

AMICA International

Automatic Musical Instrument Collectors' Association

Honor Roll

Louis Alter

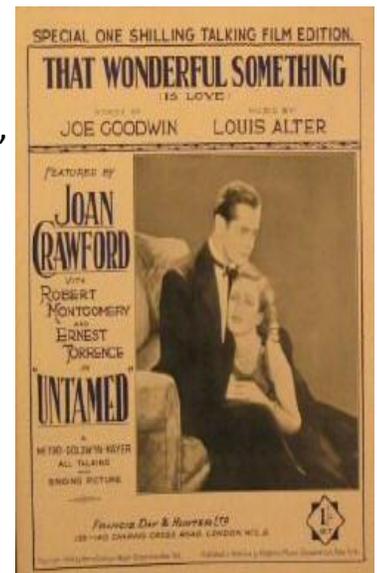
NEW AMICA HONORARY MEMBER: LOUIS ALTER-A POPULAR AMERICAN COMPOSER AND DUO-ART ARTIST , by Alf Werolin

(From the AMICA Bulletin: May 1974)

AMICA's Board of Directors recently unanimously voted to confer honorary membership to Louis Alter in recognition of his contribution as a Duo-Art recording artist. Bill Burkhardt of Grand Rapids, Michigan, proposed him for membership. The following is an excerpt from David Ewen's Book, "Popular American Composers".

Louis Alter has been as successful in writing of popular instrumental compositions for orchestra as in the writing of songs. He was born in Haverhill, Massachusetts on June 18, 1902. In his ninth year, while attending public school, he began to study the piano: At thirteen, he worked as a pianist in the local movie theatre, providing accompaniment to silent films; but instead of using the usual stereotyped repertory he would improvise his own mood music. As a student at Haverhill High School he led a jazz band that performed at school dances. After his graduation from high school, his family moved to Boston. There he attended the New England Conservatory, where he acquired a well-rounded background in the classics as a piano student of Stuart Mason.

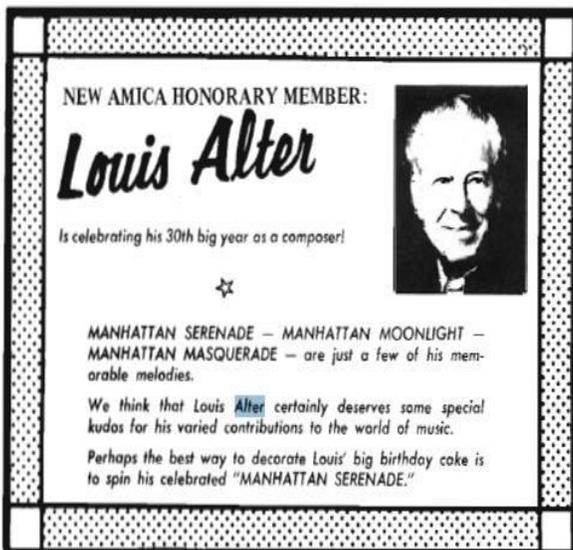
Alter went to New York in 1924. The vaudeville star Nora Bayes hired him as her accompanist (a job previously held by George Gershwin), and for five years Alter toured with Bayes in America and Europe. During this time he occasionally wrote material and played the piano for



other famous performers, including Irene Bordoni, Helen Morgan, and Beatrice Lillie. When occasion~ll~ at liberty, he worked as song-arranger for the publshng houses of Shapiro Bernstein and Irving Berlin; this experience, he feels, served him well when he entered the songwriting field.

Between 1925 and 1927 Alter had several songs published, including "To Be Loved," "I'm in Love with You," and his first hit, "Blue Shadows" (lyrics by Ray Klages), the last heard originally in the Earl Carroll Vanities of 1927. In 1928, inspired by the sights, sounds, and moods of New York City he wrote a work that made him famous, Manhattan Serenade. It was originally published as a piano solo but was immediately adapted for orchestra and recorded by Paul Whiteman and his orchestra, whose rendition was largely responsible for the world-wide popularity of the composition. It has since become a standard in the repertory of symphonic jazz. In 1942 one of ~he themes became the basis for a vocal version with lyrics by Harold Adamson.

It was in 1925 that Alter's music publisher, the legendary Jack Robbins, introduced him to Frank Milne, recording manager for Duo-Art. He then recorded several popular numbers for Duo-Art of which "Dolly Dimples" was the first. This was followed by "Bye Bye Blackbird" and "We'll Have A Kingdom". (Editor's Note: Will AMICAns please a.dvise of any other recordings with numbers.) However, Alter's ambition was in the direction of song writing and his career as a Duo-Art recording artist was relatively short.



Alter wrote four other highly impressive and frequently played orchestral impressions of New York: Manhattan Moonlight (1930), Manhattan Masquerade (1932), Metropolitan Nocturne (1935), and Side Street in Gotham (1938). Manhattan Moonlight received high honors in a national competition conducted by RCA Victor in 1930: Metropolitan Nocturne was the source of and Inspiration of an RKO movie short which won a bronze medal at the International Film Festival in Venice in 1936. In 1953 Alter wrote another ambitious orchestral work, a suite entitled Jewels from Cartier, in ten movements, each movement a musical

representation of a different gem.

In 1929 Alter went to Hollywood. His first songs for the screen were "Love Ain't Nothin' but the Blues" (lyrics by Joe Goodwin) in Lord Byron of Broadway, and "Got a Feelin' for You" (lyrics by Jo Trent) In Hollywood Revue. He has since written songs for about twentyfive motion pictures. Two of his screen songs were nominated for Academy awards: "A Melody

from the Sky" (lyrics by Sidney D. Mitchell), written for Trail of the Lonesome Pine (1936) and "Dolores" (lyrics by Frank Loesser), written for Las Vegas Nights (1941).

Other successful screen songs were "Rainbow on the River" (lyrics by Paul Francis Webster), written for the film of the same name; "Twilight on the Trail" for Trail of the Lonesome Pine, and "You Turned the Tables on Me" for Sing, Baby, Sing (lyrics by Sidney Mitchell); "A Thousand Dreams of You" (lyrics by Webster) for You Live Only Once; and "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?" (lyrics by Eddie de Lange) for New Orleans. "Twilight on the Trail" was a great favorite with President Franklin D. Roosevelt; the manuscript and a copy of the Bing Crosby recording can be found in the Roosevelt Memorial Library in Hyde Park, New York.

Louis Alter has also written songs for the Broadway stage: "My Kinda Love" (lyrics by Trent) for Americana (1928), a song soon made famous by Bing Crosby; "I'm One of God's Children Who Hasn't Got Wings" (lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II) for Ballyhoo (1930); and "The Key to My Heart" (lyrics by Ira Gershwin) for The Social Register. Among other productions in which Alter songs were heard were Sweet and Low (1930), Hold Your Horses, which starred Joe Cook (1931), and Casino Varieties (1934) .

Several other Alter songs deserve mention: "Sand in My Shoes," "Stranger in the City," "Overnight," "Nina Never Knew" and "Circus." The last, with lyrics by Bob Russell, was written in 1949 in honor of Alter's friend John Ringling North of the Ringling Brothers Circus.

In 1943 Alter appeared twice as soloist with the Los Angeles Philharmonic at the Hollywood Bowl in performances of his compositions. During World War II he served in the Air Force and was assigned to provide musical entertainment for cadets in training at twenty-six air bases of the -Western Command. For his contributions he was honored with a special citation.

Mr. Alter resides in Manhattan where he follows the continued public use of his many songs, and enjoys his piano! He has graciously said he would be happy to attend an AMICA get-together sometime and tell about his interesting career in the world of music. We welcome Louis Alter to AMICA!

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LOUIS ALTER: PARTIAL LIST OF HOLLYWOOD AND BROADWAY SONGS

- ✓ "MANHATTAN SERENADE" (Pop Vocal & orig. Instrumental)-Written 1928 as tribute to Paul Whiteman and the many roods of New York.

- ✓ "MANHATTAN MOONLIGHT" (Theme excerpt & Instrumental)-Written 1930--A nostalgic mood.
- ✓ "MANHATTAN MASQUERADE" 1932--Introduced by Paul Whiteman at Carnegie Hall.
- ✓ "TWILIGHT ON THE TRAIL" (Both from "Trail of the Lonesome Pine".)
- ✓ "MELODY FROM THE SKY" Became favorite songs of President Roosevelt.
- ✓ "YOU TURNED THE TABLES ON ME" (1936 originally introduced by Alice Faye in film "Sing Baby Sing." Later identified with Benny Goodman and others.
- ✓ "DO YOU KNOW WHAT IT MEANS\ TO MISS NEW ORLEANS" & "BREWIN' THE BLUES" (1947 from the film "New Orleans" featured in the film by Louis Armstrong and Billie Holliday.)
- ✓ "DOLORIS" Featured in film "Las Vegas" by Tommy Dorsey and Frank Sinatra
- ✓ "NINA NEVER KNEW" (Pop hit song of 1952) Records by Vic Damone, J. Jones and others.
- ✓ "CIRCUS" (1949 written for the Circus. Made popular by Sammy Davis, Jr. and many others.)
- ✓ "RAINBOW ON THE RIVER" (1937--Theme song, hit from film of same name.)
- ✓ "WHAT'VE WE GOT TO LOSE?" (1933--depression months-banks closed.)
- ✓ "MY KINDA LOVE" (1929--initially Bing Crosby hit. Bing selected this for his first record.)
- ✓ "BLUE SHADOWS" (1928--Hit of the Earl Carroll Vanities of that year.)
- ✓ "ONE OF GOD'S CHILDREN" from "Ba11y Hoo" (Lyric by Oscar Hammerstein) W.C. Fields Show.
- ✓ " OVERNIGHT" (1930--"Sweet and Low." Featured in show by Fanny Brice.)
- ✓ "STEAK AND POTATOES" (Pop hit of 1934.) for Harry Richman.
- ✓ "WHAT A LIFE" (1932--Written for and popularized by Helen Morgan.)
- ✓ "COME UP AND SEE ME SOMETIME" for Mae West theme and recording.

✓ "STRANGER IN THE CITY" 1952--Fran Warren--Ink Spots and others.

From the AMICA, April 1975

**An Interview By Joe Franklin
For His "Memory Lane" TV Show At The Friars Club In N.Y.C.
Contributed By Louis Alter**

A music man muses: It's not Marlon Brando's histrionics or Al Pacino's dramatics that mean a great deal to Louis Alter as he thinks about "The Godfather." To him the best moment occurs when the producer's pad in Beverly Hills is shown and the killer from New York is on his way for his pre-violence chat. Alter's ego is stimulated by the music played during that pictorial shot. It is "Manhattan Serenade." Alter is the composer. He penned it originally as a big orchestral piece at the behest of Paul Whiteman in 1928.

At the Friars the other lunch time over hash, Lou was remembering those days.

"I was a great fan of Whiteman when I first came down here from Boston," he said, "He was the first big name I actually followed around and met. I was having a love affair with New York when Whiteman commissioned me to write a tone poem. I walked around this city for **six** months absorbing the sights and sounds. And then suddenly it came to me. Once I plunged into it I finished it in two hours."

Alter isn't a laconic man. He can recount vividly. His past life has been an association with fine songs and big name singers. That legendary trademark--Helen Morgan sitting on the piano was of Lou's doing. The winsome song star with the warm eyes and thin, captivating voice was a scared bunny. Most times she took a shot of brandy as liquid confidence. Alter, then her musical director, knew she needed a prop like a handkerchief in hand or a hat to hold or something. She rehearsed one day, sitting atop the piano. She was comfortable for the first time.

"That's it," said Alter, "stay there." That she did for most of the career that ensued.

The first job of any consequence that Lou had in the music business was that of pianist for vaudeville superstar, Nora Bayes. He can reel off story after story about the amazing talent and generosity of this tremendously talented headliner.

"I went to London with her" Lou smiled, "She had been an unexpected flop there on a past engagement. This time she was determined to reverse things. She surely did. She was booked for two weeks at the Palladium and stayed twenty-four. Her big fan was the then dashing Prince of Wales. I was with him one night when he played drums for us." "You know," he continued, "Miss Bayes used to walk out on a stage with her hand on her hip. I asked her why one night and maybe being a devout Christian Scientist, which she was, explains her answer--'I do it so God can lead me on stage.'"

Alter, who wrote "You Turned The Tables On Me" and "Dolores," to name two, was instrumental in molding Beatrice Lillie into a night club performer. "I was helping Bea put her act together. You know, routining and finding songs. Well, her mother, who used to sing around the house and rather atrociously too, was carrying on with an old English music hall song. It struck me as a howl so I suggested that Bea include it in her act, done as a direct imitation of her mother's serious attempt in the parlor. She took my advice. It worked. And Miss Lillie had one of her biggest song successes ever. It was "There Are Fairies At The Bottom Of Our Garden."

So Lou drank double strength tea and anecdote followed anecdote. A songwriter tells stories the same way he sits at the piano and demonstrates--"and then I wrote." It is a pleasant segue of stories. But the lunch hour grew late and we had to leave. Sorry, business had to interfere with the one about Noel Coward or the reminiscence concerning Alice Faye.

*FROM "BIOGRAPHICAL SKETCHES OF WRITER CANDIDATES" FEBRUARY 26, 1969,
CONTRIBUTED BY LOUIS ALTER:*

LOUIS ALTER, composer, pianist; b. Haverhill, Mass., June 18, 1902. ASCAP 1929. Presently on ASCAP Writers Advisory Committee. Educ: New England Cons., with Stuart Mason. Pianist in film theatres at 13. Accompanist to Nora Bayes, 1924-28; also to Irene Bordoni, Helen Morgan, Beatrice Lillie. Comp., arr. for music publishers. World War II, USAAF; entertained at air bases. Piano soloist, LA Philh., Hollywood Bowl. Bway stage score, Ballyhoo. Songs for musicals incl. Earl Carroll's Vanities (1925, 1928); Americana; Sweet and Low; Crazy Quilt; Hold Your Horses. Songs for films incl. Hollywood Revue; Rainbow on the River; The Trail of the Lonesome Pine; Sing, Baby, Sing; Make a Wish; Las Vegas Nights; New Orleans. Chief lyricists: Joe Goodwin, Jo Trent, Sidney Mitchell, Edw. Heyman, Frank Loesser, Paul Francis Webster, Eddie DeLange, Harold Adamson, Ray Klages, Bob Russell, Milton Drake, Oscar Hammerstein 2nd, Lew Brown, Stanley Adams. SONGS: "Manhattan Serenade" "The Sky Fell Down"; "Blue Shadows"; "My Kinda Love"; "Overnight"; "I'm One of God's Children" "I Was Taken by Storm"; "I've Got Sand in My Shoes"; "Rainbow on the River"; "Twilight on the Trail" (orig. mss. in Hyde Park Mem. Library); "A Melody from the Sky"; "You Turned the Tables on Me"; "Dolores"; "Do You Know What It Means to Miss New Orleans?"; "Circus"; "Nina Never Knew"; "My Ecstasy"; "Stranger in the City". INSTRUMENTALS: "Manhattan Serenade"; "Manhattan Moonlight"; "Manhattan Masquerade"; "Metropolitan Nocturne" (Gold Medal, Venice Film Fest., 1936); "Side Street in Gotham"; "American Serenade". Jewels from Cartier (suite incl. "Diamond Earrings"; "Emerald Eyes").

A LOST WORLD RECALLED

★ ★ ★ ★ ★

Songwriter in London after 50 years

By ROBERT MUSEL

LONDON (UPI) — "The last time I stood here," said Louis Alter, "was 50 years ago."

He was in the courtyard of St. James Palace looking up at the windows of what once was the apartment of the Prince of Wales, long before the crown prince Edward met an American divorcee and died in self-exile in France as the Duke of Windsor.

"The prince liked to play the drums, you know," said Alter. "He used to ask me to come along and play the piano to his beat. The windows look empty now but they were always blazing with lights in those days. They are all gone, aren't they? The prince and all his beautiful people."

This is a sentimental journey for Alter, 74, who toured Britain in 1923, 1924 and 1926 as accompanist to the greatest singer of her time, Nora Bayes, before he went on to fame himself as a songwriter.

He composed the enduring symphonic jazz classic "Manhattan Serenade" at the request of Paul Whiteman and a string of hits for Frank Sinatra, Louis Armstrong, Bing Crosby, Bea Lillie, Joan Crawford, Fannie Brice.

Somehow, although his career really started here and he always planned to come back, the decades slipped by while he worked mainly in his New York apartment with fairly undiminished creativity.

"Is Kim Manchester around?" he asked. "He was a great friend of mine."

The Duke of Manchester, he was told, now lives in Kenya.

"Well," he said "I won't ask about Jack Buchanan or Gertrude Lawrence. They're gone."

"I would have liked to have seen Noel Coward. He used to beg me to get him an appointment with Nora so he could play her his songs. I liked him and especially the way he wrote so I arranged

the meeting and that was his start as a songwriter."

Alter cautioned against a "tear stained" report of his visit.

"I've always been working," he said. "I've just finished the music for Budd Schulberg's dramatization of his 'The Disenchanted' about F. Scott Fitzgerald. Budd's working on the lyrics so I took the opportunity to see whether anyone of the old gang was still around in London."

In May, Alter was elected to the songwriters hall of fame, the ultimate honor of his craft, and recalling this brought forth a flood of memories: Playing jazz with violin virtuoso Jascha Heifetz, writing "My Kind of Love" for the audition that won Bing Crosby his first film contract, President Franklin D. Roosevelt confiding that "Home on the Range" wasn't his favorite song—it was Alter's "Twilight on the Trail."

Alter said he liked the best of rock and of any other new music.

"There's only one yardstick," he said, "and it was as valid in Beethoven's time as it is in the era of the Beatles. Music is good music or it's bad music."