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American Legends: The Life of Fred Astaire

Charles River Editors

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*Includes pictures of Astaire and other important people and scenes.
*Includes Astaire's quotes about his own life and others' quotes about him.
*Includes a bibliography for further reading.
*Includes a table of contents.

"No dancer can watch Fred Astaire and not know that we all should have been in another business." – Mikhail Baryshnikov

A lot of ink has been spilled covering the lives of history's most influential figures, but how much of the forest is lost for the trees? In Charles River Editors' American Legends series, readers can get caught up to speed on the lives of America's most important men and women in the time it takes to finish a commute, while learning interesting facts long forgotten or never known.

Virtually all famous actors are regaled by the public, but even still, Fred Astaire occupies a privileged position in American pop culture. The specific films in which Astaire acted may not be especially famous in their own right - most people likely cannot recall the title of Top Hat (1935), his most decorated film - but Astaire's dancing prowess invariably creates a lasting impact on viewers. Instead of tying his fame to a single film, Astaire's genius lay in constructing his star persona around a specific set of iconographic imagery that has become embedded within American culture. Across his films, the recurring iconic images of the top hat, cane, and coat tails, as well as the image of Astaire dancing with Ginger Rogers, all constitute a timeless symbol for elegance that continues to captivate viewers who are unfamiliar with the plots of his films. There have been other film musical actors who were proficient dancers, Gene Kelly chief among them, but none were able to perform with the seamless elegance of Astaire, and none have been remembered nearly as well.

Astaire's dancing numbers epitomized grace and gaiety, making it seem as though he was carefree, but this was hardly the case. While it is easy to imagine Astaire being raised in an aristocratic family, his working-class background was so blue collar that his family eventually relied on him and his sister as the primary breadwinners in the family. Rather than being born and raised with wealth in a large city, Astaire came from a working-class neighborhood in Omaha, Nebraska, a setting so antithetical to the world of dance that it quickly became clear that the family would need to relocate. If anything, Astaire's unglamorous origins further demonstrate that the magisterial dancing and the effortlessly elegant image accompanying it were products of Astaire's tireless work ethic and insistence on perfection.

Astaire's popularity can in large part be tied to the escapism that his films offered to impoverished Depression-era American audiences, and yet Astaire was a working man, albeit one who labored in the studios of Hollywood rather than the factories of America. Considering the quiet life that he led off the movie set, it can be difficult to disassociate Astaire from his films, and while he may have attempted to project the same image off the screen, the era and his personal background were extremely important. As someone who was born just before the start of the 20th century, Astaire's life sheds light on the developments that occurred in American entertainment, from the stage (where he first performed during his youth) to cinema (the site of his greatest triumphs) and finally to television (a medium Astaire entered at the end of his career.) Astaire's career tends to obscure his all-American success story, one in which hard work

transformed a Nebraska boy from a working-class family into America’s most prominent symbol of grace.

American Legends: The Life of Fred Astaire profiles the life and career of one of America’s most famous entertainers. Along with pictures of important people, places, and events, you will learn about Fred Astaire like you never have before, in no time at all.

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