

The Strings of Judy Garland's Heart

Posted By [Mary Claire Kendall](#) On June 22, 2009 @ 3:21 pm In [Classic Hollywood](#), [Music](#) | [52 Comments](#)

Thirty years after Judy Garland-"Dorothy"-first publicly performed "Over the Rainbow" on June 29, 1939, previewing the soon-to-be-released *Wizard of Oz*, this quintessential girl-next-door reached for more sleeping pills and hoped-for sleep, only to be, mercifully, granted eternal rest.

She always wanted to be "glamorous," forgetting her far-surpassing appeal as the very essence of America.

Her story, the final earthly chapter ending forty years ago today, embodies American triumph and tragedy.



[1]

Born Frances Ethel Gumm on June 10, 1922, in Grand Rapids, Minnesota, her life nearly ended in 1921 after her parents' marriage was rocked by revelations of her father's homosexual infidelity.

But, family physician Dr. Marcus Rabwin told Frank Gumm, "you go back to your wife and tell her I said she *must* have this baby." The "powerful" Garland "force field," as fellow MGM star Ann Miller put it, was evidently already at work.

"Baby" Gumm first stole hearts when, at age 2½, she performed "Jingle Bells" before an audience, discovering to her delight that, besides her father, her other great love was performing and making people happy.

She just couldn't stop singing; so her father finally had to carry her off the stage.

The family soon decamped to a desert California town north of Hollywood after her father was "caught with a young boy." There, Ethel, sought solace from her troubled marriage by single-mindedly devoting herself into making the "Gumm Sisters" stars.

Needless to say, little Frances was the standout-their big break coming in 1929 with four one-reel shorts. But when comedian George Jessel evoked howls of laughter just by mentioning their name, he suggested they take New York Drama critic Robert Garland's surname; Frances took her first name from Hoogie Carmichael's popular song "Judy."

On November 16, 1935-six months after Metro Goldwyn Mayer's Louis B. Mayer signed up "Judy Garland"-she sang her first professional rendition of "Zing! Went the Strings of My Heart," live on coast to coast radio, as her father lay dying. Dr. Rabwin, who 14 years earlier had advised the family to bring their daughter to term, called Judy to let her know her beloved father would be listening-radio waves being their last physical "connection;" he died early the next morning.

The young, 4'11" Garland came to studio executives' attention when she sang "You Made Me Love You" to Clark Gable at MGM's party celebrating his 35th birthday-a rendition she repeated, while looking adoringly at Gable's photograph, in the all-star extravaganza *Broadway Melody of 1938*.

Bandleader Artie Shaw famously summed up Judy's talent, singing and dancing her way into America's hearts, telling her, "You *become* the song."

So, too, she *became* the tragedy of American culture-force-fed uppers and downers, plus diet pills, by five different doctors so she could keep up the pace of performance demanded by her MGM bosses who were giddily beside themselves with her money-making potential.



[2]

MGM hit the jackpot when it paired Garland with Mickey Rooney in a string of "backyard musicals." This winning formula, first showcased in the ironically titled 1937 B movie *Thoroughbreds Don't Cry*,

was followed by *Love Finds Andy Hardy*, leading to eight more films featuring this adorable, dynamic duo.

Dr. Rabwin's wife, Marcella, then working at MGM, asserted, "They didn't mean to *addict* her. They were trying to get a picture finished." Yet, the hard truth is, in the process of finishing the picture they laid the groundwork for Judy's early demise.

As E.Y. Yip Harburg, *Wizard of Oz* lyricist, explained, "A picture is one of the most devastating things to your nervous system." Even more so for Judy. As Robert Goulet said, "No one came close to her because she was so *vulnerable*."

Her very vulnerability-she required constant reassurance she was, indeed, talented and pretty, given her high-strung, insecure nature, exacerbated by her teenage loss of paternal affirmation-was the source of her greatness. This mega-talented star was all heart and just poured herself into her performances. But, combined with all the barbiturates and amphetamines, it was a toxic mix. As Oscar Levant wrote in his 1969 book, *The Unimportance of Being Oscar*, "at parties, Judy could sing all night, endlessly... but when it came time to appear on a movie set, she just wouldn't show up."

In 1940, after Judy collapsed on the set of *Strike Up the Band*, in desperate need of months-long rest, she was given only weeks to recover.

Besides her flagging energy, her tendency to show up late rankled her bosses, and on June 17, 1950, a week after she turned 28, MGM cut its prized star loose-the last straw being the demands of *Royal Wedding* (1951). Thus, began a series of incredible comebacks, starting with her dazzling concert tour, including her history-making performance [at the London Palladium](#) ^[3].



[4]

Judy became close friends of Betty Hutton during Las Vegas performances, overcoming hurt feelings over Betty replacing her in *Annie Get Your Gun* (1950).

Betty-while a lesser star, albeit possessing the same booming talent, paternal void, and extremely sensitive nature-almost died of a drug overdose just three years after Judy's death, only to be "saved" by Fr. Peter Maguire, who helped her play the role of a lifetime-"[Being Beautiful Betty](#)" ^[5].

"Being Beautiful Judy" was the one role Garland never mastered. But, as a star, looking down from the celestial firmament, it's a good bet she's mastered it now.

Sources (among others): Judy Garland: Beyond the Rainbow, A&E Biography (1997), one of ten lives featured, including that of Ronald Reagan, during Biography's 10th Anniversary celebration; Me and My Shadows: A Family Memoir by Lorna Luft (1998); Life with Judy Garland: Me and My Shadows (winner of five Emmys, based on Luft's book), Lifetime Television (2001).



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[3] at the London Palladium: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-OpkEpurBmE>

[4] Image:

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[5] Being Beautiful Betty:

[http://maryclairecinema.com/pubs/BeingBeautifulBetty_%20\(Newport%20Life-Best%20of%202009\)May%202009.pdf](http://maryclairecinema.com/pubs/BeingBeautifulBetty_%20(Newport%20Life-Best%20of%202009)May%202009.pdf)

[6] Image: #

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