

Richard Linklater's *Blue Moon*: Rodgers and Hart, without much music

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Blue Moon, Richard Linklater's new film, uses the evening of the premiere of *Oklahoma*, the first of the famed musical collaborations between composer Richard Rodgers and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, to depict the closing chapter in the life of Lorenz Hart, Rodgers' previous partner.

Rodgers and Hart were the team behind 26 Broadway musicals over a period of some 20 years. Their partnership began when Rodgers, born in 1902, was not yet out of his teens, and Hart was in his mid-20s. In the 1920s and 30s Rodgers and Hart, in Broadway shows like *Babes in Arms* and *The Boys from Syracuse*, created such timeless standards as "My Funny Valentine," "Manhattan," "The Lady Is a Tramp," "With a Song in My Heart," "Bewitched" and "Blue Moon," the song that gives the current film its title.

Blue Moon opens as a drunken Larry Hart (Ethan Hawke) collapses on a rain-soaked Manhattan street. He died of pneumonia four days later. The film then shifts to a flashback for the rest of the story. It takes place about eight months earlier, on the opening night of *Oklahoma*, on March 31, 1943. For that show Richard Rodgers (Andrew Scott) had decided, in the face of Hart's increasingly erratic work habits, alcoholism and emotional instability, to work with the well-known Hammerstein.

While Hart attended the opening night of *Oklahoma* and left the performance early, as depicted on screen, much of the rest of the screenplay (written by Robert Kaplow) is embellished or imagined. Hart is shown going to Sardi's, the famous restaurant in New York's theater district, to await an after-party. He exchanges jokes with the bartender, Eddie (Bobby Cannavale), who is trying to keep Hart from going off the wagon after a period in which he has stayed sober. Hart also banters with Morty (Jonah Lees), a young pianist at Sardi's. As the evening drags on, noted writer E. B. White (Patrick Kennedy) makes an appearance and engages Hart in conversation.

Rodgers and Hammerstein (Simon Delaney) eventually show up after the premiere. It's clear that the audience went wild for the musical, and the critics are equally enthusiastic. As Hart attempts to engage Rodgers in conversation, they are continually interrupted by a press agent reading yet another ecstatic review in the local newspapers. Rodgers tries to encourage his former partner with the suggestion that Hart work on five new songs for a revival of their 1927 show, *A Connecticut Yankee*. Hart cannot disguise his increasingly depressed state, which finds expression in a mixture of cynicism, envy, insecurity and bitterness. He has earlier made

clear his low opinion of *Oklahoma*, mocking its seriousness and lack of sophistication. He congratulates Rodgers and Hammerstein, and the viewer knows that he doesn't mean a word of it.

As the after-party begins upstairs, Hart remains below, eagerly if not frantically awaiting the appearance of Elizabeth Weiland (Margaret Qualley), a 20-year-old art student about whom he has been fantasizing the whole night. (There is no evidence that Hart met Weiland on the night in question, but *Blue Moon* is said to have been inspired by a correspondence the two carried out during this period).

In answer to Eddie's somewhat incredulous suggestion that Hart could not possibly be interested in Elizabeth because his primary sexual interest is men, the lyricist responds that he is "omnisexual." There is much ribald conversation along these lines. Finally, Elizabeth arrives. The two repair to the cloakroom where, amid conversation and confidences, the evening comes to a sad and deflated end.

Certain choices made by the filmmaker have resulted in disappointing and unsatisfactory results. First and foremost is the decision to focus the movie almost entirely on the very end of Hart's life, and the alcoholism and depression that led to his death. These are legitimate subjects to explore, of course, but there is little else to this film except 100 minutes of talk about the professional problems and emotional emptiness in Hart's life. This makes for interminable dialogue that does not add up to an illuminating and interesting cinematic experience.

With almost no exceptions, the entire audience for *Blue Moon* will have lived their whole lives after Hart's death. The youngest viewers of this story were born more than a century after Hart. They will come away from this film knowing how he died but will see little of how he lived and what he achieved in his 48 years.

It is true that the credits for the film include a total of 41 songs, ten of them by Rodgers and Hart themselves, but also many by others, including Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Hoagy Carmichael, Harold Arlen, Dorothy Fields, Jerome Kern and many more. All of this forms just a small part of the immense flowering of popular music, known as the Great American Songbook, embodied in the greatest popular songs and jazz standards from the 1920s to the 1960s. This was also a time of great achievements in the field of American classical music, of such figures as George Gershwin and somewhat later of Aaron Copland, whose work was

influenced by jazz and other popular trends.

The several dozen numbers in *Blue Moon* are part of the movie—but just barely. They are present as brief excerpts, and most of them only in piano version. By the end of the film, most will have passed by only as background. The narrative overwhelms the music. All the attention is focused on talk, almost none on what makes Lorenz Hart important in the first place. The viewer will get only the vaguest idea of the music of that era, and of the immense contribution made by Hart as a lyricist.

The acting in *Blue Moon* is for the most part adequate but not much more. Cannavale is effective as a kind of imagined foil for Hart. Qualley does not succeed in bringing her fictionalized Elizabeth to life, but the script may be largely to blame for that. Some actors, like Delaney as Hammerstein, have very little to do. The film as conceived and produced is primarily a vehicle for Ethan Hawke, who has worked with Linklater in many movies (*Boyhood*, the *Before* trilogy, *Newton Boys*) over many years.

Another issue that gets mostly overlooked in *Blue Moon*, aside from one or two references, is the historical period of the Rodgers and Hart collaboration, and how this external world found its reflection in their songs. This is not a simple matter, but it bears some examination. Rodgers and Hart first found fame, in such shows as *The Garrick Gaieties* from 1925, at the height of what is sometimes called the Jazz Age, or the “Roaring 20s.” It was a time of growing crisis. This was the period of Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby* and of Dreiser’s *An American Tragedy*, both published a century ago. The increasingly speculative boom ended in the crash of 1929.

Hart’s lyrics, in the 20s as well as during the Depression decade of the 1930s, reflected an urban sophistication that was part of this post-World War I era. The Rodgers and Hart musicals expressed the moods of a prosperous urban middle class, a layer seeking a good time and at times living for the moment. The songs also reflected a precariousness, however, the feeling that the good times would not last or, by the 1930s, that they would not return.

There is a sadness in many of Hart’s lyrics. Barely five feet tall, he may have been thinking of his own melancholy, including his lack of romantic fulfillment and his conviction that no one could love him, but the songs also touched a chord for many who wondered what the future had in store for them.

By the time of *Oklahoma* Rodgers had had enough of Hart’s erratic behavior, but he was also, in the midst of the war that was waged in the name of the fight against fascism, being pulled in another direction. Both during the war, in *Oklahoma*, and in the postwar period of continued collaboration with Hammerstein (*Carousel*, *The King and I*, *South Pacific*, *The Sound of Music*), Rodgers and Hammerstein fashioned a new kind of musical, an integrated narrative, one with greater social ambitions.

These are classics that are revived generations later. But they also exhibit some sentimentality, a somewhat smug celebration of liberal values in an America that had achieved global hegemony. They captured the spirit of an age of US dominance, first in the wartime alliance and then in the period of the postwar boom and the anticommunist Cold War against the USSR. While the Rodgers and Hammerstein shows were projecting an optimism and a tone of social harmony, the CIA was busily carrying out the most brutal

operations on behalf of American imperialism.

This was the period of McCarthyism, the Red Scare that intimidated artists and influenced the more “uncontroversial” themes of Rodgers and Hammerstein’s work. Hammerstein, who had worked with composer Jerome Kern on the epochal musical *Showboat* back in 1927, was a talented lyricist. *Showboat*, with its theme of racial equality, however, had a more subversive and oppositional character than the postwar musicals. Hammerstein’s lyrics shifted to some extent from a gritty and realistic depiction of racism and suffering, as in *Showboat*, to a didactic if not conformist approach, one emphasizing a view of America as the standard bearer of democracy.

In contrast to this, a pointed critique of the status quo can be discerned behind many of Lorenz Hart’s lyrics, composed alongside Rodgers’ music in the interwar years. *Babes in Arms*, for instance, the show that contains such standards as “The Lady is a Tramp” and “My Funny Valentine,” deals with young people encountering racism and discussing communism, themes which were later removed in postwar revivals. Among other Rodgers and Hart musicals were *Face the Music*, from 1932, about struggles during the Depression, a show that some called “Bolshevik propaganda,” and *I’d Rather Be Right*, which went so far as to satirize Franklin D. Roosevelt in the year after he had won a landslide second-term victory.

The music that Rodgers composed with Hammerstein had a different quality, a broader appeal, compared to his earlier work with Hart. The teams worked differently. With Hart, Rodgers composed first and then waited for Hart to come up with the lyrics, while with Hammerstein the lyrics came first. This could partly explain how Rodgers’ music changed, in tune with Hammerstein’s lyrics, which had less satire and sophistication, and were directed toward broader layers of the population.

These are some of the issues that are raised in considering the career of Larry Hart. Linklater has made a film that deals, as noted above, primarily with Hart’s death and not with his life. There is some similarity between his approach and that of Bradley Cooper, the director of the Leonard Bernstein biopic *Maestro* (2023). In both cases the focus remains on questions of the inner life, of psychology and identity, whether gender, sexual or racial, and not on the actual careers and the legacies of the musical figures themselves.



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