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Acknowledgements

The richest resource of the *Jazzletter* is its own readership. Ed Thigpen came to visit for the weekend recently, and was my guide to the Ella Fitzgerald article. Benny Carter was also a guide. Over the years, Benny has been invaluable help to me, patiently -- indeed cheerfully and willingly -- answering all sorts of questions about American music and its history.

I never let a piece go the printer without having someone, sometimes several persons, expert in the field of that particular issue, read it. Typos occur, in spite of all this diligence; and unfortunately the computer program I'm using doesn't contain diacritical marks, which is why the accents are missing on foreign titles and names.

The next several issues on the American song had all sorts of assistance. Drafts of the piece were scrutinized by some astute and informed people, including Henry Pleasants, Peggy Lee, Grover Sales, Hale Smith, Dominique de Lerma of the black music studies branch of Columbia College in Chicago, and Bill Kirchner, scholars all. Bill Kirchner is not only an excellent musician -- saxophonist, arranger, composer --he is also a former journalist with a very sharp eye. He is another example of the articulate jazz musician.

Another source is broadcaster Fred Hall, whom I interviewed in the January, 1989, *Jazzletter*. Fred had important things to say about what has happened to broadcasting in America, and I have recapitulated them in a somewhat condensed form because of their pertinence to the discussion.

I am grateful to all these friends and others for their counsel and help.

Death in the Family:
The Rise and Fall of the American Song
Part One

The late Nat Cole once told me a charming, but quite significant, little story. Not too many years after World War II, he had visited one of the German-speaking countries -- whether Austria, German Switzerland, or Germany itself, I no longer remember. In a restaurant he heard a pianist and singer doing a remarkably accurate imitation of himself, right down to the subtlest nuances of Nat's rather southern way of enunciating English lyrics. Nat was amused and touched by the tribute, and at the end of the set tried to thank the man, who

A. didn't recognize him; and

B. didn't speak a word of English.

He had, obviously, learned the songs phonetically from the records.

Such was the ubiquity of American popular music in the years after the war. Ironically, the Germans and Japanese had themselves helped spread it with broadcasts meant to crumble the morale of American troops with nostalgia. Instead, the Americans made disc-jockey heroines of Axis Sally and Tokyo Rose, tuning them in faithfully.

General Dwight D. Eisenhower, the supreme Allied commander, understood well that music would build morale, not break it, and ordered the creation of three bands of the Allied Expeditionary Force: an American band led by Army Air Corp Major Glenn Miller, a British band led by George Melachrino, and a Canadian band led by Captain Robert Farnon. Farnon used to sit by a short-wave radio picking up broadcasts from the United States and taking the new tunes down on paper, thereby beating everybody in Britain to the latest American hits. All three bands were presented on the BBC, and since they were heard by just about everyone in Europe who owned a radio, American music invaded Europe well before Allied troops hit the beaches of Normandy.

In France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, and Italy, girls learned American steps and danced to the records of Glenn Miller and Benny Goodman. Louis Armstrong was an international celebrity even before the war, and Josephine Baker had been one in France as far back as the 1920s. During that same decade, German musicians began awkward experiments in jazz in Berlin cabarets, not quite getting the hang of it. Even Paul Hindemith tried to play jazz piano, and indeed was still trying when he was head of the composition department at Yale University, doing so with consummate clumsiness in front of his assistant, which took a certain amount of nerve since the assistant was one of the great jazz pianists, namely Mel Powell.

American popular music and in particular jazz -- denounced by Nazi propagandists as decadent Jewish Negroid music -- was forbidden in Germany and later, under the Occupation, all of Europe. Furthermore, many musicians were executed for playing it, including some of the high-school friends of the novelist Josef Skvorecky.

Yet the appeal of this music continued unabated. Composer Claus Ogerman, who was born in Prussia, kept a treasured cache of jazz records hidden in the war years. The Belgian composer and arranger Francy Boland remembers seeing German officers in the audience when he played in jazz groups during the Occupation.

After the war, a minor legend circulated in the jazz world about a young German officer in Normandy who held up negotiations for the surrender of his surrounded unit while he asked an American officer about the current state of jazz and tried to get Benny Goodman records from him.

I always thought the story was apocryphal. Then, around 1960, when I was editor of *Down Beat*, the German jazz critic Dietrich Schulz-Kohn, known as Dr. Jazz, visited Chicago and it became my pleasant duty to show him around. I asked him if the story he knew whether the story of the surrendering officer was true. He said it was. I asked, "Why are you so sure?"

He said, "Because I was the officer."

Some weeks after that I was having lunch with the late Alan Morrison, the New York editor of *Ebony* magazine and a dedicated jazz lover. I told Alan that an interesting coincidence had occurred, and recounted my conversation with Dietrich Schulz-Kohn.

An amused smile came over Alan's face and he said, "It's

more of a coincidence than you know. Did Dietrich tell you who was the officer he surrendered to?"

"No," I said.

"It was me," Alan said.

(If in your mind a little question has arisen as to how a black officer could have been in command of white troops in Normandy in 1944, the clarifying answer is that Alan was a Canadian. The Canadian armed forces were not segregated.)

American popular music profoundly influenced that of all the rest of the world. Brazilian musicians, such as Antonio Carlos Jobim, Oscar Castro-Neves, and Sergio Mendes will tell you how extensively it affected their own, leading to the development of the modern samba form called bossa nova. Jobim says that the lyrics of Cole Porter had as much influence as his music.

Yet when the twentieth century began, there was no such thing as an identifiably American popular music. Within twenty years it had become the most admired and imitated musical form in the world. Through the 1920s, '30s, and '40s it grew in sophistication and, because of the intelligence of it, raised the level of taste and literacy in the United States and Canada. Children absorbing from the radio the lyrics of Porter, Lorenz Hart, Johnny Mercer, Dorothy Fields, Mitchell Parrish, and Johnny Mercer were memorizing object models of beautiful and intelligent speech. If the primary subject matter of the songs was love, it was a decent -- nay, admirable -- kind of love, and American popular music contributed to the stability of society.

Now as the twentieth century is nearing its end, the quality of American music has reached an incredible nadir, and the ultimate abrogation of melody is rap, which preaches violence, rape, the degradation of women, and even murder. This is what the kids in the street gangs are memorizing. The entire entertainment industry, of course, has always denied that it has any influence on public behavior, which stupefying exercise in hypocrisy is refuted by its vastly remunerative sale of advertising in radio and television, and the deliberate insertion of hidden commercials into movies. Rock music was the primary driving force in the creation of the present pervasive drug problem, which is extensively implicated in the violence of street gangs, a level of workmanship from stoned employees on assembly lines so low that even Americans eschew American manufactured goods, a cold kind of perfunctory sex and a consequent soaring rate of illegitimate childbirth, the spread of AIDS through dirty needles and all the medical expenses the disease entails, and the incalculable export of currency to Colombia. Collectively, these problems threaten to overwhelm the nation.

In 1703 the Scottish patriot Andrew Fletcher wrote, "Let me make the songs of a nation and I care not who writes her laws." The Greeks believed that the various modes of music directly affected behavior. A story attributed to Pythagoras told of a boy who became so impassioned on hearing the Phrygian mode that he almost assaulted a woman, only to be calmed by exposure to a melody in the Hypophrygian mode. The story is no doubt hyperbolic, yet thoughtful people have always known that music has incredibly powerful emotional effects, to stir sadness, joy, even patriotism: *La Marseillaise* is a positively inflammatory piece of music. If this were not so, armies would not maintain brass bands to stir suitable martial moods in men. Plato wrote in *The Republic*, "Indulged in to excess, music emasculates instead of invigorating the mind, causing a relaxation of the intellectual faculties, and debasing the warrior into an effeminate slave, destitute of all nerve and energy of soul." Music is widely used as therapy. If it can calm and cure, it can also do great damage.

An Elvis Presley fan who was 15 when Presley loomed into national consciousness in 1955 is now 51. Her children are in their thirties, her grandchildren -- to whom a majority of radio stations cater -- only 15. People who grew up on rock have reached high positions, and the late Lee Atwater, George Bush's unprincipled campaign manager, deviser of the infamous racist Willie Horton television commercial, could be found gyrating, twitching, and grimacing as he played guitar in a rock group. It is an unnoticed irony that the Reagan administration appointed William Bennett, self-proclaimed rock fan, secretary of education and then drug "czar", a man apparently incapable of seeing how rock music had contributed to the drug problem of and America's growing illiteracy, which is causing it to fall behind all the industrial nations of the world. Rock was the advertising medium of the new death merchants. And now Anthony Frank, Postmaster General of the United States, has announced the issuance of a postage stamp commemorating Elvis Presley, one of the major contributors to contemporary American illiteracy and a dope-soaked pedophile.

The decline of the quality of American songs has had a devastating effect on the English language itself. Example: there is a woman who reports on rock music for one of the Los Angeles television channels. Her name is Francesca Capucci. She gushes over her subjects, like the veriest rock groupie. This is the level of her use of language: on the recent death from AIDS of an English rock star she said he was "avant garde ahead of his time."

A few years ago, I heard magazine and newspaper editors lamenting that they couldn't find young reporters who could write grammatical English. The rock babies they hired moved up through the echelons, and now we have editors and executives who can't correct the work of their even more illiterate reporters. A Los Angeles *Times* reporter named Bruce Horovitz can write "what makes the phone campaigns so unique . . . " and the paper has neither a copyreader nor an editor who can catch the error. A CBS executive who had headed the network's news department referred to something as a "very viable challenge," serenely unaware that he had made two errors in three words. Recently newspapers ads quoted a PBS movie critic named Jim Whaley as saying a film "rips the lid off of life in the Soviet Union . . . " Off of? (Later ads corrected the error.) We should indeed teach remedial English in the schools. We should be teaching it also to executives at CBS and broadcasters at ABC and PBS, not to mention newspaper and magazine editors and the writers of advertising copy.

We cannot expect the school system to overcome an all-pervasive popular culture that has precisely the inverse effect of education. When the New York Telephone Company called for employees recently, it interviewed 57,000 persons to find 2,000 sufficiently educated and literate to be linemen and telephone operators.

American popular music today is a cultural disgrace; fifty years ago it was its glory.

Where did all that beautiful music come from? And where did it go?

David Raksin, the noted movie composer who has taught film scoring for many years at the University of Southern Califor-, and whose song *Laura* (lyrics by Johnny Mercer) ranks among the classics, said recently:

"I write all kinds of music, including concert music. I think that our country's greatest musical gift to the world is not concert music, and not jazz -- and I love jazz. Our greatest contribution is the American popular song. I'm talking about the songs of Jerome Kern, Harold Arlen, George Gershwin, Vernon Duke, Vincent Youmans, Richard Rodgers, Cole Porter, Arthur Schwartz, Stephen Sondheim. It is the most incredible flowering ever of that kind of music.

"When you listen to one of the great Kern or Arlen songs, you realize you are hearing the work of a genius. There is something Schubertian about a song like *Look for the Silver Lining*. A tune like *All the Things You Are* is an absolute marvel. Those people were wizards.

"In Vienna in the time of Lehar and those people, they wrote marvelous music, but nothing like what went on here in this country. Nothing like it has ever been done. Richard Rodgers was the best waltz composer of our time. It's amazing what went on, and it should be appreciated."

Alec Wilder, whose own work includes such songs as *I'll Be ound, While We're Young*, and *It's So Peaceful in the Country*, as well as a large body of concert music, wrote a book titled *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators 1900-1950*. Wilder analyzed the work of the major composers of American song in what is now seen to be a classic period. Wilder's book itself has assumed the nature of a classic. I rarely visit the home of a composer without seeing it on the bookshelf. (Oxford University Press published it in 1972 and brought it out again in a new edition in 1990.)

The word "ballad" derives from the Italian "ballata". It originally applied to dancing songs, but dancing was dropped -- as it has been in recent years from jazz -- somewhere around the thirteenth century, and the term thenceforth applied to long narrative songs many of which, as the 1944 *Harvard Dictionary of Music* puts it, dealt with "fabulous, miraculous, or gruesome deeds." The balladeers, who often wrote the words and composed the music, performed them on street corners and at country fairs, a tradition still honored by the singers working state and county fairs and flogging their records at tables near the doors. "Today," the Harvard tells us loftily, "the term 'ballad' is loosely applied to any kind of cheap modern song." Take that, Jerome Kern.

Actually we apply it specifically to slow songs, even instrumentals, usually of a wistful or melancholy nature.

We tend to forget that the English and Scottish narrative poems we used to learn in school were originally songs -- ballads. In some the music still survives, as in the case of *Barbara Allen*. I can still hear the last line of its refrain in my head: "Young Jamey Grove on his deathbed lay, for love of Barbara Allen." Many of the "poems" of Robert Burns are actually song lyrics. And since music is a powerful mnemonic device, a lot of us can still sing, or at least hear internally, the words of *Flow Gently, Sweet Afton*. There are some wonderfully funny ribald ballads that I learned as a boy from Royal Air Force pilots and bombardiers training during World War II in Canada, including the immortal *Frigging in the Rigging* and another whose name I cannot spell, though I still know the lyrics, *The Ball of Kerry Moor*. Some of these drinking songs go back hundreds of years, and since they are not the stuff of music publishing, their oral transmission down the generations is testimony to a timeless appeal. Sex has always caused us sorrow, as in the story of Jamey Grove, and laughter. After all, it is the matrix of life itself.

The Anglo-Irish-Scottish ballad was brought to America by immigrants and transportees -- those sentenced to penal servitude in the colonies. Many such songs survived in comparatively pure form in the Appalachians long enough for folklore researchers like Alan Lomax to record them; after that the radio began to erase them from plebeian memory.

The folk ballad form got into composed popular music, leading in Victorian times to ludicrously lachrymose songs such as *Father, Dear Father, Come Home with Me Now* (1864), probably the most famous of all temperance songs, and *The Picture That Is Turned to the Wall* (1892), by Charles K. Harris, and *A Bird in a Gilded Cage* (1900) by Arthur J. Lamb and Harry Von Tilzer. This weepy treacle was still in the air when my mother was a girl, and I know many such songs because she sang them to me, including the lines, "Her beauty was sold for an old man's gold. She's a bird in a gilllllll-ded cage." Awful nonsense. The Gay Nineties were awash in crocodile tears.

Paul Dresser wrote his fair share of such songs, including *The Pardon Came Too Late* (1891), *He Brought Home Another* and *The Letter That Never Came*. But his were a little different.

Dresser should not be underestimated or omitted from discussions of the emergence of the American song, though he usually is. There was something extraordinary about Dresser's work, a realism that is lacking in songs by his contemporaries. Most considerations of the American song suggest that the departure from European models toward a truly American song occurs in George M. Cohan and Irving Berlin. But I think it starts with Dresser, who was born Paul Dreiser in Terre Haute, Indiana, April 21, 1857, the son of a German immigrant who failed in business. On August 27, 1871, when Paul was 14, a brother was born. The family named him Theodore.

The boys endured a childhood of poverty, and Theodore Dreiser's tragic novels are permeated with a fear of cold and hunger. Surprisingly in a man whose novels are shot with such darkness -- or maybe not so surprisingly -- Dreiser had a love of fashion, fine clothes, and the trappings of success. So apparently did Paul; the name he chose is suggestive.

The father was an ardent Catholic and Paul was trained for the priesthood. At 16 (when Theodore was two) Paul broke with the father and joined a medicine show. He toured as a singer and monologist and became end man with the Billy Rice Minstrels. Both boys, in different ways, seemingly pursued lives in flight from their austere upbringing.

Dresser was one of the first songwriters -- well before Irving Berlin and of course before Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein were even born -- to perceive that most publishers were crooks and to become a partner in his own publishing house, Howland, Haviland, and Dresser.

I have read that Theodore was jealous of Paul. I suppose it's possible. Rivalry between brothers is common, and it can be particularly painful when the age difference is wide, as in the Dreisers. Paul was long gone to the flamboyant world of the show business when Theodore was still under the domination of their father. He was famous and prosperous when Theodore at 19 dropped out of Indiana University and went off to be a newspaperman in Chicago, St. Louis, Pittsburgh, and New York, struggling to make his place in the world. I would make a guess that Theodore cast his brother in a role their father had never fulfilled for either of them. Whatever the case, one catches a distant impression of a successful man very protective of his kid brother. Paul exerted his influence to get Theodore a post as editor of a magazine called *Ev'ry Month*, put out by a sheet-music publisher. What's more, Dresser, who was both a composer and lyricist, even cut Theodore in on one of his most successful songs: Theodore wrote the lyrics of the chorus of *On the Banks of the Wabash Far Away* (1899), a pastoral memoir that became the state song of Indiana. I cannot but believe that Cole Porter, a fellow Indianan, was poking sly fun at the state and the song when he wrote a song evoking another Indiana river, *By the Mississinewa*. (It is one of the funniest salacious songs ever written in America, seems to have been banished instanytly after its performance in a show, is mentioned in no anthology I have encountered, and isn't even listed in the Porter canon in the ASCAP dictionary. It is about bigamous tribadism.)

The differences between the brothers notwithstanding, one senses relationship between Theodore's novels and Paul's songs. There is a quality of compassion for victims in the work of both -- for example, the Dresser song called *The Convict and the Bird*. The title alone seems to lift it out of the wallow of affected pity that constitutes a norm of songs of the period.

Theodore's first novel, *Sister Carrie*, which caused a scandal on first publication, is about the corruption of a girl who arrives from the country to seek a life of her own in Chicago. Paul wrote a song called *She Went to the City*. Theodore's compassion for "bad" girls is paralleled in Paul's work, most obviously in the best-known of them all, *My Gal Sal*. It is an affectionate memory of a girl with a rep, as they used to say, the subject of gossip: "They called her frivolous Sal, a peculiar sort of a gal." The song is striking for the time (1905) and no doubt is, like his brother's books, a reaction against the hypocrisies of the era, or the severities of their father, or both.

She was always willing to share
ev'ry sorrow, trouble and care --
a wild sort of devil,
but dead on the level
was my gal Sal.

This lyric came five years after *Sister Carrie* was withdrawn from the market by its publisher, Doubleday -- because, it is believed, it horrified Mrs. Doubleday -- and twelve years after Stephen Crane's *Maggie: a Girl of the Streets*. Dreiser almost had a nervous breakdown over this betrayal by Doubleday, and considered suicide. He recovered, of course, and went to work as a magazine editor at a salary that was formidable for the time: $10,000 a year.

Paul died at the age of 54 in 1911, the year Irving Berlin published *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, and the same year Theodore's second novel, *Jennie Gerhardt*, appeared. Thus Paul did not live to see his kid brother become one of America's most celebrated authors. Dreiser's work, in company with that of Stephen Crane, is seen as the sunrise of realism in American fiction. And there's more than a touch of it in the songs his brother wrote.

As far as I can determine, Dresser was the first white songwriter to perceive and try to portray blacks as real people. There is no trace of condescension in his work, and two of his songs are particularly interesting in this regard, particularly when you remember that the so-called coon songs -- some of them written by blacks -- portrayed the black male as a creature of coarse and constant sexuality. The first of them is about the love of a mother for a child whose future she sees only too well. It's called *You're Just a Little Nigger, Still You're Mine, All Mine*. The second similarly perceives blacks as people capable of deep love, and I find something terribly touching in the decency and manly gentleness of the character who speaks in the song: *I's Your Nigger If You Wants Me, Lisa Jane*. Let us remember that Dresser had worked as an end man in minstrel shows at a time when, in one of the better ironies of American history, black performers were donning blackface to join them. Somewhere or other, perhaps in that

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social conscience that enspirits his brother's novels, he gained that insight and sympathy. So far as I know, Paul Dresser never wrote anything that could be called a coon song, for all their easy public acceptance at the time.

Dresser's songs are all set in America, and they are about America: *The Blue and the Gray, The Boys Are Coming Home Today, A Dream of My Boyhood Days, He Fought for a Cause He Thought Was Right, I Was Looking for My Boy, In Dear Old Illinois, In Good Old New York Town, Sweet Savannah, The Town Where I Was Born, The Voice on the Hudson, Way Down in Old Indiana*, and *We Come From the Same Old State.* Quite a few of them deal with the Civil War. Dresser was four when it started and, like Steven Crane, doubtless heard its veterans reminisce. One of his songs was titled *Lincoln, Grant or Lee.* Another was *There's No North or South Tonight.*

Something stirs in Dresser, an American awareness and sensibility that I find in no earlier songwriter, certainly not in Stephen Foster, who hasn't anything resembling Dresser's reach, though his name is better remembered. There is none of the kindly condescension toward blacks that one finds in Foster, on the one hand, nor on the other anything like the jingoism that infuses George M. Cohan's strutting songs. There's just a feeling for America and its peoples.

Theodore Dreiser looms large in American literary history, with any number of biographies and studies written about him. It is easy to learn about him. But as far as I can determine, there has never been a biography of Paul Dresser. After all, he was only a songwriter.

The flow of foreigners into the United States at the time the Dreisers' father came in the nineteenth century grew into a flood by the start of the twentieth, and the undigested heterogeneity of the population was reflected in songs. Publishers turned out fake German and Austrian songs, such as *Auf Wiedersehen* and *You Will Remember Vienna*, fake Italian songs, fake French songs. Probably the Irish got the greatest attention in songs, due to the sheer size of their population. The flow began with the potato famine of the 1840s, and grew to the point where, by 1900, the population of Boston was 60 percent Irish, a ready market for the likes of *Mother Machree* and *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling*, by the Cleveland-born composer Ernest R. Ball, and *Ireland Must Be Heaven*, by Fred Fisher, who was born in Cologne of American parents. Fisher wrote songs about Norway, Japan, and Arabia (and that archetypically American song *Chicago).*

This interest in the far-away grew to a sort of crescendo with *Hindustan* (1918), *Avalon* (1920), *The Sheik of Araby* (1921), *Copenhagen* and *Baghdad* (1924), *Valencia* and *Moonlight on the Ganges* (1926), *Constantinople* and *Nagasaki* (1928), and *Malaguena* (1930). The Spanish and quasi-Spanish songs are too numerous to list.

American musical theater reflected this fascination with supposedly exotic places, with stories laid in Austria, France, even Arabia, and an inexplicable fascination with the Gypsies.

The headwaters of American musical theater rise in Cologne, Paris, London, and the Austrian Tyrol.

A century before Paul Whiteman, there were name bands in Vienna. One of these was led by a violinist named Joseph Lanner. Lanner wrote much of what we would now call the "book" of this orchestra, refining a traditional dance of the Tyrol into the Viennese waltz. And like later bandleaders, he took on another arranger, a friend and fellow violinist named Johann Strauss. Together they made the Lanner orchestra a huge success, and the two composers alternated conducting dance music at the court balls, eventually dividing the Lanner orchestra into two orchestras, one conducted by Lanner, the other by Strauss. Strauss became an even more celebrated composer of dance music than Lanner.

In 1824, Strauss married an innkeeper's daughter named Anna Streim, who in 1825 bore him a son. He named the son after himself, always a questionable practice in the case of those who are famous, since it puts the child in the position of having to live up to the father's image if he enters the same line of work. Strauss the elder wanted his son to be something other than a musician, and the boy started life as a bank clerk. He studied violin without telling his father, left the bank, and founded his own orchestra. When the elder Strauss died in 1849, Johann the Younger combined the two orchestras and toured Europe, from Russia to England, and (in 1872) the United States, conducting concerts in Boston and New York. After that he turned leadership of the orchestra over to his brothers, Josef and Eduard, in order to devote himself to composition. When I was growing up in the 1930s, his waltzes were everywhere, on radio and on records, part of the general culture. I became saturated with them, and only on relistening to some of them recently -- *The Blue Danube, Voices of Spring, Tales from the Vienna Woods* among them -- realized what remarkable pieces they were, particularly when you remember that they were considered popular music. The melodic writing is exquisitely graceful, the counterlines always charming, the orchestration deft and sure and appropriate.

Mozart believed that musical theater should be for the people, not the privileged few. And in Paris, a popular musical theater was emerging. Though he had precursors, the man principally responsible for it was a gifted young immigrant cellist and composer from Cologne named Jacques (originally Jacob) Offenbach, who in the 1850s wrote a series of works in the genre known as *opera bouffe*. The most famous of these was *Orfee aux enfers*, a sardonic French retelling in Paris slang of the Orpheus legend. Orpheus, a second-rate musician with delusions of talent, has little interest in his beautiful wife Eurydice, preferring the company of his musician cronies. Pluto is devilishly charming and mad about her, and she, far from being carried off against her will to the nether world by Pluto, delightedly runs off with her dashing suitor. It is the wife of Zeus who objects to this arrangement, and nags Zeus to force Orpheus to bring her back for the sake of appearances. It is to this day one of the funniest shows ever written, particularly, I think, to musicians, who recognize a lot of discomfitting truths in it.

Orpheus in the Underworld established operetta as an art

form. Unlike grand opera, it allowed spoken dialogue instead of recitatives. The themes were light and witty, the endings happy. Though comic opera of this kind is considered a French invention, Offenbach was not French, and his influences were Rossini, Donizetti, and Mozart, two Italians and an Austrian who wrote theater music in accord with Italian conventions. As Alan Jay Lerner pointed out, Halevy's librettos made Offenbach's work French. Offenbach left a legacy of 100 operettas, as well as songs and orchestral works.

Journalists find almost irresistible the temptation to quote de Tocqueville, because he was prescient. So apparently was Jacques Offenbach. Try this line on for size: "Decidedly, the American advertising men play upon the human mind as a musician plays on his piano."

He died in 1880.

Franz von Suppe is considered to be the father of operetta in Vienna. His *The Boarding School* had its premiere in 1860. The work is forgotten now, as is most of his music, excepting the *Light Cavalry* and *Poet and Peasant* overtures. His operettas were widely performed in his lifetime, however, and he is significant if only because he is the precedent for the operettas of Johann Strauss.

A legend has it that while Offenbach was conducting in Vienna, he met the younger Johann Strauss and urged that he try his hand at operetta, as the new form was coming to be known. Whether it is true or not, Strauss could not have been unaware of Offenbach's work: it was everywhere. In 1871, Strauss' first operetta, *Indigo and the Forty Thieves*, opened in Vienna to immediate acclaim. His masterpiece in the genre came three years later, *Die Fledermaus*, which Alan Jay Lerner considered the greatest operetta ever written. Strauss died in 1899 of double pneumonia.

In 1875, in England, a theater manager named Richard D'Oyly Carte suggested that a barrister turned versifier and playwright, William S. Gilbert, and composer Arthur Sullivan try writing together. They turned out a one-act work titled *Trial by Jury*, which showed an influence of Offenbach. This was followed by *The Sorcerer, HMS Pinafore, The Pirates of Penzance, Patience, Iolanthe, Princess Ida, The Mikado, Ruddigore, The Yeomen of the Guard, The Gondoliers, Utopia Limited*, and *The Grand Duke*, most of which were well known in the United States as well as England. Sullivan died in 1900 at the dawn of what would be the American century in music; in 1911 Gilbert drowned in his private lake, trying to save a young girl.

The better American musicals early in the century were in effect Viennese operettas in English, which was scarcely surprising since the three most important composers in the field were Europeans and the product of Germanic musical education. Victor Herbert was Irish and educated at the Stuttgart Conservatory. Sigmund Romberg was a Hungarian trained in Vienna. The Czech Rudolf Friml trained at the Prague Conservatory under Dvorak. Indeed, it is interesting to note that of the four great later composers of Viennese operetta, not one was born in Vienna or, for that matter, even in Austria. Franz Lehar and Emmerich Kalman were born in Hungary, Leo Fall was born in Czechoslovakia, and Oscar Strauss in Germany.

Now, a curious thing happened to operetta when it crossed the Atlantic to take up residence in New York: it lost its sense of humor. Gone was the political parody of Gilbert and Sullivan, gone was the sly and salacious Parisian humor of Offenbach and Halevy. All that was left was a saccharine sentimentality. The American leavening had yet to occur.

Antonin Dvorak, during his period as director of the National Conservatory of Music in New York (1892-95), predicted that America would not develop a music of its own until composers assimilated the musical influences of the country's black population, as he -- like Smetana before him -- had incorporated Czech folk music into his work and the Russian nationalist composers, (including his friend Tchaikovsky), Borodin, Rimsky-Korsakov, and others reflected their country's ethnic musical roots. Contrary to legend, Dvorak did *not* use Negro spirituals in his so-called *New World Symphony*. The song *Goin' Home* came into existence in 1922, when composer William Arms Fisher added lyrics to the theme of the symphony's *largo* movement. The melodies Dvorak used in this work are characteristically Czech. Fisher had studied with Dvorak at the National Conservatory. Significantly, another of Dvorak's students at the National Conservatory was Will Marion Cook.

Cook also studied in Berlin with violinist Joseph Joachim, probably at the *Hochshule fur ausubende Tonkunst*, which Joachim dominated until his death. Joachim was close to Brahms, who also was one of Dvorak's friends. Indeed, Brahms had "discovered" Dvorak on a visit to Prague and had championed the latter's music to the world, even going so far as to pay for the publication of his music. These, then, were the social and musical circles in which Cook was moving.

Rudolf Friml, as we have noted, studied with Dvorak at the Prague Conservatory. After establishing himself as a composer in the United States, Friml took at least a shot at incorporating North American musical influences in the operetta *Rose Marie*, whose hero is a Mountie. It wasn't very authentic, and it is rumored to be anathema to the Royal Canadian Mounted Police. But it was a try, including the songs *Indian Love Call* and *Totem Tom Tom*. Friml's lyricist on that show was Oscar Hammerstein II, who would attempt further integration of American thematic material in *Show Boat* (1927), a collaboration with Jerome Kern, the first white musical to treat blacks as serious and major characters. Fifteen years later Hammerstein would write *Oklahoma!* (1943) with Richard Rodgers.

Will Marion Cook returned to New York to establish himself as a violinist. There are variant stories about why he gave up the violin, one being that he did so when he realized that he would never be allowed to join a symphony orchestra. He can hardly have been unaware of that even in his student days at Oberlin. In any event, it is unlikely that he set out to be a symphony section player. No violinist does. Charles Munch, in an autobiographical monograph titled *Je suis conducteur*, pointed out that whereas oboists and bassoon players and even

double bass players embrace from the start a life of more or less anonymous section work, every violinist sets out to be a celebrated virtuoso only to find that while many are called, few are chosen, after which he or she settles for a living in an orchestra. (Munch urged other conductors to be considerate of the disappointment with which every orchestra violinist lives.)

The musicologist Dominique de Lerma, head of the Center for Black Music Studies at Columbia College in Chicago, has researched the matter and tells me that what happened is this:

Cook launched a promising solo career after returning from Berlin. After a concert in Boston, he read a review that described him as the best young Negro violinist in the country. He stormed into the newspaper office, found the critic, and demanded to know if the man had written this. The critic said he had. Cook said, "I am the best young *violinist* in the country!" smashed his fiddle on the man's desk, and never played concerts again. Instead, in collaboration with the poet Paul Laurence Dunbar, he wrote the first important black musical in American theater history, *Clorindy, or The Origin of the Cakewalk*. Later he wrote *In Dahomey, Abyssinia*, and *Bandanna Land*. Throughout his career he used thematic materials and practices of the black folk-music tradition. (The one song of Cook's that passed into the jazz repertoire was *I'm Coming, Virginia*, probably best remembered for the Bix Beiderbecke recording.)

In Dahomey (1902), which starred Bert Williams and his partner George Walker, was the first full-length musical written and performed entirely by blacks to play a major Broadway theater, the New York, at 59th and Broadway. The show ran seven months on Broadway and, a year later, seven months in London, where a Command Performance was given at Buckingham Palace. The show inspired a cakewalk craze in both France and England. The show returned to New York, played Grand Opera House in New York in August of 1904, then toured the country for 40 weeks, a triumph for everyone involved, particularly its composer.

Let us get this very straight. Will Marion Cook was no "merely" intuitive natural. He was a highly skilled, highly trained, and sophisticated musician, and if later, as Ansermet noted, some of his harmonic practices reflected Debussy, we should remember that the latter's string quartet and *Preludes a l'Apres-midi d'un faune, date* from 1893. He was already a major figure in European music when Cook arrived in Berlin to study with Joachim.

Though he utilized this European knowledge in his work, throughout his career Cook followed the counsel of Antonin Dvorak: he reflected music of his country and in particular its black folk elements. And he did this in the group he organized and led called the Southern Syncopators, whose best-known soloist was Sidney Bechet.

Cook, along with another distinguished black musician, Will Vodery, was a formative influence on Duke Ellington. Ellington later recalled his friendship with Cook saying, "He and I would get in a taxi and ride around Central Park and he'd give me lectures in music. I'd sing a melody in its simplest form and he'd stop me and say, 'Reverse your figures.' He was a brief but strong influence. His language had to be pretty straight for me to know what he was talking about. Some of the things he used to tell me I never got a chance to use until years later, when I wrote the tone poem *Black, Brown, and Beige*."

Cook showed Ellington some of the standard compositional devices taught in conservatories. Indeed, he apparently urged him to undertake formal study, telling Ellington, "You know you should go to the conservatory, but since you won't, I'll tell you. First you find the logical way, and when you find it, avoid it, and let your inner self break through and guide you. Don't try to be anybody but yourself."

We can dimly glimpse the influence of Dvorak -- a principal figure of the nineteenth century European nationalist movements -- on the emerging American musical theater and even on jazz. Both were developing at the same time, in parallel, with the music of the two forms cross-pollinating, the one essentially vocal and theatrical, the other largely instrumental, and both characteristically American. Dvorak spent only three years in New York; we cannot remotely hope to estimate the extent of his impact on American music.

There had been attempts by white composers, notably Stephen Foster, as well as black composers such as Cook, Shelton Brooks, James Weldon Johnson, Ben Harney, James A. Bland, and W.C. Handy, to incorporate Negro folk elements into popular songs. Ragtime, an instrumental form rather than a song style, popular between 1890 and the start of World War I, exerted little direct influence on vocal music.

All these influences -- African, Italian, Irish, German, and more subtly the nationalist movement in the concert music of Europe -- were in the air at the start of the century, but there was little in the mainstream of American popular music that was idiomatically American. One of the men who did most to change it was Irving Berlin even though he, like Herbert, Romberg, and Friml, was not American by birth. The best evidence is that he was born in White Russia (and not, as he so often led people to believe, for whatever reason, in Siberia).

But Berlin's parents brought him to America when he was five and he grew up on the streets of New York, absorbing that city's musical atmosphere. And the song he wrote that is now seen as a watershed was *Alexander's Ragtime Band*, published in 1911. It was not ragtime, but it did contain something that was indelibly American.

The New York writer Laurence Bergreen wrote an exhaustive biography of Berlin, titled *As Thousands Cheer* (Viking, New York, 1990) that is full of little insights. Few people realize that *Alexander's Ragtime Band* is implicitly racist. Bergreen explains: "The idea behind the song derived from a long line of 'Alexander' songs instigated by Harry Von Tilzer in 1902, and he, in turn, had borrowed the Alexander character from a popular turn-of-the-century minstrel act, Montgomery and Stone. The two white entertainers, who performed in blackface, were sure to get a laugh whenever they started calling each other 'Alexander', a name their audiences con-

sidered too grand for a black man."

Bergreen notes that Berlin "knew, of course, that the song contained almost no syncopation, but he nonetheless wished to associate himself with this daring buzzword. Stranger still, when the sheet music was later published, with a pink-and-green illustration of a bandstand, the members of the band looked white, and Alexander himself had been reborn as a white bandleader." This was in spite of the "coon song" vocabulary of the lyric. ("That is the bestest band what am, my honey lamb.")

Ethnic slurs were common in song and in vaudeville, and all the minority groups were mocked, German, Irish, Jewish. Even in the works of Jewish songwriters, the Jews were slurred. Berlin wrote a song that, if published today, would send the Anti-Defamation League right into the courtroom: *Business Is Business, Rosey Cohen*. Some lyrics of the period are so awful that they're actually funny.

Fred Fisher, who in addition to *Chicago* gave us *Peg o' My Heart, Come Josephine in My Flying Machine, There's a Broken Heart for Every Light on Broadway, And the Band Played On*, and *There Ain't No Sweet Man Worth the Salt of My Tears*, wrote a song called *If the Man in the Moon Were a Coon*. When I looked it up in the 1980 *ASCAP Biographical Dictionary*, I found that it had discreetly been changed to *If the Man in the Moon Were a Loon*. A radio station on Long Island now refers to *The Darktown Strutters Ball* as *The Downtown Strutters' Ball*. Shelton Brooks (1886-1975), who wrote it, was black. So was Ernest Hogan, who wrote *All Coons Look Alike to Me* (1896). The song isn't as bad as its title. The story is about a man who is in love with a girl who contemptuously dismisses him with that remark. Nonetheless, it brought opprobrium down on Hogan's head.

Berlin, then, was no worse than his peers and *Alexander's Ragtime Band* no worse than many other casually vicious songs of the time.

Berlin had no musical training. He could neither read nor write music. He played badly in one key only, F-sharp, and used a transposing piano that changed keys at the shift of a lever. Much has been made of that piano, but the transposing piano was a fixture of publishing offices in the period of his early career. He simply acquired and kept one. He called it his Buick. In a 1954 interview, Berlin said, "It is not anything I invented. I found it in the Mills Publishing Company when I first started writing songs and they (publishers) all had them. George M. Cohan had a couple of them. He played in the key of C, which is also supposed to be an easy key. What it is it's a stationary action and a moveable keyboard with a lever. You press the middle pedal down. You can put it in any key. And the only reason I do it is because not so much to go into different keys but because I like to sing a song when I write it, and very often I'm pitched a little high or too low, so it's a little more pleasant for me. But I can work on any piano." (My thanks to Larry Bergreen for providing me with that quote. Larry tells me that his research indicated that the prototype instrument was developed in England about a hundred years ago.)

Trained or not, Berlin was a superb melodist and an adroit lyricist, and you'll hear one composer after another use the word "genius" in describing him. When Jerome Kern was asked to define Berlin's place in American music, he replied, "Irving Berlin *is* American music."

Berlin's songs grew in subtlety and sophistication throughout a long career; incredibly, he died only three years ago -- in 1989 -- shortly after his 101st birthday, having lived to see the popular music of the United States become distinctively American in color and character, influential around the world. And a lot of it followed structures that Berlin had pioneered. One sometimes reads that he originated the 32-bar AABA song form, but it is found in earlier work, including that of Stephen Foster and in the largo section of Dvorak's Ninth Symphony. But he assuredly made it the norm.

This form uses an eight-bar melody (called the "front strain") that is repeated, followed by a variant eight-bar section, often in another key, resolving to a repetition or a variant of the first melody. Another common American structure, ABAB, was favored by George Gershwin, but that too existed before Berlin: *My Gal Sal* is a 32-bar waltz in that form.

Rumor abounded that Berlin was not really the composer of his songs. A story circulated that they were written by "a little colored boy from Harlem." His music undergoes a great advance in the 1930s, leading to the sophistication of the long-form *Cheek to Cheek* and the subtlety of *Change Partners*, whose harmonic resolution at the end of the release is amazing. This growth probably contributed to the legend. But a chronological examination of his works reveals its evolutionary nature. The myth was given impetus by a jealous business associate who made the remark about the little colored boy in front of members of the press.

In his biography, Laurence Bergreen presents indisputable testimony to how hard Berlin labored on his songs from people who worked with him, among them Joshua Logan. Josh, who worked on *Annie Get Your Gun* with Berlin, told me the same thing. Bergreen describes Berlin's dogged night-long searches for melodies until he found what he was looking for. And his amanuenses, schooled musicians who took down on paper what he played for them in his clumsy manner, recall his adamancy about what he wanted, down to the voicings of chords. Indeed, Bergreen learned that when Berlin's publishing company began to issue the work of other songwriters, he became their constant, tinkering editor. Thus there are phrases of music and lyrics in songs by other writers that are the uncredited work of Berlin.

Berlin had a flair for patriotic songs, which stood him in good stead in World War I. His best-known song of that kind was *Oh How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning*, written for a war revue called *Yip! Yip! Yaphank*. He wrote another song for that show that he rejected as too solemn. "Just a little sticky," he said of it. "I couldn't visualize soldiers marching to it. So I laid it aside and tried other things." It was titled *God Bless America.*

(To be continued)