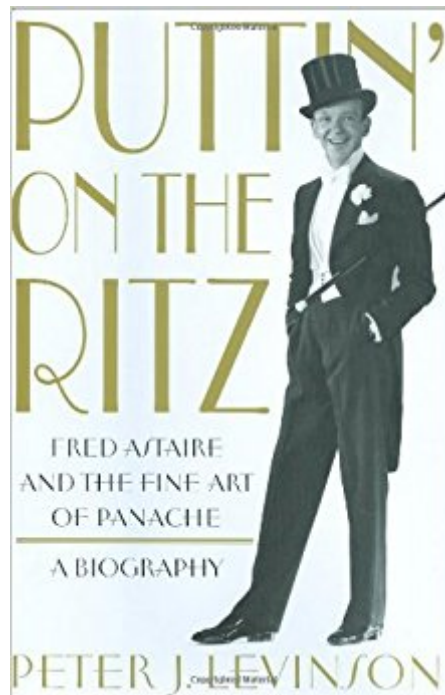


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# Puttin' On The Ritz: Fred Astaire And The Fine Art Of Panache, A Biography



## Synopsis

Fred Astaire defined elegance on the dance floor. With white tie, tails and a succession of elegant partners - Ginger Rogers, Cyd Charisse, Rita Hayworth, Eleanor Powell, Judy Garland and others - he created an indelible image of the Anglo bon vivant. His origins, though, were far more humble: Born in Omaha, Nebraska, Fred Astaire came from Midwestern stock that partially had its origin in the late nineteenth century Jewish communities of Austria. At first, he played second fiddle in vaudeville to his sister, Adele; however, once he learned how to tap and bought his first Brooks Brothers suit, the game changed. How did he transform himself from a small town Nebraska boy into the most sophisticated man ever to dance across a dance floor? In this comprehensive new book about the life and artistry of Fred Astaire, Peter Levinson looks carefully at the entirety of Astaire's career from vaudeville to Broadway to Hollywood to television. He explores Astaire's relationships with his vivacious dance partners, his friendship with songwriters like George Gershwin and Irving Berlin and his relationship with choreographers like Hermes Pan to discover how Astaire, in effect, created his elegant persona. Astaire put his mark on the Hollywood musical, starting his career at RKO and then moving to MGM. From his long list of films, certain classics like "Swing Time", "Top Hat", "Royal Wedding" and "The Bandwagon" revolutionized the presentation of dance on film; but, he also revolutionized the television variety special with the Emmy-Award-Winning "An Evening With Fred Astaire". For "Puttin' on the Ritz", veteran Hollywood insider, Peter Levinson interviewed over two hundred people who worked closely with Astaire such as Debbie Reynolds, Dick Van Dyke, Artie Shaw, Bobby Short, Oscar Peterson, Mel Ferrer, Betty Garrett, Joel Grey, Arlene Dahl, Michael Kidd, Betty Comden, Onna White, Margaret Whiting, Andy Williams, and others like Quincy Jones, John Travolta, and John Williams, to provide an intimate window on to his professional as well as his personal life. His new biography of Astaire is a celebration of the great era of sophistication on Broadway and in Hollywood as seen through the life of a man who learned how to put on the Ritz and become America's premiere song-and-dance-man: Fred Astaire.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

In this exuberant biography of Astaire, Levinson—who has written biographies of Harry James, Nelson Riddle and Tommy Dorsey, and who died last year—traces Astaire's stunningly long and successful career from early vaudeville partnership with sister Adele to the heyday of MGM musicals (and, along the way, highlights Astaire's musical influence in jazz and his tasteful, understated sartorial chic inspired by the duke of Windsor). Hailing from Omaha, Neb., Astaire nA© Austerlitz (his family the descendants of Austrian Jews), tagged along with his older, more promising sister to dance school in New York City, where the tap-and-step team got their start on the Orpheum Circuit and in Charles Dillingham's revues, before hitting stardom in the 1923 London musical *Stop Flirting*. When Adele quit to marry an English lord in 1932, Astaire renounced Broadway for the bright new medium of film, and once ensconced in Hollywood, under contract with David O. Selznick at RKO then MGM, he never looked back: from being teamed up rather reluctantly with Ginger Rogers (10 films) to finding his muse in choreographer Hermes Pan and spectacular, short-lived partnerships with legendary leading ladies, Astaire became a national treasure. Levinson takes a chatty, nostalgic look at Astaire's artistic collaborations, his longtime, stable marriage to Phyllis Potter, his shy nature and his underappreciated singing voice. (Apr.) Copyright A© Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

PETER LEVINSON (1934-2008) was a highly respected music publicist and author of the critically acclaimed biographies *Trumpet Blues*, *September in the Rain*, and *Linin' In a Great Big Way*.

Just a nice biography by an amazing talent and gentleman

I've read almost all of the books on Astaire and when they fail, they first fail the test of balance...the test of proper weighing. The central mistake is to weigh Astaire's great achievements in solo dance,

significantly over his great achievements in paired dance. The duets are typically underrated, as is the evaluation of his early career. In setting out to further iconize Astaire, writers like Levinson, not only give second class status to his greatest dancer partner, Ginger Rogers, (Hyam, Croce, and Mueller), they also, quite mindlessly, give lower status Astaire's COMPLETE achievement...defeating their own stated purposes. This results in damage to the good reputations of all concerned....even in spite of good intentions. I am sorry to hear of Mr. Levinson's passing, but this book should not have been written. There are better books on Fred than this one. Not only does it fail to weigh the establishment of Astaire's career correctly, it also has more than a few obvious errors on his formative films. What makes the book additionally disturbing is that Levinson repeats the many false statements about the alleged conflict between Fred and Ginger...false stories that emanated from the RKO publicity department to explain their breakup to the public...when the real reason was their eventual declining box office. This would be understandable in earlier years, but today, it has been refuted by so many sources, that it is just unacceptable, and should be seen as the serious error it is. After ten films, of course, there would have had to have been a few short lived "snits", as Rogers called them. But the steady respect and affection that each had for the other, throughout their entire lives, seems not to have made an impression on critics like Levinson...no matter how many times they have been denied by the accused. Levinson serves a half-baked souffle. It's disappointing, and honestly I ready to sent the whole dish back to the kitchen. Astaire's career had several aspects, but his early career was crucial to all his future successes. In this phase, he established his formidable creative process in dance, singing, music, acting, and directing. In this phase, he perfected his integrated approach to all elements of the dance-musical. And in this phase, he established his modus operandi in both the paired and solo dances. Central to this effort was Ginger Rogers. It is difficult today to recall the absolutely electrifying effect that the Fred and Ginger partnership had on audiences of the 1930s. When they were dancing on screen: quiet prevailed, breathing ceased, and hearts fluttered. Upon their completion, movie audiences burst into spontaneous applause. It is difficult to recall this today...but it's only mathematics to note that typically, in each of their films, THREE of the FOUR dances were DUETS. Hollywood producers then (as now), were hard boiled money-men...so it's quite safe to say, that this was not just happenstance. It was the PAIRED dances that sparked the imaginations of millions and created the tremendous box office bonanza for RKO. It was the PAIRED dances that established Astaire's career and assured his success and legend. And what did the often reticent Fred say about his pairing with his greatest dance partner? Here's his rare evaluation: "Ginger was brilliantly effective. She made everything work for her. Actually she made everything very fine for both of us and she

deserves MOST of the credit for our success.". Emphasis mine. By their third film, Ginger was filled with self-confidence under Astaire's and Hermes Pan's coaching. Not every dancer then could have withstood Fred's insistent perfectionism. Rogers, petite, 5-4, 105 pounds, was mentally strong, and highly motivated and determined. She never once cracked. She was the "tough cookie" who just practiced harder. The results in virtuosic performance show an ease and grace that was underlied...unlike Adele...by an extraordinary commitment and unheard of hours of practice. With Rogers, first among his partners, Astaire was able to achieve greater and greater choreographic and rhythmic complexity, knowing full well that she was capable of handling anything he and Pan could imagine. And in fact, Ginger herself, as Fred and Pan acknowledged, made her own contributions in this sphere as well. Now add to this, the chemistry, and genuine poignancy, between them...even when not dancing, but when acting...and you begin to see Ginger's central importance to the whole enterprise. Rogers was a quality actress who also danced...and beautifully so. She dramatized every dance, with great technical skill, in a whole range of emotions. Astaire and Rogers were of one mind, and heart, and soul, on the dance floor. They together, were much more than the sum of two parts...and as such, were much more than any other of Astaire's later pairings. They together entered that rarefied realm of the sublime, time and time again....in ten films. Rather than buying this book, I would recommend John Mueller's "Astaire Dancing", or Hannah Hyam's "Fred and Ginger", and still Arlene Croce's "The Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers Book". Well needless to say...that in missing all this, Levinson's book misses much about what is most essential about Fred. The book's major shortcoming...and there are many others...is that it fails, on its own terms, to give an objective view of Astaire's life and career, by failing to properly weigh the key role of Ginger Rogers, in performance, of the greatest of all film partnerships. Fans of Fred Astaire ought to be indignant at such treatment. Fred was. WAITER! OH, WAITER!

An in depth study of Astaire's life and era. This book uses many of Astaire's words from his autobio "Steps in Time".....and then fills in a lengthy objective review of his life and career. Mr. Levinson fills in many facts and comments by Astaire's peers and associates not included in Astaire's book. I was especially enlightened by Mr. Levinson's comments on Fred Astaire's jewish roots. For whatever reason Mr. Astaire had for not including that biographical fact in his bio remains a mystery to me. Everyone of us has had some "warts" in our life. Mr. Levinson, while not trying to "damage" Astaire's career, faithfully includes these facts in his book. I, as a professional pianist, having worked with some of the best choreographers and dancers in the business, have had much input from many of the people mentioned in Levinson's book. I have also worked with Ginger Rogers and played many

times under Hal Borne of whom I heard countless stories of the Fred and Ginger years. Truthfully, I adore Astaire and his fabulous career. What a talent! We'll never see another one. Ron Simone

I hate to speak ill of the dead (Levinson) but this has to be the worst book on Fred Astaire that I have ever read and I have collected all the books there are about him over the years. It is full of blinding inaccuracies and worse still is extremely dull. I am still struggling to finish it and somewhere after the chapter on Ginger Rogers I lost the will to live. I sincerely hope that the author didn't pay his researchers a lot of money as they got basic facts completely wrong. One of the most glaring was saying that Miss Roger's gown in "Top Hat," the feathered dress she fought tooth and nail to wear was pink. Wrong, every Fred and Ginger fan knows that this gown was ice blue. If he can't be bothered to check on little things like that then what can you trust? My advice would be to not waste your money on this book, there are far better books out there such as the Hannah Hyam book, "Fred and Ginger, the Astaire-Rogers Partnership 1934-1938" Buy this one and you won't be disappointed.

This book starts when Fred's great grandfather was alive! A lot of background that is interesting but basically unnecessary unless the reader is really into genealogy. It will take me a while to read thru it or I'll simply skip to the Hollywood years.

I love Fred Astaire. This book only really kept my attention when I got to the middle. It was however well researched but could have used a bit more editing as I noticed a few grammatical mistakes in it.

Enjoyed this book very much. I have been a Fred Astaire fan for over 70 years.

Levinson seems to have talked to everyone who is still alive that either worked, or knew, Astaire (with the exception of the money-grubbing final Mrs. Astaire - Robyn Smith) to produce one of the finest celebrity biographies that I have ever read. Fans of fine, classic clothes even have a chapter devoted to what Astaire wore and how he dressed.

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