

Alice Faye

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Born	Alice Jeanne Leppert May 5, 1915 New York City, New York, U.S.
Died	May 9, 1998 (aged 83) Rancho Mirage, California , U.S.
Occupation	Actress, singer
Years active	1931–98
Spouse(s)	Phil Harris (1941–95) (his death) 2 children Tony Martin (1937–40)

Alice Faye (May 5, 1915 – May 9, 1998) was an American actress and singer, called by *The New York Times* "one of the few [movie](#) stars to walk away from stardom at the peak of her career."^[1] She is remembered first for her stardom at [20th Century Fox](#) and, later, as the [radio comedy](#) partner of her [husband](#), bandleader and comedian [Phil Harris](#). She is also often associated with the [Academy Award](#)–winning standard "[You'll Never Know](#)", which she introduced in the 1943 [musical film](#) *[Hello, Frisco, Hello](#)*.

Early life

Born **Alice Jeanne Leppert** in [New York City](#), she was the daughter of a New York police officer of [German](#) descent and his [Irish-American wife](#), Charles and Alice Moffit Leppert. Faye's entertainment career began in [vaudeville](#) as a chorus [girl](#) (she failed an audition for the [Ziegfeld Follies](#) when it was revealed she was too young), before she moved to [Broadway](#) and a featured role in the 1931 edition of *[George White's Scandals](#)*. By this time, she had adopted her stage [name](#) and first reached a radio audience on [Rudy Vallée's](#) *The Fleischmann Hour* (1932–1934), where she may have met her future husband and comedy partner, [Phil Harris](#).

Meanwhile, she gained her first major film break in 1934, when [Lilian Harvey](#) abandoned the lead role in a film version of *[George White's 1935 Scandals](#)*, in which Vallée was also to appear. Hired first to perform a musical number with Vallée, Faye ended up as the female lead. She became a hit with film audiences of the 1930s, particularly when Fox production head [Darryl F. Zanuck](#) made her his protégé. He softened Faye from a wisecracking show girl to a youthful, yet somewhat motherly figure such as she played in a few [Shirley Temple](#) films.^[2]

Faye also received a physical makeover, from being something of a singing version of [Jean Harlow](#) to

sporting a softer look with a more natural tone to her blonde hair and more mature makeup, including losing the notorious "pencil" eyebrows. Considered less than [serious](#) as an actress and more than serious as a singer, Faye nailed what many critics consider her best acting performance in 1937's [In Old Chicago](#). The film was also extremely memorable for its twenty-minute ending, a recreation of the [Great Chicago Fire](#), a scene so dangerous that women, except for the main [stars](#), were banned from the set. Her co-stars in that film were [Tyrone Power](#) and [Don Ameche](#), two of Faye's most frequent co-stars, as it was customary for studios to pair its contract players together in more than one film.

Faye, Power, and Ameche were reunited for 1938's [Alexander's Ragtime Band](#). Although the film was mainly designed to showcase over twenty [Irving Berlin](#) songs, Faye again received strong reviews and the film was considered a landmark from changing the status of musicals as light, frivolous fare to a respectable film genre. One of the most expensive films for its time, it also became one of the most successful musicals of the 1930s.

By 1939, Faye was named one of the top ten box office draws in Hollywood. That year she made [Rose of Washington Square](#) with Tyrone Power. Although a big hit, the film was [supposedly](#) based on the real life of comedienne [Fanny Brice](#), and Brice sued Fox for stealing her story.

Because of her bankable status, Fox occasionally placed Faye in films that were put together more for the sake of [making money](#) than showcasing Faye's talents. Films like [Tail Spin](#) and [Barricade](#) (both 1939) were more dramatic in nature than regular Faye films and often did not contain any songs for Faye to sing. But due to her immense popularity, none of the films that she made in the 1930s and 1940s lost money.

In 1940, Faye played one of her most memorable roles, the title role in the musical biopic [Lillian Russell](#). Faye always named this film as one of her personal favorites, but it was also her most challenging role. The tight corsets Faye wore for this picture caused Faye to collapse on the set several times and it shrunk her waist six inches.

After declining the lead role [Down Argentine Way](#), due to an illness, Faye was replaced by the studio's newest musical star, [Betty Grable](#). She was paired as a sister act opposite Grable in the film [Tin Pan Alley](#), later that same year. During the making of the picture, a rumor arose that there was a rivalry between Faye and Grable. In a *Biography* interview, Faye admitted that the Fox publicity department built up the rumor, but she was otherwise very close to Grable. Over time, Grable would become Fox's top musical star, but her value did nothing to diminish Faye's success. Grable would also take many movie roles that were initially designed with Faye in mind.

In 1941, Fox began to place Faye in musicals photographed in Technicolor, a trademark for the studio in the 1940s. She frequently played a performer, often one moving up in society, allowing for situations that ranged from the poignant to the comic. Films such as [Week-End in Havana](#) (1941) and [That Night in Rio](#) (1941), where she played a Brazilian aristocrat, made good use of Faye's husky singing voice, solid comic timing, and flair for carrying off the era's starry-eyed romantic storylines.

In 1943, after taking a year off to have her first daughter, Faye starred in the Technicolor musical [Hello, Frisco, Hello](#). Released at the height of World War II, the film became one of Faye's personal favorites and one of her highest-grossing pictures for Fox. It was in this film that Faye sang "[You'll Never Know](#)." The [song](#) won the [Academy Award for Best Song](#) for 1943 and the sheet [music](#) for the song sold over a million copies. However, since there was a clause in her contract (as was the case with most other Fox stars) stating that she could not officially record any of her movie songs, other singers like [Dick Haymes](#) (whose version hit #1 for four weeks), [Frank Sinatra](#), and [Rosemary Clooney](#) have been more associated with the song than Faye. However, it is still often considered Faye's signature song. That year, Faye was once again named one of the top box office draws in the world.

End of motion picture career

As Faye's star continued to ascend during the war years, [family](#) life became more important to her, especially with the arrival of a second daughter, Phyllis. After her birth, Faye signed a new contract with Fox to make only one picture a year, with the option of a second one, in order to give Faye a chance to spend more time with her family. But Faye also used this as an opportunity to campaign for serious roles, turning down numerous scripts in the process.

Faye finally accepted the lead role in [Fallen Angel](#), whose title became only too telling, as circumstances turned out. Designed ostensibly as Faye's vehicle, the film all but became her celluloid epitaph when Zanuck, trying to build his new protege [Linda Darnell](#), ordered many Faye scenes cut and Darnell emphasized. When Faye saw a screening of the [final](#) product, she drove away from the Fox studio refusing to return, feeling she had been undercut deliberately by Zanuck.


According to her obituary in the *New York Times*, "Ms. Faye handed the keys to her dressing room to the studio gate guard and drove off the lot." In 1987 she told an interviewer, "When I stopped making pictures, it didn't bother me because there were so many things I hadn't done. I had never learned to run a house. I didn't know how to cook. I didn't know how to [shop](#). So all these things filled all those gaps."[\[3\]](#)

Zanuck hit back, it is said, by having Faye [blackballed](#) for [breach of contract](#), effectively ending her film career. Released in [1945](#), [Fallen Angel](#) was Faye's last film as a major [Hollywood](#) star. Ironically, for several years after, Zanuck tried to bring Faye back onto the screen with major roles in films such as [The Dolly Sisters](#), [A Tree Grows in Brooklyn](#), [The Razor's Edge](#), and [Wabash Avenue](#), which would give her the chance to [work](#) opposite her husband, Phil Harris.

Seventeen years after the *Fallen Angel* debacle, Faye went before the cameras again, in [1962](#)'s [State Fair](#). While Faye received good reviews, the film was not a great success, and she made only infrequent cameo appearances in films thereafter, most notable playing a secretary in the critically panned all-star flop, [Won Ton Ton, the Dog Who Saved Hollywood](#), in 1976.

Marriage and radio career

Faye's first marriage, to [Tony Martin](#) in 1937, ended in divorce in 1940. A year later, however, she married [Phil Harris](#). This marriage became a plotline on an episode of the hit radio show hosted by Harris's then-employer, [Jack Benny](#), which struck platinum, both in Faye's personal and in her professional life.

 The couple had two daughters, Alice (b. 1942) and Phyllis (b. 1944), along with Harris's adopted son from his first marriage, Phil Harris, Jr. (b. 1935), and they began working in radio together as Faye's film career declined. First, they teamed to [host](#) a variety show on [NBC](#), *The Fitch Bandwagon*, in 1946. Originally conceived as a music showcase, the Harrises' gently-tart comedy sketches made them the show's breakout stars. By 1948, Fitch bowed away as sponsor in favor of [Rexall](#), the [pharmaceutical](#) giant, and the show, now a strictly [situation comedy](#) with a music interlude each from husband and wife, was renamed *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show*.

Harris's comic talent was already familiar through his tenure on *The Jack Benny Show*, where he played Benny's wisecracking, jive-talking, hipster bandleader. With their own show revamped to a sitcom, bandleader-comedian Harris and singer-actress Faye played themselves, raising two precocious children in and out of slightly zany situations, mostly involving Harris's band guitarist Frank Remley ([Elliott Lewis](#)), obnoxious [delivery](#) boy Julius Abruzzio ([Walter Tetley](#), familiar as nephew Leroy on [The Great Gildersleeve](#)), Robert North as Faye's fictitious deadbeat brother, Willie, and sponsor's

representative Mr. Scott ([Gale Gordon](#)), and usually involving bumbling, [malaproping](#) Harris needing rescue from acidly-loving Faye.

The Harrises' two daughters were played on radio by Jeanine Roos and Anne Whitfield; written mostly by Ray Singer and Dick Chevillat, the show stayed on [NBC](#) radio as a fixture until 1954.

Faye singing ballads and swing numbers in her honey [contralto](#) voice was a regular highlight of the show, as was a knack for tart one-liners equal to her husband's. The show's running gags also included references to Alice's wealth from her film career ("I'm only trying to protect the wife of the money I [love](#)" was a typical Harris drollery) and occasional barbs by Faye aimed at her rift with Zanuck, usually referencing *Fallen Angel* in one or another way.

Later life and death

Faye and Harris continued various projects, individually and together, for the rest of their lives. Faye made a return to Broadway after forty-three years in a revival of *Good News*, with her old Fox partner [John Payne](#) (who was replaced by [Gene Nelson](#)). In later years, Faye became a spokeswoman for [Pfizer](#) Pharmaceuticals, promoting the virtues of an active senior lifestyle. The Faye-Harris marriage endured until Harris's death in 1995; before that, the couple donated a large volume of their entertainment memorabilia to Harris's hometown [Linton, Indiana](#).

Three years after her husband's death, Alice Faye died in [Rancho Mirage, California](#) from [stomach cancer](#), four days after her 83rd [birthday](#). She was [cremated](#) and her ashes rest beside those of Phil Harris at the mausoleum of the [Forest Lawn Cemetery \(Cathedral City\)](#) near Palm Springs, [California](#). She has a star on the [Hollywood Walk of Fame](#) in recognition of her contribution to [Motion Pictures](#) at 6922 Hollywood Boulevard. In 1994, a Golden Palm Star on the [Palm Springs, California, Walk of Stars](#) was dedicated to her.^[4] *The Phil Harris-Alice Faye Show* remains a favorite of old-time radio collectors.

Popularity and legacy

Her voice, the *New York Times* wrote in her obituary, was "inviting." [Irving Berlin](#) was once quoted as saying that he would choose Faye over any other singer to introduce his songs, and [George Gershwin](#) and [Cole Porter](#) called her the "best female singer in Hollywood in 1937."^[5] During her years as a musical superstar, Alice Faye managed to introduce twenty-three songs to the hit parade, more than any other female Hollywood movie star. During her peak years, she was often considered the female equivalent to [Bing Crosby](#).

Although Faye has always had many [fans](#) around the globe, she was never more popular anywhere else than she was in England. In *The Alice Faye Movie Book*,^[citation needed] a particular article is devoted to Faye's popularity there. The author of the article, Arthur Nicholson, mentions that Faye was enormously popular there even in her Harlow days. As opposed to other films shown in England, which were usually shown for three days a week, all of Faye's films were given the rare privilege of being played for an entire week. The article goes on to mention that, even after Faye retired in 1945, her old films still made as much money (in some cases, even more) as current releases. When Faye returned to the screen for *State Fair* in 1962, the film broke [records](#) in England. In 1966, the BBC aired *Alexander's Ragtime Band* on [television](#) and soon other Faye films followed. As of the writing of the article, the BBC stated that there were more requests for Faye's pictures than any other star's.