

A NOVEL BASED ON THE LIFE OF
HARRY WARREN

AT LAST

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PROJECT

Prologue

In October 2001 in New York City, a revival of the musical *42nd Street* swept Broadway. Perhaps the post–September 11 audience, a solid mix of visitors and New Yorkers, flocked to it with such enthusiasm because the show has that feeling of being a perennial—one of those classics that blooms again and again in regional productions, schools, and community theaters. In truth, this 2001 production was the first Broadway revival of *42nd Street*.

What most people didn't know then and continue to be largely unaware of today is that *42nd Street* was not originally conceived of as a stage musical. The first adaptation of the eponymous novel by Bradford Ropes was a Warner Brothers movie musical in 1933. And as any lover of musical theater knows, the key ingredient in the secret sauce of a hit musical is, of course, the music. In this case, it came from the imagination of Harry Warren, who provided the toe-tapping celebratory melodies that would become part of our American DNA—first in the form of a Depression-era movie, then in the Broadway revival for a grieving American people picking up the pieces after an unthinkable tragedy almost seventy years later. Though

the 2001 audience members were more well-heeled than their Depression-era counterparts, it was with the same fearless defiance that they opted for celebration and not surrender.

As a uniquely American art form, the movie musical has a power like no other. If there is one person more responsible than anyone for defining this genre and taking credit for its success, it is arguably Harry Warren, the first major American songwriter to write primarily for film. Even the tremendous weight of a Hollywood flop was not enough to keep a Harry Warren hit from breaking out. According to the National Archives, no other songwriter—with the possible exception of Irving Berlin—has contributed so much “to the canon of American popular song in the twentieth century as Harry Warren.” Though not much has been written about this true genius, what does exist all plays into the same trope: Why isn’t Harry Warren better known? The real truth of the matter is that even in today’s digital world, with so much information at our fingertips, the public is rarely aware of who writes songs because it is focused on the performers.

It could also be true that Harry was not all that concerned about fame, but was simply doing his best to survive and thrive in an industry of fame seekers—an environment that made him feel he was supposed to toot his own horn, even if he was never truly comfortable doing so. To compare him with Irving Berlin in terms of name recognition paints this picture; Berlin insisted on having his name splashed all over the movie posters of films he wrote for, while the humbler Harry would never have dreamed of making that demand. This could be key to understanding the legacy of Harry Warren—a desire for attention for

his music more than for himself. In the end, was he rewarded for this humility? If you consider that he had more top-ten hits on *Your Hit Parade*—forty-five to Berlin’s thirty-three—the answer is yes.

The inversion of *42nd Street* starting out onscreen before moving to the stage parallels Harry Warren’s life and career in a sense, because while he may not have been as well-known as he would have liked in his day, his musical legacy is immeasurable. Had Harry been alive in 2001 to see the salutary effect his *42nd Street* score was having on the broken hearts in his hometown of New York City, it would surely have put a smile on the face of the man Bing Crosby once described as a “genial curmudgeon.” Harry would have delighted in being rediscovered by a new generation. He lived just long enough to see his beloved *42nd Street*, which had launched his Hollywood career, make it to Broadway the first time—even if it was bittersweet, due to some negative circumstances surrounding the production.

As a place of made-up tales—both the kind told onscreen as well as rumors about people in the business—the heightened world of Hollywood is famous for apocryphal stories that can become transformed as gospel truths. There’s one that’s been going around about Harry Warren for a long time regarding what happened at the Eighth Academy Awards in 1936. Despite being repeated in print multiple times, the only documentary proof that exists supports the fact that the incident never happened. So, did Harry himself have a hand in repeating this tale as a way to keep his name on the lips of the industry he simultaneously loved and loathed? Was this musical genius

employing subterfuge and outsmarting everyone on this score?
Up until now, perhaps it has been a case of “when the legend
becomes fact, print the legend.”

Chapter One

TUTI

Snow fell steadily, bringing a welcome blanket of quiet over the city. Brooklyn, yet an independent city from New York in the year 1893, was still recovering from a massive hurricane four months earlier. Known as the Midnight Storm, it struck in the dark, unleashing a level of destruction never seen in New York City—flooding lower Manhattan, snatching roofs off buildings, and snapping apart some of the largest trees in Central Park, which was not yet forty years old. For Rachel Guaragna, a pregnant mother of ten, it was beyond nerve-wracking. She, her husband, and their children had barricaded the windows of their Brooklyn brownstone with every mattress and pillow they could find, hoping to ride out the storm.

This fresh memory shadowed Rachel as she walked home from the neighborhood Italian market, where she'd gone to pick up provisions for the family Christmas Eve dinner. *Il Cenone*, as it was called in her native Calabria, consisted of thirteen dishes centered on seafood, as meat was not to be eaten the day before Christmas, according to Catholic tradition. Rachel's pushcart

was filled with cherrystone clams for *spaghetti alle vongole*, salted cod with sweet red peppers, cheeses and olives, and a panettone with dried Calabrian figs and dark chocolate. Evidence of the Midnight Storm could still be seen everywhere, like in the giant hole in the side of a warehouse where a crane had swung through, taking a large corner of the building with it. Rachel remembered the day after the storm, when the family went out to check on friends and neighbors and survey the destruction. Downed trees blocked streets, and children in Prospect Park were distressed by the sight of hundreds of dead birds that had fallen out of their branches after drowning in their nests.

Things were much calmer now, with the city under the spell of Christmastime. It was December 24, and Rachel and her family were looking forward to midnight Mass at Our Lady of Loreto. She entered their townhouse at 2218 Fulton Street, rolled her cart of goods into the kitchen, and lit candles to place in the front windows. Then, in an instant, the calm was but another memory—she gasped loudly and clutched her belly. As she steadied herself with one hand on the counter, Antonio came in from his boot shop on the ground floor, rushing to his wife’s side.

“Call the midwife,” Rachel said in a quiet voice, slowly lowering herself onto a chair. “The baby is coming early.”

Antonio grabbed a pillow and placed it behind her back as he called out to his eldest daughter. “Carolina, *viene in fretta!*” he pleaded for her to come quickly. Antonio’s adrenaline coursed through him as though this was his first time witnessing his wife

go into labor, even though he'd already experienced it ten times before.

Carolina came rushing down the stairs and sprang into action, putting her mother's feet up and setting water to boil on the stove to help cleanse her in preparation for the birth. Antonio ran out the front door to fetch the midwife, and Carolina leaned in close to her mother.

"Mama, we can get help for you if your pain is too great," she said. "I know what it says in the Bible about childbirth, but even Queen Victoria was chloroformed for the birth of Prince Leopold, her eighth child."

"I'm glad you will have that if you need it one day," Rachel said, in earnest.

"I don't want you to suffer, is all," Carolina told her.

"I don't think there's time—this baby seems in a hurry to get here."

When Antonio returned with the midwife, they moved Rachel into the bedroom, helping her change into clothing that could be easily removed after the birth.

"I am sorry to have to take you away from your family today," Rachel said.

The midwife smiled. "We will have plenty of time to celebrate Christmas as soon as this baby is born."

As Rachel suspected, she did not have to labor long before a baby boy arrived a few hours shy of Christmas. For Rachel, it brought forth a deep reflection on the experience of the Blessed Mother.

“As though birthing a child isn’t difficult enough. Imagine not having anywhere to go and not understanding how you came to be with child in the first place,” Rachel told the midwife.

“It is a great gift to have a child born on this day,” the midwife said, swaddling the newborn.

Antonio entered the bedroom just as Rachel was saying, “He will be specially blessed and glorify God every day of his life.”

“A priest?” he asked.

“I don’t know. I just know he will have some kind of special talent. I would like to name him Salvatore Antonio if you don’t object.”

“*Va bene allora*,” he said, agreeing wholeheartedly.

Like Christmas itself, the baby was a gift that would keep on giving—long after his birth and well beyond his lifetime. They all wished one another a *buon Natale* as the older children took over making dinner.

The family embarked on their first outing with the baby a few weeks later. Rachel and Antonio pushed the carriage down the walkway as the younger children played along the riverfront, following Antonio Jr., the eldest. They ambled south beneath the Brooklyn Bridge to a bench beside the East River. As the wind gusted, little Salvatore began to cry. Rachel took him out of the carriage and buttoned him inside her warm wool coat.

“What’s the trouble, *Tuti*?” she asked, cooing his nickname.

“Perhaps it is too cold for him today,” Antonio said.

After some nuzzling, the baby’s crying ceased, and Antonio

fixed his gaze on the bridge. “It is hard to believe the bridge was just finished ten years ago,” he said. “It seems like something that has always been here.”

“Yes, it does,” Rachel agreed, marveling at the modern miracle of engineering. “It brings me joy to know an immigrant built it. It shows all we have to offer.”

“Has something made you fearful?” Antonio asked.

“I worry at times about our children and what they could face because of their heritage.”

Fear had become almost palpable amongst Italians after an incident in New Orleans in which a lynch mob, seeing no need for a trial, dragged three Italians accused of murder out of a jail and into the streets and killed them.

“Seeing the bridge always makes me feel a certain kind of pride for the immigrant,” Rachel said. “Hopefully, it will serve as a bridge between cultures as well. Father Moretti mentioned the German bridge builders in a homily once when he was talking about fathers and sons.

“Roebbling, the father, crushed his foot between a boat and a piling while he was taking some measurements. He got tetanus and died. His son, who was just thirty-two at the time, had to take over the project. Then *he* became very ill and needed his wife’s help. Had it not been for her, the bridge would not have been finished. Father Moretti used her as a symbol of the Blessed Mother because she was able to communicate his message to see the completion of the miracle. Mrs. Roebbling was well educated and knew advanced mathematics and physics.”

“I see,” Antonio said.

“And do you know what her maiden name was?” she asked. He shook his head. “Warren.”

“Warren?” he repeated in his Italian accent.

“Does it not sound a little like the first part of our surname, *Guaran-gna*?”

Antonio paused as he realized what she was intimating. “Are you suggesting we change our name? The name I’ve had for fifty years? *Il nome della mia famiglia*?”

“Many Italian families have done this, Antonio.”

“Several of our own children were born here, so they *are* American,” he countered.

Their conversation went quiet for some time. They became more chilled by the minute as the wind picked up.

“Best we get Tuti home now,” Rachel said.

As they strolled home, they quietly weighed the wisdom of anglicizing the family name. Contrary to popular belief, names were not frequently changed by Ellis Island officials, many of whom had been immigrants themselves and commonly spoke several languages. When passengers were listed on ship manifests in first or second class, they were usually not questioned at all; it was mostly the passengers who traveled in steerage who were screened and rejected for their lack of skills or for illness. Most often, people chose to change their own names when they arrived as a way of taking on a new identity.

“When I came through Ellis Island, my interpreter did not even suggest I change my name. In fact, he asked if I knew the

Guaragnas of Palermo.” Antonio stated his final thought on the matter with his Italian pride ringing through loudly.

Antonio and Rachel knew they were amongst the first great wave of immigrants after the unification of Italy’s north and south, along with fourteen million other Italians who left for America between 1876 and 1915, embarking on a risky journey aboard overcrowded and barely seaworthy ships. Antonio left his home of Cassano allo Ionio in the province Cosenza in Calabria in the Italian south on November 21, 1887, and sailed on the vessel *La France* from Naples to Buenos Aires. As a bootmaker, he’d been told there was a demand from the gauchos of Argentina for strong, fine riding boots, so essential to their work. As it turned out, Argentina was not much of an economic improvement over Italy, and neither Antonio nor Rachel cared much for living there. When they decided to try again in New York, Antonio thought it best for him to go ahead of the family and find a place for them to live and a shop for his work. This meant Rachel making the voyage alone with the seven children they had at the time. It was a journey she barely survived, enduring wretched conditions and emotional trials well beyond what most can imagine. She made it through the experience by dreaming about what their new life would be like. In the letter in which he sent for her, Antonio described the home he’d found for them that had a space for his shop on the ground floor. She read one line of his letter over and over: “*La Statua della Liberata ti aspetta per dare il benevenuto a te e ai bambini*”—the Statue of Liberty is waiting to welcome you and the children.

When the family attended church on Sundays, little Tuti always sat motionless during the music, his feet dangling off the edge of the pew. On some days, the family lost track of him as they enjoyed fellowship with their friends and neighbors after Mass. But they always knew where to find him: in the apse of the church, trying to get a closer look at the organ. One morning, the choir director and organist, a kind young woman named Miss Pauline Schneider, told Tuti, "Go ahead, pick a note to play." Antonio, Rachel, and Tuti's brothers and sisters looked on as he enjoyed a special moment with Miss Schneider. As he placed his finger on a key and pushed down, a note rang out of the organ pipe. At the same time, a ray of light beamed through the stained glass, splashing Tuti in a rainbow of color. From that moment, he came to regard music as a special kind of magic. He looked up at Miss Schneider as if to say, *Did I do that?*

When it was time for Tuti to start school, Antonio and Rachel were still struggling with whether to change the family name. Ultimately, they opted to become the Warrens. Around the same time, Tuti's brothers and sisters suggested he go by Harry to prevent him from taking some of the teasing they'd endured as Italians. Tuti didn't particularly care for the name and often wrote "Salvatore" before "Harry" on his schoolwork, as though he wasn't ready to let go of his Italian identity.

All in all, Tuti's protective brothers and sisters made life in their Brooklyn brownstone boisterous and fun. When they weren't out playing football in the street with a ball was actually a block of wood tied up inside a newspaper, they were listening to music or reading books. Some of Harry's early favorite titles

were *Young Wild West Junior* and *Freddy Fear Not*. These stories became the foundation for his lifelong love of reading. Business was steady for Antonio and their home was alive with music, despite not having a piano. They loved listening to Italian opera, and Giacomo Puccini became Tuti's favorite. Driven by a desire to play music too, he became enamored with his father's accordion, teaching himself to play. Given the instrument's formidable learning curve, Antonio was impressed by how quickly Tuti was figuring it out. Antonio held music in high regard, just as he did the customs of the Old World. He insisted the children tip their hats for the doctor as a show of respect for those with education and a profession.

Still known as Tuti at home, Harry declared his wish to become an altar boy as soon as he turned eight. Ever since his first experience with the church organ, he'd consistently been the first one out the door for church because he couldn't wait for the music. He'd wait out on the sidewalk for the rest of his family, tapping his foot impatiently while loudly humming some favorite new melody. He began asking his parents if he could stay after Mass to listen to the choir rehearsals. He'd sit in the pews with his eyes closed, listening intently to every note and nuance. He proved himself such a devotee, and Miss Schneider saw how much he longed to learn music. She was impressed by all the time he spent there, while other boys his age were running around outside and playing games in the street. She invited him to become the youngest member of the choir and began working with him one-on-one, teaching him chords and scales.

“Harry, it is as if you already *know* music,” she told him one day.

He laughed. “Sometimes it feels like I do.”

“Well, it would not surprise me, for it is a gift from God. You already speak English and Italian, and now he’s given you a third language with which to communicate. It’s the universal language of the world that anyone can understand. Make sure Father knows you are grateful, for it is not a gift he bestows on all of us. Just a special few.”

Harry rushed home to share the news of being invited to join the choir.

“Miss Schneider is starting a children’s choir?” Rachel asked.

“No, I’m going to be in the regular choir! She said I could because I learned all the parts—soprano, alto, tenor, and bass.”

Rachel and Antonio listened with pride as Tuti shared all he’d been learning. It was Miss Schneider who introduced him to harmony, at which point an entire new world opened up for him. His first time performing with the choir was on his tenth birthday, Christmas Eve in 1903. After Mass, Rachel went to thank the choir director.

“Miss Schneider, I made you these *scalidde*, a Calabrian traditional Christmas sweet.”

Miss Schneider looked down at the beautiful plate of fritters shaped like small ladders. “Thank you so much, Mrs. Guaragna,” she said. “Excuse me—Mrs. *Warren*.”

“In Calabria, it is believed the ladder symbolizes the possibility of rising to heaven,” Rachel said.

“How wonderful. I will enjoy them with that very intention,” Miss Schneider said, smiling.

“Calabria does not have a proper landscape for dairy cattle, so many treats there are made without butter, milk, or cream. We did not have sugar there either. Everything is sweetened with honey or *mosto cotto*, a cooked-down grape,” Rachel explained. “Thank you for taking such an interest in our Harry. He is learning a great deal from you and talks of nothing but music.”

“Harry has a God-given gift, of that I am sure. It is my great pleasure to teach him what I know. Before long, he will be teaching me.”

Miss Schneider was not wrong about how quickly Harry would progress. By the time he was a young teenager, he could sight-read music.

One day when the boys needed haircuts, Antonio marched them over to the neighborhood barber, Frank de Rosa. When they walked in, Harry noticed musical instruments in the barber-shop’s window.

“Say, what’s all this?” young Harry asked the barber.

“I sell haircuts *and* musical instruments,” Frank laughed. “Would you like to try one?”

As Harry’s older brothers took turns in the barber chair, Harry carefully inspected each instrument before choosing one to try.

“That’s a clarinet. It’s in the woodwind family,” Frank told him.

“I love the sound,” Harry said. He played each note through the clarinet, then gently put it down before moving on to the harmonica. He blew into it, and just as Frank began telling him about the other set of notes produced by sucking air in, Harry had already figured that out.

Harry began making daily visits to the barbershop to try the different instruments. Frank picked up on Harry’s great sense of rhythm, and soon enough, Harry gravitated to the drums, which he taught himself to play.

When he turned fourteen, someone asked him to play in a dance hall band in Canarsie, the roughest part of Brooklyn. He told his father what it was like leaving on the 1:00 a.m. train from the Canarsie station: “You just hear one long whistle and see the policemen lined up with their clubs out on the platform at the next stop.” Despite the tense circumstances of the gig, he almost couldn’t believe he was getting paid to play music, something he would have happily done for free.

In the summer, he got a job selling fruit at the Yiddish Liberty Theatre in Brownsville, Brooklyn. He’d walk up and down the aisles, selling apples and oranges to the frequently sobbing audience taking in the melodrama. Harry always got a big charge out of Hymie, a policeman who worked at the theater patrolling the aisles before a performance, knocking hats off heads with his cane.

Brownsville was a predominantly Jewish neighborhood also known as Little Jerusalem, and before Harry knew it, he was picking up Yiddish. He had an incredible mind for languages. Many of the Jewish families he met at the fruit stand assumed

he was Jewish until he told them he was actually Italian Roman Catholic. Upon learning this, some hired him to work as a *Shabbat goy*, performing tasks on the Jewish Sabbath that they were not able to.

One day at the barbershop, Harry became intrigued by the flute. Of all of Frank's instruments he'd tried, the flute was the trickiest. It would take time to practice and develop the correct embouchure, the position of the mouth, to play it. One day while Frank was in the middle of a haircut, Frank heard Harry struggling with the instrument.

"I'll tell you what," Frank said. "Why don't you take the flute home, where you'll have more time to practice?"

"You'd let me do that?"

"I'll make you a deal. When you learn it, you can demonstrate it, along with all the other instruments you now know how to play, for customers interested in buying them."

"Thank you, Mr. De Rosa!" Harry cried. He ran all the way home with the flute case under his arm.

Harry picked up on the fact that Frank booked a lot of musical acts for parties, bar mitzvahs, and other events. Once Harry had learned nine different instruments, Frank invited him to rehearse with other musicians at night after the barbershop had closed.

"*Fa maggiore*," Frank would call out, followed by another chord, "*Sol minore*." With Harry's highly attuned ear, he learned to follow the chord changes quickly. They went through song after song this way, late into the night.

“No matter what I play, you can keep up. How are you learning it all so quickly?” Frank asked.

“I study Puccini,” Harry said, as if it was the most obvious thing in the world.

“Puccini, ay? Well, you have set yourself quite a high standard! But until you get as good as Puccini, how would you like to play engagements and get paid for it?”

“You mean like Mousie does?” Harry asked. That was Harry’s brother Charlie, who’d been performing in a trio called Dunn, Warren, and Mack—a song-and-dance act Harry’s sister Carolina would sometimes perform in too, whenever she could get away without their father knowing.

“Yes, like Mousie. It wouldn’t interfere with your school; it would just be on weekends and occasionally at night if it’s not too late. You’ll have to get your mother and father’s permission, of course.”

Harry asked his parents about it that night at the dinner table as a Verdi record played in the background.

“It’s remarkable how far you’ve come with your music without any formal lessons, Tuti,” his father said.

“So, it’s okay with you if I play engagements with Mr. De Rosa?”

“*E un onore essere chiesto,*” Antonio said. He believed it was an honor for Harry to be asked.

Harry’s mood was buoyant until he looked over at Carolina. She was several years older and would have given anything for her father’s blessing of her performing aspirations.

Harry was well aware of their father’s disapproval of this idea

for his daughter—one night when she and Charlie were both gone, Antonio had asked Harry where they were. Harry knew he couldn't lie to his father.

“I think they are performing together, Papa.”

Harry watched his father grow angrier once these suspicions had been confirmed.

“Where, Tuti? Where are they?” Antonio fumed.

“I just know it's somewhere here in Brooklyn, that's all.”

Antonio went to the other children to pry more information out of them. They watched him grab his coat and put on his hat. “I'm going to get the deputy to get your sister,” he said, “because I know she won't come with me.”

“But she'll go with the deputy?” Annie the eldest sister wondered.

“If I tell him she's underage, he'll have no choice but to remove her.”

Antonio Jr. spoke up. “Papa, she's not underage anymore.”

“You see?” their father scoffed. “She's forcing me into a lie on top of it.”

Harry feared for his sister—he could just imagine what it must have been like for her getting ripped off the stage in the middle of a show. When his father returned home with her, she was still in tears. When she climbed in Harry's bed to comfort him, he whispered, “I'm sorry, Carolina.”

“It's not for you to worry about, Tuti.”

He was relieved she was not upset with him. In fact, she adored him—and would soon become a mother figure to him when Rachel began to fall ill.

On Harry's fifteenth birthday, the family went to midnight Mass on Christmas Eve. It was the first time Miss Schneider invited a string section to accompany the choir. The sound took Harry's breath away and he took it as a sign to follow music as far as it would take him. It was the best birthday gift he could have ever imagined—a vision of his future. A few days later, he went to see his godfather, Pasquale Pucci. Pasquale played in the John Victor Brass Band, a group of about a dozen players that toured Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, and New York with the Keene & Shippey and Harry Lukens' carnivals.

"Mamma is sick," Harry told Pasquale. "I think it would be best for her to have one less child around."

"Well, we need a snare drummer, and you've gotten pretty good," Pasquale said. "It only pays \$12 a week, which would probably mean skipping a meal here and there."

"I'll do it! Please take me with you this summer, Pasqua."

And just like that, Harry ran away with the circus.

They spent the season traveling up and down the Hudson, stopping at all the towns along the way. Harry soaked up all he could about the lives of the colorful people he worked alongside and learned the tricks of the trade, such as the stagehands' code for alerting the next crew about performers who didn't tip. The crew would tie a shoelace to that person's trunk to alert the next crew about the bum. Of all the performers, the animals were Harry's favorite. He adored the zebra, was amused by the trained bear, and kept a safe distance from the chimpanzee. When summer ended, Harry found himself once again working at The Liberty Theatre, this time as a stagehand—a step up from

selling fruit to the hysterical vaudeville audiences the previous summer.

The seed had been planted. Once Harry had gotten a taste of show business, his future became clearer to him with each passing day. He wasn't even thinking about music specifically; he just wanted to be in the business one way or another. He was also increasingly drawn to another aspect of Puccini's operas: the way music tells a story.

One evening on the road, Pasquale came to Harry with terrible news. "Dear boy, your Mamma . . ."

Harry sat straight up and put his flute down. "Is she okay, Pasquale?"

"No, son. I'm very sorry. She's with our heavenly Father now."

Harry was just fifteen. He immediately returned home, where his father told him her body had just given out. Her last words had been about how grateful she was that all her babies lived.

After his summer tour with the circus, Harry did not return to Commercial High School, which was a relief for him. He'd always been a bit tortured about how beautiful their orchestra was, and he could never join it because he didn't play a stringed instrument.

Harry's sisters would have to take care of him now—Antonio was already sixty-five years old. At Rachel's funeral Mass, Miss Schneider chose selections she knew Harry would love; he cried during "Ave Maria."

After the service, he went up to Miss Schneider with the \$75 he'd saved up working for the circus. "I'd like to give you this for the music program," he said.

She looked at the money in his hands and smiled, gently closing his fists around it. "It's kind of you to offer," she said, "but I would rather you use it to get that piano you've been wanting." Young Harry stared back at her. "That way, you can practice anytime and learn all the Puccini you'd like. You'll make your mother in heaven proud."

Harry wiped away a tear and turned to exit the church, feeling every bit like the motherless child he now was.