

E.Y. “Yip” Harburg
*I’m the Peter Pan of Tin Pan Alley
I deal in rainbows and sunny blue skies,
I sell you bluebirds and lovable eyes;
I make the nation’s songs.*

Benjamin Sears¹

E.Y. “Yip” Harburg was born Irwin Hochberg in New York City on April 8, 1896, son of Louis and Mary (Ricing) Hochberg. Many of the songwriters of his era were first and second generation Americans, in most cases from New York’s Lower East Side, and Yip was no exception. His parents immigrated from Russia in the 1880s; Yip was their third surviving child and the second to be born in the U.S.

As will be seen, Yip’s concerns in life are reflected in his songs; biographical details were not among those concerns. Many sources list his birth year as 1898; that is the date found in the *ASCAP Biographical Dictionary*, and has come to be accepted in many cases. His name, too, has been a source of confusion, his first name appearing as Irwin, Isidore, and Yisrael, and his last name eventually undergoing a change from Hochberg to Harburg.

His entry in the *ASCAP Biographical Dictionary* lists him simply as E.Y. Harburg. The *E*, he once conjectured, may have stood for Edgar; the *Y* could have stood for a variant spelling of his actual name, Yisrael. He, however, preferred “Yip”. . . When asked about his unusual name metamorphosis, he preferred that Isidore Hochberg not be identified as Yip Harburg, adding with a twinkle, “What’s in a name?”²

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²*Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, Edward Jablonski, Northeastern University Press (Boston), 1996.

The ultimate change of name came in 1923, when he married Alice Richmond. Irwin Hochberg became Edgar Yipsel Harburg. The name everyone called him, though, was the preferred Yip (or Yipper).

“The nickname Yip, well, it’s one of those funny things that stick to you for the rest of your life. . . .*Yipsel* was the [Yiddish] term for a squirrel and evidently I was a flighty kid. I moved fast and went from one thing to another and I clowned a lot and I sort of was a maverick in the family. . . .Now, when you’ve lived in one place all your life like New York and your friends grow up with you in public school and they go with you to high school, well. . . so it was Yippy and Yipianny and then I began writing under Yip.”³

Like Irving Berlin, Harburg was born into true poverty and grew up living by his plentiful wits and hard work. The experience of hardship contributed to his life-long politic stance, seen throughout his career in lyrics that questioned capitalism, sexism, and racism (amongst other things). Unlike Berlin, however, Harburg went through school, where his love of show business was nurtured, much as Berlin’s was in the Lower East Side dives. “I had an English teacher: Ed Gillesper. I’d write something for the school newspaper, or a composition, and he’d read it, see something funny in it, and say ‘Harburg, come up here and read it to the class.’ I’d read, and there would be twenty-odd kids laughing out loud, and, by God, that was really something. I’d tell myself, ‘I want to repeat *this* experience!’”⁴

Around that same time he was regularly attending the Yiddish theatre with his father, usually when the two were supposedly attending temple. “. . .On many a Saturday, my father packed me up and told my mother we were going to *shul* to hear a *magid* (itinerant preacher). . . . But somehow, instead of getting to the *magid* from Slutsk we always arrived at the Thalia Theater where the great Madame Lipsik or Tomashevksy was performing. . . . The Yiddish

³Yip Harburg, undated interview with Studs Turkel, quoted in *Who Put the Rainbow in The Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist* by Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg, University of Michigan Press, Ann Arbor, MI, 1993. Yip was a great talker, so this article will quote extensively from his own comments on his life and career.

⁴*Brother, Can You Spare a Dime? (E.Y. Harburg)* from *They’re Playing Our Song - Conversations with America’s Classic Songwriters* by Max Wilk, Da Capo Press, New York, 1997.

theater was my first break into the entertainment world, and it was a powerful influence.”⁵ He also spent as much time as he could at vaudeville houses, watching the great stars of that genre, some of whom he later wrote for, including Al Jolson, Fanny Brice, Willie Howard, Ed Wynn, and Bert Lahr.

The self-described childhood image, “I moved fast and went from one thing to another and I clowned a lot and I sort of was a maverick” was a characteristic that would last throughout his life. The squirrel-like energy was always a part of him, and references to Yip abound with descriptions like “dynamic”, “vigorous”, and even Vernon Duke’s less-than-flattering “aggressive”⁶. Yip maintained a childlike quality, making his apparently autobiographical allusion to the boy-who-never-grew-up in the unpublished song *Peter Pan of Tin Pan Alley* an apt one (and engendering such comments as “Harburg sauntered through life with a distinctive youthful twinkle”⁷, and “a slight, ebullient man with a puckish manner and eyes that were constantly twinkling with laughter”⁸). Even when writing songs late in his life such as *Time, You Old Gypsy Man*, those qualities never abandoned him (“But you old gypsy man/Thanks for a glorious time” — clearly the ride has been worth it).

Yip attended Townsend Harris Hall, which was attached to City College. Before his years there, he spent many hours at the Tompkins Square Library (in the winter it was warmer than home), where his extracurricular reading included two authors who would influence his own writing: O. Henry⁹ and W.S. Gilbert (through his *Bab Ballads*). In 1996, in honor of his 100th birthday, Yip’s love of that branch library was permanently commemorated with the naming of

⁵*From the Lower East Side to “Over the Rainbow”*: Yip Harburg from *Creators and Disturbers: Reminiscences by Jewish Intellectuals of New York*, drawn from conversations with Bernard Rosenberg and Ernest Goldstein, Columbia University Press (New York), 1982.

⁶*Passport to Paris*, Vernon Duke, Little, Brown (Boston), 1955.

⁷*The Lemon-Drop Kid*, John Lahr, **The New Yorker**, September 30, 1996.

⁸*New York Times*, March 7, 1981.

⁹“When I came across O. Henry, I gobbled up every one of his stories. He made a dramatic impression on me; to this day, I can’t write a poem without an O. Henry twist in the last line.” *Creators and Disturbers*.

the Yip Harburg Reading Room.

Townsend Harris Hall “crammed a four year course into three. I went there, and earned money at night lighting street lamps. . . I’d put the lights on when dusk set in, and then I had to get up at three or four in the morning and go out and turn ‘em off!”¹⁰ It was at Townsend Harris that he met another Gilbert enthusiast who would become a life-long friend: Ira Gershwin.

We sat next to each other — G, H, you see. We began collaborating on a column for the City College Newspaper. Yip and Gersh. He was always interested in light verse, too. He introduced me to a lot of things that I’d not had access to. The Gershwins weren’t poor — they had restaurants. George was a kid, then, just a snip of a kid, and Ira sort of sloughed him off because George didn’t care too much about education and had dropped out of school. I remember once going to the Gershwins’ to hear the Victrola — that was a very new thing, Victrola records. That was the first time I heard W.S. Gilbert’s lyrics set to Sullivan’s music. Up to that time I thought he was simply a poet! Ira played *Pinafore* for me, and I had my eyes opened. I was starry-eyed for days. I couldn’t sleep at night. It was that music — and the satire that came out with all of the emotion that I never dreamed of before when I read the thing cold in print!¹¹

It was this realization that words could sing that made him a songwriter, though the practical realization of his career did not come immediately. It is interesting that Yip did not hear much music as a child; his reminiscences speak of the occasional German band or Italian organ grinder making their way through the streets (many years later he would make reference to the aura of the German bands in a film song, *Moonlight and Pretzels*, and hurdy-gurdies are mentioned in at least two songs). It is also interesting to note that, in another similarity to Irving Berlin, English was not his first language. The family spoke Yiddish at home, and it wasn’t until he was school age that Yip began using English.

Now, the comparison to Irving Berlin changes. Berlin’s career as a songwriter blossomed because, as a boy essentially he was already doing it; the songwriting became an extension of his song plugging. In Yip’s case there was a lengthy diversion in business.

Yip stuck it out through Townsend Harris Hall and City College, unlike his buddy Ira Gershwin who dropped out during their sophomore year. Yip continues his story:

¹⁰*They’re Playing Our Song.*

¹¹*They’re Playing Our Song.*

I suppose I should have taken a B.A. degree, but I didn't. I went on to a B.S. I took all the damned hard courses like integral calculus. Nothing like the so-called "crap courses".

When I got out of college, I didn't pursue poetry. That was work for a dilettante — nobody made a living at that. That's for fun, that's a sideline, you don't earn money that way, I used to think. . . .¹²

Through this time, though, he did not give up his poetry, often contributing to columns such as *The Conning Tower* of Franklin P. Adams (otherwise known by his initials as FPA). *The Conning Tower* was the goal of many aspiring writers; Ira Gershwin was first published there in a short quote by "Gersh".

After college, Yip went to Uruguay for the years 1917-1920, where he worked for the Swift Company. He gained business experience, which would be of use in the next phase of his life, and learned Spanish, which he would put to use later as a lyricist.¹³ He returned to New York in 1920:

So I went into the electrical-supply business with a college classmate. I don't know why he wanted me as a partner. Maybe it was because by that time I was something of a local celebrity with my poems. For the next few years we made a lot of money and I hated it. I hated every moment of it. I'd signed a contract saying I wasn't going to spend any time except on business — the guys who put up the money for the business probably figured I'd go off and neglect it.

But the economy saved me. The capitalists saved me in 1929, just as we were worth, oh, about a quarter of a million dollars. Bang! The whole thing blew up. I was left with a pencil, and finally had to write for a living. As I told Studs Turkel once, what was the Depression for most people was for me a life-saver!

I called up my friend Ira. . . . Ira introduced me to Jay Gorney, and we began writing songs.¹⁴

Ira's reaction to that call was that Yip should have taken up songwriting long before. Ira wrote Yip a check to tide him over, along with making the introduction to Gorney. Gorney was

¹²*They're Playing Our Song.*

¹³Yip wrote songs in Spanish, *No Me Creas*, and *Igual Que Tu*. He also adapted Maria Grever's *Let's Forget Tomorrow Tonight* from Spanish to English.

¹⁴*They're Playing Our Song.*

looking for a new lyricist, and had seen Yip's contributions to *The Conning Tower*, so when Ira called Gorney, the latter knew already who "Yip" was.

Over all, 1929 proved to be a year of dramatic changes for Harburg. His first marriage ended in divorce, his business went under, he met the woman who would become his second wife,¹⁵ and he found his true career in songwriting.

Yip and Gorney quickly put some songs into **Earl Carroll's Sketchbook**, a 1929 revue (a show form that was extremely popular in the 20's and 30's). No lasting hits came out of the show, but Yip was established as a songwriter, contributing songs first to two 1929 films, and then six more films and two more Broadway revues in 1930. In 1930 he had his first collaborations with Harold Arlen and Vernon Duke (of the latter Yip said "with my pumpernickel background and his orchid tunes we made a wonderful marriage"¹⁶), who would be important figures in his career in the coming years. At the start of his career, in these revues Yip was using satire as a important component of his lyric writing. This would develop as his career went on, but the consistent basis of his use of satire is summed up best in his own words:

. . .I've always been aware of the idiocy of the whole establishment and the system. That's what titillated me into using satire. I've always thought that the way to educate, to teach, the way to live without being miserable, even though you're surrounded by misery, was to laugh at the things that made you miserable. For me, satire has become a weapon. . . the way Swift used it in his prose, Gilbert in his verses, Shaw in his drama. I am stirred, and my juices start flowing more when I can tackle a problem that has profundity, depth, and real danger. . . by destroying it with laughter.¹⁷

His first hit was written in 1930 with Johnny Green, *I'm Yours*. Then, in 1932 he produced a song that would prove to be one of the most enduring in the history of American popular song. In that year Yip and Gorney were amongst a number of songwriters who contributed material to **J.P. McEvoy's New Americana** revue. One of the show's songs was an

¹⁵Edelaine Roden was married to Jay Gorney when the Harburg/Gorney partnership began; she married Yip in 1943. Brahms and Sherrin in *They're Playing Our Song* note that this allowed "Eddy" to quip that "she never married a man who did not write *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?*".

¹⁶*They're Playing Our Song*.

¹⁷*They're Playing Our Song*.

anthem about the Depression, *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime*. Again, Yip tells the story best:

It was a terrible period. You couldn't walk along the street without crying, without seeing people standing in breadlines, so miserable. Brokers and people who'd been wealthy, begging. "Can you spare a dime?". . . .

When Jay played me the tune he had, I thought of that phrase, "Can you spare a dime?" It kept running through my head as I was walking the streets. And by putting the word "brother" to the line, I got started on it.

But I thought that lyric out very carefully. I didn't make it a maudlin lyric of a guy begging. I made it into a commentary. That may sound rhetorical, but it's true. It was about the fellow who works, the fellow who builds, who makes the railroads and the houses — and he's left empty-handed. How come? How did this happen? Didn't I fight the wars, didn't I bear the gun, didn't I plow the earth? In other words, the fellow who produced is the fellow who's left empty handed at the end.¹⁸

As his own comments, and more so the lyrics themselves, show, this early song finds Yip in full possession of his style: economy of words, clever turns of phrase, and a strong political stance, along with sharply drawn character (we learn about a great deal about the "I" very quickly), and a highly dramatic situation. These traits would serve Harburg well throughout his writing career.

Two more Harburg standards followed in 1932. For the play **The Great Magoo**, producer Billy Rose wanted a song for "a barker in a Coney Island joint. . . A man disillusioned with the world [who] had finally fallen in love."¹⁹ Yip and Arlen contributed *It's Only a Paper Moon*, which survived the short run of the show to find its way into the film, *Take a Chance*. Yip later considered it his favorite of his lyrics.

In the same year Yip worked on a major collaboration with Vernon Duke, the revue **Walk a Little Faster**. From that show came *April in Paris*. The story of the creation of this song has been retold many times. Duke had written a tune for which he wanted lyrics about Paris, a city he loved. Yip had never been to Paris, but "went down to Cook's Tours and got some brochures to

¹⁸*They're Playing Our Song*.

¹⁹Yip Harburg, *Lyrics and Lyricists Series* at the 92nd Street YMHA, New York, NY, December 20, 1970; quoted in *Who Put the Rainbow in The Wizard of Oz?*.

see what it [Paris] was like”.²⁰ His imagination did the rest.

Yip’s final collaboration with Duke was the 1933-34 edition of the **Ziegfeld Follies** which produced *What is There to Say?* and *I Like the Likes of You*, ending a stormy yet fruitful songwriting relationship.

Through this period other song and film work continued to come his way. His Broadway shows remained in the revue format, but he experimented in the Gilbert & Sullivan style of through-composed scenes, with songs telling stories and essentially developing scenes with sung dialogue, along with topical satire.²¹ It was his teaming with Ira Gershwin for **Life Begins at 8:40** in 1934 (their only show together, though they did team up for some individual songs) that this was truly fulfilled. With a score by Harold Arlen, **Life Begins at 8:40** has a major scene drawn very much from the Gilbert & Sullivan tradition: *Beautifying the City*. Characters introduce themselves, carry on discussions, and generally are satirized in this sung-through sketch. Besides *Beautifying the City*, Yip and Ira wrote a number of love songs that take a skewed view of love, with *Fun to be Fooled* (Fun to be fooled/Fun to pretend/Fun to believe/Love is unending); another with a title that tells all, *What Can You Say in a Love Song (That Hasn’t Been Said Before)?*; and *You’re a Builder Upper* (You’re a builder upper, a breaker downer/A holder outer, and I’m a giver in-er/Sad, but true, I’m a sap-a-roo, too/Taking it from a taker over like you), as prime examples. Throughout his career, Yip avoided using the direct phrase “I love you” (though it does turn up). “For me the task is never to say the thing directly, and yet to say it — to think in a curve, so to speak.”²²

From *Beautifying the City* it is only a short step the *Munchkinland Sequence* in **The Wizard of Oz**.

I loved the idea of having the freedom to do lyrics that were not just songs but *scenes*. That was our [Yip and Harold Arlen] own idea, to take some of the book and do some of the scenes in complete verse, such as the scenes in Munchkin Land. It gave me wider

²⁰Yip Harburg, *Lyrics and Lyricists* series, December 20, 1970.

²¹For example, **Ballyhoo of 1932** (music by Lewis Gensler) with *Ballyhujah* and *Man About Yonkers*.

²²*They’re Playing Our Song*.

scope. Not just thirty-two-bar songs, but what would amount to the acting out of entire scenes, dialogue in verse and set to Harold's modern music.²³

Much has been written about this now-famous sequence. Suffice it to say, a quick look at the scene shows what Yip was talking about, and also shows the Gilbertian influence on his writing. Glinda begins the story, with Dorothy taking it up and filling in the details, then various Munchkins introduce themselves and add to the discussion, continuing through to the interruption caused by the Wicked Witch's entrance (not unlike Katisha's entrance in Gilbert & Sullivan's *The Mikado*).

At the time of the film's release, Yip's contributions to it were not credited beyond the lyrics. However, with the sustained popularity of the film, and histories of not only the film but of the creators and stars, it is now better known what his efforts were. The movie had a number of uncredited script writers, including Yip, who provided lead-ins for the songs, and the entire scene in which the Wizard awards the heart, brains, and courage.

The success of Yip's ideas in **The Wizard of Oz** eventually led him (and Harold Arlen) back to Broadway with **Bloomer Girl** (1944). **Bloomer Girl** can be considered Yip's first successful Broadway effort away from the revue format. Both **Hooray for What?** (Harold Arlen, 1937) and **Hold on to Your Hats** (Burton Lane, 1940) were technically book musicals, but in both cases the books were overwhelmed by the personas of the stars, respectably Ed Wynn and Al Jolson, turning them into showcases having little relation to creators' original intentions. **Hooray for What?** did, however, have a significant place in Yip's career: it was the first show to have its conception and lyrics by Harburg, a script shaped (though ultimately not written) by him, and perhaps most important "politics by Harburg".²⁴ The show dealt with fascism and war. In short, a naive inventor (Wynn) creates a deadly gas, the formula for which is stolen by spies. They read the formula incorrectly, and create a laughing gas. "When they let it loose on the soldiers, they all began to laugh. . . . The Germans began kissing the Russians and the Russians

²³*They're Playing Our Song*.

²⁴*Who Put the Rainbow in The Wizard of Oz?*

began kissing the Japanese. . . . And that was the end of the show.”²⁵ Yip was preaching “love, not war” long before the ‘60s.

Bloomer Girl’s “most notable claim may be that it was the first post-**Oklahoma!** musical to consolidate and build upon the formal revolution that **Oklahoma!** had begun”.²⁶ As with **Oklahoma!**, **Bloomer Girl** was what is now called an “integrated show” bringing together plot, lyric, music, and dance as unified elements in telling the story. And again, it had “politics by Harburg”: women’s rights (*It Was Good Enough for Grandma*), and racial equality (*The Eagle and Me*). With the film **Cabin in the Sky**²⁷ from the year before, Yip had now made it clear where he stood on racial issues, and overall, that he was not going to compromise on political issues in general. Politics had been an element in his song writing as early as 1930, then with a full realization in *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?*, but now it was the basis for entire shows.

Finian’s Rainbow (Burton Lane, 1947), Yip’s stage masterpiece, continues the attacks on American politics seen in **Hooray for What?** and the American racial condition begun in **Bloomer Girl**. Again, Yip provided concept, lyrics, and co-wrote the book, thus giving himself full rein for “politics by Harburg”. He deftly satirizes consumerism, the gap between the haves and the have-nots, and makes a strong (and still disturbing) statement on racism. Many consider **Finian’s Rainbow** unstageable today because it is not “politically correct” in its portrayals of African-Americans, and (even worse to many) the turning of a bigoted white man’s skin to black. It is, however, this apparent political incorrectness that gives the show its strength. **Finian’s Rainbow** has two parallel stories of change of skin color. Senator Rawkins turns black and becomes the victim of the racism he has long practiced, an experience that opens up a generous part of his heart he never knew, thus ending his racism. Og, the leprechaun, loses his mortality — and therefore turns from leprechaun green to Irish white — but learns to love, something he could not do as an immortal (*When I’m Not Near the Girl I Love* wittily shows the first steps of

²⁵Yip Harburg, interview with Deena Rosenberg, quoted in *Who Put the Rainbow in **The Wizard of Oz?***

²⁶*Who Put the Rainbow in **The Wizard of Oz?***

²⁷This film was a daring step for Hollywood: a film with an entirely Afro-American cast.

this transformation). It is these twin stories of learning to love which makes **Finian's Rainbow** startlingly politically correct.

Given the post-war mood, it is no surprise that a prominent lyricist taking the political stances that Harburg took would come foul of the Blacklist. In the 1940s Yip's politics were what was known as "progressive", meaning that he was politically left wing, but this had always been his politics. Yip was as vocal off-stage as on about his politics, but he was never a member of the Communist Party. The line between those on the political left and the Communist Party was easily blurred, both by the Party and by the McCarthyites. The Party in the United States manipulated progressives with anti-fascist, anti-racist, and similar positions, and many idealistic artists were caught up in this. Yip was not, but it suited the McCarthy faction to accuse him (and other progressives when they felt it filled their needs).²⁸

Yip told of meeting with Roy Brewer of the International Alliance of Theatrical Stage Employees, who asked "Did you write a song called *Happiness is Just a Thing Called Joe*?" Yip replied that it was a big hit. Brewer went on, "Which Joe were you talking about? Was it Joe Stalin?" Yip later said of the incident, "Either you bust out laughing or you throw the desk at him. I just broke into laughter. This got them mad."²⁹ Yip's Hollywood days were now essentially over, but Broadway was still open to him, and it was for Broadway that he fashioned another — in this case complex and confusing — political satire, **Flahooley**.

Flahooley (Sammy Fain, 1951) is probably the most painful nose-tweaking that Yip gave the establishment. Again, his target is consumerism, and thus capitalism. The show, however, never settled, and confusion was caused by the presence in the cast of Yma Sumac, who provided exotic color and little else. Yip never lost faith in **Flahooley**, rewriting it as **Jollyana** in 1952, and as late as the '70s having new songs written for possible productions. One song was

²⁸Catherine Parsons Smith gives an excellent look at William Grant Still's travails in this regard in "*Harlem Renaissance Man*" Revisited: *The Politics of Race and Class in William Grant Still's Late Career*" in *American Music*, Volume 15, #3 (1997). He was but one example of an idealist caught up in the lure of the Communist Party in the United States.

²⁹Yip Harburg, radio interview with Celeste Wesson, WBAI, 1976, quoted in *Who Put the Rainbow in **The Wizard of Oz**?*

considered so inflammatory that it was kept off the cast album: *Sing the Merry*, which sharply contrasts the true message of Christmas with 20th century Christmas consumerism (“Sing the merry Christmas spirit/Sing the joys of brotherhood/In the Ivy covered walls of/Saks Fifth Ave. and Bergdoff Good”). Amongst Yip’s sketches for this song is this ending quatrain: “Sing the cashbox, sing inflation/Sing the gadget overpriced/And for Christ’s sake may this nation/Soon give Christmas back to Christ”. McCarthyism takes its lumps, too, as the show opens with the chorus, *You, Too, Can Be a Puppet* (“Here is a new idea/Here is a panacea/You too can be a puppet”). **Flahooley** would never be a vehicle to ingratiate Yip with the right-wing Hollywood establishment.

Jamaica (Harold Arlen, 1957) remains his last Broadway show to produce enduring songs, though it suffered a fate similar to that of **Hooray for What?** and **Hold on to Your Hats**. As the show went through its development it became a vehicle for Lena Horne, and its politics (consumerism in *Push de Button* and *Hooray for de Yankee Dollar*; politics and war in *Leave de Atom Alone*) became diluted. But it had another daring Harburgian aspect: like **Cabin in the Sky** it had a solely Afro-American cast, a step as daring for Broadway as it had been for Hollywood.

Two other Broadway shows followed, **The Happiest Girl in the World** (1961, based on Aristophanes, with an anti-war stance) and **Darling of the Day** (1968), a more traditional musical of romance, though with a mild political twist aimed at the class system. Neither was particularly successful, though both have scores worth hearing, particularly **Darling of the Day** which has some lovely Jule Styne songs. **The Happiest Girl in the World** gave Yip a chance to experiment with “retro-fitting” lyrics to the melodies of a dead composer, Jacques Offenbach, whose music afforded him the chance not only to write verse that had a Gilbertian feel, but to set it to music that had a similarity to Sullivan’s. In 1971, Yip produced his last stage piece, **What a Day for a Miracle** (music by Larry Orenstein and Jeff Alexander), a show about the children’s crusade, at the University of Vermont.

After blacklisting ended Yip did return to Hollywood, writing for **Gay Purr-ee** (a 1962 animated feature with music by Harold Arlen), **I Could Go On Singing** (1963, again with Arlen — Judy Garland’s last musical), and a film version of **Finian’s Rainbow** (1968).

One of the fascinating aspects of Harburg's career is that he did not regularly collaborate with any single composer (and therefore is not remembered as part of a team), but wrote with nearly 50 different composers, something which was unusual for a Broadway/Hollywood writer. This may have contributed to his never becoming a "household name" but in terms of his lyrics it was an asset. Perhaps no other lyricist, and certainly none of the major ones, wrote with as many collaborators or with such facility in such varied styles. Yip himself appreciated this aspect of his writing, "I think I've been very lucky to work with men who were really original craftsmen. . . . And the thing is that what I like to do is to test myself in almost every direction. I don't like to stay in one spot. I like to try a new tangent, to explore. . . . Writing with different composers is always a different psychological experience. Each one has his own approach to creating. To know their idiosyncracies and to be able to get the best out of each one is fascinating. Each composer brings out a different aspect in your work."³⁰ "I'm a chameleon — I love putting myself into everyone's shoes — and each composer lends me a pair."³¹ Again, the *yips!* quality.

Since he wrote with many composers, it also gave him the freedom to reuse ideas, a freedom he might not have felt if he had worked with one collaborator. Certain words and themes crop up throughout his career. The most obvious is "rainbow", a word which appears in one show title, six song titles, and finds its way into the lyrics of another twenty-two songs. Rainbows were a source of joy and wonder for Yip, representing "dreams that you dare to dream". In three songs with rainbow in the title (two well-known, one not so), Yip gets three very different takes on rainbows. *Look to the Rainbow (Finian's Rainbow)* is about following dreams, something Finian McLonergan does with results that surprise everyone. In **Darling of the Day**, the painter Priam Farll declares *I've Got a Rainbow Working for Me* as he tells of the limitless possibilities of an artist's imagination. In *Over the Rainbow (The Wizard of Oz)*, Yip uses another one of his stylistic traits: asking a question, but in this song the question is not one of resignation, but of aspiration.

It is this very questioning that drove Yip's work. As with the rainbow, a question became

³⁰*They're Playing Our Song*.

³¹*Creators and Disturbers*.

a show title, **Hooray for What?**, and questions are found over thirty times in song titles. In many of those songs, Yip uses the question to present his indirect approach to the phrase, “I love you”: *How About a Little Date for Breakfast?*; *How Can I Hold You Close Enough?*; *How Do You Do It?*; *What Can You Say in a Love Song (That Hasn't Been Said Before)?*; *What Is There to Say?*; and a wonderful unpublished song, *Who Do You Kiss Goodnight?* are just a few examples. Politically, one need look no further for questions than *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?*, but there is also *Have You Heard About the Meeting?*.

Another view of Yip's reworking ideas is the development of one that culminated in two versions of a song with Harold Arlen: *Buds Won't Bud*. Around 1930 Yip wrote a song with Jay Gorney called *Nothing's Right (When Your Love's All Wrong)*. The second chorus opens:

Oh the buds won't bud
The dew won't dew
One and one ain't even two
Nothing's right when your love's all wrong.

The same chorus ends with:

I'm so alone
On my own
I'm so lonely in a crowd
Oh I see and weep
Weep and pout
All the world's a big black out,
Nothing's right when your love's all wrong.

In the framework of the song, the “buds won't bud” quatrain does not particularly stand out, as it is part of a long chorus, and thus not be likely to be remembered. The other germ of *Buds Won't Bud* is the line “all the world's a big black out”, which passes very quickly and will come to be changed in later versions.

There are two 1932 versions and they are virtually identical. One was intended for **Ballyhoo of 1932**, with music by Lewis Gensler, *'Cause You Didn't Do Right By Me*.

The other is *You Didn't Do Right By Me*, an unpublished song that Yip wrote with Dana Suesse (known as “The Girl Gershwin”, famous for her song, *You Oughta Be in Pictures*). Suesse spoke of the song in a 1985 interview with Harburg's son, Ernie: “I don't know whether

we intended to show it to somebody like a Broadway revue or music or something. . . I don't know what we intended to do with it."³² She also said of it, "it's not a very good tune really, it's just a throwaway tune. It's the lyric that's darling."³³ Now Yip extends the conceit of "buds won't bud" and other things that "won't", adding a short "bridge" that uses a new idea, then returning to the main idea. The first chorus is:

The buds won't bud, the dew won't dew,
One and one ain't even two,
And the cuckoo clocks refuse to coo,
'Cause you didn't do right by me!
The flies won't flit, the breeze won't breeze,
Butterflies are bumble bees,
And the birdies sing in minor keys
'Cause you didn't do right by me!
Life was like a song
When our hearts went pitter pat,
Then you done me wrong,
And the big round world went flat!
The buds won't bud, the seeds won't sprout,
The daisies all grow inside out,
And this thing called love's a big washout
'Cause you didn't do right by me!

'Cause You Won't Play House (1934) has music by Morgan Lewis (and is Yip's only collaboration with the composer of *How High the Moon*). This version is quite similar to *'Cause You Didn't Do Right By Me*, with some changes in placement of the "won't" phrases, and some new ones. The Lewis version was used in a specific show, *New Faces (of 1934)* and was published that year. One of the charming features of the song is the idea that the problem is not that "you won't love me", but rather that "you won't play house", giving the song a risqué turn.³⁴

³²Interview with Dana Suesse, May 1, 1985 by Ernie Harburg, Art Perlman, and Brad Ross, given to the author by Ernie Harburg. Used by permission of the Harburg Foundation, New York, New York.

³³Interview with Dana Suesse, May 1, 1985.

³⁴Yip's view of love was a bit freer than the norm of the '30s. In the aforementioned *Who Do You Kiss Goodnight?* (1931), the singer's concern is very much what is going on in the bedroom (But when you turn out the light, jump into bed/Who tucks the pillow beneath your

The two Harold Arlen versions appeared in films. The first, written in 1937, was originally intended for **Hooray for What?**, but was cut from the show, then moved into **Andy Hardy Meets a Debutante** (released in 1940), and was sung by Judy Garland. A big change from the Lewis version is that now it is more straightforwardly about unrequited love; rather than “you won’t play house”, it is “when the one you love won’t love you”. In 1940, Harburg and Arlen made some lyric and musical changes to the song for the film **Cairo**, there sung by Ethel Waters. The 1937 and 1940 verses are almost entirely different; the choruses of the 1937 version are longer, with more play on the “won’t” motive, and the choruses have different “bridge” sections. The Arlen versions take phrases from previous versions, add new ones, and generally improve upon the idea, particularly in Yip’s greater indulgence in word play. The 1937 lyric has such pairings as “nicks won’t nack” and “my mind won’t mind”, and the 1940 adds “T’s won’t cross and I’s won’t dot”.³⁵

Other song ideas that underwent recycling are *Napoleon* (**Jamaica**, 1957), which was adapted from an unused 1937 song, *Napoleon’s a Pastry* (cut from **Hooray for What?**), which in turn had its germinal idea in an unpublished song from the early 30s, with music by Jay Gorney called *Don’t That Mean a Thing to You?* (Napoleon, Napoleon/Trained his kings to kneel and bow/Along came Josephine/Napoleon is just a pastry now); *Moon About Town* (1934, an unjustly neglected song) with music by Dana Suesse, was a revision of an earlier unpublished song with music by Jay Gorney and Karl Hajos, *Manhattan Moon*; *You’re Kinda Grandish* from **Stage Struck** (1936) found new life as *Something Sort of Grandish* in **Finian’s Rainbow** (and, even there, it had an unused version called *You’d Be Kinda Grandish*); and an unused piece of *Follow the Yellow Brick Road* (Follow the rainbow over the stream/Follow the fellow who follows a dream) underwent only slight revision to find its place in another **Finian’s Rainbow**

head?).

³⁵All six songs are added at the end of the chapter for further comparison. Of the six total versions, the Gorney, Gensler, and Suesse are unrecorded; both the Judy Garland and Ethel Waters versions of the Arlen songs are commercially available; and the author, with pianist Bradford Conner, has made the only commercial recording of the Morgan Lewis version.

song, *Look to the Rainbow* (Look, look, look to the rainbow/Follow it over the hill and stream/Look, look, look to the rainbow/Follow the fellow who follows a dream).

Up to his death (in 1981), Yip never stopped planning new projects and rethinking his less successful shows, such as **Flahooley**. At the age of 84 he was driving to a story conference for a new film based on Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, for which he was planning to write the lyrics, when he suffered a heart attack which killed him instantly. In death, as in life, there was an O. Henry twist. Yip's car drifted into another car (causing no injuries), which became the source of at least two rumors. One is that he died in a head-on collision.³⁶ The other was that the second car was, in fact, a limousine once belonging to Richard Nixon. It was not, but the image of Yip literally crossing paths with the right wing even in death is one he would have enjoyed.

Yips! to the end.

³⁶*American Songwriters*, David Ewen, H.W. Wilson Company (New York), 1987.

The Evolution of *Buds Won't Bud*
A look at the various stages of creating a lyric

Nothing's Right (When Your Love's All Wrong) -
undated manuscript, probably early '30s
Music by Jay Gorney

Verse:

When the one you love
Doesn't love you
Skies seem grey above
When they're really blue
Even since we parted
I've been so broken hearted
And nothing seems to matter
Now that we are through.

First Chorus:

Oh there ain't no sun
Ain't no moon
Ain't no words to fill my tune
Nothing's right when your love's all wrong
Some bad news on it's way
Excess baggage gone astray
Nothing's right when your love's all wrong
Because there ain't no rest
East or West
When there's no one to understand
For every place is just a space
As empty as No Man's Land
You love a man
Love him well
One mistake and all is Hell,
Nothing's right when your love's all wrong.

Second Chorus:

Oh the buds won't bud
The dew won't dew
One and one ain't even two
Nothing's right when your love's all wrong.
Lots of fish in the sea
They don't mean a thing to me
Nothing's right when your love's all wrong.
'Cause since you said "Good bye"
All the sky up high
Is a weeping cloud.
I'm so alone
On my own
I'm so lonely in a crowd
Oh I see and weep
Weep and pout
All the world's a big black out,

Nothing's right when your love's all wrong.

'Cause You Didn't Do Right By Me, 1932
(unpublished), Music by Lewis Gensler

The Buds won't bud
The dew won't dew
One and one ain't even two
And coo-coo clocks refuse to coo
'Cause you didn't do right by me.

The flies won't flit
The breeze won't breeze
The butterflies turn to bumble bees
And birdies sing in minor keys
'Cause you didn't do right by me.

Life was like a song
When our hearts went pitter pat
Then you done me wrong
And the big round world went flat

The buds won't bud
The seeds won't sprout
The daisies all now grow inside out
And the world is just a big washout
'Cause you didn't do right by me.

The chickens won't chick
The crows won't crow
And do-re-me is vo-de-o
Even eenie-meenie's minus mo
'Cause you didn't do right by me.

The Klux won't Klan
The stamps won't glue
And C.O.D. is I.O.U.
And the good old Red, White is Blue
'Cause you didn't do right by me.

Life was like a song
When our hearts went pitter pat
Then you done me wrong
And the big round world went flat

Oh life's a flop
And loves a curse
And war is Hell

And women worse
And the gosh darn system's in reverse
'Cause you didn't do right by me.

You Didn't Do Right By Me - 1932 (unpublished)
Music by Dana Suesse

Verse:

From a nearby tree, tweet, tweet!
Came a melody, tweet, tweet!
For a bird in love always sings a rhapsody.
But his song next morn - heigh ho!
Was a sad, forlorn sigh, oh!
For his love had flown, and the little bird was me!

Chorus:

The buds won't bud, the dew won't dew,
One and one ain't even two,
And the cuckoo clocks refuse to coo,
'Cause you didn't do right by me!
The flies won't flit, the breeze won't breeze,
Butterflies are bumble bees,
And the birdies sing in minor keys
'Cause you didn't do right by me!
Life was like a song
When our hearts went pitter pat,
Then you done me wrong,
And the big round world went flat!
The buds won't bud, the seeds won't sprout,
The daisies all grow inside out,
And this thing called love's a big washout
'Cause you didn't do right by me!

The pups won't pup, the crows won't crow
Do-re-me is vo-de-o,
Even eenie meenie's minus mo,
'Cause you didn't do right by me!
The Klux won't clan, the glue won't glue
C.O.D. is I.O.U,
And the good old red and white is blue,
'Cause you didn't do right by me!
Life was like a song
And my purse was fat
Then it all went west,
Now I'm on my back and flat.
Oh, life's a flop, and love's a curse,
And war is hell and women worse,
And the gosh-darned system's in reverse,
'Cause you didn't do right by me.

'Cause You Won't Play House - 1934 (Harms, Inc.)
Music by Morgan Lewis

Verse:

You're as fickle as a feather weathervane in the breeze;
Monday you're warm, Tuesday you freeze;
Love's a funny proposition 'till it's finally set.
Wednesday it's fair, Thursday all wet,
But for me the silly sun will never shine
Till you're really mine.

Chorus:

The buds won't bud,
The dew won't dew,
The cuckoo clocks refuse to coo
And one and one ain't even two,
'Cause you won't play house.
The flies won't flit,
The grass won't grow,
The radio won't hi-di-ho
And eeny meeny's minus mo,
'Cause you won't play house.
I seem to love you more and more
When you deserve my loathing,
Furthermore I think that you're
A big bad wolf in sheep's clothing.
The buds won't bud,
The seeds won't sprout,
The daisies all grow inside out,
The world is just a big wash out,
'Cause you won't play house.

Buds Won't Bud - 1937 (Leo Feist, Inc.)
Music by Harold Arlen

Verse:

When your hair turns to silver overnight,
Something's wrong, something's wrong.
When your heart and your mind begin to fight,
Something's wrong, very wrong
When the clock sips tea
As your head strikes three
And you feel as if Walter Disney gave you birth,
Something strange has happened to this earth.

Chorus:

Buds won't bud
Breeze won't breeze and dew won't dew.
One and one ain't even two
When the love you love won't love you.
Buds won't bud, chicks won't chick, and nicks won't
nack;
Blue is white and white is black,
When the love you love won't love back.
On account there's no accounting
Ever since you bowed out.
All my moods won't mood
And my food won't food
And my ties won't tie
And my tears won't dry;
And to make things worse,
My heart is beating in reverse,
'Cause buds won't bud,
Breeze won't breeze,
And dew won't dew.
One and one ain't even two
When the love you love
Won't love you.

2nd Chorus:

Buds won't bud, breeze won't breeze and crow won't
crow
Eenie meenie's minus moe
When the love you love
Says heigh ho!
Buds won't bud, notes won't note and knots won't
knot;
Plots won't play and plays won't plot
When the hope you hope goes to pot.
On account there's no accounting
Ever since you bowed out
All my moans won't moan
And my phone won't phone
And my clock won't wind

And my mind won't mind;
And it seems like
The world is on a sit-down strike,
'Cause buds won't bud, breeze won't breeze
And dew won't dew.
C.O.D. is I.O.U.
When the love you love
Won't love you.

Buds Won't Bud - 1940 (unpublished)
Music by Harold Arlen [revision of 1937 lyrics]

Verse:

When your world goes to pieces overnight,
Something's wrong, something's wrong.
When you don't know your left shoe from your right
Something's wrong, very wrong
When the clock sips tea
As your head strikes three
And you feel like you're in a Walter Disney dream
Something's wrong with this entire scheme.

Chorus:

Buds won't bud
Breeze won't breeze and
Dew won't dew.
One and one ain't even two
When the love you love
Won't love you
Buds won't bud
Chicks won't chick and
Nicks won't nack;
Black is white and white is black,
When the love you love
Won't love back.
On account there's no accountin'
When you can't have the one you like
All your troubles just keep mountin'
And the world is on a sit-down strike
'Cause buds won't bud
Breeze won't breeze and
Dew won't dew
One and one is eighty-two
When the love you love
Won't love you

2nd Chorus:

Buds won't bud
Breeze won't breeze and
Crow won't crow
Eenie meenie's minus mo

When the love you love
Says "heigh ho"
Buds won't bud,
Notes won't note and
Knots won't knot
T's won't cross and
I's won't dot
When the hope you hope
Goes to pot
On account there's no accountin'
When you can't bring your dream about
All your troubles keep on mountin'
And the world is just a big black-out
'Cause buds won't bud
Breeze won't breeze and
Dew won't dew
C.O.D. is I.O.U.
When the dream you dream
Won't come true.