

History of the Hollywood Musical Syllabus

This series will look at the evolution of the American movie musical. Each week, we will watch and learn about an important film in the musical genre with an introduction to each film that will include important historical points, fun facts and short biographies of the stars. Join us for a chronological trip through Hollywood musical history beginning with:

The Jazz Singer (1927) – The first “talking” film features Al Jolson as a Jewish performer torn between his faith and his love of popular music. Historically important because of the film’s technical aspects but fun to see and hear Jolson singing such popular tunes as “Dirty Hands, Dirty Face,” “Toot Toot Tootsie” and “My Mammy.”

The Broadway Melody (1929) – MGM touted this musical as “All Talking! All Singing! All Dancing!” and it won the Best Picture Academy Award. Bessie Love and Anita Page play a sister act trying to crash Broadway and Charles King is the singer who comes between them. Many of the songs have become standards: “You Were Meant for Me,” “The Wedding of the Painted Doll,” and the title tune.

Love Me Tonight (1932) – French singing star Maurice Chevalier and Jeanette MacDonald star in Rouben Mamoulian’s delightful musical which many critics consider to be one of the best musicals ever made. Rodgers and Hart wrote the score which includes “Isn’t It Romantic,” “Mimi,” and the title song.

42nd Street (1933) - Busby Berkeley’s choreography highlights this fast-paced musical classic which breathed new life into the Hollywood musical. Ruby Keeler and Dick Powell have the first of several on-screen pairings as the young lovers, and Bebe Daniels sings the classic “You’re Getting to Be a Habit with Me.” The score also includes “Shuffle Off to Buffalo” and the title tune. Look for Ginger Rogers and Una Merkel in the chorus line.

I’m No Angel (1933) – Mae West stars in this rowdy comedy with music, a true “pre-code” film. Mae helped saved Paramount from bankruptcy during the Great Depression with this film which co-stars a very young Cary Grant.

Kid Millions (1934) – Samuel Goldwyn released this musical comedy featuring Ziegfeld star Eddie Cantor in one of his most enjoyable films. He’s backed by an all-star cast including Ethel Merman, Ann Sothorn, George Murphy and the fabulous Nicholas Brothers. There’s even a Technicolor sequence set in a candy factory! Lucille Ball plays one of the chorus girls.

Top Hat (1935) – Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were the most popular Hollywood dance team in history and Top Hat was their most popular film. Irving Berlin wrote the wonderful score which includes “Isn’t This a Lovely Day to Be Caught in the Rain?” “Cheek to Cheek” and a spectacular finale called “The Piccolino.” See if you can spot Lucille Ball in the flower shop scene.

Born to Dance (1936) - By the mid-1930’s, MGM had already acquired the reputation of making great musicals, and Born to Dance was produced specifically to introduce their newest dancing star, Eleanor Powell. MGM spared no expense in showcasing Powell and surrounded her with a sparkling supporting cast including James Stewart, Una Merkel, Buddy Ebsen and Virginia Bruce. They all get to sing Cole Porter’s lively score which includes “Easy to Love” and “I’ve Got You Under My Skin.”

A Night at the Opera (1935) - The Marx Brothers star in one of their best films and wreak havoc aboard an ocean liner and disrupt the Paris Opera House. Kitty Carlisle and Allan Jones play the young lovers and sing several songs including the hit, “Alone.” Don’t miss the famous stateroom scene!

Show Boat (1936) – The little-seen 1936 version of Jerome Kern’s groundbreaking Broadway musical stars many of the original stage cast members: Irene Dunne and Allan Jones play the star-crossed lovers, Helen Morgan recreates her role of Julie LaVerne, and Paul Robeson gives a powerful person as Joe and sings “Ol’ Man River,” which was originally written for him.

The Great Ziegfeld (1936) – MGM’s lavish biography of the showman Florenz Ziegfeld has never been equaled for its opulence. William Powell plays the title role and Myrna Loy and Oscar-winner Luise Rainer portray two of the women in his life. Winner for Best Picture and Best Dance Direction for the amazing production number “A Pretty Girl Is Like A Melody.” **(This film is three hours with a short intermission).**