

# THE BILLBOARD Music Popularity Charts

## • The Honor Roll of Popular Songwriters

By Jack Burton

### No. 78—MILTON AGER

It was the World's Fair year of 1893, and Chicago, bursting with pride and hospitality, was a wide-open town. Down in the Loop the musical extravaganza, 1492, was a nightly sell-out and Florenz Ziegfeld was making his debut as an impresario by glorifying Sandow, the strong man, instead of beautiful girls. On the famed midway, John Philip Sousa's band was featuring Charles K. Harris's *After the Ball* and Little Egypt was dancing to the exotic strains of an Oriental melody composed by Sol Bloom, who later was to become a patriarch among the nation's congressmen. And about five miles to the west, as the stork flew, Milton Ager was born on an October day of this epochal year.

Since Chicago's West Side is not noted as a cultural center, Milton Ager must have come under the influence of the music and gaiety that welled from the magic city that had been built on the the 400th anniversary of the discovery of America. There was no music in the roaring blast furnaces of the Crane iron foundry near his home or in the elevated trains that rumbled overhead or in the harangue of the soap-box orators in Union Park. Nevertheless Milton Ager, who had a natural ear for music, was destined for a musical career from the day his youthful fingers first touched the keyboard of an upright piano, which he taught himself to play instead of wasting his time and tuition money he didn't have at Papa Ziegfeld's Chicago Musical College.

In the days when "Tinker to Evers to Chance" were making diamond history, Ager worked as a peanut vender on week-ends at the old Cub ball park, and after graduating from McKinley High School he persuaded the manager of the Chicago branch of Waterson, Berlin & Snyder, to hire him as a song plugger. On this job he was still working for peanuts, and doubling as window dressing, too, since he demonstrated the hits of Irving Berlin and Ted Snyder while playing the piano in the display window that overlooked State Street. His apprenticeship also took him on the business side of the footlights when he traveled the Orpheum Circuit as an accompanist for Gene Green, a scat singer who popularized *Melancholy Baby* and pioneered song intermissions at movie picture houses in the silent film era.

Like all embryo songwriters, Milton Ager had his eyes and heart set on New York's Tin Pan Alley, and realized his dream in 1914 when he was made an arranger in the home office where he learned what makes a popular song click by taking down piano copies for Irving Berlin, Walter Donaldson, George Meyer, Jean Schwartz and other top composers on the Waterson, Berlin & Snyder staff.

Milton Ager also did a bit of extra-curricular work that put his name on a sheet music cover for the first time. With Pete Wendling as a partner, Ager composed instrumental pieces that they demonstrated as a two-piano team and sold to Henry Waterson at \$25 apiece, a take that was split \$12.50-\$12.50. These numbers, which were used in the making of Little Wonder 10-cent records, bore such titles as *Hee-Ha* and *The Steeplechase*, and Ager loaded the arrangements with sound effects that made virtuoso out of tramp

drummers, anticipating the vogue of *Mule Train* and Spike Jones by 35 years.

While working at Waterson, Berlin & Snyder's, Ager became acquainted with Billy Jerome, and when the writer of *Mister Dooley* and *Chinatown*, *My Chinatown* founded the William Jerome Music Company with the financial backing of George M. Cohan, Milton joined the new firm and wrote several songs with the top man himself. In 1917, however, when Cohan gave Leo Feist the publishing rights to *Over There* on the condition that the William Jerome Music Company and its personnel should be absorbed in the deal, Ager, while working as a free lance, frequented Feist's and the near-by Blue Ribbon Bar in order to cultivate Grant Clarke, whom

he regarded as one of the great lyricists of all time.

Thus a friendship was formed that resulted in Milton Ager's first hit in 1918, following a hitch in the army at Fort Greenleaf, Ga., where he became imbued with the song possibilities of Dixieland. With Grant Clarke he did some preliminary work on a number they both liked but which made little if any impression on Feist's high brass until Al Jolson dropped in one afternoon in search of new material. And after Jolson had turned thumbs down on all the published songs in the catalog, Clarke dug up the dormant number that he and Ager had been working on.

"That's it," Jolson declared after hearing only the first few bars of the chorus. "Finish it and make me a special arrangement."

And Ager and Clarke had a smash hit in *Everything Is Peaches Down in Georgia* the night Jolson first sang it in a Winter Garden revue.

After writing two other popular sellers that Feist published, *Freckles* and *I'm in Heaven When I'm in My Mother's Arms*, Milton Ager, thru Jack McGowan, met John Murray Anderson, who at McGowan's suggestion, commissioned Ager to write the score for *What's in a Name*, a musical he was about to produce, and when the show opened, Ager made the Broadway grade with *A Young Man's Fancy*, the hit of the production with a melody based on the tinkling notes of a music box.

*What's in a Name* also brought Milton Ager and Jack Yellen, the lyricist, together for the first time. (Continued on page 38)

# SMASHING THROUGH TO NEW TOP SALES!

## "Tennessee Waltz" by Patti Page

5534-5534X45

### Flipside—"Boogie Woogie Santa Claus"

## MORE MERCURY MONEY MAKERS!

#### "I'm Gonna Live 'Til I Die"

Frankie Laine  
("A Man Gets Awfully Lonesome")  
5544-5544x45

#### "It's a Marshmallow World"

Vic Damone  
("When the Lights Are Low")  
5496-5496x45

#### "Stranger in the City"

Tony Fontaine with Lou Douglas' Orch.  
("And You'll Be Home")  
5536-5536x45

#### "Our Lady of Fatima"

Richard Hayes and Kitty Kallen  
("Ave Maria")  
Vic Damone—5535

#### Also Available

#### "Our Lady of Fatima"

("Honestly I Love You")  
Richard Hayes and Kitty Kallen  
5466-5466x45

#### "Frosty the Snowman"

Two Ton Baker with Jerry Murad's Harmonicats  
("Tubby the Tuba Song")  
MMP-76

#### "Time Out for Tears"

Dinah Washington  
("Only a Moment Ago")  
5503-5503x45

#### "Nevertheless"

Frankie Laine  
("I Was Dancing with Someone")  
5495-5495x45

#### "Moonlight and Roses"

Herb Jeffries  
("The One Rose")  
5541

#### "The Medicine Show"

Bus Butler  
("The Rubber Ball Bounce")  
6281

#### "The Thing"

Two Ton Baker with David LeWinter & His Orch.  
("Autumn Leaves")  
David LeWinter & His Orch.  
5548-5548x45

#### "Hey Keesideetch"

Jerry Murad's Harmonicats  
("Harmonicats' Blues")  
5533

#### "To Think You've Chosen Me"

Eddy Howard  
("The One Rose")  
5517-5517x45

#### "Xmas in Killarney"

Ralph Marterie & His Orch.  
("Rainbow Guy")  
Bette Chapel with Ralph Marterie's Orch.  
5549

#### "All About Eve"

Alfred Newman and His Orch.  
("Banjo and Fiddle")  
5540

#### "You're Just in Love"

Bette Chapel with David LeWinter & His Orch.  
("I've Never Been in Love Before")  
5545

#### "Jing-a-Ling, Jing-a-Ling"

Richard Hayes with Jerry Murad's Harmonicats  
("Silver Bells")  
Richard Hayes and Kitty Kallen  
5532

#### Also Available

#### "Jing-a-Ling, Jing-a-Ling"

("Can't Seem To Laugh Anymore")  
Richard Hayes with Jerry Murad's Harmonicats  
5492-5492x45

#### "Basin Street Blues"

Herb Jeffries  
("Flamingo")  
5542

#### "If You've Got the Money, I've Got the Time"

Ernie Lee & His Southerners  
("No, No, Joe")  
6289

#### "Hot Rod Race"

Tiny Hill and His Orchestra  
("Love Bug (tch)")  
5547

#### "All My Love"

Patti Page  
("Roses Remind Me of You")  
5455-5455x45

#### "Oh Babe"

Kay Brown  
("Baby Me")  
5538

#### "I'll Never Smile Again"

Ralph Marterie and His Orch.  
("I Only Have Eyes for You")  
5507-5507x45

#### "Handcuffed to Love"

Tiny Hill and His Orchestra  
("I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby")  
5546

#### "Back in Your Own Backyard"

Tiny Hill and His Orchestra  
("I'll Sail My Ship Alone")  
5508-5508x45

#### "I'm Movin' On"

Tiny Hill and His Orchestra  
("Just a Girl That Men Forget")  
5524

#### "Beyond the Reef"

Jerry Byrd  
("Pagan Love Song")  
5531

#### "How Deep Is the Ocean"

Dinah Washington  
("Why Don't You Think Things Over?")  
8192

#### "These Foolish Things"

Herb Jeffries  
("Solitude")  
5539

#### "Hadacol Bounce"

Bill Nettles & His Dixie Blue Boys  
("When Your Own Love Ain't Around")  
6275

#### "Teardrops From My Eyes"

Red Kirk  
("Can't Understand a Woman")  
6288

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