

This Day in History... January 27, 1885

Happy Birthday, Jerome Kern

Jerome David Kern was born on January 27, 1885, in New York City, New York. A prolific composer, he wrote over 1,000 songs for more than 100 stage productions and films, most famously *Show Boat*.

Kern had a talent for music from an early age. His mother taught him piano and organ when he was a child. After the family moved to Newark, New Jersey, he wrote the songs for his school's first musical.

Kern left school before graduating in the hopes of pursuing a career in music. His father insisted he work at his business, but after Kern made the costly mistake of ordering 200 pianos instead of two, his father let him follow his dream. Kern joined the New York College of Music in 1902 and published his first composition, "At the Casino," that same year.

After college, Kern spent time in England and found work adding new songs to British musicals for use on Broadway. Kern also wrote some songs for British plays. His first complete score was for the Broadway show *The Red Petticoat* in 1912.

By the start of World War I, Kern had written over 100 songs for about 30 musicals. Kern's compositions were popular – they worked with the popular foxtrot dance style and incorporated ragtime and jazz elements, making them fresh and modern for the time. Kern may have composed music for silent films as early as 1912, but the first documented music he wrote for a film was the 1916 serial *Gloria's Romance*.



Show Boat follows its characters for 50 years.

In the 1920s, Kern worked on at least one show every year. In 1925, he met Oscar Hammerstein II, who would become a lifelong friend and collaborator. Hammerstein was the only other composer Kern would collaborate with for an extended period of time. He seldom collaborated with other composers for very long.

Following the successes of *Sally and Sunny*, Kern wanted to take a chance. He had read Edna Ferber's novel *Show Boat* and wanted to make it into a musical. The story dealt with racism and alcoholism, which were rarely included in musical comedies. But Kern was permitted to take the chance, and *Show Boat* would become one of his greatest successes. While the songs from many of his other musicals remained popular on their own, the plays themselves were largely forgotten. But *Show Boat* has been revived many times and is Kern's most enduring work. It also included some of his most well-known songs, including "Ol' Man River," "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," "Make Believe," and "You Are Love."

Kern went to Hollywood in 1929 to oversee the film adaptations of *Sally*, *Men of the Sky*, and *Sunny*. Kern composed his last new Broadway show, *Very Warm for May*, in 1939. After that, he returned to Hollywood to score a number of movies, including *I Dream Too Much*, *Roberta*, *Lovely to Look At*, and *Swing Time*. Kern's final film score was for *Centennial Summer* in 1946. Kern suffered a cerebral hemorrhage and died on November 11, 1945. The following year, a film based loosely on his life, *Till the Clouds Roll By*, was released.

Over the course of his career, Kern composed more than 1,000 songs and wrote 108 theatrical scores. He was twice the recipient of an Academy Award for music.



This stamp was issued in 1985 for Kern's 100th birthday.



Kern was a founding member of ASCAP (American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers). This stamp was issued for that organization's 50th anniversary.

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