

Ben Bagley's Ira Gershwin Revisited

Ira Gershwin Revisited was one of the most fun of the Ben Bagley Revisited series. He assembled a great cast and Dick Hyman provided really wonderful arrangements. For this reissue we have, of course, spruced up the sound quite a bit, because the original LP and CD releases were never optimal.

Ira Gershwin, older brother of George, was born Israel Gershowitz on December 6, 1896. While George began plugging songs and writing early on, Ira was slower to enter the music business, first working for his father. When he began writing lyrics he did not want to seem like he was just trading in on George's growing reputation, so he wrote under the pseudonym Arthur Francis, which were the first names of his two other brothers. The first show for which he wrote lyrics was *Two Little Girls in Blue* in 1921. Later that year, George and Ira collaborated as composer and lyricist for the show *A Dangerous Maid*, although Ira was still, at that point, using his Arthur Francis pseudonym. But the collaboration worked and the Gershwins were off and running. Their first Broadway hit was *Lady, Be Good*, and they continued their amazing collaboration through twelve shows and four films, pro-

ducing some of the most iconic and brilliant popular songs in the history of music.

After brother George's sad and untimely death at the age of thirty-eight, Ira went on to collaborate with several other great composers, with much success. For the movie *Cover Girl* he wrote to the music of Jerome Kern, for *Where Do We Go from Here*, *The Firebrand of Florence*, and *Lady in the Dark* he wrote to the music of Kurt Weill, for *Life Begins at 8:40* and the Judy Garland version of *A Star is Born* he wrote to the music of Harold Arlen, for *Park Avenue* he wrote to the music of Arthur Schwartz, for the MGM movie *The Barkleys of Broadway* he wrote to the music of Harry Warren, for *Ziegfeld Follies of 1936* he wrote to the music of Vernon Duke, and for MGM's *Give a Girl a Break* he wrote to the music of Burton Lane. His facility for wordplay and rhyme is absolute genius – his turns of phrases, his titles, the ability to put a smile on your face or bring tears to your eyes or make you laugh out loud was, in a word, dazzling.

For Bagley's Revisited series, the songs were not the hits, but the lesser known works and sometimes completely un-

known works. And *Ira Gershwin Revisited* is loaded with gems. There are several wonderful songs from the 1953 MGM musical film *Give a Girl a Break*, which starred Debbie Reynolds, Marge and Gower Champion, a young Bob Fosse, and an uncredited George Chakiris. There are songs from George White's *Scandals*, *The Barkleys of Broadway*, *A Dangerous Maid*, *Treasure Hunt*, *Ziegfeld Follies*, *The Firebrand of Florence*, *Where Do We Go from Here*, and *Park Avenue*. Perversely, Bagley also includes a song by George with lyrics by Arthur Jackson, just because he liked the tune. You could never predict with Ben, who described himself as "incurably insane."

This thoroughly delightful album is loaded with sparkling performances by Blossom Dearie, Mary McCarty, Danny Meehan, Charles Rydell, Ethel Shutta, and Margaret Whiting. For the original CD release, Bagley added a few songs, and those are sung by Dody Goodman, Paula Lawrence, KT Sullivan, and Arthur Siegel. Honestly, who could ask for anything more?

— Bruce Kimmel