



Edens, Roger (1905-1970)

by Linda Rapp

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Roger Edens was a gifted composer and arranger who gave a new look to movie musicals through his work with the Arthur Freed unit at the MGM studios. He was mentor and friend to many in the entertainment industry, including Judy Garland.

Edens came from a large family in Hillsboro, Texas. The youngest of eight brothers, he was born Rollins Edens on November 9, 1905. Unlike his rambunctious siblings Edens was of an artistic and studious nature. His parents, though not well-off, managed to scrape together enough money to finance his education at the University of Texas.

Upon graduation Edens found work playing piano on a cruise ship. A manager from New York heard him and helped him land a job with a jazz band. Edens, who always enjoyed a close relationship with his family, brought his widowed mother to stay with him on Long Island.

At this time Edens changed his first name to Roger. The reasons for this are unclear, but William J. Mann suggests that it is "possible he considered 'Rollins' just too precious, too dandy, for the hard-drinking, woman-chasing world of orchestras and musicians."

Edens moved on to a job with the Red Nichols Orchestra, which played at the Alvin Theater on Broadway. In a dramatic turn of events Edens was called from the orchestra pit to the stage when Ethel Merman's pianist suffered a heart attack before the second performance of George and Ira Gershwin's *Girl Crazy* in 1932. Impressed by Edens' work, Merman employed him as her accompanist and arranger for her next show and her nightclub act. When she headed for Hollywood she brought along Edens to be music director of Roy Del Ruth's *Kid Millions* (1934), in which she starred.

Also moving to California was Edens' wife, the former Martha LaPrelle, whom he had dated in college. Their marriage was characterized by long periods apart since her job as a buyer for a fashion house entailed extensive travel.

According to Edens' nephew J. C. Edens his aunt "never cared much for Hollywood." Even Edens' closest friends in California rarely saw her. The couple soon separated and eventually divorced.

Edens meanwhile had attracted the attention of MGM producer Arthur Freed when the latter heard him play at the audition of a singer. Freed was not much impressed by the singer but instantly recognized Edens' skill as a composer and arranger. He quickly hired him as a member of his creative staff.

The Arthur Freed unit was a team of talented composers, arrangers, lyricists, choreographers, and others who set the standard for movie musicals. Because so many of the people were gay the unit was called "Freed's Fairies" within the industry.

Freed, who was not gay, never had as his purpose the creation of a team of gay artists, nor were all the

members of the Arthur Freed unit gay. Freed did want a first-rate team, however, and hired without regard to sexual orientation. A large number of the gifted people on it turned out to be gay, including composers Cole Porter, Frederick Loewe, Robert Wright, and Chet Forrest, choreographers Robert Alton and Jack Cole, and directors Charles Walters and the closeted Vincente Minnelli.

Edens became the heart and soul of the Freed unit. Freed had the utmost confidence in him. Production assistant Lela Simone stated that "Freed did not occupy himself with details because he had Roger and he knew that Roger was going to do the best job there is." Freed's reliance on Edens is reflected in his decision to elevate him to the rank of associate producer on a number of films beginning with Minnelli's *Meet Me in St. Louis* (1944). It was extremely rare for a person to move from a job as a musician to one in production.

Edens' first film with Freed was Victor Fleming's *Reckless* (1935), for which he was musical supervisor. In his career Edens worked on over forty films as composer, musical director, producer, or a combination of these. The long list includes Robert Z. Leonard's *The Great Ziegfeld* (1936), Fleming's *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Busby Berkeley's *Babes in Arms* (1939), Minnelli's *Cabin in the Sky* (1943), Charles Walters' *Easter Parade* (1948), Gene Kelly and Stanley Donen's *Singin' in the Rain* (1952), and George Cukor's *A Star Is Born* (1954).

The Freed unit, with Edens at the helm, created a new kind of musical. Whereas musical movies had previously been essentially stories occasionally interrupted by songs, Edens insisted that "songs in film musicals should be part of the script itself." In the Freed unit songs fit seamlessly into the plot.

Hollywood honored Edens with three Academy Awards. His first, for *Easter Parade*, was followed in rapid succession by Oscars for Donen's *On the Town* (1949) and George Sidney's *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950).

Edens played an important part in the career of gay icon Judy Garland. The two met in 1935 when Edens was called in to replace Garland's father, Frank Gumm, an amateur pianist, at Garland's audition at MGM. Edens was quick to appreciate her talent and became not only her musical mentor but also a lifelong friend.

Edens wrote a song for Garland to sing at Clark Gable's birthday party in 1937. It not only delighted Gable but also favorably impressed the producer of Del Ruth's *Broadway Melody of 1938* (1937), who had Garland sing it in the film.

After working with Garland on a couple of other projects Edens served as musical director for *The Wizard of Oz* and also as rehearsal pianist for Garland. Garland's daughter Lorna Luft credits Edens with teaching her mother to have the courage to show her vulnerability in her performances. "Without Roger," she commented, "we might never have had 'Over the Rainbow,' at least not the way we remember it."

Edens continued to contribute to Garland's professional success. He provided her "Born in a Trunk" number for *A Star Is Born*--uncredited because he was under exclusive contract to MGM and the film was a Warner Brothers production.

Edens and Charles Walters were also key in arranging Garland's 1951 triumphant vaudeville act at the RKO Palace Theatre, which won rave reviews from the critics.

Edens' professional star continued to rise. Freed chose him as producer of two movies, Donen's *Deep in My Heart* (1954), featuring the music of Sigmund Romberg, and *Funny Face* (1957).

By this time the heyday of the movie musical was coming to an end and various members of the Freed unit had moved on. Edens worked on a few more films, notably Walters' *The Unsinkable Molly Brown* (1964) and Kelly's *Hello, Dolly!* (1969), but also pursued other opportunities. During the 1960s he renewed his professional association with both Garland and Merman, penning material for their nightclub acts. He also coached Katharine Hepburn for her performance in Alan Jay Lerner and André Previn's stage musical *Coco* in

1969.

Edens succumbed to cancer on July 13, 1970 in Hollywood.

Edens' career is a stunning success story, the more remarkable because his achievements came in an era of widespread homophobia. Gay performers sometimes resorted to "lavender marriages" or invented fictitious wives to conceal their sexual orientation. Even working behind the scenes and in the congenial atmosphere of the Freed unit, Edens, according to Mann, kept a photo of his ex-wife on his desk for years although he was living openly with another man.

Mann also recounts the touching recollection of Frank Lysinger, an MGM messenger boy whom Edens had befriended around 1939. Edens often invited him to dinner along with Lena Horne and musical director Lennie Hayton, gatherings of "two officially unsanctioned" couples since studio head Louis B. Mayer had forbidden Horne, an African-American, and Hayton, who was white, to date each other. Edens, who championed Horne at the studio, also tried to bring happiness to her personal life.

This kindness and compassion were typical of Edens' character. His collaborator and long-time friend Kay Thompson described him as "a darling man," and Michael Morrison, another friend and the business partner of gay actor William Haines, commented that "all sorts of people were drawn to him."

Edens was a model of professional success and personal dignity.

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