

Blue skies: Berlin's Beekman



Michael Riedel
Broadway Matinee

If you care about American popular music, you must make a pilgrimage to Beekman Place: 17 Beekman Place, to be exact. There stands a five-story, neo-Georgian brick town house from the 1930s. Today it belongs to the Grand Duchy of Luxembourg, but from 1946 until his death in 1989, it was the home of Irving Berlin.

His songs — “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” “Blue Skies,” “Oh! How I Hate To Get Up in the Morning,” “Cheek to Cheek,” “White Christmas” — caught on in many cases defined the shifting moods of American life from 1910 until the ‘60s, when rock ‘n’ roll upended Berlin’s musical style. As Jerome Kern famously said, “Irving Berlin has no place in American music. He is American music.”

The composer, born Izzy Baline in Russia, has rarely gone out of fashion. Friday the New York Pops kicks off its new season at Carnegie Hall with a Berlin salute, “From Rags to Ritzes.” And his home is the sub-



Robert Miller

During a visit from Paris, Linda Emmet, Irving Berlin's daughter, toured her old family home on Beekman Place, which now serves as the consulate for Luxembourg.

ject of a charming book, “The Luxembourg House on Beekman Place,” which contains an essay by **Pamela Hanlon** on the composer’s life at 17 Beekman Place. Not long ago, Berlin’s daughter, **Linda Emmet**, was in town (she lives in Paris), and I asked her to take me on a tour of the home she grew up in.

Berlin was a very rich man by the time he bought the mansion. He had just sold the movie rights for “Annie Get Your Gun” for the

princely sum of \$650,000, writes **Laurence Bergreen** in his Berlin biography “As Thousands Cheer.” Once a poor Jewish immigrant on the Lower East Side, he used to swim the East River as a boy. Now, as one of the richest men in show business, he wanted to be by the river again, only this time in style.

On the first floor is a spacious but comfortable sitting room where Berlin and his beloved wife, **Ellin Mackay**, an heiress, would entertain close friends. Emmet re-

members parties attended by Moss Hart and Kitty Carlisle Hart, playwrights **Russel Crouse**, **Howard Lindsay** and **Robert Sherwood**, and Berlin’s favorite singer, **Rosemary Clooney**.

When they weren’t throwing a party, Berlin and his wife would meet every afternoon in the room for a pre-dinner cocktail.

After dinner, when everyone else went to bed, Berlin went to work. “His office was at the top of the house so nobody



Michael Ochs/Getty Images

Berlin, in an undated photo from about 1970, composed late at night at home.

would hear or disturb him,” Emmet says. The office was lined with rare books and manuscripts — first editions of **Voltaire** and **Hugo**, a nine-volume biography of **Napoleon** and original letters from **Shelley**.

An upright piano stood in the corner. It was on this last hit show, 1950’s “Call Me Madam.” Ironically, it’s about **Perle Mesta**, the first US envoy to . . . Luxembourg.

“We did not know that when we bought the house,” says **Francois Knaff**, the consul general. “It was a happy coincidence.”

At the back of the house on

the second floor is a small kitchen, where Berlin would make himself a late-night snack of scrambled eggs.

There was a first-class wine cellar in the basement. It’s off limits to visitors, though Emmet still refers to it as “our cellar.”

Berlin’s last years at Beekman Place weren’t his happiest. “My father suffered from depression,” says Emmet. “It became worse as he grew older. And as his health failed, he didn’t want people to see him.”

In his 90s, Berlin almost never left the town house. But every Christmas Eve, a group of carolers would stand outside his front door and sing “White Christmas.” One night the maid invited them in, and they found Berlin, in his pajamas, pouring out cups of hot chocolate.

“I want to thank you,” he said. “That’s the nicest Christmas present I’ve ever had.”

Berlin died in his tiny bedroom at the top of 17 Beekman Place. He was 101.

Today the room is a nondescript office that is, technically, Luxembourg territory. But lingering there a few minutes after everyone else had started down the stairs, I heard the sound of America.

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