

The Star That Got Away

By BENNETT LAW

A *Star is Born* was the culmination of Judy Garland's screen career. In a filmography studded with a host of indelible screen moments – singing "Over the Rainbow" in *The Wizard of Oz* (a song she propelled to the top spot on the NPR list of the 100 greatest musical achievements of the 20th century), the stunning "Get Happy" number that Louis B. Mayer ordered tacked onto the end of the middling *Summer Stock*, and her definitive rendition of "Have Yourself a Merry Little Christmas" from *Meet Me in St. Louis*, to name a few – one towers above all the rest.

Garland's rendition of "The Man that Got Away" is a breathtaking display of muscular talent, power, and authority. Garland is simply stunning. Her mesmerizing performance is supported by director George Cukor's decision not to cut away from her during the entire number. The performance is recorded in one take: there is not a single film edit the entire way through. The sheer bravado of Garland's performance – and Cukor's confidence in her ability to grip an audience – is thrilling every time you watch it.

The question in considering the new 2004 release of a restored version of the *A Star is Born* soundtrack on CD is, does the thrill survive the transfer? The answer, unfortunately, is no. However bad the recording is – and because many of the original recordings have been lost, portions of this soundtrack are not in stereo, and even copies of worn acetate recordings are included – the reason for this likely lies as much with Garland as with the inferior recording.

Judy Garland was in the fairly unique position for an artist of her stature of never having released a great, coherent studio album. Other major jazz and pop singers of the 20th century – Frank Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Peggy Lee, and Barbra Streisand – released scores of magnificent albums. But with Garland, remove her concert record-

**A Star Is Born:
Original Soundtrack**
Liner Notes by John Fricke
Columbia / Legacy / Sony Music
Soundtrax, 2004

**West Side Story:
Original Motion
Picture Sound Track**
Liner Notes by Richard
Ridges
Columbia Broadway Masterworks
2004

ings (at Carnegie Hall, the Palace, and the Palladium) from your CD collection and what you're left with is – well, do you have any other Garland albums?

There is a flatness to Garland's recordings apart from those brilliant concerts. Some spark in Garland didn't happen without that audience. And that flatness mars the new material included on this soundtrack.

A Star is Born famously suffered a controversial 30-minute gutting after its premiere in 1954. In 1983, historian/archivist Ron Haver ransacked the Warner vaults and restored the picture as best he could to its original edit, sometimes running dialogue and scoring over stills projected on the screen, as the original footage has been lost forever. The newly re-released soundtrack includes much from these 30 minutes, including two complete musical numbers sung by Garland ("Here's What I'm Here For" and "Lose that Long Face") and a host of orchestral portions of the score that were excised from the film in theatrical release. These additions, however, are uninteresting – the new songs are just not good songs, and they are not captivatingly performed.

The only other Garland performance new to this CD is from a worn acetate recording held by Michael Feinstein of "The Trinidad Coconut Oil Shampoo Commercial." The CD liner notes refer to "the poor sound quality" of this entry, and that's being generous.

All that said, this is now the definitive version of this soundtrack, and for some Garland fans that will be enough. But for those of

us who are more discriminating in our appreciation of Judy Garland, the better route may be to purchase the DVD of the expanded film (which thankfully has been selected for protection and preservation by the Library of Congress and The National Film Registry). To really enjoy what made this film and Garland so wonderful, drop it in the DVD player and skip ahead to "The Man that Got Away." Fifty years after its release, it still thrills.

West Side Story Is HOT!

Also newly released is a re-mastered version of the soundtrack to *West Side Story*. Tom and I compared the 1992 CD re-issue track-by-track against this re-mastered 2004 version, and I have to tell you – run to the store to buy it. Push old ladies out of your way if you have to! I would not have believed this, but the 2004 recording is light years better than the version you have in your CD collection.

All of the sound is brighter, clearer, warmer, and deeper. The strings that open the "Dance at the Gym" are so clear and strong, now, that you hear lines that are virtually unheard on the earlier recording. Balance is restored when more than one voice is singing, in songs like "America" and the "Quartet," so it sounds like the singers are all in the same room, rather than on different soundstages.

The improvements – heard throughout the soundtrack – are most striking in the more delicate numbers, like "Tonight," "Somewhere," and "Maria." The clarity of the sound makes these highly emotional sequences more immediate and so much more compelling than any previous recording. This transformation is sensational, making what was already a favorite soundtrack recording of one of the greatest shows in the American musical canon far better. ▼

Bennett Law enjoys his Broadway soundtrack CD collection at home in Bethel.

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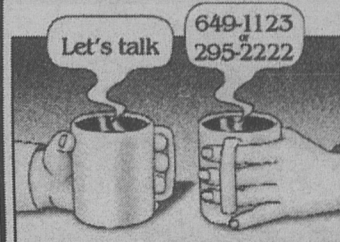
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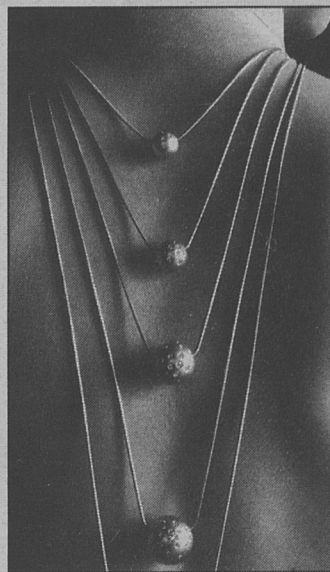


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