, on WLIW; and Katherine Barrett Swett, English teacher, poet, and granddaughter of Irving Berlin and Ellin Mackay.

**Katherine Swett:** He did write a song for me.

**Sally Helm:** What song?
Katherine Swett: I was a slightly pushy child. And it went Katherine, dear Katherine, between us, I wouldn't compare you to Venus, which wasn't very friendly, but I would be willing to state your greater than Katherine the great… You're all the aces in the deck, but outside of that, you're a pain in the neck. And I, I liked that, that, you know, it's important to be able to laugh at yourself.

Sally Helm: It makes it a real Irving Berlin song.

Katherine Swett: Yes, exactly.


This episode was produced by Julia Press. It was story edited by Jim O’Grady and sound designed by Brian Flood. HISTORY This Week is also produced by Morgan Givens, Corinne Wallace, and me, Sally Helm. Our associate producer is Emma Fredericks. Our senior producer is Ben Dickstein. Our supervising producer is McCamey Lynn, and our executive producer is Jessie Katz.

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