

# Early Female Musical Writers Discovered Through Copyright Records

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Ben West, director, performer, and musical theater historian, discovered what appears to be the first musical registered with the Copyright Office written solely by a woman. In 1905, Clare Kummer registered her musical *Noah's Ark*.

West discovered the *Noah's Ark* registration while researching *The Show Time! Trilogy*, a three-part documentary about the history of American musical theater from the mid-1800s through 1999. *Show Time! The First 100 Years of the American Musical*, the primary entry, charts the evolution and cultural impact of the form; *45 Minutes from Coontown*, focuses on black musical theatre writers; and *68 Ways to Go*, focuses on female musical theatre writers. West conducted much of his research for the trilogy at the Library of Congress, including the Copyright Records Reading Room.

"Since much of my focus involves works written prior to 1978, the cutoff year for electronic copyright records, I have spent a significant amount of time in the Copyright Office," said West. "Though the Office offers a service to assist researchers and patrons in their respective quests, I am very much a hands-on investigator. As such, I have enjoyed tremendously my time in the Office navigating the seemingly endless—and endlessly surprising—card catalog of copyright entries."

West began researching Kummer for the first installment of *The Show Time! Trilogy*. He said of the research:

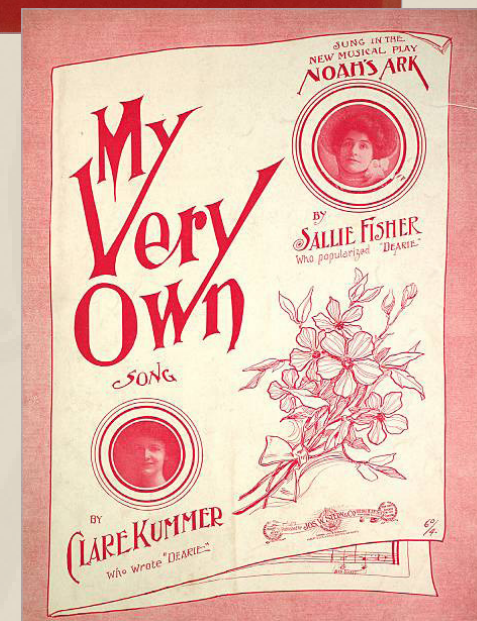
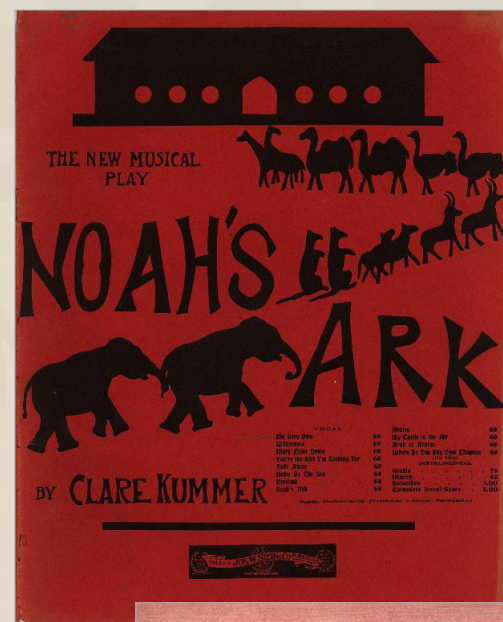
Perhaps best-known for scripting such hits as *Good Gracious*, *Annabelle* and *A Successful Calamity*, Ms. Kummer kick-started her theatrical career in 1905 as a songwriter, penning the beloved blockbuster "Dearie," which was interpolated into the American production of the London smash *Sergeant Brue*. That same year, the budding writer would further extend her musical talents, reportedly signing a three-year, three-show deal with producer Henry W. Savage. It was further reported that the pair's first offering, "to be completed by October 1 and produced early in the season," would be *Noah's Ark*.

Though it was originally written, copyrighted, and announced for production in 1905, *Noah's Ark* remained docked until April 22, 1907, when it would make its premiere at the Academy of Music in Baltimore under the auspices of Maurice J. Lehmyer.

But Clare Kummer's self-described "dramatic event in history, and its result, set to music" never reached New York. Following its well-received Baltimore premiere and a subsequent stop in DC during which outside director Julian Mitchell reportedly doctored the show, *Noah's Ark* ran aground . . . on its way to Pittsburgh. On May 26, 1907, *The Washington Post* cheekily cracked, "The dramatic department of *The Post* will offer a reward to anyone who can find the missing play."

Though the adventures of *Noah's Ark* end with its scrapped Pennsylvania pilgrimage, the decidedly obscure musical remains historically significant, for it appears to have been the first full-length American musical written entirely by a woman.

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Cover of the musical play "Noah's Ark", above, and cover of the sheet music to the song "My Very Own" from the musical play "Noah's Ark" by Clare Kummer.

West noted that in the early-1900s, star performers often interpolated their own specialty material into existing musicals. “My research has found that at least two such items were interpolated into *Noah’s Ark* specifically for its star, Harry Bulger: ‘Come Along With Me’ by William Jerome and Jean Schwartz, and ‘Re-incarnation’ by E. Ray Goetz and Vincent Bryan,” he said. “Nonetheless, as written, Clare Kummer remains sole author of the musical that is *Noah’s Ark*. And indeed, copyright records confirm her sole authorship, and have further revealed a copy of the musical’s original script, which now resides in the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress.”

While researching Kummer, West found the musical *Topsy and Eva*, with a book by Catherine Cushing and a score by vaudeville stars Rosetta and Vivian Duncan. Unlike *Noah’s Ark*, this musical, which was a liberal jazz-infused adaption of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, made it to Broadway, and it appears to be the first full-length Broadway musical written entirely by women. West found that the original *Topsy and Eva* script was deposited to the Copyright Office and is now in the Library’s Music Division collections.

West talked about the importance of copyright, specifically how it relates to musicals and the theater. “Fundamentally, copyright is crucial for safeguarding intellectual property,” he said. “With regard to my work as an author and historian more specifically, copyright has proven invaluable. *The Show Time! Trilogy*, for example, traces the evolution and cultural impact of the American musical from

the mid-1800s thru 1999. As such, I am regularly investigating older, unpublished, and out-of-print material. Copyright has proven a remarkable resource and especially fruitful, yielding countless pieces of rare sheet music, and several librettos for lesser-known but nonetheless significant stage shows.”

Copyright records are valuable resources for researchers on so many levels. These records help make it so that, as Kummer noted on the title page of *Noah’s Ark*, “All things are possible . . . in fact more than likely.” ©



PHOTO BY KRIS ROGERS

Ben West, creator and performer of “The Show Time! Trilogy.”



Clare Kummer at the piano, above. “My Very Own” from the musical play “Noah’s Ark” registration card.