

This Day in History... January 16, 1908

Birth of Ethel Merman

Ethel Agnes Zimmermann was born on January 16, 1908, in Astoria, Queens, New York. Known as the “Queen of Broadway,” her dazzling career lasted more than 50 years.

Merman attended William Cullen Bryant High School, where she trained for secretarial work. She participated in several extracurricular activities including the school’s magazine, speakers’ club, and student council. Every weekend, her family went to watch vaudeville shows at the Palace Theatre. After graduating, Merman worked as a stenographer during the day and sang at private parties and nightclubs in the evenings. Around this time, she decided to change her name, because it was too long for a theater marquee. She dropped the “Zim” and the final “n” from her name, to become Ethel Merman.

Merman appeared in her first movie in 1930, Paramount’s *Follow the Leader*. That same year, a theater producer saw her performing at the Palace Theatre and convinced her to audition for George and Ira Gershwin’s new musical, *Girl Crazy*. She performed “I Got Rhythm” and they immediately cast her in the role of Kate Fothergill. The play opened to positive reviews in October 1930 and ran for 272 performances. One review said Merman sang “with dash, authority, good voice, and just the right knowing style.”



Merman got her big break in the Gershwin musical *Girl Crazy*.

Merman was soon juggling the play and live concerts at three venues, plus she was contracted for 10 short musical films for Paramount. After a very brief vacation, she was hired to help improve *George White's Scandals*, which ran for 202 performances on Broadway. She then appeared in the musical *Take a Chance* and the films *We're Not Dressing* and *Kid Millions*.

In 1934, Merman appeared in the first five Cole Porter musicals – *Anything Goes*. Her performance was widely applauded as “vivacious and ingratiating... the embodiment of poise and technical adroitness.” Two years later she reprised her role in the film version of the musical, but it was heavily edited to meet Hollywood guidelines and Merman was unhappy with the final product.

Merman remained busy appearing in several films and Broadway musicals. She was a favored performer for many of the major songwriters of the day, including Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, and Rodgers and Hammerstein. In 1945, Dorothy Fields asked Merman to star in a musical about Annie Oakley. *Annie Get Your Gun* ran for nearly three years with 1,147 performances. Merman starred in the Broadway revival of the play two decades later.

In 1950, Merman won a Tony Award for her performance in *Call Me Madam*. And in 1953, she won a Golden Globe for performance in the film adaptation. Merman then took the lead role in *Happy Hunting*, which ran for 412 performances. In 1959, she took on perhaps her most famous role, as Rose Hovick in *Gypsy*. After that musical ran for 702 performances, Merman went on a national tour, performing to packed houses despite a back injury. She then appeared in the hit comedy film *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad, Mad World*, which was the one of the top-grossing films of 1963.

Merman appeared on several television shows including *That Girl*, *The Lucy Show*, *Match Game*, *Batman*, *Tarzan*, and more. The musical *Hello, Dolly!* was composed specifically for Merman to star in, but she turned it down initially. Six years after it opened, she joined the cast and received frequent standing ovations and high praise in her reviews. The play closed in December 1970 and was Merman’s final Broadway show. She recorded an album of her classic songs set to a disco beat in the 1970s. In 1972, Merman was awarded a special Tony Award in recognition of her lifetime contribution to show business.

Merman suffered from brain cancer in her later years and died on February 15, 1984. That night, all the lights on Broadway were dimmed in her honor.



Merman was a self-taught singer who was described as “a doll from Astoria with a trumpet in her throat.”



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