

Who Could Ask For Anything More?

Busby Berkley, Judy Garland & the filming of *Girl Crazy*

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For Christmas in 1942 Director Busby Berkley received a special gift from his forty some showgirls slated to star in his next picture. Well known for wearing a white sweatshirt, he was gifted with a long sleeve shirt with the names of all the girls on it. Also, embroidered on the shirt was the name of the picture they would begin filming in the New Year. It read “*Girl Crazy*, Xmas, 1942.” This was to be the ninth of ten films that paired MGM’s powerhouse tandem of Judy Garland & Mickey Rooney. However, this was not the first time the George and Ira Gershwin musical had been adapted to the screen. RKO Studios in 1932 used it as a vehicle for the comic team of Bert Wheeler and Robert Woolsey. This new version of the tale of playboy Danny Churchill’s banishment to a western dude ranch to make him forget about booze and women had the star power with Rooney and Garland to top the original.

Production had been slated to begin at the end of 1942, but was pushed back to January of 1943. The first scene scheduled to be filmed was the “I’ve Got Rhythm” musical number. Berkley envisioned shooting the sequence in grand form with animals, pistols, and bullwhips to give it a rodeo type feel. A musical number that would recall some of his most

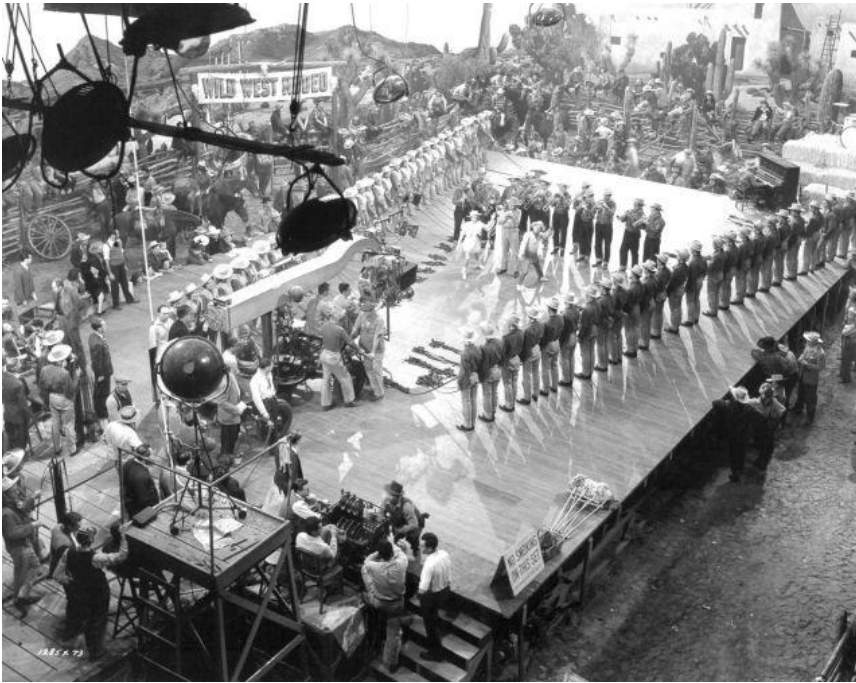
memorable moments on films he worked on in the 1930’s. This was at odds from how music supervisor Roger Edens felt the scene should be. “I’d written an arrangement of ‘I’ve Got Rhythm’ for Judy and we disagreed basically about its presentation.” Edens recalled. “I wanted rhythmic and simply staged, but Berkley got his big ensembles and trick cameras into it again, plus a lot of girls in Western outfits with fringed skirts and people cracking whips and firing guns all over my arrangement and Judy’s voice.” Shouting matches resulted and Edens took his concerns about the sequence to MGM’s mogul Louis B. Mayer. This would be an omen of things to come.

Berkley would also have problems with the star of his film. Garland had worked with Berkley many times before, but this would be the picture where their relationship would reach its breaking point. Known for being a perfectionist, Garland had tired of his demanding ways. Famed Hollywood columnist Hedda Hopper witnessed this treatment in the filming of ‘I’ve Got Rhythm’: “I saw him work her over. He watched from the floor with a wild gleam in his eye, while in take after take he drove her toward the perfection he demanded. She was close to hysteria. I was ready to scream myself. But the order was



repeated time and time again: “Cut. Let’s try it again, Judy. Come on, move! Get the lead out!” Garland would later comment to Hopper, “I used to feel he had a big black bullwhip and he was lashing me with it.”

Actress Dona Massin who also worked on the film described an equally bleak take on things:



“Judy didn’t like Buzz and neither did I! But I think the reason she didn’t like him is that he made her nervous. He was always saying, “Open your eyes! God, how big can you open your eyes?” I worked all the Judy/Mickey pictures with Buzz; the last one I worked with her on was “Girl Crazy” when she and Mickey were being lifted up and down, up and down. And she went out of her mind, she was so frightened. She was afraid of the gunshots.”

After shooting was done on this sequence, Garland would not dance for three weeks on the orders from her family’s doctor. She was exhausted and had suffered significant weight loss. With the number completed, producer Arthur Freed fired Berkley as

director and replaced him Norman Taurog who would complete filming on the picture. Although this was the only sequence Buzz ended up filming he would get his own title card for the number. On analysis, “I’ve Got Rhythm” is easily the most memorable part of the film. Legendary Tommy Dorsey and his orchestra introduce the sequence with Judy Garland in full cowgirl regalia singing to the band members. Male and female dancers glide through faux Western set and soon the camera rises in iconic Busby Berkley fashion to take in the entire company in action. The sequence ends with a cannon going off and the main characters singing the song’s memorable last line. When it comes to Berkley’s many filmed musical sequences this remains a highlight for me. The catchiness of the song’s tune mixed with the phony Western set are part of the charm here. Garland with her expressive eyes popping has a vibrant energy that complements Rooney along with the numerous dancing cowboys and cowgals. Who could ask for anything more?

**Writer’s Note- I consulted two books for information in this article:*

- “*Buzz: The Life and Art of Busby Berkeley*” by Jeffrey Spivak
- “*Get Happy: The Life of Judy Garland*” by Gerald Clarke