



Hart, Lorenz (1895-1943)

by Raymond-Jean Frontain

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Lorenz Hart (standing, right) with Richard Rodgers in 1936.
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Barely five feet tall, balding early, and possessing a disproportionately large head, Larry Hart was the first to disparage his own attractiveness. His jokes, however, masked a deeply-rooted inability to accept the possibility of romantic happiness or sexual gratification.

Hart impulsively proposed marriage to several women friends, none of whom thought his offer serious. And when he allowed himself to act upon his desire for other men, he seems to have had difficulty performing sexually. (Biographer Frederick Nolan quotes one unidentified male partner's shock at discovering Hart cowering in the bedroom closet after sex, suggesting that the songwriter was unable actively to pursue homosexual pleasure without being overcome by guilt.)

The result of such emotional imbroglio is that, despite having written lyrics as witty as any sung on the Broadway stage before or since, Hart is best remembered for his songs of unfulfilled desire and failed romance.

Born Lorenz Milton Hart on May 2, 1895, to an immigrant Jewish family, Hart learned from his entrepreneur father that self-assertion allows survival. Never without a business venture, many of which were dishonest, Hart's father provided Larry with a lasting model for the cycles of impulsive free-spending and resulting impecuniosity that characterized Hart's own life.

Hart entertained both friends and strangers lavishly, often living far beyond his means, but with a (sometimes unfounded) optimism that something would turn up. And, like his father, Hart was a ball of ferocious energy, both physically and creatively.

Recalls Oscar Hammerstein II, "In all the time I knew him, I never saw him walk slowly. I never saw his face in repose. I never heard him chuckle quietly. He laughed loudly and easily at other people's jokes and at his own, too. His large eyes danced, and his head would wag. He was alert and dynamic and fun to be with."

As disorganized and undisciplined as he was tirelessly inventive verbally, Hart possessed a nervous energy that could make him an exasperating person to work with. Words poured so easily from him that, increasingly as he aged, he preferred socializing and drinking with hangers-on to working.

And although Hart seems to have inspired genuine affection in everyone he met, no one who knew him was surprised when he died on November 22, 1943, of pneumonia contracted while wandering the streets of Manhattan in a downpour, badly intoxicated.

Composer Richard Rodgers, with whom Hart began an extraordinarily successful collaboration in 1919, recollected that when he met Hart he acquired "in one afternoon a career, a best friend, and a source of permanent irritation." Their early years together, spent writing musical revues and novelty songs for burlesque comedians, culminated in their first Broadway hit, *A Connecticut Yankee*, in 1927.

Finding their chances of continued financial success in New York severely limited by the Great Depression, however, they followed many of their Broadway contemporaries to Hollywood where, after the initial success of writing the songs for Maurice Chevalier and Jeannette MacDonald in *Love Me Tonight* (1932), they were frustrated by the pedestrian projects they were assigned by studios, and by the increasing criticism that Hart's lyrics were too witty and too darkly satiric to succeed on sets decorated with plastic palm trees.

Their return to New York resulted in their final and most fruitful period, which saw the hit productions of *Jumbo* in 1935, *On Your Toes* and *Babes in Arms* in 1936, *The Boys from Syracuse* (a musicalization of Shakespeare's *Comedy of Errors*) in 1938, and the breakthrough musical *Pal Joey* in 1940.

Apart from their polysyllabic rhymes and sophisticated wit (master poet W. H. Auden included Hart's "Take Him, He's Yours" in an anthology of light verse), Hart's lyrics are remarkable for two reasons. First, they are amazingly frank about sexual matters. In *Pal Joey*, the title character openly boasts of the sexual chase in "Happy Hunting Horn"; his credo is suggested by the double entendre inscribed in the title of another of the play's songs, "Do It the Hard Way."

His inamorata, philandering socialite Vera Simpson, sings of her mid-life sexual reawakening in "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered": "I'll sing to him / Each spring to him / And worship the trousers that cling to him."

Far from being taken sexual advantage of, Vera is shrewd about the paradoxical nature of sexual desire. Men, she observes, are stimulants, "Good for the heart / Bad for the nerves," or ornaments which are "Useless by day / Handy by night." And if she complains that men are "all alike," she's also honest enough to acknowledge that they're "all I like."

In a double entendre that depends upon the auditor's understanding "on" to refer to the missionary position, she accepts that the socially uncouth Joey is "a laugh, / But I love it / Because the laugh's on me." As she sings elsewhere, "Horizontally speaking, / He's at his very best."

And, after ending their affair, Vera celebrates her relief at being no longer sexually dependent upon Joey--"The ants that invaded my pants, / Finis!--" for she is "Bewitched, bothered, and bewildered no more."

Second, Hart's lyrics are remarkable because they feign indifference to, or casually accept, disappointment. The lyricist is unlike most of his contemporaries who could not imagine a show ending without the boy getting the girl. As songs such as "Blue Moon" and "Lover" evidence, Hart was perfectly capable of writing a traditional love song; likewise, in "My Heart Stood Still" and "With a Song in My Heart" he presents the exhilaration of a love that is freshly, ecstatically, joyously experienced.

But more often--in songs such as "My Romance," "Falling in Love with Love," and "This Can't Be Love"--Hart asserts the reality of a deeply experienced love by mocking the very conventions that other lyricists (and the record-buying public) had grown to rely upon.

Moreover, Hart's most psychologically profound love songs prove to be those in which the speaker laments his or her disappointment. "Spring Is Here," for example, which contrasts the loveless speaker's depression with the natural joy of the season of rejuvenation, might be an Elizabethan complaint.

The speaker in "Glad to Be Unhappy" may well be articulating the fundamental principle of Hart's philosophy of love when he protests that "Unrequited love's a bore, / And I've got it pretty bad. / But for someone you adore, / It's a pleasure to be sad."

Together these reasons explain why, despite one of the most original scores that Broadway theatergoers had

yet experienced, *Pal Joey*, Hart's greatest play, did not arouse audience enthusiasm when first mounted. The show was a hit, but it inspired little affection in audiences in 1940. Only when it was revived in 1952 did it garner the kind of enthusiasm it deserved.

Joey, more anti-hero than hero, is a likeable cad who exploits women even as he is himself sexually exploited by a supposedly respectable society matron. When Joey and Vera sing of their sexual bliss in the apartment that she has furnished for him ("our little den of iniquity"), they not only challenge the moral standards that the Broadway musical was designed to inculcate, but implicate audience members in their satire of society's hypocrisy.

The audience's appreciation of Joey and Vera's keeping separate bedrooms, "One for play and one for show," for example, reveals audience members' guilty familiarity with the strategy of disguising supposedly immoral private behavior with a carefully crafted public persona; in addition, the line asks audience members to reconsider their impressions of those in society who appear always "*comme il faut*."

And if the audience is uncomfortable listening to adulterous lovers singing of the salubrious benefits of infidelity, Hart reminds his audience that things have been this way "since antiquity."

Likewise, when the pair boast that "Ravel's Bolero works just great" as background music to their lovemaking, Hart shocks some audience members with the scandalous use to which a piece of classical music is being put, while alerting others to the deeply sensuous nature of a selection they've been trained to think of as being sexless because canonized by the symphony orchestra that they so properly and mechanically patronize. Little wonder that audiences were left cold by the original production.

After Hart's death, Rodgers began a second great collaboration, this one with Oscar Hammerstein II. Together they produced such important but artificially wholesome shows as *Oklahoma*, *The Sound of Music*, and *South Pacific*. Significantly, Rodgers never composed a song of real longing again; without Hart, his music was just too straight.

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