

Steps in Time

by Fred Astaire

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At the 1981 American Film Institute's Lifetime Achievement Award gala, producer George Stevens, Jr. introduced the evening's inductee as "the premiere dancer of the Twentieth Century, and the greatest performer in the history of motion picture musicals." Mr. Stevens was, of course, referring to none other than Fred Astaire.

In 1959, Fred Astaire (1899-1987), actor, dancer, choreographer, star of stage and screen, published his autobiography, *Steps in Time*. (The title of the book was suggested to him by good friend and theater legend, Noel Coward.) The result of Mr. Astaire's effort is a delight; his prose—like his dance—is graceful, debonair and effortless.

Written in a witty and anecdotal style, *Steps in Time* traces the life of a man who not only lived through the extraordinary times and artistic achievements of the 20th Century, but was often a major contributor to them: we follow Fred from his childhood in vaudeville, to co-starring in musical comedies with sister Adele in New York and London during the Roaring Twenties, to his movie successes in the Depression-era Thirties, to meeting and falling in love with his first wife Phyllis, to his overseas USO tour during World War II, to the founding of the Fred Astaire Dance Studios, right on through to his television triumphs in the late 1950's including *An Evening with Fred Astaire*, which earned a record nine Emmy awards. (Watching his television dance work, it is hard to believe that anyone could dance that well at age 60, much less at age 25!)

Unlike the *tell all* autobiographies of today, the shy and humble Astaire pens not a single unkind word for those he worked with. Quite the contrary, he is quick to laud praise on those he admired, and takes the time to set the record straight concerning misconceptions about himself and his relationships; in particular, his relationship with his most famous dance partner, Ginger Rogers:

For decades it was rumored that Fred and Ginger did not get along well. In *Steps in Time*, Fred makes it clear that they were terrific friends who deeply respected each other's talents, and during the six years in which they made nine films together at RKO, they had just one little fight. The "fight" concerned an outfit made of ostrich feathers that Ginger wore in the *Cheek to Cheek* number in *Top Hat* (1935). When the duo danced, the dress would shed a few feathers every now and again, and by the end of the dance number, flying feathers abounded. Hence, what should have been good footage was ruined, and Ginger's refusal to wear a different costume only increased the on-set tension between them. However, this tension was short-lived, as Astaire explains in the book: "We

laughed about that episode for weeks afterward. It was sort of a running gag with Ginger and me. I used to call her feathers!". (In 1949, Fred's unique contribution to the motion picture arts was recognized with a special Academy Award, presented to him by his friend, Ginger Rogers.)

Steps in Time is a splendid account of a man who seemed to know everyone worth knowing, as well as those we might not expect him to know; from Hollywood's elite to European aristocracy (Fred offers many amusing anecdotes about Britain's royal family), to bookmakers, bell hops, and gamblers—especially those who bet on the horses, a favorite pastime of Astaire's.

The dancer for whom George & Ira Gershwin and Irving Berlin wrote more songs than for any other artist, also collaborated with industry greats Jerome Kern & Dorothy Fields, Florenz Ziegfeld, Noel Coward and so many others. (In fact, so profound was Astaire's impact on the music of the 20th Century—he is considered to have introduced at least 20 of the century's greatest 100 songs—that Astaire was recognized with a posthumous Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 1989.)

Although Astaire appeared with Gene Kelly in just a few musical numbers scattered amongst several films and over a few decades—including Ziegfeld Follies (1946) and years later in the *That's Entertainment!* film series—we discover that Astaire actually "replaced" Kelly in the starring role of a major Hollywood musical:

In 1948, Kelly broke his leg prior to filming MGM's *Easter Parade* with Judy Garland. Fred, who had "retired" from films, was asked to "fill in" as a last-second replacement. Being the gentleman the he was, Fred obliged, but only with Kelly's blessing. Though there was an obvious age difference between Astaire and co-star Garland, it was Fred's tremendous personal charm and well-maintained dance form that made him appear significantly younger in the role.

Steps in Time is the autobiography from one of the most important artists of the Twentieth, or possibly, any century. If you're looking for an easy, breezy read on one of the great dance icons, we highly recommend *Steps In Time*.

Title: Steps in Time

Author: Fred Astaire

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Fred Astaire - Filmography

Dancing Lady (1933)

Flying Down to Rio (1933)

The Gay Divorcee (1934)

Roberta (1935)
Top Hat (1935)
Follow the Fleet (1936)
Swing Time (1936)
Shall We Dance? (1937)
A Damsel in Distress (1937)
Carefree (1938)
The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle (1939)
Second Chorus (1940)
Broadway Melody of 1940 (1940)
You'll Never Get Rich (1941)
You Were Never Lovelier (1942)
Holiday Inn (1942)
The Sky's the Limit (1943)
Yolanda and the Thief (1945)
Ziegfeld Follies (1946)
Blue Skies (1946)
Easter Parade (1948)
The Barkleys of Broadway (1949)
Three Little Words (1950)
Let's Dance (1950)
Royal Wedding (aka Wedding Bells) (1951)
The Belle of New York (1952)
The Band Wagon (1953)
Daddy Long Legs (1955)
Funny Face (1957)
Silk Stockings (1957)
On the Beach (1959)
The Pleasure of His Company (1961)
The Notorious Landlady (1962)
Finian's Rainbow (1968)
It Takes a Thief (TV Series) (1968-1970)
A Midas Run (aka Run on Gold) (1969)
Santa Claus Is Comin' to Town (1970) (TV) (voice)
The Over-the-Hill Gang Rides Again (1970) (TV)
Imagine (1973)
The Towering Inferno (1974)
The Amazing Dobermans (1976)
Un Taxi Mauve (aka The Purple Taxi) (1977)
The Easter Bunny is Comin' to Town (1977) (TV) (voice)
The Man in the Santa Claus Suit (1978) (TV)
A Family Upside Down (1978) (TV)
Ghost Story (1981)
George Stevens: A Filmmaker's Journey (1984)