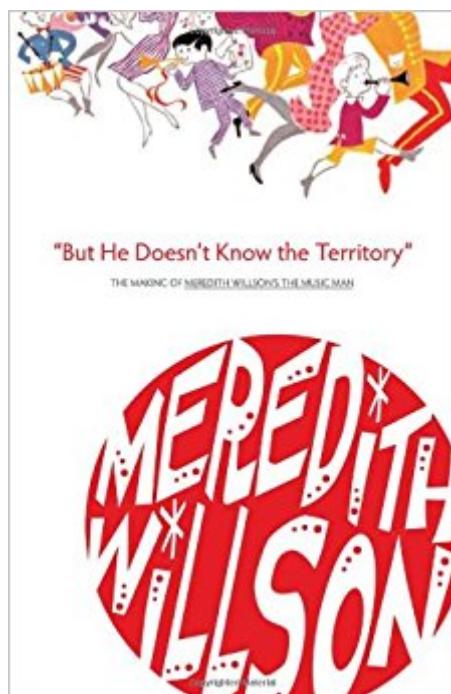


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# But He Doesn't Know The Territory: The Making Of Meredith Willson's The Music Man



## Synopsis

Composer Meredith Willson once described The Music Man as “an Iowan” attempt to pay tribute to his home state. Never once forgetting his roots, Willson reflects on the ups and downs, surprises and disappointments, and finally successes of the making of one of America’s most popular musicals. His whimsical, personable writing style will bring readers back in time with him to the 1950s to experience firsthand the exciting trials and tribulations of creating a Broadway masterpiece. A newfound admiration for The Music Man—and the man behind the music—is sure to follow.

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## Customer Reviews

“Dollars to doughnuts, Meredith Willson dotes on brass bands. In The Music Man, he has translated the thump and razzle-dazzle of brass-band lore into a warm and genial cartoon of American life.”  
—Brooks Atkinson, New York Times, 1957

Meredith Willson (1902–1984) was a renowned composer, songwriter, and musician. He is best known for composing The Music Man and The Unsinkable Molly Brown.

I very much enjoyed this book. It took a while to get into it, as Meredith Willson's writing style is very colloquial. Once the story gets into the development of the play and the description of how the production got off the ground, it becomes very enjoyable. My only regret is that this book only

follows the development of the musical through its opening night on Broadway. If it had carried through to the duration of the play on Broadway and the development and production of the movie version, it would have been more enjoyable. As it is, it ends just as the opening night concludes. And it does so very abruptly. Overall, an enjoyable read.

I can't rate this highly enough. Meredith Willson takes the reader inside his head and into his life during the years he spent writing and developing "The Music Man", one of the greatest American musicals. While his trademark wit and wry laconic humor effortlessly lead the reader through the story, his deep passion and rare intelligence shine through. The book takes you through every twist and turn right up to the curtain on opening night. You learn the slow tortuous process of gradually getting every detail perfect in what we now know as an apparently effortlessly perfect show. Readers who love theatre, musicals, and the history of show business shouldn't miss this wonderful book. It was written and published very shortly after the show's initial success, and every word feels fresh and alive with the feelings of events that have just happened. What a treasure!

One critical reviewer found this book too wholesome. It is indeed wholesome, G-rated if it were a movie. But isn't that exactly what one would expect from the writer/composer of *The Music Man*, which is probably the most wholesome musical ever produced? I found it filled with wonderful stories, nearly all of them heart-warming, one of the rare books that make you feel better while reading them, and afterwards, than you did when you started. Willson's style is a kind of mix of Garrison Keilor and Damon Runyon. I couldn't put it down, read it all in a single day and enjoyed every moment of it. Highly recommended.

Interesting behind-the-scenes story about how "The Music Man" came together. You probably need to be a serious fan of the musical/movie to really appreciate this. I was hoping for a little more detail in the section where the on-stage product was developing. That seemed a little light, compared to the space devoted to the very early development of the script and putting together the production team. When we got to the part about the actual rehearsing and off-Broadway opening, the pace moved almost too quickly. However, Willson writes with a fun, light style that helps relay his sense of amazement of what was happening. A very entertaining read.

I learned of the reprint of this book as I was rehearsing a community theatre production of "Meredith Willson's The Music Man." I purchased this and his earlier one (also just republished) "And There I

Stood With My Piccolo". If you know the show, or are interested in Americana, you will enjoy this book. It's a breezy read, full of the trials and tribulations of trying to follow a dream when you don't exactly know how to do it. The show took many years to form; Willson, a band leader, radio music director and arranger, had never written a musical before, and the ups and downs of the process in the 1950s, even when you "know people", is conveyed in a hilarious and entertaining way. There are some wonderful down-to-earth narratives in it. I am in the Barbershop Quartet in the show, and was fascinated by his explanation of why he hired a real BSQ for the cast before anyone else, and why he wanted BSQ music in his play. If you are intrigued by the creative process, by the energetic telling of a true story, or by musical theater, you will truly be glad you picked up this book. It was passed on to our Harold Hill, Mrs. Shinn and others, and the last I saw it was on my table in the dressing room where it disappeared! I hope it is still being enjoyed...

This is a marvelous book for anyone who is in the cult of Meredith Willson (that is, anyone who knows his name has two 'L's) or for anyone who is in the cult of The Music Man (may its name be praised). Anyone else will probably find it too dated or obscure to really enjoy. For those of us in both cults, it's a very juicy read, full of tidbits about songs and character developments. For instance: Winthrop didn't originally lisp; in early drafts he was a "spastic," as they called it in those days, and a genius composer. There are tons of gems like that packed throughout, and great insider details about producers, tryouts, casting, the Buffalo Bills (one of the quartet quit his job as a Buffalo cop to take the Broadway job), etc, etc, etc. Willson's super-breezy writing style works well for him here. But (as with The Music Man itself) it's not really a style anyone else attempts, or should. Great stuff.

When directing a musical for our local community theatre, we like to know everything we can about the show. This book tells the complete story of the process involved in writing THE MUSIC MAN, one of the classic all-American shows of the Broadway stage. The years-long effort is a fascinating study, but it's written with a great deal of home-spun humor by Meredith Willson, who wrote the libretto, the melodies and the lyrics--including "Till There Was You," and "76 Trombones." It's a fun read for almost anyone--especially if you have a love of musical theatre.

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