



Incomparable Fred

The Astaire Style Debunked

by Nick Zegarac

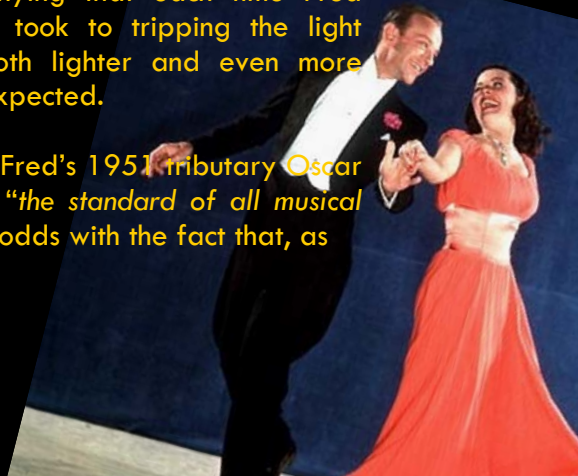
"I don't think about art...I just dance."

The more one attempts to critique 'the Astaire style' the more a quiet discovery is made in the need to tread lightly on the degree of truth in that statement. Explications merely generate praise. But Fred Astaire's dancing is all about passion; a brooding intangible made obvious only in hushed observance of the man in motion. No snapshot from our collective memory will suffice. Instead we are drawn into a false acceptance that a lack of rehearsing has made such liquid perfection not merely effortless, but possible.

In only ten films with Ginger Rogers, Fred Astaire patented a trademark of refined elegance that was a far cry from his initial assessment made at RKO Studios of "can't act, can't sing...can dance a little." Although Fred was concerned that his partnership with Ginger - like the one before it with his sister, Adele - might brand him as merely half of a dancing act, he was also quite often the first to acknowledge that his terpsichorean skills were merely a serviceable means to an end.

It seems ironic then, and just a tad frightening, to consider how close we came to losing the better half of Fred Astaire's prowess to his own persistent desire for retirement. Had rival dancer Gene Kelly not broken an ankle during rehearsals on **Easter Parade** Fred might never have returned to films. Despite the fact that many of his subsequent roles made sardonic jabs at the top hat and tails as passé, there is no denying that each time Fred Astaire suited up and took to tripping the light fantastic it became both lighter and even more fantastic than anyone expected.

Yet the juxtaposition of Fred's 1957 tributary Oscar for "artistry" in raising "the standard of all musical pictures" is strangely at odds with the fact that, as





an artist, Astaire was hotter than he had ever been in his career. Even when the movie musical waned in popularity Astaire's appeal with audiences did not. He made the successful segue from film to television, continued his film career in comedic and dramatic roles on the big screen, and, was even nominated as Best Supporting Actor for 1974's **The Towering Inferno**.

Yet despite these later accolades, his worldly reputation has remained as that of 'Mr. Astaire;' "*the grand old man of the dance*". His place with top hat, white tie and tails is a shimmering legacy firmly secured in the cinema firmament at least as long as spats are considered stylish and chic hoofing remains impartial to horses. Perhaps then, no greater assessment of 'the Astaire style' exists than the one offered by friend and lyricist, Jerome Kern. "*Astaire can't do anything bad.*" The realization comes much later – that he never did.