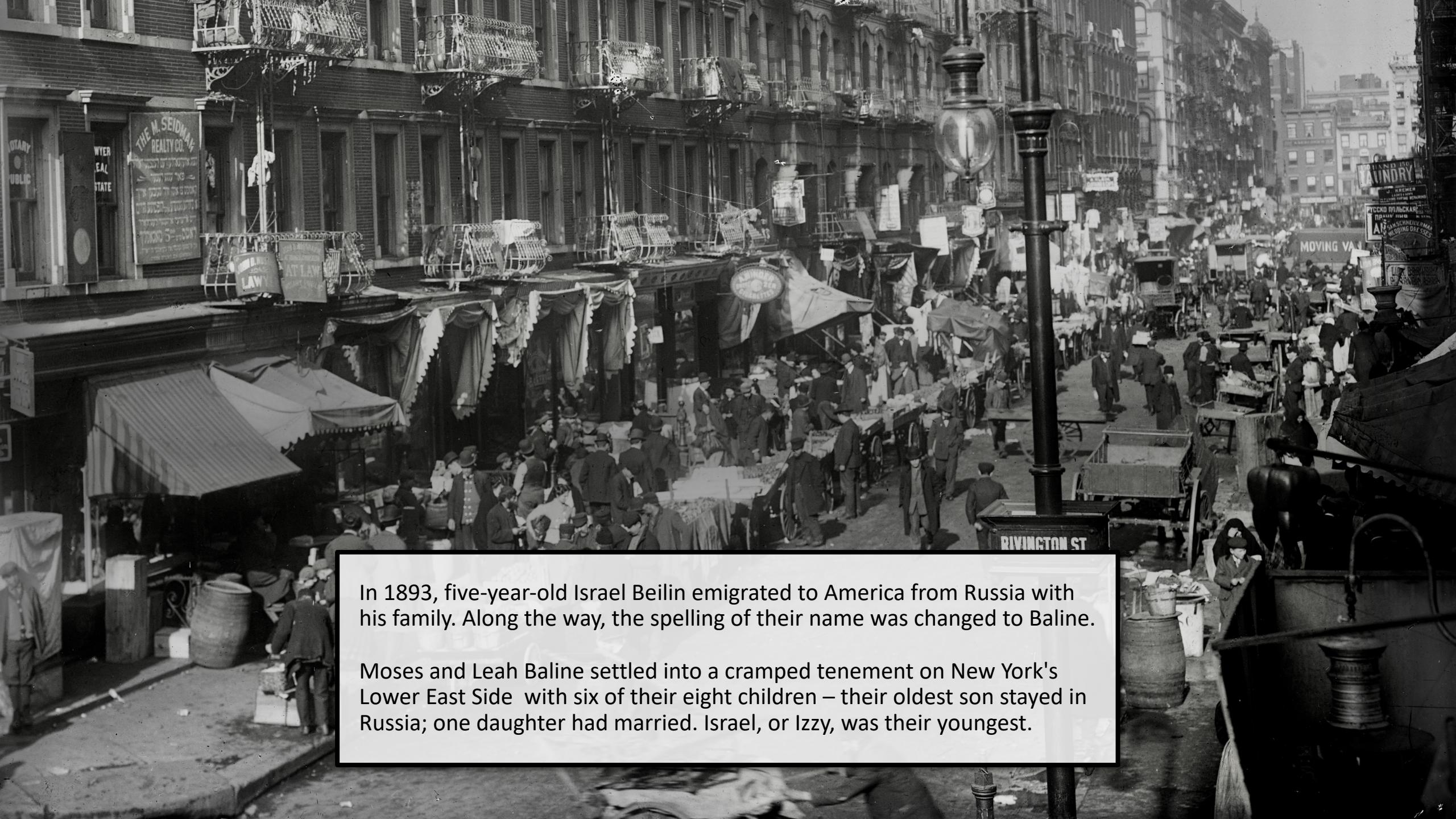


# Irving Berlin

AMERICA'S MAESTRO

Margot Morrell



In 1893, five-year-old Israel Beilin emigrated to America from Russia with his family. Along the way, the spelling of their name was changed to Baline.

Moses and Leah Baline settled into a cramped tenement on New York's Lower East Side with six of their eight children – their oldest son stayed in Russia; one daughter had married. Israel, or Izzy, was their youngest.

For a while, Moses certified meat for a kosher butcher. The family scraped by sewing collars, stringing beads, and working in sweatshops.

Moses died in 1901. Izzy soon left home to make life easier on his mother and sisters.

Hustling newspapers and singing on streets, Izzy cobbled together pennies to pay for a mattress in a "dormitory."

Years later he said, "Everybody ought to have a Lower East Side in their life."





Music was in Izzy's DNA. In Russia, Moses had been a cantor, like his father and grandfather, leading the music at temple services. Moses nourished his youngest's talent. Izzy's future began to take shape when he got a job as a singing waiter on the Bowery.

After the restaurant closed at night, Izzy would fiddle with the keys on the piano, searching for the notes to make his songs catchier. Working through the night became a life-long habit.

At eighteen, with a partner, Izzy sold his first song – "Marie from Sunny Italy." His share of the proceeds amounted to thirty-seven cents. On the sheet music, the name of the lyricist was listed as I. Berlin.

He got a job with a music publisher on New York's Tin Pan Alley and, over the next five years, honed his craft.

# ALEXANDER'S RAGTIME BAND

BY IRVING BERLIN



His first hit, "Alexander's Ragtime Band," was inspired by African-American ragtime music developed in the 1890's.

In May 1911, *The New York Sun* predicted, "In a few days, 'Alexander's Ragtime Band' will be whistled on the streets and played in the cafés."

The jaunty tune and the name, Irving Berlin, were soon famous all over the world. The song caught a "second wind" when it set off a dance craze - a precursor to the Jazz Age.



Berlin never learned how to play the piano in a formal sense. He could only play the black keys in the key of F Sharp. In the future, he had pianos custom built with a lever to shift to a different key.



In 1912, after a whirlwind romance, he married Dorothy Goetz, the twenty-year-old sister of a fellow songwriter.

On their honeymoon in Cuba, she contracted typhoid fever and died six months later. Berlin was devastated.

His tribute to her, "When I Lost You," sold over a million copies.

It took twelve years for him to find a replacement for Dorothy.



In 1914, Berlin partnered with Victor Herbert, Jerome Kern and other leading composers to found the non-profit organization ASCAP – the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers – to collect royalties on behalf of creators.

Victor Herbert, Irving Berlin, John Philip Sousa

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In 1917, America entered World War I and Irving Berlin was drafted into the Army.

His commanding officer at Camp Upton, the Army's induction center sixty-miles east of Broadway, suggested he write a show to raise the funds needed - \$35,000 – to build a community center.

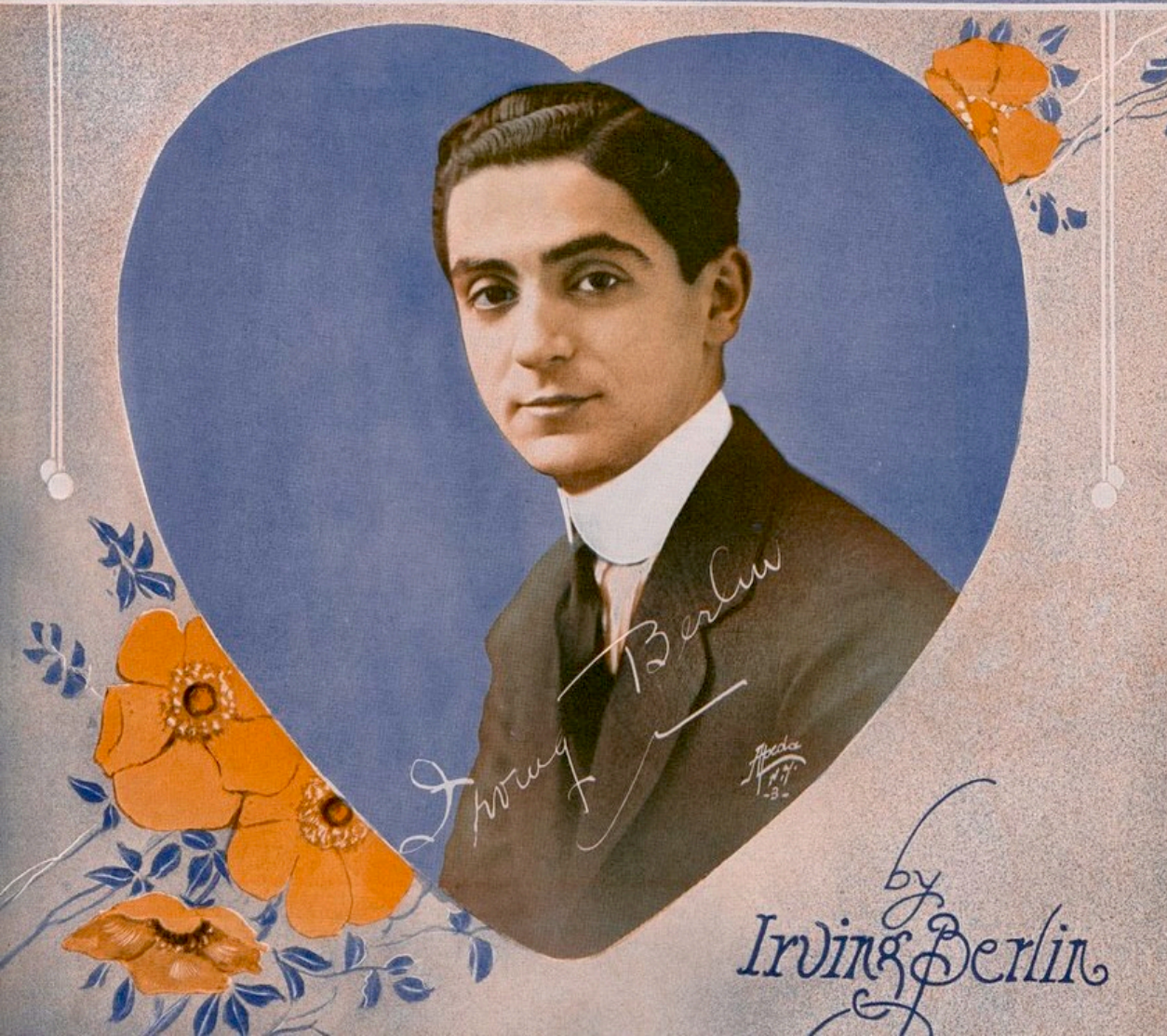
Berlin put his talent to work and wrote *Yip Yip Yaphank* featuring the enduring hit, "Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning."

The show debuted at Camp Upton before moving on to the Century Theater on Central Park West. For *Yip Yip Yaphank*, Berlin also wrote "God Bless America" but held it back. In 1938, he decided the time was right to release the song.

Berlin's show raised over \$80,000 but the fighting in Europe had raced ahead so rapidly, the community center was never built.



# THE HAND THAT ROCKED MY CRADLE RULES MY HEART



In 1919, he wrote *The Hand That Rocked My Cradle Rules My Heart*.

How can I ever pay the debt I owe you  
Mother o' mine, Mother o' mine  
What is there I could ever do to show you  
How much I love you  
Mother o' mine

[Refrain]:  
I kiss the hand, the wrinkled hand  
That rocked my cradle in babyland  
A mem'ry lingers of bygone years...

In 1913, he had moved her to a "country" house in the Bronx.



After the war, seasoned producer, Sam H. Harris, approached Berlin with the idea of building a theater to host his musical reviews. Berlin liked the idea and suggested a name, Music Box.

They hired an architect and built a theater that seats 1,025 at 239 West 45<sup>th</sup> Street.

In 1989, their theater was designated a national landmark.



In the spring of 1924, as a last-minute replacement, Berlin was seated next to twenty-one-year-old socialite / journalist Ellin Mackay at a dinner party.

Ellin had grown up in a six-million-dollar mansion on Long Island's posh north shore. But it hadn't all been a fairytale. When Ellin was ten, her mother deserted the family to marry a "good friend" of her husband's.

Ellin's staunchly Roman Catholic father, whose mistress was a star at the Metropolitan Opera, objected strenuously to her marrying – in the words of an editorial – "a former Bowery urchin." Even if that "urchin" was now world famous and spectacularly successful.


At the time, Ellen was sort of engaged to a Washington, DC diplomat but that dinner party sparked a romance that culminated in a 2-minute wedding ceremony at New York's Municipal Building on January 4, 1926.

Over the course of their circuitous path to matrimony – she went off to Europe for months, he was distracted by work - he filled the air waves with love songs inspired by Ellen.

On a dreary Monday morning, they made up their minds over a phone call. By noon, they were on their way to get married, accompanied by Berlin's business partners, publicist Ben Bloom and music publisher Max Winslow.

Their marriage was front-page news across America.





From a nearby drug store, Ellin called her sister and her maid - "Pack a bag!" The newlyweds had dinner with her mother before speeding off to the Ritz Carlton in Atlantic City. A few days later, they boarded an ocean liner for Europe.

An editorial in the *Times Union* said, "there is something hopeful in the fact that good old-fashioned love and romance can still triumph."

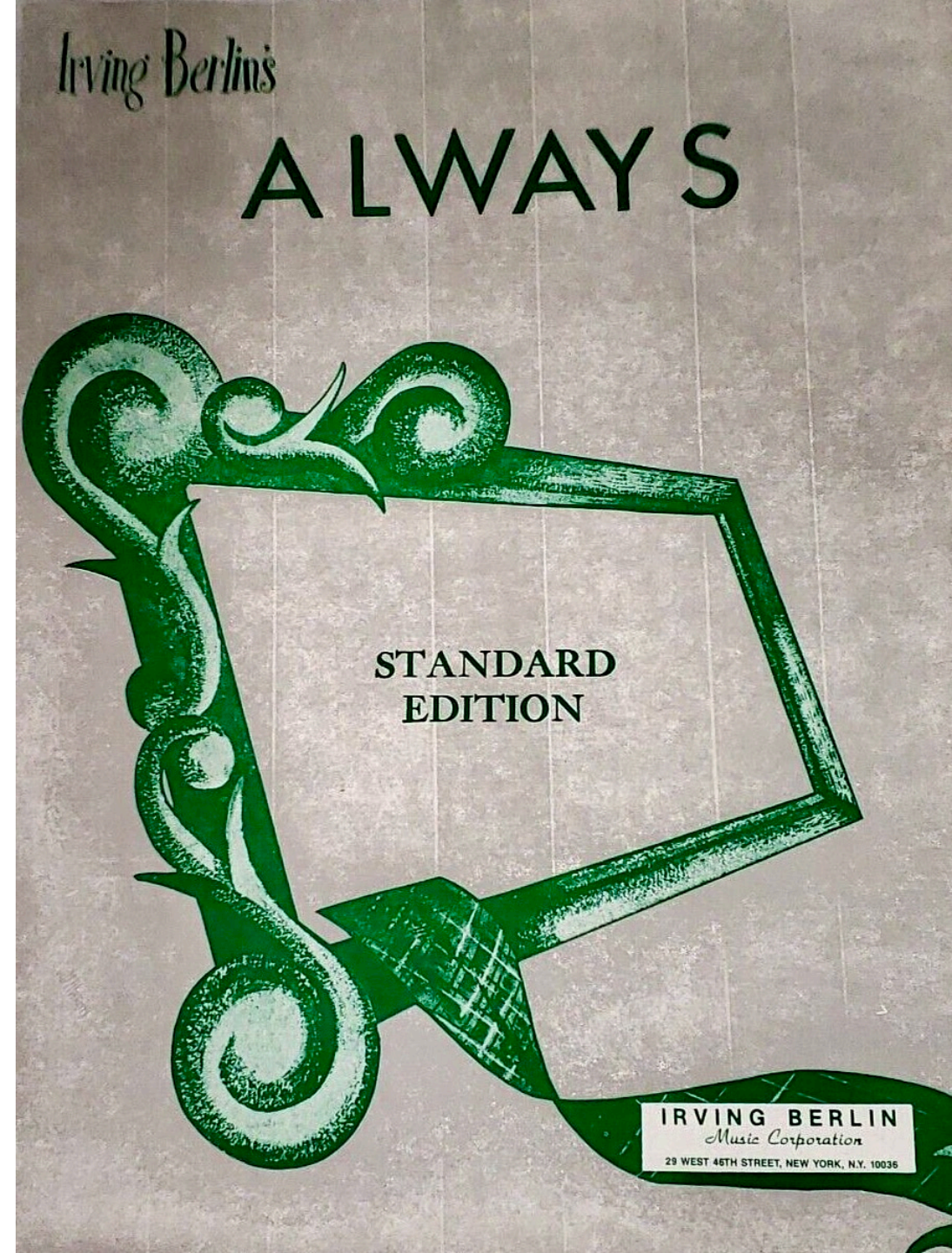
The Berlins' love affair lasted for over sixty years.

Ellin's father cut off her lavish income after the wedding. Berlin transferred the royalties from "Always" to her name.

"Everything went wrong  
And the whole day long  
I'd feel so blue  
For the longest while  
I'd forget to smile  
Then I met you  
Now that my blue days have passed  
Now that I've found you at last

[Chorus]  
I'll be loving you always  
With a love that's true always  
When the things you've planned  
Need a helping hand  
I will understand always, always.

Days may not be fair always  
That's when I'll be there always  
Not for just an hour  
Not for just a day  
Not for just a year  
But always."







Berlin celebrated the birth of their first daughter in 1927, by writing "Blue Skies."

"Blue skies smiling at me  
Nothing but blue skies do i see

Blue birds singing a song  
Nothing but blue skies from now on

Never saw the sun shining so bright  
Never saw things going so right

Noticing the days hurrying by  
When you're in love, my how they fly

Blue days, all of them gone  
Nothing but blue skies from now on..."

Irving Berlin with  
Mary Ellin, ca. 1928

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A few years later, Berlin wrote the score for *Top Hat* - Fred Astaire's second film with Ginger Rogers. The movie's highlight was Astaire dancing and singing to Berlin's tune, "Cheek to Cheek."

The film set a house record when it opened at Radio City Music Hall in late August 1939. Twenty-five policemen were brought in to control the crowds.

Berlin retained the rights to the score and was guaranteed 10% of the profits over \$1,250,000. The film was RKO's most successful production in the 1930s and earned over \$1,325,000.

Berlin wrote six more scores for Fred Astaire. *Top Hat* was the most successful until it was surpassed by *Easter Parade* in 1948.





On the twentieth anniversary of the end of World War I, Berlin released his homage to his adopted country.

The "First Lady of Radio," Kate Smith, introduced "God Bless America" on her popular radio show. Berlin's tribute became her signature song.

Berlin donated the royalties to the Boy Scouts and Girl Scouts of New York City.

"God bless America, land that I love  
Stand beside her and guide her  
Through the night with the light from above

From the mountains to the prairies  
To the oceans white with foam  
God bless America, my home sweet home."

A close-up, low-angle shot of a piano keyboard. The keys are white and black, and the piano's wooden frame is visible in the background. The lighting is warm and soft, creating a sense of intimacy and focus on the instrument.

“AMERICA’S MUSIC WAS BORN AT HIS PIANO.”

ISAAC STERN

Arriving uncharacteristically early at his office, one morning in 1941, Berlin was bursting with excitement about a song he had written over the weekend. "Not only is it the best song I ever wrote, it's the best song anybody ever wrote!"

He was right. "White Christmas," written for the 1942 film, *Holiday Inn*, starring Bing Crosby and Fred Astaire, won an Academy Award and still holds the world-record for best-selling single.

Bing Crosby's version alone has sold over 50 million copies. In total, the song is estimated to have sold more than 100 million copies.

"White Christmas" highlights Berlin's genius. He kept his music simple. The lyrics consist of eight sentences.





Harkening back to his days as a singing waiter, Berlin got a kick out of making cameo appearances in his shows.

At the opening of the 1942 Broadway production of *This is the Army*, when Berlin appeared on stage to sing, "Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning," he received a 10-minute standing ovation from the audience.



During World War II, he entertained  
U.S. troops stationed in England...

...and Women of the U.S. Army Corps (WACs) in New Guinea...








... and later said, these were the happiest years of his life.



Back in Hollywood, the magic continued with another smash, *Easter Parade* starring Judy Garland and Fred Astaire.



He followed that up with *There's No Business Like Show Business*.

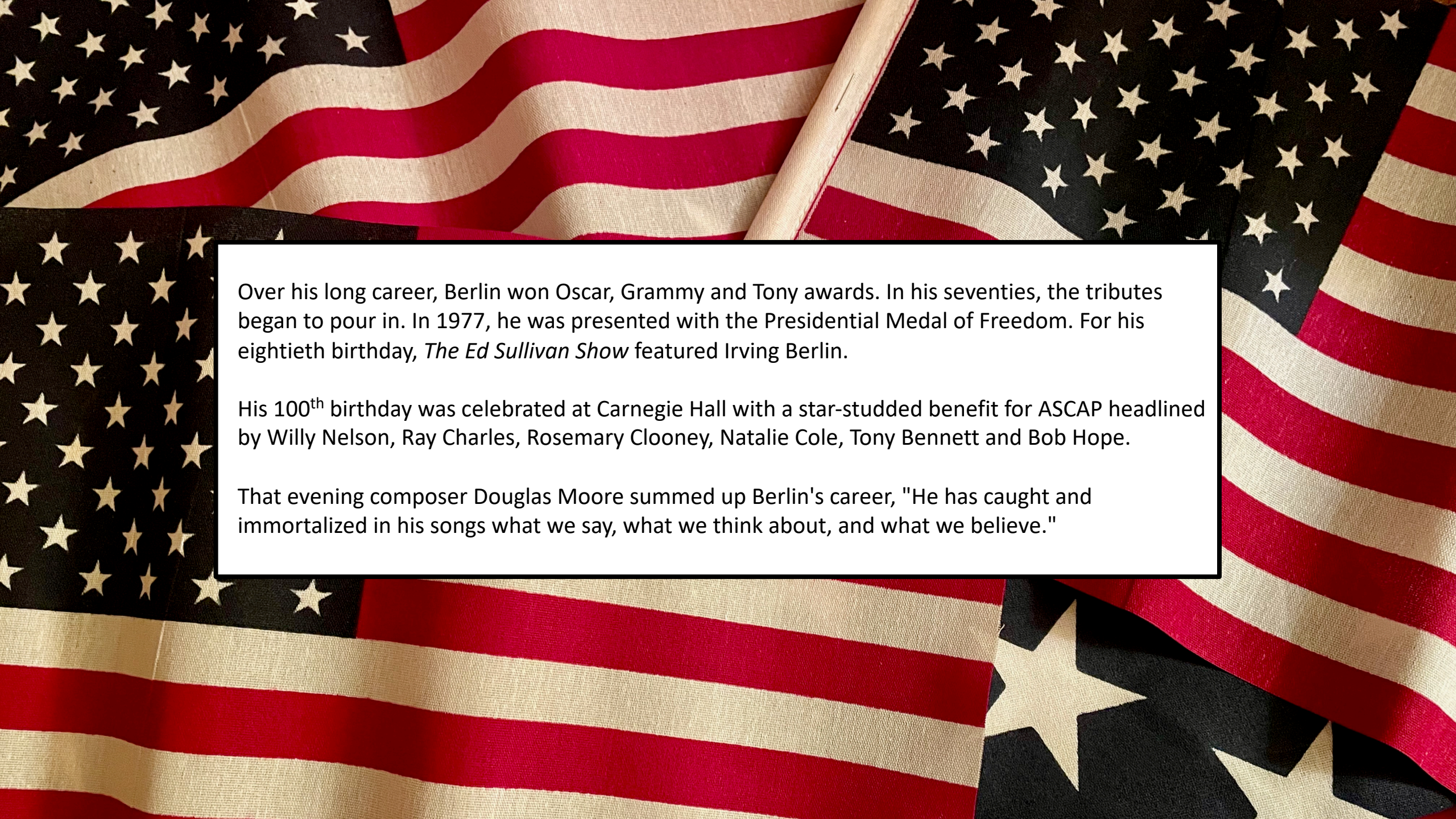
A black and white photograph featuring a vintage microphone and a typewriter keyboard. The microphone is positioned diagonally across the upper right portion of the frame. The typewriter keyboard is visible in the lower left and bottom center. A semi-transparent white rectangular box with a thin black border is centered over the image, containing text. The background is softly blurred, showing bokeh light effects.

The great composer Jerome Kern summed up Berlin's genius,  
“Irving Berlin has no place in American music. He is American music. Emotionally, he honestly absorbs the vibrations emanating from the people, manners and life of his time and, in turn, gives these impressions back to the world—simplified, clarified and glorified.”



Returning to Broadway, Berlin churned out more hits with *Annie*, *Get Your Gun* and *Call Me Madam* both starring Ethel Merman.

Watching auditions with Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein, II

The background of the image consists of several overlapping American flags. The flags are shown in a close-up, slightly angled perspective, with the stars and stripes clearly visible. The colors are vibrant, with the red stripes and white stars standing out against the dark blue field.

Over his long career, Berlin won Oscar, Grammy and Tony awards. In his seventies, the tributes began to pour in. In 1977, he was presented with the Presidential Medal of Freedom. For his eightieth birthday, *The Ed Sullivan Show* featured Irving Berlin.

His 100<sup>th</sup> birthday was celebrated at Carnegie Hall with a star-studded benefit for ASCAP headlined by Willy Nelson, Ray Charles, Rosemary Clooney, Natalie Cole, Tony Bennett and Bob Hope.

That evening composer Douglas Moore summed up Berlin's career, "He has caught and immortalized in his songs what we say, what we think about, and what we believe."



In the 1960s, musicals fell out of fashion. The aging Berlins gracefully retired to their home on Beekman Place in midtown Manhattan. Ellin died after a series of strokes in 1988. Berlin followed a year later, aged 101.





But on a snowy Christmas Eve in the 1980s, a neighbor decided to celebrate by singing "White Christmas" at the Berlins' door that evening.

Buzzing around the neighborhood that day, he mentioned his plan to friends. "What time?" they asked.

At the appointed hour, a small group gathered outside 17 Beekman Place to sing the familiar words.

As they finished, the heavy front door swung open, and a staffer presented a tray of champagne to the carolers.





“The song is ended, but the  
melody lingers on.”

Irving Berlin