

THE HISTORY OF HER LIFE IS IN HER SONGS...

by John Fricke

CHASING RAINBOWS

Before *Meet Me in St. Louis*, *Easter Parade*, *A Star is Born*, and *Judgment at Nuremberg*. Before *Judy* at Carnegie Hall, at The Palace, at The Palladium. Before the top-rated TV specials and the acclaimed television series. Before the charting singles and record albums and the hundreds of national radio appearances. Before the Tony, Grammy, and special “Oscar” awards, the Golden Globes, the Emmy and Academy Award nominations. Before she was billed—and unequivocally endorsed—as “Miss Show Business” and the “World’s Greatest Entertainer”....

Before all of that, she was simply (if magically) “the little girl with the great big voice.”



The Gumm sisters: Mary Jane, Virginia and Frances (Judy Garland).

She was Judy Garland, and *Chasing Rainbows* is Goodspeed’s unique new musical that tells her life story across those early vaudeville-to-Hollywood years. Conceived by Tina Maria Casamento Libby, the show imaginatively recreates Judy’s world from 1927 to 1938, following her from age five to sixteen. It was the era in which she traversed a show business path that led from her beginnings as an unknown to her status as a theatrical wunderkind, to her passage

through the gates of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and to that iconic role as “Dorothy Gale...from Kansas” in the classic 1939 film version of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Because she was Judy Garland, that pre-Oz period was as fraught with excitement, laughter, drama, and song as all that followed. She debuted on stage at thirty months: Baby Frances Ethel Gumm of Grand Rapids, Minnesota, performing solo and with her two older sisters—and all of them trained by an ambitious mother and doting father. Soon thereafter, the Gumm Family forsook the Midwest for Southern California, and “Baby Gumm’s” increasing series of theater performances with her sisters on the West Coast were augmented by appearances on local radio and in short movie musicals.

From the onset, Baby was the trio’s stand-out. Even then, critics responded to her God-given, prodigious talent, charisma, communicative power, and overwhelming desire to please. The reviews between the late-1920s and the mid-1930s cite her “remarkable work” and her “pip of a low-down voice”—“with twice the charm and genuine ability of all the [movie child stars] put together.” The universal summation was always the same: “Her singing and dancing literally stopped the show.”

Initial Hollywood interest in The Gumm Sisters seldom went beyond the talking stage, but everything changed when the oldest sibling got married and broke up the act. In short order, then-thirteen-year-old Baby was touted on her own. As a result, the intense determination of her mother finally paid off, and MGM signed the recently-renamed Judy Garland to a long-term pact.

All of this is related in *Chasing Rainbows*, incorporating the cast of real-life characters with whom she interacted: Mickey Rooney, Shirley Temple, Clark Gable, Lana Turner, Deanna Durbin, George Jessel, and Louis B. Mayer among them. Most importantly, the emotionally true script by Marc Acito embraces the behind-the-scenes events that formed and focused Judy Garland: the approbation from her peers and audiences, the initial rejections by corporate Hollywood, the executives who derided her as “not pretty enough” for the movies, the dream-come-true of an MGM contract, and—predominantly—her parents’ troubled marriage and her own desire to succeed... simply in the hope that her achievement and income would stabilize her family.

Best of all, the narrative of *Chasing Rainbows* is happily, frequently interspersed with the classic American popular songs so intrinsic to that time and to the very foundation of Judy Garland’s saga: “Over the Rainbow,” “Dear Mr. Gable: You Made Me Love You,” “Zing! Went the Strings of My Heart,” “Broadway Rhythm,” “I’m Always Chasing Rainbows,” “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love,” and a dozen more. The musical numbers have been evocatively arranged by David Libby.

It’s now safe to say that Judy Garland’s accomplishments and her hold on the imaginations, emotions, and hearts of cross-generational audiences remain unsurpassed—and seldom, if ever, equaled. In song and story, *Chasing Rainbows* recounts her adventures on the road to Oz, and how she became and remains a timeless, cherished, and undeniable entertainment legend.

John Fricke is widely-regarded as the preeminent Garland and Wizard of Oz historian; his seven books on those topics have sold a quarter-million copies. He is the recipient of two Emmy Awards as co-producer and co-writer of the PBS “American Masters” Judy Garland: By Myself, and the A&E “Biography” special, *Judy: Beyond the Rainbow*, as well as a Grammy Award-nominee for the liner notes accompanying the 25th Anniversary Retrospective Garland CD for Capitol/EMI. He serves as Creative Consultant for *Chasing Rainbows*.