



# Queen of Vaudeville: The Story of Eva Tanguay

*Andrew L. Erdman*

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In her day, Eva Tanguay (1879–1947) was one of the most famous women in America. Widely known as the "I Don't Care Girl"—named after a song she popularized and her independent, even brazen persona—Tanguay established herself as a vaudeville and musical comedy star in 1901 with the New York City premiere of the show *My Lady*—and never looked back. Tanguay was, at the height of a long career that stretched until the early 1930s, a trend-setting performer who embodied the emerging ideal of the bold and sexual female entertainer. Whether suggestively singing songs with titles like "It's All Been Done Before But Not the Way I Do It" and "Go As Far As You Like" or wearing a daring dress made of pennies, she was a precursor to subsequent generations of performers, from Mae West to Madonna and Lady Gaga, who have been both idolized and condemned for simultaneously displaying and playing with blatant displays of female sexuality.

In *Queen of Vaudeville*, Andrew L. Erdman tells Eva Tanguay's remarkable life story with verve. Born into the family of a country doctor in rural Quebec and raised in a New England mill town, Tanguay found a home on the vaudeville stage. Erdman follows the course of her life as she amasses fame and wealth, marries (and divorces) twice, engages in affairs closely followed in the press, declares herself a Christian Scientist, becomes one of the first celebrities to get plastic surgery, loses her fortune following the Wall Street Crash of 1929, and receives her last notice, an obituary in *Variety*. The arc of Tanguay's career follows the history of American popular culture in the first half of the twentieth century. Tanguay's appeal, so dependent on her physical presence and personal charisma, did not come across in the new media of radio and motion pictures. With nineteen rare or previously unpublished images, *Queen of Vaudeville* is a dynamic portrait of a dazzling and unjustly forgotten show business star.

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