

THE MERRY MONOHANS

Universal, 1944. Directed by Charles Lamont; written and produced by Michael Fessier and Ernest Pagano; photographed by Charles Van Enger; musical direction by Hans J. Salter; dance directors Louis Da Pron and Carlos Romero.

With Donald O'Connor, Peggy Ryan, Jack Oakie, Ann Blyth, Rosemary De Camp, John Miljan, Gavin Muir, Isabel Jewell, Ian Wolfe, Robert Homans, Marion Martin, and Lloyd Ingraham.

During the war years, Universal took their contract players like Jane Frazee, Grace MacDonald, Robert Paige and Eddie Quillan and put them into an endless group of "B" musicals that rapidly became as stereotyped as the "B" western--and a good deal less exciting. As a more elaborate off-shoot of these "B"s, Universal launched a group of more elaborate musical comedies starring Donald O'Connor, erstwhile child actor. Rather rigidly restricted to their period, with wartime plotlines and much contemporary slang and jive-talk which has of course dated incredibly, they were not only salvaged but turned into big boxoffice successes by the sheer personality and song-and-dance trouping of Donald O'Connor. Few of them utilised his talents to the full, as such later films as Singing in the Rain amply proved, and their scripts indicated that Universal had never forgotten their "B" picture parenthood. But not a few of them had a good deal of charm and spirit, with The Merry Monohans stacking up quite as one of the best, perhaps because its writer-producers, Fessier and Pagano, were actually more concerned with plot and characterization than they were with songs. Although a number of the films had musical elements, they scored best with off-beat comedy, one of their most enjoyable works in this period being San Diego, I Love You. In any event, The Merry Monohans is an unpretentious but thoroughly enjoyable little film, typical of its genre, yet certainly transcending it.

FOOTLIGHT SERENADE

20th Century-Fox, 1942. Directed by Gregory Ratoff; produced by William LeBaron; screenplay by Robert Ellis, Helen Logan and Lynn Starling from an original story, "Dynamite", by Fidel LaBarba and Kenneth Earl; music and lyrics by Leo Robin and Ralph Rainger; dance director Hermes Pan; art director Richard Day; photographed by Lee Garmes.

With Betty Grable, John Payne, Victor Mature, Jane Wyman, Phil Silvers, James Gleason, Cobina Wright Jr., June Lang, Frank Orth, Mantan Moreland, Irving Bacon, Charles Tannen, and George Dobbs.

Fox's contribution to the musical cycle in the very early days of sound was quantitatively small, but qualitatively high, with Sunny Side Up as a genuine standout. In the mid-thirties however, they developed a successful formula for medium-budget

black-and-white musicals with interchangeable plots, cliches and stars: Alice Faye, Sonja Henie, the Ritz Brothers and Don Ameche going through a decidedly lack-lustre parade of shows with radio or vaudeville backgrounds, with occasionally a much doctored biography thrown in for good measure. The war years saw no major change in their formula, merely a tremendous new boom in popularity for the genre, and thus a willingness to spend more on the film, this in turn leading to a greater stress on Technicolor. Betty Grable gradually replaced Alice Faye as their top musical star, her undeniable sex appeal making her an armed forces' pin-up favorite, a position for which Faye's quite and wholesome charm was now too tame. Actually, the magnetic Grable personality and vivacious dancing ability, so amply demonstrated on Broadway, had to be toned down for a very Production Code-conscious Hollywood, and her sensuous attributes were not exploited as much as they might have been in a later era. Since the Grable musicals were guaranteed box-office blockbusters, it's interesting that the best ones were those in black-and-white, where money not spent on color and large sets could have been diverted into better stories and casts. Footlight Serenade admittedly isn't an example of literary genius, but its plot moves and has a little more common sense to it than such empty if bigger color films as Coney Island, Pin Up Girl, and Song of the Islands. Moreover, Lee Garmes--one of the best cameramen in Hollywood--is able to give a glistening and glossy photographic veneer denied to her color films. None of the Fox musicals were great in the sense that Love Me Tonight or Singing in the Rain were great, but Footlight Serenade is one of the most enjoyable, and certainly one of Betty Grable's best.

--notes by William K. Everson