Fred Astaire (1899-1987)  
by Imogen Sara Smith

Fred Astaire was Hollywood’s preeminent dancer, and he was very likely the twentieth century’s most recognizable and accessible icon of dance in mainstream culture. In the dance world, Astaire was and is revered for his artistry: his peerless execution, choreographic inventiveness, musicality and rhythmic individuality. He was also a fine singer, a charming light comedian and a paragon of style. Astaire’s name is synonymous with elegance and sophistication, yet he was always unaffected and distinctively American. His performances fused effortlessness with thrilling intensity, the gliding rapture of the ballroom and the crackling fusillades of tap, to produce an incomparable essence of American dance.

Astaire did not like to talk about his art, insisting tersely, “I just dance,” but his fellow dancers and choreographers more than made up for his reticence. George Balanchine praised his “concentrated genius” and said, “There is so much of the dance in him that it has been distilled.” Rudolf Nureyev called him “music in motion,” and Martha Graham spoke of his “ability to surmount form, and to seem to create at the same instant a new form, which is the mark of an intrinsic dancer.” Astaire has been cited as an inspiration and influence by performers across the realms of classical and popular dance, from Merce Cunningham, who admired his sense of “wit and play,” to Michael Jackson, who, as a youngster, studied Astaire’s films. When asked to sum up how dancers feel about Astaire, Mikhail Baryshnikov said mischievously, “It’s no secret. We hate him,” explaining that, “He gives us complexes because he’s too perfect.”

Astaire was born Frederick Austerlitz, II in Omaha, Nebraska, on May 10, 1899, the son of an Austrian immigrant and his American-born wife. Like so many of the great male dancers, Astaire owed his start to an older sister, the precociously talented Adele, with whom he was sent to dancing school. Fred was just five years old when his mother took him and Adele to New York, hoping to put them in show business. A dance teacher named Claude Alvienne suggested they change their name to Astaire, and created a routine for the brother-and-sister team that combined song, dance, and sketch comedy. Over the next decade, Fred and Adele Astaire advanced on the vaudeville circuit, eventually becoming successful headlining performers (with a successful act devised by Aurelio Coccia) before moving on to musical revues.

Between 1917 and 1932, the Astaires appeared in ten Broadway productions, several of which traveled to London. On both sides of the Atlantic, Fred and Adele became popular, critically acclaimed, and stylish celebrities. A dark-eyed beauty celebrated for her effervescent personality, Adele was the more outgoing of the siblings, but it was the shyer and more serious Fred who developed and perfected their routines. Many who saw them dance together said Adele was the best partner Astaire ever had, but in 1932 she retired from the stage to marry Charles Cavendish, a younger son of the Duke of Devonshire. Although he was uncertain about his future as a solo performer, Fred Astaire proved not only that he could carry a show by himself, but also that he had a potential unexplored during his partnership with his sister: he could be a compelling romantic lead. For the 1932 Cole Porter show The Gay Divorce he created and performed a ravishing duet of seduction to the song “Night and Day,” danced with Claire Luce.

In 1933, Astaire made his first film appearance, a brief cameo as himself in the Joan Crawford vehicle Dancing Lady.
Hollywood producers worried that he was not conventionally handsome enough for the movies, though the legend that his initial screen test produced the judgment, “Can’t act. Balding. Dances a little,” has never been verified and may be apocryphal. In any case, he was a hit with audiences, particularly in the dance “The Carioca,” which he performed with Ginger Rogers in his second film, Flying Down to Rio (1933). Astaire resisted the notion of being teamed with a regular partner, but he and Rogers were so enormously popular with Depression-era audiences that RKO, the studio where he was under contract, starred them in eight films between 1934 and 1939. With magnificent scores and gleaming art deco sets surrounding sublime dances, the Astaire-Rogers musicals are among the glories of dance on film. They have never lost their following and have come to stand for all that is most glamorous and romantically transporting about classical Hollywood.

After The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle in 1939, the team separated, and over the next 18 years Astaire continued to star in musicals at different studios and with various partners, never appearing with the same partner more than twice. It is widely accepted that Rogers was his best screen partner, not because she was the finest dancer (though she matched Astaire extremely well in both style and physical proportions), but because she brought the greatest dramatic depth and emotional eloquence to their duets through her acting skill and the exquisite undertow of resistance that she supplied. Astaire and Rogers don’t just dance together but talk, flirt, argue, and make love through dancing. None of his later partnerships achieved such engrossing psychological dimensions and magical sense of rapport. However, the different styles of the other women he danced with, some trained in tap (Eleanor Powell), some in ballroom (Rita Hayworth), and some not trained to a professional level (Judy Garland, Audrey Hepburn) brought out different aspects of Astaire’s own style.

After Silk Stockings in 1957, Fred Astaire moved on to work in television, for which he created four award-winning dance specials in the 1960s, forming a new partnership with Barrie Chase, and played straight dramatic roles in films, making only one more movie musical, Finian’s Rainbow, in 1968. Though he retired from performing, Astaire remained keenly interested in popular forms of dance and the careers of contemporary dance entertainers until his death in 1987.

While Astaire has always been celebrated as a virtuoso performer, he is less often considered as a choreographer, though he was the principal creative force behind almost all of the dances he performed on film. This lack of recognition stems partly from the fact that he worked collaboratively with dance directors (most often Hermes Pan), with whom he usually shared credit on screen. But it may also stem from the spontaneous air of his dancing; it looks as though what he tells Ginger Rogers in Top Hat were true: “Every once in a while, I suddenly find myself…dancing.” Nothing could be further from the truth: Astaire was a tireless perfectionist who rehearsed his material exhaustively—and exhaustingly. In contrast to his breezy, nonchalant screen persona, he was a hypercritical worrier who could detect flaws and find fault where others saw none. He stated that it was precisely because he rehearsed so much that he could make his dancing look easy and natural. The steps were thoroughly absorbed into his body, but he made them look fresh as thoughts that just came into his head and as effortless as breathing.

Film enabled Astaire to achieve an even greater degree of perfection than was
possible on stage, and he used many takes to get exactly the effects he wanted. As soon as he was established enough to gain creative control over his movies, Astaire insisted on a method of filming dance that differed radically from the camera-centric style then current (for instance, in the films of Busby Berkeley). In Astaire’s films the camera shows the dancers full figure and tightly framed; there are no close-ups of feet and very few close-ups of faces. Dances are captured in as few shots as possible, and editing is subtle and unobtrusive. “Either the camera will dance or I will,” he famously declared (Winge, 7). The style that Astaire pioneered has become standard for everyone interested in filming dance so as to preserve continuity, create a fluid and coherent sense of space, and not distract from the choreography with showy camera effects.

Fred Astaire referred to his “outlaw style” of dancing: he drew freely from tap, ballroom, and many other types of popular dance (swing, Latin, jazz, etc.), but he refused to be limited or bound by the rules or conventions of any particular form. Rather than correct classical technique, Astaire displayed a continually startling, expressive, and idiosyncratic genius in motion. Eschewing clichés and familiar patterns, each Astaire dance is an original exploration of a choreographic idea, which creates its own movement vocabulary, and which develops through a series of experiments, shifts, and transformations. While his romantic duets always express a particular stage or development in a relationship, Astaire’s solos gave him freedom to build dances in many different moods and styles. He danced while getting dressed; while lighting firecrackers; with a drum set; with a hat-rack; on the walls and ceiling of his room; on a bar, breaking glasses with his feet. He expressed debonair pleasure, frustration and anger, romantic yearning, playful curiosity, and a continual sense of discovery. Jerome Robbins paid tribute to the complexity and nuance of Astaire’s choreography in his ballet I’m Old Fashioned (1983), a series of variations on a single Astaire duet from the film You Were Never Lovelier. Robbins revealed that it took him and two assistants twelve hours to learn the piece, because it was so full of rhythmic shifts and stylistic detail.

Even Astaire’s walk conveyed an irresistible inner rhythm, and in dance he used the musical beat as a structure to play against and around, creating a riveting tension and unpredictability, especially in his solos. Astaire’s hobbies included songwriting and playing the drums, and he said that his greatest inspiration came from music. He, in turn, inspired the composers who wrote for him. Few performers introduced more songs destined to become pop standards, and though his voice never had the polished power of his dancing, his musicality and expressiveness more than made up for technical limitations. Songs like Berlin’s “Cheek to Cheek,” Gershwin’s “They Can’t Take That Away from Me,” and Harold Arlen’s “One for My Baby” were all written with Astaire’s voice, rhythm, and personality in mind. Their enduring popularity is another facet of his legacy, along with the films that continue to draw new audiences to dance and represent the best of American popular culture.

NOTES

dancing and struck up a friendship. Baryshnikov made his comments at a ceremony when Fred Astaire received a Lifetime Achievement Award from the American Film Institute in 1981.

For full references to works cited in this essay, see Selected Resources for Further Research.

Imogen Sara Smith is the Project Manager for the Dance Heritage Coalition, and has almost ten years’ experience working in dance archives. As an independent film scholar, she is the author of In Lonely Places: Film Noir Beyond the City, and Buster Keaton: the Persistence of Comedy, and she writes regularly on film and the arts for a variety of journals and websites.