

“When You Wish Upon a Star”—Cliff Edwards (recorded 1938, released 1940)

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Essay by James M. Bohn (guest essay)*



Cliff Edwards

Given the dramatic contour of the melody, and the well-crafted, optimistic message of the lyrics, the success of “When You Wish Upon a Star” is not surprising. It won an Academy Award for Best Song, was named by ASCAP as the most performed feature film standard, and was declared the seventh greatest song from a movie by the American Film Institute. The tune has also become a corporate anthem for The Walt Disney Company, suitably encapsulating the company’s common theme of dreams and wishes. However, this use of corporate exploitation in no way diminishes the perfection of this well-crafted song, its sentiment, or its impeccable performance.

Born in Hannibal, Missouri, in 1895, Cliff Edwards started singing in saloons when he was 14 years old. He took up the ukulele, as he had no one to accompany him, and it was the cheapest accompanying instrument he could find. Dubbed “Ukulele Ike” by a waiter at Chicago’s Arsonia Café, who had trouble remembering his name, the nickname stuck for the rest of his career. He took to the vaudeville circuit with pianist Bob Carleton, later joining Joe Frisco as part of his headlining act.

Edwards started recording in 1919, signing with Pathé Records the following year. In the ‘20s he had recordings on Banner, Columbia, Perfect, and Regal as well. By 1922, he was performing in a blackface act with Lou Clayton, a practice that has been considered reprehensible for the past half century, but was a common form of popular entertainment in the early decades of the 20th century. Edwards starred in several Broadway musicals in the ‘20s, including “Lady Be Good” by George and Ira Gershwin. Years before Gene Kelly sang “Singin’ in the Rain,” Edwards performed the number in “The Hollywood Revue of 1929.”

Edwards had been a popular entertainer throughout America for nearly two decades by the time the Disney Studios tapped him to voice a character in their forthcoming film, “Pinocchio.” That character would become Jiminy Cricket, a role that would color the rest of his career. According

to noted Disney historian J. B. Kaufman, Edwards was the only actor ever considered for the part.

By the time Leigh Harline had assigned to write the score and songs for “Pinocchio,” he had worked on the score for “Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs,” and had scored about 50 film shorts, including “The Band Concert,” “Music Land,” and “The Old Mill.” Harline was a formally trained composer who had studied at the University of Utah. Before joining Disney in 1932, he had worked in radio in Los Angeles as composer, conductor, performer, vocalist, and announcer.

By the time Ned Washington was brought on board for “Pinocchio,” he was a notable lyricist, having co-written a number of well-known tunes, such as “Singin’ in the Bathtub” (with Herb Magidson and Michael Cleary), “I’m Getting Sentimental Over You” (with George Bassman), and “The Nearness of You” (with Hoagy Carmichael). The Disney Studios lawyer, Gunther Lessing, signed Washington to a short-term contract in late April, 1938, nearly two years before the movie’s premiere. Like Edwards, Washington was a vaudeville alumnus. Having worked as an emcee, he started writing lyrics in the late ‘20s on Broadway for “Earl Carroll’s Vanities.” Washington then moved to Hollywood in 1934 to work at MGM.

“When You Wish Upon a Star” is in 32 bar form (A-A-B-A), a common format for Tin Pan Alley tunes. The iconic lyrics are framed by having “oo” rhymes at the end of each A section (“you,” “do,” “true”). The lyrics for the middle eight starts with word “fate” and closes out with the word “longing,” providing a passing suggestion of the sadness that makes the fulfillment of a wish so satisfying.

The melody of the tune is really, if you’ll pardon the pun, the star of the song, functioning as a metaphor for wishes and dreams. Commencing with an octave leap, the first two measures sequence up a third. This upwards ascent is then balanced by stepwise motion downward. The middle eight also features a gradual ascent that mirrors the optimism of the lyrics. The performance of the song that appears at the beginning of the film takes advantage of the substantial vocal range possessed by Cliff Edwards. The final note of the song is a high B, a full two octaves above the lowest note of the melody, which is also the tune’s first note. Ending on the dominant, as the song is presented in E major, lends a lack of melodic resolution that reflects the unfulfilled nature of dreams and wishes.

There were two recordings of Cliff Edwards singing “When You Wish Upon a Star” released when “Pinocchio” first hit the silver screen. The RCA Victor release 26477A is the recording that appears in the movie. This was part of a three-record set that also contained screen-used recordings of “Little Wooden Head,” “Give a Little Whistle,” “Hi Diddle Dee Dee,” and “I’ve Got No Strings.” The final side of the set, 26479-B, contains the finale where “Turn on the Old Music Box” transitions into the version of “When You Wish Upon a Star” that concludes the feature.

Decca Records 3000A contains a version of “When You Wish Upon a Star” with Edwards backed by Victor Young and his Orchestra with the Ken Darby Singers. Not to be outdone by RCA Victor, this was part of a four-record set that also included “I’ve Got No Strings,” “Turn on

the Old Music Box,” “Little Wooden Head,” “Jiminy Cricket,” “Three Cheers for Anything,” “Give a Little Whistle,” and “Hi Diddle Dee Dee.” Again, all of these recordings were made with Victor Young and the Ken Darby Singers. The 3000A recording of “When You Wish Upon a Star” includes an eight-bar vocal introduction. The performance rendered by Edwards in this version is rhythmically more relaxed, lending a casual air. Regardless of which recording you listen to, the song reaches upward, aspiring and inspiring us to be hopeful, and to not be afraid to wish.

James Bohn is a composer and scholar on the faculty of Stonehill College, where he directs of the music program. His music has been performed internationally as well as throughout the United States and has appeared on several recording labels. In addition to “Music in Disney’s Animated Features: Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs to The Jungle Book,” he wrote a book about composer Lejaren Hiller.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.