

**The New York Public Library  
New York Public Library for the Performing Arts, Dorothy and Lewis B. Cullman Center  
Music Division**

Guide to the  
**Harry Ruby papers**  
1917-2004 (bulk 1917-1974)  
JPB 11-18

Compiled by Kate Jadwin, Pratt Institute, 2012, December 2011

## **Summary**

**Creator:** Ruby, Harry, 1895-1974

**Title:** Harry Ruby papers, 1917-2004 (bulk 1917-1974)

**Size:** 1.8 linear feet (6 boxes)

**Source:** Donated by Larry Lowenstein, 2009.

**Abstract:** Harry Ruby was an American composer, songwriter, librettist and screenwriter. This collection documents Ruby's personal and professional life through scrapbooks, press clippings, musical scores, songbooks and sheet music, publishing and copyright agreements, writings, correspondence, telegrams, lyrics scripts, theatre programs and photographs. Also included are copies of the eulogy read at Ruby's funeral, as well as letters of condolence to Ruby's family after his death.

**Access:** Collection is open to the public. Library policy on photocopying will apply. Advance notice may be required. Inquiries regarding audio materials in this collection may be directed to the Music Division ([musicdiv@nypl.org](mailto:musicdiv@nypl.org)). Audio may be subject to preservation evaluation and migration prior to access.

**Copyright information:** For permission to publish, contact the Chief, Music Division, The New York Public Library.

**Preferred citation:** Harry Ruby papers, Music Division, The New York Public Library.

**Custodial history:** These materials arrived as part of a larger collection of combined materials belonging to Harry Ruby and Gerard Oestreicher. Although the two men were related through Oestreicher's marriage to Ruby's daughter, the consolidated material has been divided into two collections. Ruby and Oestreicher never collaborated professionally and had no documentation suggesting a personal relationship.

**Processing note:** Folders were created, as there was no original order. Due to deterioration, scrapbooks were dismantled and rehoused in folders. Proper handling procedures should be used when viewing any of the press clippings, as many are in poor condition.

## **Related collections**

Abe Burrows collection. Rodgers and Hammerstein Archives of Recorded Sound, The New York Public Library.

Abe Burrows papers. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library.

Edward Jablonski and Lawrence D. Stewart collection. Harry Ransom Humanities Research Center, University of Texas at Austin.

Gerard Oesreicher papers. Music Division, The New York Public Library.

Harry Ruby papers. Wisconsin Historical Society Archives/Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research.

Reminiscences of Harry Ruby: Oral History. Columbia University Libraries.

Richard and Edith Barstow papers. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library.

Richard Rodgers papers. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library.

Zero and Kate Mostel papers. Billy Rose Theatre Collection, The New York Public Library.

## **Creator history**

Born Harry Rubinstein on the lower East Side of New York City in 1895, Harry Ruby was the fourth of six children. His main childhood interest was baseball, a passion which remained with him throughout his life. As a teenager, Ruby discovered his natural aptitude for music when he learned to play the piano. For a very brief period after high school, at his father's insistence, Ruby apathetically studied business before abandoning his post graduate education. Seeking a more exciting path, Ruby found himself working as a song-plugger in stores, restaurants and cafes. He was soon playing variety houses, working the vaudeville circuit as a pianist for the Messenger Boys Trio and the Bootblack Trio.

During this period Ruby met and struck up a friendship with Bert Kalmar, a successful vaudevillian who also ran a music publishing company with Harry Puck in New York. Before long, Kalmar hired Ruby as a staff pianist, song plugging for his company. After a knee injury that ended his stage career, Kalmar returned to New York, devoting his career to songwriting. At the time Ruby was working as a composer, collaborating with a number of other lyricists. Soon Ruby and Kalmar began to collaborate, and by 1920 the two formed a permanent team.

Kalmar and Ruby wrote only individual songs for vaudeville, revues and records from 1920 to 1922. The following year brought their first libretto and musical score to Broadway, *Helen of Troy*, N.Y., which opened the door for other hit shows and their future work with the Marx Brothers. Throughout the rest of the decade they churned out a succession of hit songs and continued to write lyrics, as well as compose for and collaborate with others on musicals.

Kalmar and Ruby's last Broadway musical for nearly twelve years was *Top Speed*, which they co-produced and co-wrote with Guy Bolton. Running a mere 102 performances, *Top Speed* was a relative commercial failure. This disappointment coupled with the advent of talking pictures and musical films led to Kalmar and Ruby's decision to move to Hollywood in 1930.

In Hollywood, Kalmar and Ruby worked for RKO (Radio-Keith-Orpheum) Pictures writing songs for the film comedy team Wheeler and Woolsey. In addition, the two wrote the screenplay and songs for the *Amos 'n' Andy* film *Check and Double Check* and made film adaptations of three of their musicals, all released in 1930: *The Cuckoos* (based on *The Ramblers*), *Animals Crackers* and *Top Speed*. A slow year, the team only scored one independent hit song in 1931, *Nevertheless (I'm in Love with You)*.

Things picked up in 1932 with the release of two films that Kalmar and Ruby composed and screenwrote: *The King of Spain* and *Horse Feathers*. The next three years afforded them a number of commercial successes, co-writing *Duck Soup* (1933), *Hips, Hips, Hooray!* (1934), *Kentucky Kernels* (1934), *The Circus Clown* (1934) and *Bright Lights* (1935). The late 1930s were less active for Kalmar and Ruby, for which their screen and songwriting is noted for *Walking on Air* (1936), *The Life of the Party* (1937), *Everybody Sing* (1938), *You're an Education* (1938), *The Story of Vernon and Irene Castle* (1939) and others.

In 1941, Kalmar and Ruby returned to Broadway, writing the music and co-writing the script for the musical comedy *High Kickers*. They continued to write hit songs for films and independent artists until Kalmar's death in 1947. Shortly before Bert Kalmar's death, the duo signed a contract with MGM to make a biopic based on the Kalmar and Ruby partnership. In 1950, the film *Three Little Words* was released, with Red Skelton as Ruby and Fred Astaire as Kalmar. The film breathed new life into the team's song catalog, leading to Top Ten revival hits, chart covers and new chart recordings.

Ruby continued to write, but was without a hit. In the 1950s, Ruby co-wrote his last screenplay, *Lovely to Look At* (1952), and wrote *The Real McCoys* television theme song (1957). The 1960s brought a renewed interest in the Marx Brothers, restoring luster to a good deal of Kalmar and Ruby songs. Towards the end of his life Ruby was frequently a guest on a number of television programs recalling his musical career and in 1970 was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame. Ruby spent his last years in Woodland Hills, California before passing away on February 23, 1974.

A handful of Kalmar and Ruby songs endure in popularity to this day, most notably Connie Francis' multimillion selling rendition of *Who's Sorry Now* and Louis Armstrong's recording of *A Kiss to Build a Dream On* (a revised version of *Moonlight on the Meadow*), which was nominated for an Academy Award in 1952, featured in the 1993 film *Sleepless in Seattle*, the 1998 computer game *Fallout 2*, and the 2005 film *Lord of War*.

### **Scope and content note**

This collection documents Harry Ruby's personal life and professional career as a composer, songwriter, librettist and screenwriter. The materials include scrapbooks; press clippings; musical scores, many with annotations; songbooks; publishing and copyright agreements; writings; correspondence and telegrams; typescripts; theatre programs; and a framed, autographed photograph of Sigmund Romberg. Also included are copies of the eulogy read at Ruby's funeral, as well as letters of condolence to Ruby's family after his death.

Notable items in the collection are the dyeline and manuscript copies of sheet music of Ruby's songs, including some with marginalia and revisions; typescripts, including some with marginalia and hand written edits; the original film script of *Lovely to Look At*; several drafts of Ruby's unproduced script and scores of *Between Two Rivers* and *Music at Midnight*; as well as original print song books and sheet music of Ruby's songs. Also notable are Ruby's writings, consisting of poems, lyrics, drafts of letters, and original essays typed by Ruby on his own typewriter.

The correspondence and telegrams in the collection are related to his work, the majority of which are congratulatory and thank-you messages from friends, family and associates. The publishing and copyright agreements consist of letters, contracts and typed agreements stipulating credit, adaptation, performance, financial, and other related rights.

The scrapbooks in this collection contain press clippings, a press book for the Amos 'n' Andy film Check and Double Check, magazines, a press book for Top Speed, reproductions of reviews and articles, photographs, typed reviews and ephemera such as playbills, programs and invitations that reflect various works with which Ruby was involved.

Audio recordings in the collection document Ruby's songwriting career and consist of a compilation record featuring the song Three Little Words. Inquiries regarding audio materials in the collection may be directed to the Music Division ([musicdiv@nypl.org](mailto:musicdiv@nypl.org)) in advance. Audio materials may be subject to preservation and migration prior to access.

## **Arrangement**

Alphabetical by format.

## **Key terms**

### **Names**

Kalmar, Bert, 1884-1947  
Ruby, Harry, 1895-1974

### **Occupations**

Lyricists -- United States

### **Special formats**

Photographs  
Scores  
Scrapbooks  
Scripts  
Sheet music

## Container list

- b.1 f.1 Correspondence, 1930-1974
- b.1 f.2 Memorial Materials, 1974, 1995, undated
- b.6 Photograph--Romberg, Sigmund, 1940
- b.1 f.3 Press Clippings, 1922-1974
- b.1 f.4-5 Publishing and Copyright Agreements, 1935-2004
- Scores
- b.3 f.1-2 A-H, 1955-1972, undated
- b.2 f.5 *The Happiest Girl in the World*, undated
- b.3 f.3-5 I-Z, 1965-1972, undated
- b.2 f.6 *West Side Story*, undated
- Scrapbooks
- b.2 f.1 Amos 'n' Andy Journal, 1930
- b.2 f.2 *Top Speed* Press Book, 1930
- b.2 f.3-4 Miscellaneous, 1923-1963
- Scripts
- b.4 f.1-2 *Between Two Rivers*, undated
- b.4 f.3 *Crime Seldom Pays*, undated
- b.4 f.4 *The Last Fight*, undated
- b.4 f.5 *Letters*, undated
- b.4 f.6 *Lovely to Look At*, undated
- b.4 f.7 *Melody Street*, undated
- b.4 f.8 *Music at Midnight*, undated
- b.4 f.9 *Night of 20,000 Stars II*, undated
- b.4 f.10 *Pull Up a Chair*, undated
- b.4 f.11 *Songs for Wonder Boy*, undated
- b.4 f.12 *Top Speed*, undated
- b.4 f.13 Untitled, undated
- b.5 f.1-6 Songbooks and Sheet Music, 1917-1963 (Alphabetical by title.)
- b.1 f.6 Writings, undated