Dorothy Fields (1905–74), whose work straddled stage and screen, had a tremendously successful career as a lyricist and librettist. Fields grew up in a famous American theatre family: Her father was Lew Fields, a comedian, actor, producer, and theater manager, and half of the famous Weber and Fields duo of vaudeville. As the youngest member of her family, Dorothy spent most of her childhood years living with both her father’s celebrity as a leading Broadway producer as well as with his success in the business (p. xii). Greenspan explains that, in the Fields house, “she grew up in an atmosphere in which words—their meanings and their sounds, the way they are used and misused—were highly valued” (p. xvi). The early experience may have had an impact on her later choice to work as a lyricist and librettist.

Broadway Legacies Series Editor Geoffrey Block explains early in her study that Fields’ “family is a major part of her story, and, despite all the films, for almost all her creative life it is mainly a Broadway story” (p. xii). That mentioned, author Charlotte Greenspan offers a thorough and well-researched biographical study of Fields that explores her early influences (including her early exposure to her father’s work as much as his discouraging her from becoming interested in the business), her initial work as a lyricist for Mills Music as well as for Cotton Club revues (for example, Blackberries, which opened on September 29, 1929), and her lifelong concurrent work for Broadway musicals and films. According to Greenspan, Fields was a lyricist for “more than four hundred songs, mostly distributed in nineteen Broadway shows and more than thirty films, as well as librettos for nine musicals” (pp. 223-24). Close partnerships included, among others, composers Jimmy McHugh, Jerome Kern, Arthur Schwartz, Albert Hague, and Cy Coleman. She also was her brother Herbert’s partner in writing books for seven musicals—the last ones of Herbert’s career, which included Annie Get Your Gun (the musical premiered in 1946; the film, directed by George Sidney and Busby Berkeley, was released in 1950). Though Fields’ life was more centered in New York than in Hollywood and her career more focused on musicals than films, Greenspan gives ample attention to those thirty films to which Fields contributed. More significantly, the author treats the work of the lyricist as part of the music, whether it be Fields’ composing for revues, Broadway musicals, or Hollywood films.

A selective list of Fields’ most popular songs for films include “The Way You Look Tonight,” “A Fine
Romance,” and “Pick Yourself Up” (all for George Stevens’ Swing Time, released in 1936), as well as “I Feel a Song Comin’ On” and “I’m in the Mood for Love” (featured in Raoul Walsh’s Every Night at Eight, 1935), “Lovely to Look At” (originally used in William A. Seiter’s Roberta, 1935), and “If My Friends Could See Me Now” and “Big Spender” (featured in Bob Fosse’s 1966 musical Sweet Charity as well as in the 1969 film of the same title). “The Way You Look Tonight,” written with Kern, earned her an Academy Award for Best Original Song, making her the first female lyricist to win in that category. A year earlier, her partnership with McHugh on the song text “Lovely to Look At,” with music composed by Kern, was nominated in the same category. Her songs are still widely used and well known through their resurgences in film and television. Just a few examples of films in English alone include Roman Polanski’s Chinatown (1974, using “The Way You Look Tonight”), Steven Spielberg’s Catch Me If You Can (2002, “The Way You Look Tonight”), Richard Laxton’s Grow Your Own (2007, “Big Spender”), John Crowley’s Is Anybody There? (2008, “I’m in the Mood for Love”) and Susanna White’s Nanny McPhee Returns (2010, “Pick Yourself Up”). Television offers examples such as “A Fine Romance,” which became the titular theme song of a 1980s BBC series starring Dame Judy Dench and her husband Michael Williams (Dench sings the theme). Much more recently, her music was used on another successful television series. In the mid-season finale of AMC’s television show Breaking Bad, season five, during the eighth episode titled “Gliding Over All,” Dave Porter uses the Nat King Cole and George Shearing rendition of “Pick Yourself Up” to accompany the prison murder montage, orchestrated by criminal mastermind protagonist Walter White.

Fields’ musical background, according to Greenspan, took place during her school years and included singing in theater as well as piano lessons (pp. 22 and 24). In 1925, she briefly had her own dancing school at Carnegie Hall—Greenspan explains that it is unclear what kinds of credentials she may have had to run a dancing school, but she guesses that perhaps Fields accompanied her dancers on piano during classes (p. 36). This kind of educated guess also suggests Fields’ potential skills and comfort level as a pianist. In addition, as a theater performer, producer, and house owner, her father worked with several composers who would later work in collaboration with Fields and her brother Herbert. One in particular was an eighteen-year-old Kern; another was a yet-to-be-famous Cole Porter (p. 25). Later, her brother Herbert was responsible for giving more exposure to composers in the business. Early in his own career as a librettist, he teamed with Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart (p. 37).

Apparently, Fields unintentionally found her calling as a lyricist. Greenspan relays Fields’ telling of how she made her start. It was shortly after her false start running a dance school that she met songwriter J. Frederick Coots (later known for “Santa Claus Is Coming to Town,” composed in 1934, and the popular standards “You Go to My Head,” composed in 1938, and “For All We Know,” published in 1934). After hearing her play on the piano a few Rodgers and Hart songs, he asked if she had ever tried to write songs. Coots then worked with Fields on her earliest attempts, mostly inspired by Hart’s early work (p. 41, cited in Chap. 4, fn 19, as Reminiscences of Dorothy Fields [Nov. 1958], pp. 3–4, in the Columbia University Oral History Research Office Collection). When Coots and Fields approached Mills Music with their songs, Fields met her first professional composer collaborator, McHugh. At the time, he was the professional manager at Mills Music and, although he did listen to their songs, Fields did not credit him as one of her earliest supporters (p. 43, cited in Chap. 4, fn 22, as An Evening with Dorothy Fields, DRG Records LP DRG 5167, track 2). Her persistence led to Mills Music’s hiring her to complete overnight lyric writing projects on commission (p. 43). By the late 1920s, McHugh, also a Cotton Club composer, asked her to write songs with him (pp. 45 and 55). In the meantime, early songwriting success included “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love” (composed for Lew Leslie’s Blackbirds revue, which opened on Broadway as Blackbirds of 1928) and “On the Sunny Side of the Street” (composed in 1930 for Leslie’s International Revue). He would remain her first songwriting collaborator in Hollywood.

As it did with many songwriters and others who worked in theater in the early 1930s, Broadway simply did not provide enough work. Fields and her family, along with many others, were thus motivated to find work in Hollywood. Chapters 1 through 6 focus on the development of Fields as a lyricist (for a publisher as well as for staged shows in New York). Subsequent chapters examine her work as a lyricist and librettist in films alongside musicals. My only criticism is that subheadings were not used (or maintained). Greenspan manages to coordinate a variety of resources, mostly originating from New York, in order to delve deeply into Fields’ life, including her career and life choices while working in both industries.
Readers will appreciate that this is the kind of research that unfolds best over a long period of time. Equally important, the author takes up the task of explaining the important figures in Fields’ life: in this book, general readers learn about Fields’ family and the numerous composers with whom she worked.

In 1929, Fields and McHugh had their first contract with MGM, which led them to their contributing four songs to Charles Reisner’s Love in the Rough and further songs to W. S. Van Dyke’s Cuban Love Song (1931) and Reisner’s Flying High (1931, pp. 74-75). Significantly, Cuban Love Song was McHugh and Fields’ first title song as a songwriting duo. Greenspan explains why being contracted to write the title song was an important accomplishment for a film songwriter:

The use of title songs predated talking or singing movies (as, for example, McHugh’s title song for the 1925 The Big Parade). Movies and title tunes had a commercially symbiotic relationship. A movie could provide a remarkably powerful plug for a song, introducing it to large audiences across the country in a short period of time. Title tunes, on the other hand, could be a kind of warm-up act or advertisement, heard on radio or phonograph, stimulating interest even before the film was released. Title tunes need not have lyrics. Max Steiner’s “Tara” theme for Gone with the Wind did not require words to attach itself to people’s memories. Sometimes the words were added after the movie was released. For example, David Raksin’s “Laura” subsequently acquired a brilliant lyric by Johnny Mercer. However, the title tunes that McHugh and Fields wrote were songs from the start. They incorporated the title of the film in the text of the song, and the song was sung in the course of the film (p. 77).

In her preliminary Note about the Lyrics, Greenspan informs her readers of major obstacles to the study of Fields’ lyrics:

One of the publishers that issues the print licenses for many of the lyrics I had hoped to reprint requested $150 per song. The total amount for the number of lyrics I wanted to publish would have been formidable. Furthermore, it was necessary to get permission to reprint lyrics from the executor of Dorothy Fields’ estate, her son, David Lahm. Although Mr. Lahm has been very generous with his time, going over the manuscript and offering many suggestions and opinions, his generosity did not extend to granting permission to reprint the lyrics (p. xix).

Greenspan nevertheless finds ways to explain Fields’ songwriting techniques. Just some examples include describing Hart’s influence on the lyrics of “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love,” the structure of the song, how Fields used the first line of the refrain as the last line, “a useful trick to help hearers remember the [title] of the song,” varying (or “flipping”) words around in order to find better ways to rhyme lines, or having (as in “I’m in the Mood for Love”) difficult-to-rhyme words like “love” rhyme with itself consistently until the last stanza in which she rhymes the word with “clouds above” (pp. 49-50 and 86), exploring interplay (as with “Never Gonna Dance” at the end of Swing Time), as well as full circles (text-wise), and leitmotifs (pp. 106-07). Furthermore, Greenspan explains how Fields and her contemporaries used other songwriting devices. These included using an economy of words with a telegraphic quality and Yiddish constructions in English (like placing “the object of the phrase before the subject and verb,” p. 51). According to Greenspan, early on McHugh used a pedagogical approach to help Fields compose quickly for Mills Music and Cotton Club songs: he certainly supplied her with published and unpublished examples of songs for Mills Music; it is also possible that he showed her his early Cotton Club songs that were written with Al Dubin (p. 59).

Fields’ second long-term songwriting partner was Kern. Greenspan points out that Fields’ career reached a turning point when she paired with Kern. They worked on songs for Roberta (1935), Swing Time, John Cromwell’s I Dream Too Much (1935), Tay Garnett’s The Joy of Living (1938), Mervyn LeRoy and Vincente Minnelli’s Lovely to Look At (1952, with Fields revising some lyrics for the film), A. Edward Sutherland’s One Night in the Tropics (1940)—five of which were done with Kern and Fields sitting side by side at the piano. During this time, Fields was developing strengths in particular kinds of songs used in both films and musicals. These include the anti-love lyric, in which Fields was not always gender-neutral and employed ironic declaration (p. 114), as well as songs that were meant to lift spirits (p. 222). Examples of the anti-love lyric are the songs “You and Your Kiss” and “Remind Me” (both composed for One Night in the Tropics, p. 114). Greenspan also describes Fields as being “especially careful to avoid the overly sentimental or overly earnest love ballad” (p. 85).

For Fields and especially Kern, Swing Time offered songwriting challenges. The film was a Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers vehicle. Greenspan explains that Astaire and Kern worked at crossed purposes: “Astaire wanted at least two dance numbers in a jazzy, swingy style, a style antithetical to Kern’s musical strengths” (p. 105). Fields, on the other hand, was familiar with “writing a Bojangles text”
with McHugh; the challenge for both Fields and Kern went beyond the musical issue, since Astaire (a right- and light-footed tap dancer a bit more aligned with the Paul Draper ballet-tap style) had, as Greenspan remarks, “few points of contact with that of Bill Robinson” (p. 105, a left-footed tap dancer known more for his rhythmic counterpoint with/complement to music than Astaire).

By 1938, Fields returned to New York, and it was not until the early 1950s that she would write songs for films. Her focus as both lyricist and librettist (with her brother) became the Broadway musical. Fields and her brother worked with composers in this period who had been successful on Broadway as well as in films: Irving Berlin, Porter, and the lesser-known Schwartz (p. 119). The last was also a film producer. Collaborating with Schwartz, Fields was the lyricist for Stars in Your Eyes (1939) and A Tree Grows in Brooklyn (1951). They collaborated again on the musical By the Beautiful Sea (1954). This time, Fields worked as both lyricist with Schwartz and book writer with her brother Herbert. Porter as well as Berlin wrote their own lyrics, so Fields’ collaborations with them often meant working on the books with her brother. The Porter musicals included Let’s Face It! (1941), Something for the Boys (1943), and Mexican Hayride (1944). She and Herbert had the original idea and wrote the book for the musical Annie Get Your Gun (1946), with music composed by Berlin. Fields again had the opportunities to work as both book writer and lyricist, with composer Sigmund Romberg, for the musical Up in Central Park (1945) and with composer Morton Gould on the musical Arms and the Girl (1950). Greenspan explains that many of these musicals were remade later as films. According to Greenspan, Sidney Lanfield’s Let’s Face It! (1943), Lewis Seiler’s Something for the Boys (1944), and Charles Barton’s Mexican Hayride (1948) were “all radical reshapings, or as one might say defacings ... The original creators accepted the reality that once a contract was signed, with the best economic deal one could make, it was wise to let go and not look back because one’s work might be changed into something unrecognizable” (p. 135). Eventually, all of Fields and her brother’s collaborations were turned into films. Typically, the films would have fewer musical numbers than their original musical ancestors. Greenspan observes that decisions to replace songs were also done mostly on financial rather than aesthetic grounds (p. 136). Likewise, the film Annie Get Your Gun (1950) underwent changes; however, the score was not dropped and very few songs disappeared (pp. 164-65).

By 1951, Fields returned to writing songs for films that were not Broadway remakes. This period, however, yielded less successful films than the ones she worked on in the past. She nevertheless was reunited with some composer collaborators from the previous decade. Just one example includes working with Schwartz on Roy Rowland’s Excuse My Dust (1951). Other mediocre films involved her partnering with Harry Warren for Charles Waters’ Texas Carnival (1951) as well as with Harold Arlen for Don Hartman’s bomb Mr. Imperium (1951) and Harry Levin’s The Farmer Takes a Wife (1953).

By the late 1950s into the early 1970s, Fields found more success than in the previous period, particularly through her work as lyricist with composer Hugoe as well as librettist with her brother Herbert for the musical Redhead (1959), which was the Tony Award winner for Best Musical. Her subsequent projects, Sweet Charity (1966) and Seesaw (1973), both with composer Coleman, also garnered Tony Award nominations for fields in the Best Composer and Lyricist as well as the Best Original Score categories. Apparently, Coleman and Fields wrote about twice as many songs that eventually got used in Sweet Charity the musical (p. 220). In 1966 there was a revival of Annie Get Your Gun on Broadway (again with Ethel Merman, Fields’ original choice for the main character) and in 1969 the movie production of Sweet Charity was released. Fosse also directed the film, and some of the songs with Fields’ lyrics were retained (p. 215).

Overall, Greenspan’s detailed study offers several valuable perspectives on Dorothy Fields’ career, her compositional techniques, the typical processes of songwriting for both musicals and films, and the contexts in which she worked. As a result, readers interested in the film music aspects of her career learn to think about lyrics used in film scenes as well as what it was like to be a successful female songwriter in the industry. If her father was a self-made man in the theater and film industries, his daughter followed in those footsteps, managing to open the doors for self-made women as a lyricist for films produced by some of the major studios of her day. Arriving in Hollywood after the transition from silent to sound cinema, Fields was a lyricist and librettist when the chief Hollywood studios included Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Warner Bros., Paramount, Twentieth-Century Fox, and Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), as well as Universal, Columbia, and United Artists (pp. 72-73). Women writers who had successful careers in 1920s and 1930s Hollywood included Frances Marion, Anita Loos, Bess Meredyth, Jeannie Macpherson, and Sonya

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Levien (p. 73). In general, fame for successful film songwriters was difficult to attain. Greenspan points out, for example, that in the 1930s alone when Fields wrote songs for twelve films, critics mentioned her in reviews of just half of them. Film songs were subjected to becoming discarded for various reasons (p. 84). In addition, Greenspan explains the songwriting process of the time for these films as highly competitive:

It was common in Hollywood in the 1930s for several people or teams, unbeknownst to one another, to be assigned what amounted to options for the studio to choose from; it was a practice many writers found unnerving (p. 78).

Fields nevertheless managed to not only survive, but to have it all: concurrent careers as lyricist and librettist for films and musicals, family, and extremely rewarding collaborations. Greenspan’s engaging writing style impels film music scholars as well as general readers to learn more about and to appreciate this fascinating songwriter.

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