Fred Astaire

The greatest dancing entertainer in Hollywood was born Frederick Austerlitz to an Austrian immigrant family in Omaha, Nebraska. There was nothing special about his birth, however, he was destined to greatness. The entire Austerlitz family was musically talented. He went on stage at age 5. Fred broke in to Vaudeville with his sister, Adele. She is the one who gave him the name, “Astaire” – from an uncle’s name. Adele and Fred teamed up and performed all over the country in a Vaudeville act. Their mother, Johanna toured with them. Both children were very talented and it showed in their constant bookings.

Fred never recalled having any keen interest in dance or the theater at this time, but described a life-changing incident at a dance school his sister was attending: “The story goes that one time when I had gone with my mother to fetch Adele, I put on a pair of ballet slippers. I found them in a corner while I was dawdling around the place, killing time, waiting for Adele to finish her lesson. I had seen other children walk on their toes, so I put on the slippers and walked on my toes. It was as simple as that”. Although he spent most of his childhood touring on the vaudeville circuit, he would occasionally settle down with his family and their neighbors and friends, who were almost all families of Austrian immigrants.

During the 1920s, Fred and Adele appeared on Broadway and on the London stage in shows, winning acclaim with theater audiences on both sides of the Atlantic. The act had its ups and downs through struggles, Vaudeville strikes and accidents both were involved in. They split in 1932, when she married her first husband, Lord Charles Cavendish. They were inducted into the Theatre Hall of Fame in 1971. Fred went on to achieve success on his own on Broadway and in London with *Gay Divorce*, while receiving offers from Hollywood.

Fred was introduced to a lifelong passion, horse racing, at Belmont Park by several friends and performers. Fred bet on his first horse, Tiger Rose, and won. He continued to "play the ponies" through betting with the bookies who hung around the Broadway dressing room doorways throughout his stage career. It was through horse racing that he met Phyllis Potter, a fragile, gentle beauty who Astaire had noticed at the races at Belmont. When Phyllis finally accepted his marriage proposal, she said; "I think you should go back and investigate your future career. After all, if we are going to be married you'll have to work - won't you?" They were married on July 12, 1933.

A famous story about Fred was a Paramount Pictures screen test report that read simply: "Can't sing. Can't act. Slightly balding. Also dances.” Fred was discouraged but never gave up. In fact he kept the negative review on his mantle for the rest of his life to remind him of how he had overcome the critics to become a success. After a brief detour at MGM in 1933, where he appeared as himself dancing with Joan Crawford in the film *Dancing Lady*, he eventually ended up at RKO Studios, where he made the top musicals of that era, with Ginger Rogers as his costar. They made 10 movies together.
Astaire is credited with two important innovations in early film musicals. First, his insistence that the (almost stationary) camera film a dance routine in a single shot, if possible, while holding the dancers in full view at all times - a policy Astaire maintained from <i>The Gay Divorcee</i> until he was overruled by Francis Ford Coppola during the filming of <i>Finian's Rainbow</i> in 1968. He famously quipped: "Either the camera dances or I do". Second, he was adamant that all song and dance routines be seamlessly integrated into the plotlines of the film. Typically, an Astaire picture would include a solo performance by Astaire - which he termed his "sock solo", a partnered comedy dance routine and a partnered romantic dance routine.

His perfectionism was legendary. So was his modesty and consideration towards his fellow performers, however his relentless insistence on rehearsals and retakes was a burden to some. Although he viewed himself as an entertainer, he is considered by some to have introduced more standards from the Great American Songbook than any other singer. Composers like Cole Porter wrote a number of songs especially for him, such as: "Night and Day", "Cheek to Cheek", "Let's Face the Music and Dance", "The Way You Look Tonight", "A Fine Romance", "They Can't Take that Away from Me", and "Change Partners". Irving Berlin (whom he met early in his career and became a life-long friend), Jerome Kern, and the Gershwins contributed classic songs for his musicals, mainly through his sincere presentation of their songs.

Astaire also teamed up with other stars, notably with Bing Crosby in <i>Holiday Inn</i> (the film that introduced the song “White Christmas” to the world) and <i>Blue Skies</i>. It is rumored that while filming a scene in <i>Holiday Inn</i> where Fred was supposed to be drunk, that he actually took a drink between each take so that he really was drunk during the final film version. If true it shows his determination to do a scene the “perfect way.”

Fred announced his retirement in 1946 but his fans wanted more. He returned to the big screen to replace the injured Gene Kelly in Easter Parade in 1948 opposite Judy Garland, and for a final reunion with Rogers, The Barkleys of Broadway. He then went on to make more musicals throughout the 1950s: <i>Three Little Words</i> and <i>The Belle of New York</i>, <i>The Band Wagon</i>, <i>Silk Stockings</i> and <i>Funny Face</i>, with Audrey Hepburn. His film legacy at this point was thirty musicals over a twenty-five year period. Afterwards, Astaire announced that he was retiring from dancing in film to concentrate on dramatic acting. He received rave reviews for the drama <i>On the Beach</i> in 1959.

Astaire's final musical film was <i>Finian's Rainbow</i> in which he shed his white tie and tails to play an Irish rogue. His last on-screen dance partner was Petula Clark, who portrayed his skeptical daughter. He admitted to being as nervous about singing with her as she confessed to being apprehensive about dancing with him. He continued to act into the 1970s, appearing in films such as <i>The Towering Inferno</i> for which he received his only Academy Award nomination in the category of Best Supporting Actor. He appeared in the first two <i>That's Entertainment!</i> documentaries in the mid-1970s, in the second performing a song-and-dance routine with Gene Kelly. In 1976, he
recorded a disco-styled rendition of Carly Simon's "Attitude Dancing". In 1978, Fred Astaire co-starred with Helen Hayes in a well-received television film, A Family Upside Down, in which they play an elderly couple coping with failing health. Fred won an Emmy Award for his performance along side Helen Hayes for A Family Upside Down. His final film was <i>Ghost Story</i> in 1981.

His life and career were award – winning. 1958's <i>An Evening with Fred Astaire</i>, won nine Emmy Awards, including "Best Single Performance by an Actor" and "Most Outstanding Single Program of the Year." It was also noteworthy for being the first major broadcast to be prerecorded on color videotape. He received an honorary Academy Award in 1950 "for his unique artistry and his contributions to the technique of musical pictures." He also won Emmys in 1961 and 1978. He received the first-ever Kennedy Center Honors in 1978. Fred made over 40 movies, both musicals and dramas, performed in 16 television shows, which began his theatre career as a “triple-threat” (acting, dancing and singing) on the stage with his sister, Adele. As a tribute to his talent, he was once chosen as the "Entertainer of the Century" with almost thirty years left before the century ended. His legacy continues today as his movies are shown continuously.

Permission is granted to reprint this article provided the following paragraph is included in full:

Jim Mathis, CSP is an international Certified Speaking Professional, executive coach and trainer. To subscribe to his free personal and professional development newsletter, please send an email to: subscribe@jimmathis.com with the word SUBSCRIBE in the subject. An electronic copy will be sent out to you every month. For more information on how Jim and his programs can benefit your organization or group, please call 888-688-0220, or visit his web site: www.jimmathis.com.