Antony John

Songs and the Audience in Early Movie Musicals

Introduction

The terms in which the movie musical is so often described—pure entertainment, mere escapism, simple wish-fulfillment—represent a double-edged sword. For although they acknowledge the musical as a form of utopianism, they simultaneously devalue that utopianism. In his essay "Entertainment and Utopia," Richard Dyer expounds upon the notion of the utopian musical: "Entertainment offers the image of 'something better' to escape into, or something we want deeply that our day-to-day lives don't provide.[1] Alternatives, hopes, wishes—these are the stuff of utopia, the sense that things could be better, that something other than what is can be imagined and maybe realized."[2] To illuminate his argument, Dyer discusses *Golddiggers of 1933* (1933), in which he contrasts the post-Depression realism of the film narrative with the grandiose spectacle of the (distinctly non-realist) Busby Berkeley finale. The strength of his analysis is that he does not dismiss the musical as being "merely" utopian, in the sense of mindless spectacle. Instead, he argues that utopia serves a profound and socially nourishing function—that of enabling the audience to understand and imagine an alternative to the problems of modernity. The two parts of this equation, understanding and imagining, correspond to the narrative and the numbers, respectively, such that every problem encountered within the narrative finds a solution in the utopian concluding numbers. Thus the most perceptible societal problems, such as poverty and dispiritedness, obtain resolution in the finale, which evokes abundance and energy. Importantly, however, the film does not offer a sociological model of a utopian world. "Rather the utopianism is contained in the feelings it embodies. It presents, head-on as it were, what utopia would feel like rather than how it would be organized."[3]

Compelling though it is, Dyer's critique describes the utopian experience in predominantly narrative and visual terms. The contribution of the songs as music is largely overlooked. In seeking to redress this visual-aural imbalance, this article considers the following three questions: first,

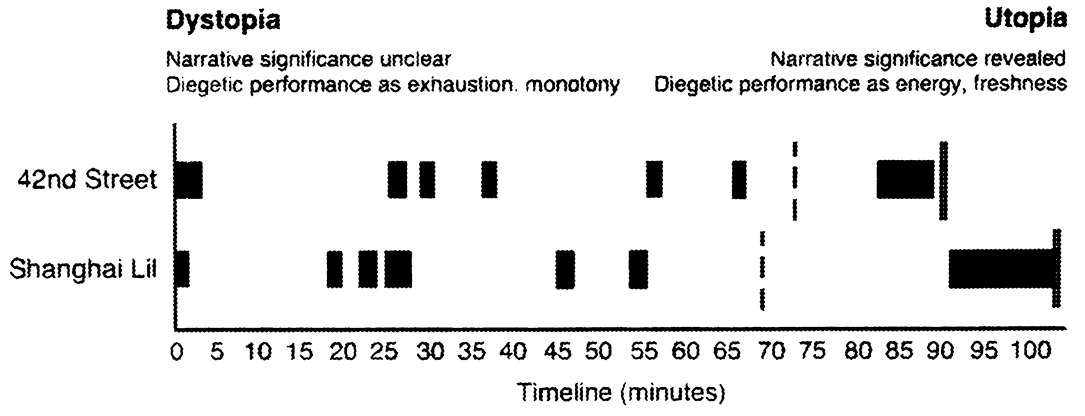


Figure 1. The title song in the Warners backstage musicals of 1933.

how does the title song contribute to the formation of the utopian finale? Second, can Dyer's theory account for musicals outside of the American tradition? Is it, for instance, as telling for a contemporary British musical? Third, what are the ideological implications of utopianism as expressed in these contrasting national traditions?

The Warners Backstage Musicals of 1933

42nd Street, Golddiggers of 1933, and *Footlight Parade* form a triptych of Warner Brothers backstage musicals from 1933. In addition to a narrative that operates within the context of a theatrical production-in-progress, all three conclude with spectacular dance numbers choreographed by Busby Berkeley.[4] This shift from production-in-progress to spectacular finale is reflected in the shift from narrative to numbers, from a realist to a non-realist aesthetic. Through hard work the obstacles arising in the rehearsals are negotiated, resulting in the effortless dancing and the unity of chorines in formation.[5] As such, the musical projects a clear narrative schematic. So too does the title song.

Figure 1 indicates the periods during which the title song is—diegetically or non-diegetically—performed in *42nd Street* and *Footlight Parade*.[6] In the case of *Footlight Parade*, there is no title song as such, although "Shanghai Lil" certainly fulfils that role. The figure reveals that in each film the title song makes several appearances, and is reprised at least every twenty minutes. The goal of this technique is simple: to ensure that the spectator is well acquainted with the song that forms the musical basis of the concluding visual spectacle.

Musical convention dictates that this technique of reprising the song indicates that it will ultimately prove to be of narrative significance. Yet the precise nature of this significance is not revealed to us until the finale. Before the finale, diegetic renderings of the song take place exclusively within the realist confines of the dance studio, and therefore alert us only to the fact that the song is part of a show. More important still, until the finale we are not privy to the lyrics of the song, the element most likely to

Still photo courtesy of Antony John

The pianist and piano as symbols of physical and musical exhaustion.

anchor it in meaning.[7] Our desire to apprehend the narrative significance of the song thus places emphasis on the finale. Only there can the song be said to be narratively self-contained, textually through the addition of lyrics and musically through its extended and orchestrationally elaborate arrangement.

Diegetic performances of the title song place further emphasis on the finale. Throughout each film, the dance rehearsals are always accompanied by diegetic piano, and the qualities associated with the rehearsal become associated with the piano. The exhaustion of hearing the same music played over and over on the same instrument is the exhaustion of seeing the same dance performed over and over by the same cast. The monotony of the fragmented musical performance is the monotony of the fragmented dance rehearsal. Thus the diegetic piano represents a source of tension, a tension moreover that may be assuaged only by effecting a shift to orchestra. Not coincidentally, orchestral cues throughout the narrative are exclusively non-diegetic. Only in the finale, then, can the plenitude of the full orchestra be justified diegetically.

The timbral contrast of diegetic piano and non-diegetic orchestra may reflect the gulf that separates the title song as work in progress from its ultimate realization in the finale. In *Footlight Parade*, Chester Kent (James Cagney) sits at a piano toying unsuccessfully with the melody of "Shanghai Lil." Frustrated by his inability to secure a musical and narrative context for his melody, he slams the lid of the piano. As he leaves the room a non-diegetic orchestra reprises the theme in a short but extravagant ar-

rangement that pre-empts the finale. The cue hints at a utopia that is to come, when the lavish arrangement will form the basis of the equally lavish spectacle, all fully realized diegetically. In the context of the present scene, however, it underlines the enormity of the task ahead.

In summary, we become accustomed to the title song through repetition. Repetition imparts narrative significance, and our desire to grasp the precise nature of this significance places emphasis on the finale as the moment of narrative resolution. In the event, the finale consists not merely of the utopian image of dancing chorines (contrasting with the exhaustion of the rehearsals), but also the utopian sound of full orchestra (contrasting with the exhausted timbre of solo piano). Analogous to the narrative, the song traces the same trajectory as the musical itself, from dystopia to utopia.

Looking on the Bright Side (1932)

According to the narrative standards of the Hollywood backstage musicals of 1933—savvy, sexy, and fast-paced—the British-made musical *Looking on the Bright Side* (1932) appears rather primitive. Even describing the film in terms of a realist narrative is somewhat misleading, since narrative continuity is not really the point. What we experience instead is variety: a concept of film as a series of loosely connected acts, recalling the tradition of the British music hall.[8]

Looking on the Bright Side does more than simply borrow the format of music hall entertainment, however, it recreates the music hall experience. Gracie Fields, the star of the film and one of Britain's biggest box office draws in the 1930s, was well known to contemporary audiences from her music hall performances. A national icon of the working classes, she reprised the same persona throughout her films of the early 1930s: one who avoided glamorization, spurned wealth, and poked fun at figures of authority in her broad Lancashire accent.[9] At a time when the music hall tradition was all but finished, appealing to working class sensibilities proved instrumental in securing an audience for Gracie's films. As Andy Medhurst explains: "The music hall offered a sense of community to an urban proletariat involved in repetitive labor; it restored a feeling (illusory and transitory perhaps, but perceptible and felt) of belonging, after the alienation of the workplace. And it did so primarily through song, and later comedy. Singing together and laughing together—this was what bound the individuals in the music hall audience into a whole."[10] Gracie's films fulfilled the same social function.

Although, like *42nd Street* and *Footlight Parade*, the title song is heard often throughout *Looking on the Bright Side*, it is of a contrasting musical design to its U.S. counterparts, and the audience's acquaintance with the song ultimately serves a different purpose. In place of the anxious, heavily orchestrated minor-key title songs of the Hollywood musicals, "Looking on the Bright Side" is an upbeat, simply orchestrated, major-key song (see Figure 2). Simplicity is also a characteristic of its form: after a short intro-

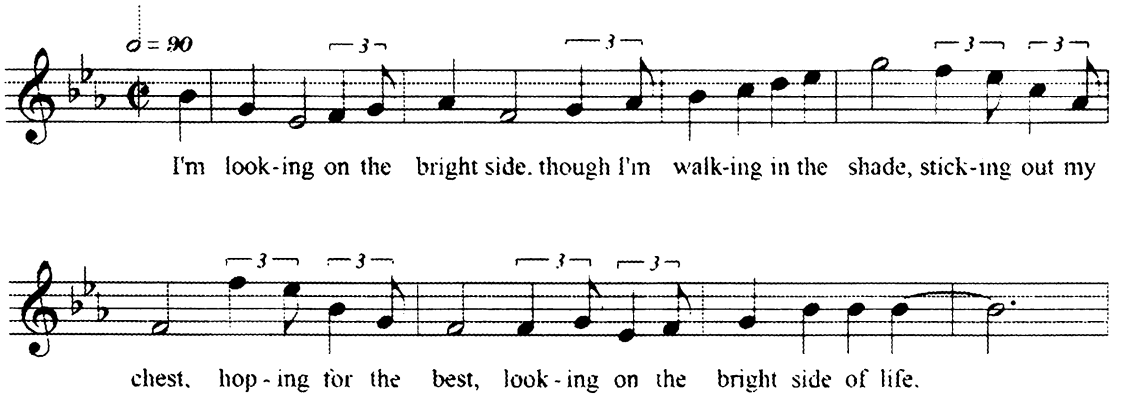


Figure 2. Opening of the chorus to Looking on the Bright Side.

duction the chorus is sung twice, followed by a bridge passage and a final chorus. The key to the song is its catchy tune, the positive mood enhanced by the optimism of the chorus lyrics.

Given its repetitive form, we might imagine that the song would receive only excerpted performance, in the manner of the Warners musicals. On the contrary, as Figure 3 reveals, the film begins with a ten-minute exposition during which the title song rarely stops.[11] Narratively, too, this opening contrasts with that of the Hollywood musical. Narrative drive in the first minutes of the Hollywood musical is supplanted by narrative stasis, affording us the opportunity to savor every moment of the exposition. And so we should, for where the Hollywood musical opens to images of the Depression (aborted shows, unemployed chorus girls), Gracie exists within an already established working-class utopia. Her partner Laurie, the composer of the title song, has just received printed copies of this, his first published song. Gracie and Laurie liberally distribute copies to the fellow occupants of their tenement building. As though familiar with the song, they begin to dance. Soon the entire tenement courtyard is filled

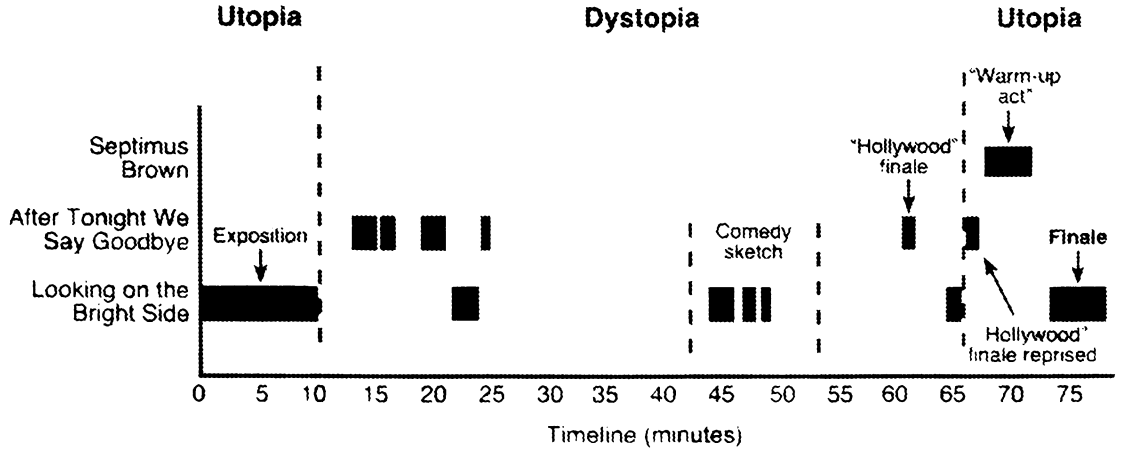


Figure 3. The title song in Looking on the Bright Side *(1932).*

Still photo courtesy of Antony John

Music fostering community: Gracie and Laurie distribute copies of his song.

with Gracie's neighbors, cavorting to the strains of a non-diegetic accompaniment. But this is no choreographed spectacle. Its purpose is to reveal the energizing effect of the song on the workers and thereby to endorse its value in the formation of community. As long as the song is playing, utopia exists—not a utopia wrought from human struggle, but a utopia which, fostered by camaraderie and solidarity, happily dispenses with struggle.

If the foregoing account gives the impression that the chorus of the song is repeated *ad nauseam*, then it has served its purpose. Indeed, the director, Basil Dean, would not have it otherwise. For the importance of this exposition is not merely to introduce a song that will achieve ultimate fulfillment in the finale, but to teach the chorus—both music and, possibly, snatches of lyrics—to the audience so that they may provide the finale themselves.[12] Future repetitions of the song will therefore serve the dual purpose of refreshing our musical memories, and transporting us to the communal state with which the movie began. Of course, the fact that the song ends after ten minutes implies that the utopian exposition does not go unchallenged. Sure enough, aspiring to fame and wealth, Laurie spurns Gracie and decides to try his hand as a professional songwriter. The songs are good, but the star whose services he enlists is not, and he is fired. The failure of his project unfolds through his hapless interactions with his upper-class employer, depicted as a money-grabbing, unsophisticated fellow. Throughout this period of narrative dystopia the only statements of the title song accompany Gracie as she gainfully tries to "look on

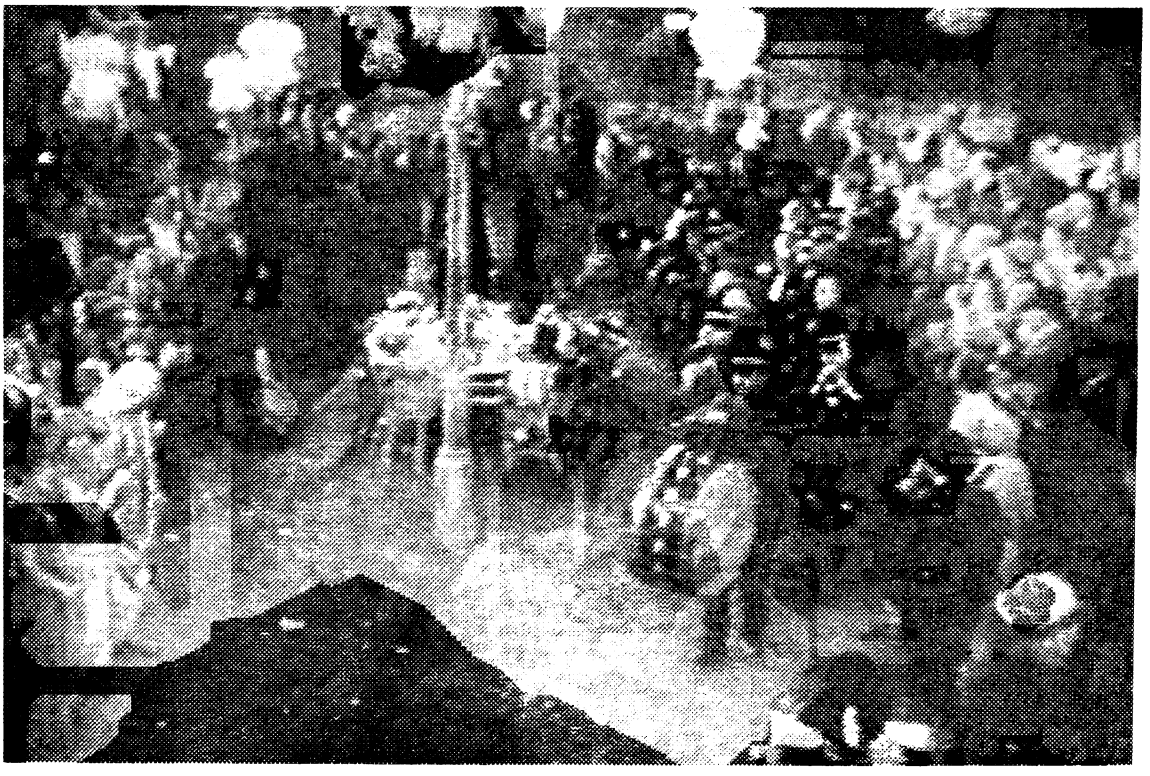
the bright side." Although he has deserted her, Gracie realizes that by singing Laurie's songs herself, she can make a success of him once more. Reluctantly, and without his support, she heads to the theater. And so, it would appear, the stage is set for the Berkeleyesque finale.

In the event, however, Gracie's "Hollywood" finale is worlds apart from Berkeley's. Images of a wildly appreciative audience convey well the success of her performance, but incongruous, superimposed head shots of Gracie, crowned with an unflattering clown's hat, seem to qualify this success. Performing to a West End (and therefore upper-class) audience proves to be an alienating experience, contrasting with the inclusiveness of the East End (and therefore working-class) tenement community.[13] Lasting less than a minute, this remarkable scene conveys the comparative irrelevance of the theater production within the wider context of Gracie's everyday social interactions, and makes necessary a finale that endorses these interactions. In the context of the Hollywood musical, it is the anti-finale, robbed of its spectacle and narratively inconclusive.[14]

Gracie declines to attend an expensive, post-production supper held in her honor, and instead invites her upper-class patrons to the party she is throwing for her working-class friends. Having arrived at the tenement building she treats the crowd and, more importantly, the cinema audience to a comic song called "Septimus Brown." Through the music hall staple of statement-and-response, Gracie's song becomes a warm-up act, putting the diegetic crowd and the cinema audience itself in a relaxed, responsive

Still photo courtesy of Antony John

Isolation and incongruity—the anti-finale.



Community as utopian finale. Still photo courtesy of Antony John

mood, by calling upon the vocal interjections of both groups.[15] Preaching her mantra of inclusiveness, she has managed through song to incorporate even her upper-class neighbors and the cinema audience in her party. And having secured their collective involvement, the finale proper commences.

Gracie instructs the makeshift band of musicians assembled in the courtyard to strike up, and they comply with a hearty rendition of the title song. In keeping with its "realistic" setting, the finale enables the entire cast to make their curtain calls as guests at Gracie's party, including the Salvation Army band and the police troop that formed the basis of the earlier comedy sketch. But this time Gracie's vocal contribution is diminished, and instead the aural focus is on her fellow workers and the cinema audience itself. The diegetic illusion of spontaneous performance is validated by the cinema audience, the realism of the finale reflected in their singing.[16]

With this image of diegetic cast and the reality of the live audience singing together, we have recaptured that experience of "what utopia would feel like." But unlike the Hollywood musical, this utopian state owes nothing to fantasies of "escape" and "wish-fulfillment." Joining in the finale, the audience simultaneously creates a makeshift community, and endorses the wider working-class community from which it is drawn. Laurie's social aspirations may have ruptured the narrative equilibrium, but Gracie's constancy ensures that it is restored. Throughout the film, the title song has mirrored this process, from utopia to dystopia to utopia once more.

Conclusion

How does all of this relate to the Hollywood musical, in which the problems of the realist narrative are "solved" by the finale? Dyer argues that in the Berkeleyesque extravaganza, "the non-realist presentation of the numbers makes it very hard to take this solution seriously."[17] Perhaps this does not go far enough, however, for by fetishizing technique and focussing on the specific skills (singing, tap dancing) of highly trained personnel, the spectacle of the Hollywood finale forecloses the possibility of collective audience participation. In doing so, the form of the musical itself compromises utopia. Quite the reverse obtains in the British musical, however, for the return to a utopian state is achieved by reprising the "ordinary" location (the tenement building) and the "ordinary" cast (the occupants) of the exposition.

But perhaps the most interesting difference between these national streams of movie musical is the way in which they may be seen to endorse the prevailing capitalist ideology through contrasting narrative schemes. Regarding Hollywood musicals as synonymous with "entertainment," Dyer concludes that, "the ideals of entertainment imply wants that capitalism itself promises to meet."[18] Thus, for instance, consumerism facilitates the transition from scarcity to abundance. The separation of narrative and numbers in the Hollywood musical presents utopia as something to be worked for, but something distinctly attainable within a capitalist ideology. But this notion of capitalist plenitude is lacking in one important respect, for it offers no means by which the problem of societal fragmentation may be resolved through the formation of an all-inclusive community.[19] In contrast, the British musical starts from the premise that community is utopian, and organizes the numbers in such a way that this may be affirmed. In so doing, the movie constitutes a working-class palliative, encouraging the audience to embrace the existing social structure and its place within it. More than narrative or images, songs and the audience determine the success of the undertaking.

Notes

1. Richard Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," *Movie*, no. 24, Spring 1977, pp. 2-13. Reprinted in Rick Altman, ed., *Genre: The Musical* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1981), 175-189.

2. Ibid., 177.

3. Ibid., 177.

4. Martin Rubin provides an insightful analysis of the numbers and choreography in these films in *Showstoppers: Busby Berkeley and the Tradition of Spectacle* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), 97-114.

5. The political desirability of an affirmation of hard work and pulling together is clear within the context of the Depression: "The musical form is essentially ritualistic. It is meant to reaffirm faith—not to illuminate conditions or states of being. The Warners musical of the early 1930s tried to come to terms with the questioning of the American Dream and to reaffirm faith in that ideal." Mark Roth, "Some Warners Musicals and the Spirit of the New Deal," in Altman, ed., *Genre*, 45. The same holds true in

Britain: "Cooperation and self-sacrifice were greatly admired and valued in British features during the Depression era. In all but two years between 1929-1939, approximately one of every three movies involved working-class characters banding together to help one another." Stephen C. Shafer, *British Popular Films 1929-39: The Cinema of Reassurance* (London: Routledge, 1997), 182.

6."Diegetic" and "non-diegetic" are film-critical terms less familiar to musicologists than to movie aficionados. "Diegetic" sound arises from the action of characters on stage, say when an actor picks up and plays a violin or turns on a radio. "Non-diegetic" music is background sound or underscoring and arises from no visible source on stage.

7. The only exception to this occurs when Peggy (Ruby Keeler) rehearses the opening of "42nd Street" shortly before she is due to go on stage. Even here, however, she provides only a brief excerpt before protesting, "I can't do it," an outburst that intensifies the prevailing narrative uncertainty.

8. Andrew Higson writes that within this particular narrative structure, "Gracie Fields's role . . is to perform, to entertain, but not necessarily to trigger the next causal shift in the narrative. She can inhabit this diegetic world performatively, but she is not necessarily required to move through it narratively." Andrew Higson, *Waving the Flag: Constructing a National Cinema in Britain* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), 149.

9. Gracie's accent was significant both as a comic prop and as a conduit to working-class appeal, a fact she acknowledges in her autobiography: "I've never used . . . a 'natural voice' on the stage in me life. . . I 've always talked funny, exaggerated my accent, clowned it. I don't think I could talk all la-de-dah for very long." Gracie Fields, *Sing As We Go* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961), 58. Sarah Street goes further: "musical-comedy allowed her to inflect her star persona with a utopian sensibility which spoke to working-class audiences of community, solidarity and longing. As well as her singing voice, Fields' northern accent was her most distinctive characteristic, representing a region and a class on screen." Sarah Street, *British National Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1997), 46. For an excellent account of Gracie's role as national icon, see Jeffrey Richards, *The Age of the Dream Palace* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984), 169-190.

10. Andy Medhurst, "Music Hall and British Cinema," from Charles Barr, ed., *All Our Yesterdays: 90 Years of British Cinema* (London: British Film Institute, 1986), 180. For a thorough discussion of the relationship between early British cinema and music hall traditions, see Michael Chanan, *The Dream That Kicks* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1980), 130-170.

11. Figure 3 does not incorporate all of the songs from *Looking on the Bright Side*. The two remaining songs ("You're More Than All the World to Me" and "I Hate You") also feature prominently.

12. The deliberate manner in which the title song is repeated diegetically during the exposition gives rise to some awkward moments, narratively speaking. After Gracie and Laurie perform the song in the beauty parlor where they work, their customer transparently enquires, "How did the chorus go again?" There follows a complete reprise of the song by the entire cast of parlor workers and customers, including even the woman who had posed the question.

13. This is not an isolated incident in Gracie's early films. Writing on her first film, *Sally in Our Alley* (1931), Marcia Landy describes a scene in which Gracie performs at an upper-class party: "When she performs, the audience treats her with condescension, as a freak. Their singing along with her is presented as noblesse oblige and as voyeurism, in contrast to the community involvement with her singing in her neighborhood. With the upper-class audience, she is on stage, clearly separated from the spectators." Marcia Landy, *British Genres: Cinema and Society, 1930-1960* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1991), 336.

14. Gracie's ostensible on-stage "success" is compromised still further when, only moments later, we see a dejected Laurie returning home. As he climbs the steps of their tenement building, the title song is reprised in a mournful, minor key arrangement.

15. She goes on to describe her experience: "Tonight I feel like Cinderella. A fairy waved her wand and here I am at the party." Again, the importance of the Hollywood finale has been subtly undercut, for Gracie invokes the notion of fantasy not to describe her presence on the stage and her success on that platform, but rather her presence at the party with her friends.

16. For more on film exhibition and the role of the audience in 1930s Britain, see John Ellis, "British Cinema as Performance Art: Brief Encounter, Radio Parade of 1935 and the Circumstances of Film Exhibition," from Justine Ashby and Andrew Higson, eds., *British Cinema, Past and Present* (London: Routledge, 2000), 95-109.

17. Dyer, "Entertainment and Utopia," 186.

18. Ibid., 184-185.

19. Jane Feuer maintains that in the case of the Hollywood backstage musical, the audience becomes a community through the "myth of integration": "By promoting audience identification with the collectively produced shows, the myth of integration seeks to give the audience a sense of participation in the creation of the film itself. The musical film becomes a mass art which aspires to the condition of a folk art—produced and consumed by the same integrated community." Feuer's argument is spot on, although identifying with an "internal audience" and vicariously participating in the show itself are distinct activities, and the resulting communities—one imagined, one real—are likewise significantly different. Jane Feuer, "The Self-reflective Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," in Altman, ed., *Genre*, 168. See also, *The Hollywood Musical*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), 23-47.

This article is a revised version of papers presented at the Third Triennial Susan Porter Memorial Symposium—"Hollywood Musicals and Music in Hollywood"—sponsored by the American Music Research Center at the University of Colorado at Boulder, August 2001, and the American Musicological Society, Southeast Chapter Meeting, Greenville, North Carolina, September 2001. My sincere thanks to Tom Riis, Candace Ellman, and the audience members who provided valuable feedback. Additionally, I wish to acknowledge my incalculable debt to Simon Hay and Christian Thorne for their many contributions to this essay.