

## ABOUT THE SONGS

F. Scott Fitzgerald—literary giant, chronicler of the Jazz Age and notorious “bad boy of letters”—was a songwriter. Not only that, he wrote a musical; and then wrote two more.

Of course, one would have no occasion to know this, unless they happened to be in Princeton, New Jersey between the years 1913 and 1917: that’s when the young author attended its storied university, determined to become the next big man on campus. Fitzgerald arrived at Princeton University with two goals: to make the football team (which he did not); and to infiltrate the illustrious Triangle Club.

The Triangle Club is Princeton’s touring undergraduate musical comedy troupe. This year it celebrates its 125th anniversary, which also makes it the country’s oldest touring undergraduate musical comedy troupe. Triangle was then as it is now, the grandest possible adventure for a young dreamer. Every year its students wrote and presented an original musical comedy, then took it on the road to wreak havoc on the provinces. Those who have borne witness to a Triangle Show can attest to its wholly idiosyncratic character, a disarming blend of sentiment and satire vacillating wildly between the exceptionally smart and the delightfully stupid... the perfect outlet for a man who would describe himself later as a “romantic egotist”.

Perfect and all-consuming, as it turned out. So poor were his grades that Fitzgerald was forbidden from touring, holding office or even performing in his own shows. He eventually withdrew from the university, reporting for military duty in a uniform tailored by Brooks Brothers... but not before providing the lyrics for three complete scores. That’s a staggering fifty-seven musical numbers.

Fitzgerald is not the only Triangle Club member to make his mark in the Arts. A tiny sampling of those who came before and after includes Booth Tarkington, Jimmy Stewart, Joshua Logan, José Ferrer, Clark Gesner, Wayne Rogers, Roger Berlind, David E. Kelley, Brooke Shields, Ellie Kemper and Jeff Moss, the first head writer of

*Sesame Street*. A number have made a career in the musical theatre, to which Fitzgerald never returned, in spite of his love for it. "I guess I am too much a moralist at heart," he wrote his daughter in 1939, "and want to preach at people in some acceptable form rather than to entertain them." Ironically, Rodgers and Hammerstein's landmark *Oklahoma!* would open only three years after his death at the age of forty-four, proving the medium could indeed support his level of psychological realism. Who knows what Fitzgerald might have accomplished had he continued to experiment with the form.

Imagining such an alternate reality has just become a bit easier, thanks to the artistry of Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks and the untiring efforts of Steve Wexler, Marc Segan and the rest of Triangle's Board of Trustees. As a quasiquicentennial gift to the club—and to Scott and Zelda, wherever they may be—the Board has asked Vince to arrange a few of Fitzgerald's songs not as they sounded originally, but as they might have sounded in Fitzgerald's heyday in the 1920s and '30s.

The first, "Charlotte Corday" (performed here by Ms. Caroline Hertz and Mr. Chris Beard), is from his final effort, the 1916 *Safety First* with music by F. Warburton Guilbert. The second, "My Idea of Love" (performed by Ms. Sarah Anne Sillers), is from 1915's *The Evil Eye* with music by Harry L. Gordon, Jr. and Rex Brashear. All three performers are recent Triangle graduates, as is former Triangle conductor and orchestrator Emily Whitaker, who joins the Nighthawks on piano and celeste. As is typical of the 1910s, the songs have little to do with the plots of the shows. (In one case, the show's program assigns the song to a different character than the published score.) Still, the songs are fascinating in what they reveal about changing attitudes towards gender roles which anticipate the flappers Fitzgerald would immortalize in his best-known works.

**"Charlotte Corday"** (*Safety First*, 1916) Music by F. Warburton Guilbert, Lyrics by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

**"My Idea of Love"** (*The Evil Eye*, 1915) Music by Harry L. Gordon, Jr. and Rex Brashear. Lyrics by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

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The cycle of ambition and disappointment is a theme that recurs in both Fitzgerald's work and personal life, and it's difficult not to see it reflected in his experiences at Princeton; still, he'd remain nostalgic and loyal to his alma mater until the very end. His first novel *This Side of Paradise* is as much a love letter to the university as it is a cautionary tale, and he was making notes on the latest issue of the *Princeton Alumni Weekly* when his heart gave out in December of 1940. In January 1935 he wrote a letter to one of the current students, composer/lyricist Brooks Bowman '36, about a song Bowman had written for Triangle's most recent show *Stags at Bay*. Perhaps it could be adapted into a school song with a few changes? "East of the sun, west of the moon,/ Lies Princeton," he suggested. "South of the south, north of the north,/Lies Princeton," for, Fitzgerald continued, "Princeton to Princeton men lies outside of time and space."

No one knows what Bowman made of the suggestion, but Fitzgerald's enthusiasm for the song turned out to be well-founded. Nearly cut from the show and recorded as an afterthought to fill out a disc that ran short, "East of the Sun" reached number one on the Lucky Strike Hit Parade in August of that year and became the only bona fide hit song in the Club's history. Tragically, the enormously gifted Bowman had his life cut short in 1937, in an automobile accident four days short of his twenty-fourth birthday. But the song has gone on to become a standard, having been performed by Hal Kemp, Arthur Tracy, Sarah Vaughan, Benny Goodman, Tommy Dorsey and Frank Sinatra, Stan Getz, Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Tony Bennett, Diana Krall and now Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks.

**"East of the Sun"** (*Stags at Bay*, 1934) Music and Lyrics by Brooks Bowman.

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Despite the fact he'd never again tackle the form in his professional life, Fitzgerald retained his passion for musical comedy. In a letter to his daughter, he wrote of it as

“more ‘fun’ than anything else a literary person can put their talents to and it always has an air of glamor about it...” He even cited it as the crucial factor in his decision to apply to Princeton, in a 1920 article in *The Saturday Evening Post*:

“Near the end of my 1st year at school I came across a new musical-comedy score lying on top of the piano. It was a show called *His Honor the Sultan*, and the title furnished the information that it had been presented by the Triangle Club of Princeton University. That was enough for me. From then on the university question was settled. I was bound for Princeton.”

Our final two Fitzgerald selections—again, arranged not in the original style, but reimagined for the era in which he was at his pinnacle of his success—are from his first show, for which he provided both book and lyrics: 1914’s *Fie! Fie! Fi-Fi!* (Appearances to the contrary, Fitzgerald title predates that of the 1925 Broadway classic *No, No, Nanette*. Readers of *This Side of Paradise* may also remember the title of that novel’s fictional Triangle Club show: *Ha-Ha Hortense!*)

Luckily for Fitzgerald, the club decided to hold an open competition his first year for the show it would produce the following fall. Fitzgerald spent the bulk of his freshman spring semester working on his submission, to the detriment of his studies. Fitzgerald buffs will know he kept an autobiographical ledger during his early years which served as a sort of shorthand diary. The entry for February 1914 says it all: “Began Triangle play” he writes... followed shortly by “Failed many exams.” Having won the competition and with no lyric-writing experience, Fitzgerald studied the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan “like mad” and turned out some very funny lyrics, one of my favorites being the manicurist heroine’s description of a catfight she’s just had with the bloviating Mrs. Bovine:

“I said that she would make a shapely stove if she was thinner;  
Then she hit me with a file, and so I stuck the scissors in her.”

The ensemble follows, of course, in proper Gilbertian fashion:

“It’s rather rude to prod a lady just before her dinner.  
And it’s not a very kindly thing to stick the scissors in her.”

The show, which features music by A.L. Booth '15, is light, entertaining fare and trades heavily on Oscar Wildisms, but features a real musical comedy rarity in its heroine’s bittersweet fate. After reuniting the romantic couple and saving Monaco from the Chicago gangster who has usurped the throne, the manicurist Fi-Fi is unmasked to be none other than Sady Hanks, the gangster’s estranged wife who has sacrificed her new life in the name of justice. For her troubles she is summarily drummed out of town by the chorus with the title song: “Fie! Fie! Fi-Fi!” It’s pretty dark stuff for 1914. “All raise their glasses,” reads the final stage direction. “Finale of laughter, gaiety and happiness follows, during which Sady stands unnoticed on the steps, her hat on, and a suit-case in either hand. Curtain.” It’s a fascinating suggestion of where Fitzgerald would go with his future literary work.

Once again, the songs are performed by our recent Triangle graduates. Emily Whitaker joins Vince Giordano and the Nighthawks at the piano and celeste as Caroline Hertz and Sarah Anne Sillers share the heroine’s lament “Men”, followed by Chris Beard as he sings the male ingenue’s farewell to his sweetheart just when things look their worst (“Goodnight and Goodbye”).

“**Men**” (*Fie! Fie! Fi-Fi!*, 1914) Music A.L. Booth, Lyrics by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

“**Goodnight and Goodbye**” (*Fie! Fie! Fi-Fi!*, 1914) Music A.L. Booth, Lyrics by F. Scott Fitzgerald.

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