

This Day in History... July 15, 1904

Birth of Dorothy Fields

Lyricist Dorothy Fields was born on July 15, 1904, in Allenhurst, New Jersey. She wrote more than 400 songs for Broadway and film, including “The Way You Look Tonight” and “On the Sunny Side of the Street.”

Fields came from a theatrical family. Her father had been part of a popular vaudeville duo and later became theater producer. Fields was a bright student, performing particularly well in English and drama. Early on she wanted to be an actress, but her father discouraged this. So, she worked as a teacher and laboratory assistant, while secretly sending some of her stories to magazines.

Fields performed on stage a few times before she met composer J. Fred Coots, who suggested they write songs together. While they never did collaborate, Coots introduced Fields to composer Jimmy McHugh. McHugh asked her to write lyrics for *Blackbirds of 1928*, which became an instant hit. Fields and McHugh then became a song writing team until 1935. Together they wrote “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love,” “Exactly Like You,” and “On the Sunny Side of the Street.” They also wrote songs for the Cotton Club, many of which Duke Ellington recorded.



Fields collaborated with Kern on “The Way You Look Tonight,” among other hits.

Fields began writing for Hollywood films in the mid-1930s, frequently teaming up with Jerome Kern. Together they worked on *Roberta* (1935) and *Swing Time* (1936). Their song, “The Way You Look Tonight,” from *Swing Time*, earned the pair the 1936 Academy Award for Best Original Song. Fields went on to provide the lyrics for the film *The King Steps Out*, and the plays, *Stars in Your Eyes*, *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, *Let’s Face It!*, *Something for the Boys*, and *Mexican Hayride*.

In 1945, Fields presented the famed Rodgers and Hammerstein with her idea for a musical based on the life of Annie Oakley. They signed on to produce it and Fields worked with her brother and Irving Berlin. *Annie Get Your Gun*, starring Ethel Merman, was a major success and ran for 1,147 performances.

One of Fields’s greatest successes was the play *Redhead* (1959), which won five Tony Awards. She also collaborated with Cy Coleman on *Sweet Charity* (1966) and *Seesaw* (1973).

Fields’s career spanned 48 years – and she was one of the first successful female Tin Pan Alley songwriters. She co-wrote over 400 songs for 15 plays and 26 movies. Her gift for creating simple, yet interesting lyrics – which often utilized catchy phrasing – made her one of the most popular lyricists on Broadway. Fields died from a heart attack on March 28, 1974.



Fields stamp from the 1996 American Songwriters issue.



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