

Thanks for the Memory: How Leo Robin Helped Usher In the Golden Age of Song in Film

"Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend" and "Blue Hawaii" are among his songwriting credits.

By [ROY TRAKIN](#)



CREDIT: SNAP/SHUTTERSTOCK

The centerpiece of Scott Ora's cluttered San Fernando Valley apartment is the 1939 Oscar his step-grandfather, the late lyricist [Leo Robin](#), was presented for co-writing "Thanks for the Memory." Sung by [Bob Hope](#) and Shirley Ross in the film "The Big Broadcast of 1938," the trophy sits proudly on the piano where Robin worked on some of his biggest hits. The movie marked the comedian's breakout role and Leo's tune, co-written with frequent collaborator Ralph Rainger, soon became Hope's theme song. It was Robin's only Academy Award win out of a total of 10 nominations.

Over the course of 20 years, from 1934 (when the best original song category was introduced and he was nominated for "Love in Bloom") through 1954, Robin, a member of the Songwriters Hall of Fame who died in 1984 at the age of 84, earned 10 Oscar nominations (two in 1949 alone). His impressive catalog includes signature tunes for Maurice Chevalier ("Louise"), Jeanette McDonald ("Beyond the Blue Horizon"), Bing Crosby ("Please," "Zing a Little Zong"), Dorothy Lamour ("Moonlight and Shadows"), Jack Benny ("Love in Bloom"), Eddie Fisher ("One Hour With You"), Carmen Miranda ("Lady in the Tutti Frutti Hat") and [Marilyn Monroe](#) ("Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend"). His

songs have been covered by Bing Crosby and Elvis Presley (“Blue Hawaii”), Perry Como, James Brown and Billy Eckstine (“Prisoner of Love”) as well as Frank Sinatra (“For Every Man There’s a Woman,” “Thanks for the Memory”). “My Ideal,” originally sung by Maurice Chevalier in the 1930 film, “Playboy of Paris,” is now a jazz standard with interpretations by Margaret Whiting, Chet Baker, Thelonious Monk, Coleman Hawkins, Art Tatum, Dinah Washington, Sarah Vaughn and Tony Bennett, while “Easy Living” because a regular in the sets of Billie Holiday and Ella Fitzgerald.

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Although the release of “The Jazz Singer” in 1927 is generally regarded as the first sound motion picture – featuring a black-faced Al Jolson crooning “Mammy” — Hollywood began cranking out all-singing, all-talking Technicolor films like Warner Bros.’ operetta “The Desert Song” and “On With the Show,” in 1929, making the intersection of motion picture sound and song 90 years old.

Interest in the era has ebbed and flowed, but seems on the upswing again as Oscar-winning director Damien Chazelle recently announced his next project, “Babylon,” will take place in that golden era when silent movies became talkies.

By the mid-’20s, Leo Robin, a Pittsburgh native whose father Max was an insurance agent and amateur poet, graduated from both law school and studying theater at Carnegie Tech, followed by stints as a cub reporter writing a love advice column, a publicist, a social worker and a copywriter for a steel mill. Bit by the show biz bug, Leo moved to New York with ambitions to become a playwright or actor, embracing the “bohemian life” in Greenwich Village.

An introduction by one of his Carnegie professors to fellow Steel City native and noted Broadway director George S. Kaufman steered Leo into becoming a lyricist after reading his poems and convincing him to write lyrics. He first had to explain the concept to the fledgling songwriter. George and Ira Gershwin then introduced Leo to music publisher Max Dreyfus, who had Leo working on eight Broadway shows in the course of two years from 1926 to 1928, breaking out with “Hallelujah!” from the smash musical “Hit the Deck,” which went on to be covered by a number of jazz artists, including Fats Waller.

In 1928, Robin was recruited by Hollywood as a certified “hit-maker” at the dawn of the sound era, hired by Paramount Pictures, and paired with Richard Whiting (Margaret’s father) for the studio’s first musical, “Innocents of Paris,” released in 1929, which also marked the American debut for French crooner Maurice Chevalier. The dapper

entertainer's U.S. career was launched with what would be his signature song, "Louise," featuring those memorable Leo Robin lyrics... "Every little breeze seems to whisper Louise."



“He wrote the song after he was given the name of the character,” says Ora, a Certified Public Accountant who is the trustee for his grandfather’s estate. “Ernst Lubitsch worked with Leo because he liked that he didn’t turn his characters into performers. He tailored the lyrics to the scripts, and it’s amazing the songs became so well-known afterwards on their own.”

As for Oscar winner “Thanks for the Memory,” Ora recalls Leo thinking it was “just material,” another forgettable movie song, though it turned into one of his most memorable.

Robin collaborated with a wide range of composers, from his original partner Whiting and his frequent co-writer, Ralph Rainger (pictured at right with Robin), who died in a tragic plane accident in 1942, to Jerome Kern, David Rose, Arthur Schwartz, Frederick Holland, Harold Arlen, Harry Warren and Jule Styne. Forming Paramount’s go-to movie music team before moving to Fox, Robin and Rainger wrote hundreds of songs for some of the screen’s most memorable characters, from Marlene Dietrich’s femme fatale cabaret singer Helen Faraday in “Blonde Venus” (1932) to five-year-old Shirley Temple in “Little Miss Marker” (1934), from Claudette Colbert’s Sally Trent in “The Torch Singer” (1933) to Jessica Dragonette’s Princess Glory of Lilliput in the animated “Gulliver’s Travels.” (1939).

“I can remember my grandfather from when I was five years old,” says the 62-year-old Ora. “I learned to swim in the pool of his home in Beverly Hills. We bonded, not so much about his career, but things we both loved, like baseball... He was a big Dodger fan. One of his favorite people was Vin Scully. He admired the way he told the story of the game with words. He took my brother and I to the 1966 World Series between the Dodgers and the Baltimore Orioles.”

These days, Ora spends his time dealing with Robin’s publishing assets – which are represented by a variety of companies, including Sony/ATV and Music Sales Group – yielding an annual return well into “six figures.”

“Leo was a very private man, but he loved to tell stories about the old days in Hollywood,” says Ora.

By 1949, a Hollywood success, Robin returned to Broadway with Jule Styne to create the score for “Gentleman Prefer Blondes,” a vehicle for Carol Channing and later a movie starring [Marilyn Monroe](#), whose longtime assistant, ironically enough, was Leo’s third wife Cherie Redmond, Ora’s maternal grandmother. The song became an enduring pop culture staple when [Madonna](#) borrowed its imagery for her “Material Girl” video, while Monroe did the same for “Thanks for the Memory,” when she tacked it on to her steamy birthday salute to President John F. Kennedy at New York’s Madison Square Garden. Other iconic Leo Robin-inspired moments include James Brown tackling “Prisoner of Love” just before splaying to his knees at the famed T.A.M.I. Show at Santa Monica Civic Auditorium in 1964.

“My grandfather enjoyed his life, but he’d rather hang out to Nate & Al’s than talk about himself,” says Ora. “He didn’t think anyone would be interested in what he did. Music historian Michael Feinstein says it best ‘Leo Robin is an unsung genius of American popular song.’”

And his legacy just happens to define the modern sound era of motion pictures.



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