

Change of Plan

As most of you know, I went through a batch of medical problems which, cumulatively, cost me a year of work, but they seem to be of the past.

There have always been twelve *Jazzletter* issues a year since it started in 1982. But I found myself researching subjects to far greater depth than I could in my earlier days of writing for magazines, and I have sometimes put weeks and even months of work into a subject, tending to throw the publication out of synch.

I have finally surrendered to the inevitable and decided to alter the dates of the issues. That is to say, I have eliminated 2006, and those who subscribed for that year are instead subscribed to the "new" 2007. It doesn't affect you. I never much liked 2006 anyway. It was not a very good year.

Georges et Maurice

RING LARDNER JR. wrote a short story called *Rhythm* about a successful composer of popular songs who, on reading a glowing newspaper review of his work, becomes inflated with vanity and decides to essay "serious" music, that is to say, larger "classical" forms. Lardner makes corrosive fun of him. After a certain fling at that altitude, the songwriter comes to his senses and returns to his humbler song-writing roots.

It was clear that Lardner's target was George Gershwin. Lardner, whose bitter misanthropy infuses all his writing, clearly didn't know musicians and he certainly didn't know music. But the story did its damage.

A condescension toward Gershwin has continued down through the years. The Australian-born conductor and Puccini biographer Mosco Carner wrote of *Porgy and Bess*, "Nor does the general level of the score let you forget for long that its author was the uncrowned king of Tin Pan Alley obsessed with a pathetic ambition to write 'straight' music." The British conductor Constant Lambert in his 1934 book *Music Ho!*

called the *Rhapsody in Blue* "neither good jazz nor good Liszt, and in no sense of the word a good concerto." It was never of course intended to be a concerto. Lambert said it was, in common with Gershwin's other works, "the hybrid child of a hybrid. A rather knowing and unpleasant child too, ashamed of its parents and boasting of its French lessons." Lambert was himself a composer who left us nothing of distinction, and his book is largely forgotten now. But for the next twenty years or so, it had an influential currency in the "serious" music world.

This image of Gershwin plagued his life and has haunted his memory. The most salient value of Howard Pollack's new book *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (University of California Press) is that it blows that myth away on the winds of his research.

A story has long circulated that Gershwin asked Maurice Ravel how much he would charge to take him as a student. Ravel, the story holds, asked him how much money he made and when Gershwin told him, Ravel asked Gershwin how much he would charge to take *him* as a student. Reading Pollack's book, I doubted the story all the more since Ravel and Gershwin were friends. Another version of the tale has Gershwin asking Stravinsky how much he would charge. But Stravinsky attested that the story was true, except that it concerned not himself but Ravel, and, he said, he had the story direct from Ravel. In passing, we should note that you can hear Ravel's influence in Gershwin's jewel of a tone poem, *An American in Paris*.

This condescension to Gershwin overlooks the serious musical studies he began at twelve, and instrumental pieces such as the *Lullaby for String Quartet*, an exquisite piece composed when he was eighteen, and *Rialto Ripples*, a piano instrumental demanding considerable technique — which Gershwin had and to spare — written the following year, before he made his venture into song writing and had his first hit with *Swanee* in 1919.

Some time after *Swanee* was published, a curious figure enters Gershwin's life: Eva Gauthier, was an iconoclastic French Canadian mezzo soprano born in the capital city of Ottawa in 1885. Her career was abetted by the interest and

encouragement of Sir Wilfrid Laurier, seventh prime minister of Canada, and his wife, who was a pianist. Gauthier studied in London, Paris and Rome. In 1910, she was removed almost at curtain time from the role of Mallika in *Lakme* at Covent Garden because another singer in the cast thought her voice was too powerful.

And powerful it apparently was. She moved to New York and vowed never to sing opera again, and kept her word, devoting her time to recitals. She became celebrated for championing contemporary composers, including Ravel, Debussy, Poulenc, Milhaud, and Schoenberg. She had lived for a time in Java, and even introduced Javanese music into her recitals. And she had a taste for the emerging new music that came to be known as jazz.

On November 11, 1923, Gauthier gave a concert at Aeolian Hall. Aeolian Hall was on the third floor of 29-33 West 42nd Street, built by the Aeolian piano company. The street-through hall — its other entrance was on 43rd Street — seated 1100. (It now houses the State University of New York State College of Optometry.)

She was a tiny woman — four-foot-eleven — with a thick figure. But she had incredible stage presence. Her program that evening comprised six groups of songs. Five of them were devoted to Bellini, Purcell, Byrd, Bliss, Milhaud, Bartok, Hindemith and Schoenberg. The third group comprised American “popular” songs: Berlin’s *Alexander’s Ragtime Band*, Jerome Kern’s *The Siren’s Song*, Walter Donaldson’s *Carolina in the Morning*, and three songs by Gershwin, *Stairway to Paradise*, *Innocent Ingenue Baby*, and *Swanee*. And for this group of songs, she had Gershwin at the piano — his first venture onto a “classical” concert stage.

In a review published in the *World*, critic and composer Deems Taylor described him as “a tall, black-haired young man who was far from possessing the icy aplomb of those to whom playing on the platform of Aeolian Hall is an old story. He bore under his arm a small bundle of sheet music with lurid black and yellow covers. The audience began to show signs of relaxation: this promised to be amusing Young Mr. Gershwin began to do mysterious and fascinating rhythmic and contrapuntal stunts with the accompaniment.” He made the audience laugh when he imported a fragment of Rimsky-Korsakov’s *Scheherazade* into *Stairway to Paradise* — the jazz musician’s device of “quotes.”

Music critic and photographer Carl Van Vechten wrote: “I consider this one of the very most important events in American musical history.”

Toward the end of January, 1924, Gauthier and Gershwin repeated their recital in Boston, where H.T. Parker wrote in

the *Evening Transcript*, “He diversified [his accompaniment] with cross-rhythms; wove them into a pliant and outspringing counterpoint; set in pauses and accents; sustained cadences; gave character to the measures wherein the singer’s voice was still.”

It seems more than likely that these reviews and others like it inspired Ring Lardner’s acerbic story.

In the 1960s, when I lived in New York, I wrote for several magazines that were primarily devoted to high fidelity and classical music, including *Stereo Review* and later *High Fidelity* and its subsidiary, *Musical America*. The editors were almost entirely men with classical music backgrounds. When I mentioned Ravel’s relationship with Gershwin, I would encounter skepticism, and in one instance an editor told me that it was impossible that they ever met.

Yet violinist Joe Venuti told me that he met Ravel in the company of Paul Whiteman and Gershwin. And Gene Krupa told Bobby Scott that when he still lived in Chicago, he came out one night in the club, sat down at his drums, and was bowled over to see Ravel, whom he idolized, at a front table.

This almost certainly happened in 1928. That year Ravel made a concert tour to 25 Canadian and American cities.



Gauthier, Ravel, seated; Gershwin far right.

The recurrent condescension toward Gershwin had it that in his musical social climbing, he sought to meet Ravel — an echo of the Lardner story. It turns out that the opposite is true. Eva Gauthier set up a birthday party for Ravel in New York on March 7, 1928, the night before he was to play Carnegie Hall. She asked him if he had any special request. He said, Yes, he wanted to meet George Gershwin. She so arranged it,

and acted as translator for the two men. There is a photo taken at that party. It shows tiny Eva Gauthier sitting on a piano bench next to tiny little Ravel — he was under five foot four — who is playing the piano or about to. And there with a group of his friends is George Gershwin. Gauthier said that Ravel asked Gershwin to play, and his playing left Ravel “dumbfounded.” She said, “The thing that astonished Ravel ‘‘was the facility with which George scaled the most formidable technical difficulties and his genius for weaving complicated rhythms and his great gift of melody.’’ In an interview with *Musical Digest* later that month, Ravel urged Americans to “take jazz seriously.” He said, “Personally I find jazz most interesting: the rhythms, the way the melodies are handled, the melodies themselves. I have heard some of George Gershwin’s works and find them intriguing.”

You can hear the jazz influence in Ravel’s humorous and charming and too-seldom performed *Five O’Clock Fox Trot*.

POLLACK WRITES THAT in his essays, “Like many others of his time, Gershwin used the term *jazz* . . . rather vaguely.”

A problem was that in talking about jazz — a term that was only coming into general use in the 1920s — no two persons seemed to mean the same thing. That hasn’t changed. In 1960, I commissioned John S. Wilson of the *New York Times* to write an article for *Down Beat* defining jazz. Since the admirers of traditional New Orleans jazz didn’t think Dixieland qualified as jazz, and the Dixieland fans held a similar opinion of big-band swing, and most of them considered bebop an abomination, John concluded jazz was anything you liked.

In 1925, Gershwin wrote “Europeans cannot write jazz; it belongs peculiarly to America. It is American music, and nothing else is.” He didn’t live long enough to hear the Belgian Francy Boland, whose work for the Clarke-Boland Big Band is some of the greatest big-band jazz ever written, or the generation of superb jazz players that would arise in Europe after World War II. In 1930, he said, “Jazz has contributed an enduring value to America in the sense that it has expressed ourselves.” And he said, “Jazz is not Negro but American,” which puts him squarely in the company of Art Blakey, who denied that jazz was African music. Blakey said, “I’m an American, and jazz is American music.”

In a 1926 article, Gershwin wrote that “our best jazz is far too good musically to be popular in the street. Practically none of my own songs can boast of that wide popularity which entitles them to be called ‘songs of the street.’” And that puts him in the company of Sweets Edison, who said, “Jazz is no folk music. It’s too hard to play.”

In 1937 Gershwin said he had always hated the word *jazz*. This puts him in the company of Duke Ellington, Miles Davis, and many other musicians who have sought to escape the restrictions the term imposes on them. I don’t like the word, any more than I like the term “classical music,” but we are stuck with both of them.

Gershwin is not generally considered to have been a jazz pianist, but critic Martin Williams wrote that “there was more jazz in him than we generally suppose.”

Gershwin recorded little if anything after 1928, but there is a considerable body of recordings and recordings derived from his piano rolls from the 1920s. Dick Hyman, a scholar, a formidable pianist, and a remarkable adept at stride, said, “Gershwin was certainly playing jazz piano, however obsolete our ears perceive his style to have been.”

Gershwin was close to the Harlem stride pianists, which led at times to allegations that he borrowed or stole themes. Eubie Blake said that *I Got Rhythm* came from a tune by William Grant Still, but in later years backed away a little: “Gershwin probably didn’t mean to take it or steal it because he didn’t have to. The man was a genius!”

Sir Thomas Beecham said, “Mediocre composers borrow. Great composers steal.”

The fact is that musicians constantly influence each other. Harold Arlen said, “You can’t tell many people that they borrowed, but you could tell George. Of course George made everything his own — he never just copied.”

Gershwin was close to Duke Ellington and Fats Waller, whose son said that Gershwin was often at their home and would go anywhere to hear Fats play. Waller’s cousin said, “Fats and George Gershwin were great friends and they deeply respected one another. They’d sit for hours, playing tunes for each other and making suggestions to one another.” Waller spoke of his admiration for the *Rhapsody in Blue*, the *Concerto in F*, and *Porgy and Bess*. Gershwin’s music influenced Waller; Waller’s influenced Gershwin.

Pollack says, “Like Waller, Ellington may have influenced Gershwin’s later work — something of *Creole Love Call*, for instance, made its way into an *American in Paris* — but Gershwin plainly made a decisive impression on Ellington, especially in inspiring him to undertake works longer than the average three-minute number.” And in small ways, too. Note the opening phrase of *Someone to Watch Over Me* (1926) and Ellington’s *In a Sentimental Mood* (1935).

Much has been made of the influence of jazz on Gershwin; but Gershwin gave just as much back to jazz. John Lewis was firm in the view that jazz and the great American songs grew up in a kind of symbiosis. Of all the songwriters jazz musicians liked to play, including Richard Rodgers from the

Rodgers and Hart period, and Harold Arlen, none approached Gershwin. The chord changes of *I Got Rhythm* are simply part of the vocabulary of jazz. So many tunes are based on them that Roger Kellaway remarked, "Sometimes when we actually are playing *I Got Rhythm*, it sounds to me like it's based on *I Got Rhythm*." *Apple Honey, Red Cross, Anthropology, Shaw 'Nuff, Oleo, Rhythm-A-Ning, Bweebida Bobbida* and countless more are on the list, including Ellington's own *Cotton Tail* in 1944.

Everyone who knew him attests to Gershwin's love of his own music, and his delight in playing it at parties. But it was so ingenuous, so sweet, that no one objected to it, in part no doubt because he was such a formidable pianist.

Harold Arlen, one of Gershwin's primary disciples, said, "It will come as a surprise to many who know . . . the man's excitement over his own work and his enthusiastic appreciation of every contribution he had to make, to learn that he also had a very eager enthusiasm for what a great many of us were writing."

And Kay Swift said, "I never saw a composer who cared that much about everybody else's music."

They treasured each other, Gershwin, Arlen, Harry Ruby, Cole Porter, Vernon Duke, Arthur Schwartz, Vincent Youmans.

There was clearly great personal affection among them. Duke Ellington took exception to the 1945 movie biography of Gershwin (as did just about everybody who knew him) for portraying him as a "man and artist of temperament who was somewhat rude at times." In his autobiography *Music Is My Mistress*, Ellington wrote that this was an aspect of Gershwin "I certainly never encountered. I never heard of this in his lifetime, and I was very close to many people who were as close to him as they could be, and they could not recall this side of him either." He remembered Gershwin as humble and down to earth, a man who would come to the openings of his shows "dressed like a stage-hand If you didn't know him, you would never guess that he was the great George Gershwin."

ANYONE WHO LISTENS TO the two Ravel piano concertos, especially the First, in G, can hear the influence of Gershwin. Indeed, the *Concerto in G* was long considered an *homage* to Gershwin. And although the Paul Whiteman Aeolian Hall concert of 1924, at which the *Rhapsody in Blue* was premiered, is usually credited with launching Gershwin's "classical" career, it would seem that the Gauthier recital was even more responsible. Whiteman probably was inspired to organize that second concert by Gauthier's earlier Aeolian Hall presentation.

The night after that party with Gauthier and Gershwin, in Carnegie Hall, Ravel received a standing ovation which he said far surpassed any he had ever experienced in Paris. It manifested, of course, the American admiration, indeed reverence, for things European. This would be followed in that decade by a European respect for jazz that it would not experience at home for many years. Later that year, 1928, Ravel was awarded an honorary doctorate by Oxford University. This must have offered a certain solace for the fact that earlier in his career, he had been refused the Prix de Rome not once but several times.

Ravel said that in their reluctance to take in jazz and the blues as a national style, American composers' "greatest fear is to find themselves confronted by mysterious urges to break academic rules rather than belie individual consciousness. Thereupon these musicians, good bourgeois as they are, compose their music according to the classical rules of the European epoch." Anton Dvorak, when he was head of the American Conservatory in New York in the early 1890s, had given similar advice to his students, including Will Marion Cook, who directly influenced Duke Ellington.

The patronizing attitude to Gershwin is probably reinforced by the fact that Ferde Grofé, Whiteman's arranger, orchestrated *Rhapsody in Blue*, leaving the impression that Gershwin couldn't write orchestration. This is nonsense. Gershwin orchestrated all his other instrumental works, including the *Concerto in F, An American in Paris, the Cuban Overture, and Variations on I Got Rhythm*, which is exquisite. Grofé orchestrated the *Rhapsody* only because, having been commissioned by Whiteman to write an instrumental piece, Gershwin forgot about it and realized on reading in a newspaper about the forthcoming Aeolian Hall concert that he had only two weeks to put a piece together. And he gave Grofé a four-stave sketch, which was very complete. A very good modern reproduction of the entire concert was reconstructed and conducted by Maurice Peress for a two-CD package on the MusicMasters label (1968).

Sergei Koussevitsky, who commissioned the *Second Rhapsody* for the Boston Symphony Orchestra, said of the work, "It is a masterful orchestration — finished — complete The boy's talent does not stop with composition — his talent to orchestrate is what amazed me." *An American in Paris* also shows an influence of Francis Poulenc, another of the "classical" composers with whom Gershwin was friends. Poulenc in turn said *An American in Paris* was one of his favorite works of the 20th Century. Shostakovich thought *Porgy and Bess* was a worthy descendant of Borodin and Moussourgsky, and said Gershwin was the American composer who interested him most. Rachmaninoff attended

performances of Gershwin's music whenever he could, and some writers say they hear a Gershwin influence in the Russian's 1927 *Fourth Piano Concerto*. Early on, Gershwin studied with Rubin Goldmark and then with composer Edward Kilenyi, including the works of Percy Goetschius, which Kilenyi had him study from cover to cover — one of the very few musicians to do so; I know of only two who have made their way all the way through this austere discipline.

Béla Bartók in the fourth of the *Six Dances in Bulgarian Rhythm* of his *Mikrocosmos* made a note: "Very much in the style of Gershwin. Gershwin's tonality, rhythm, and color. American folk song feeling."

Gershwin admired Alban Berg, Dmitri Shostakovich, Igor Stravinsky, Darius Milhaud, and Arnold Schoenberg, with whom he often played tennis in California. He asked Schoenberg to take him as a student, but the latter said, "I would only make you a bad Schoenberg and you're such a good Gershwin." This relationship was confirmed to me recently by Schoenberg's son Lawrence, a mathematician and teacher now retired. He said their relationship "was very warm. They had great respect for each other." Nadia Boulanger too turned him down as a student on much the same grounds, but he did some later study with Henry Cowell and Joseph Schillinger. Indeed, Pollack documents that Gershwin was admired by such comparatively conservative figures of the classical music world as Walter Damrosch, Howard Hanson, Deems Taylor, and John Alden Carpenter. More modernist composers also admired Gershwin, including Aaron Copland, Roger Sessions, and Virgil Thompson.

Gershwin objected to the common image of him as an idiot savant who simply wrote down inspired melodies that came to him from nowhere. In 1927 he said, "Melodies and rhythms are for the most part manufactured, and I don't exactly wake up in the morning with a sentimental tune or a snappy fox trot ringing in my ears. . . ." In 1930, he said, "I can think of no more nerve-racking, no more mentally arduous task, than making music." He said that if he had to rely on inspiration he might compose three songs a year.

In 1936, he told *Newsweek*, "It's just as difficult to write popular music as it is to write serious music. Well, let me put it this way: I use as much energy in writing popular music as I do the other kind. I work hard to find a good theme for a popular song. I try to get one that doesn't sound like all the others, and then I like to put a little twist into the song that will make it different."

This recalls something Mozart said in a letter to his father: "People make a great mistake who think that my art has come easily to me. No one has devoted as much time and thought to

composition as I. There is not a famous master whose music I have not studied over and over."

But he made sketches of ideas, and, like Gershwin could, under pressure, write with astonishing speed.

David Ewen's biography of Gershwin, updated for a new edition in 1970, notes that concert pianist Beryl Rubinstein, on the faculty of the Cleveland Institute of Music, told a newspaper interviewer as far back as September, 1922:

This young fellow has the spark of musical genius which is definite in his serious moods This young American composer has the fire of originality With Gershwin's style and seriousness he is not definitely from the popular music school, but one of the really outstanding figures in this country's musical efforts.

And when Gershwin died, Arnold Schoenberg, one of icons of twentieth century classical music, said:

George Gershwin was one of these rare kinds of musicians to whom music is not a matter of more or less ability. Music to him was the air he breathed, the food which nourished him, the drink that refreshed him. Music was what made him feel and music was the feeling he expressed.

Directness of this kind is given only to great men and there is no doubt that he was a great composer.

What he has achieved was not only to the benefit of a national American music, but also a contribution to the music of the whole world. In this meaning I want to express the deepest grief for this deplorable loss to music; but may I mention that I also lost a friend whose amiable personality was very dear to me.

IN 1928, AFTER after meeting Ravel in New York in April, Gershwin spent some months in Paris, where he associated with a number of composers, including Georges Auric, Jacques Ibert, Darius Milhaud, Francis Poulenc, Arthur Honegger, Alexandre Tansman, Sergei Prokofiev, Igor Stravinsky, and of course Ravel. Pollack says, "For all the naturalness of his music, Gershwin assiduously studied music throughout his life, piano with Hamitzer, Wasserman, and Hutcheson; theory and composition with Killenyi and Goldmark; orchestration and musical history with Cole; as well as, in later years, conducting with Bodanzky and theory with Cowell, Riegger and Schillinger."

One of the major services Pollack does in this book, both for Gershwin's memory and for his admirers, is his careful examination of the structure of his instrumental works. It is

not, however, stuff for the laymen, and one would benefit by going through the book at the piano, to see exactly what he's talking about. It is the same with Alec Wilder's *American Popular Song*. Reading it is useless; the book has to be studied. But Pollack makes the case forcefully that Gershwin's larger works are far more disciplined and formal in structure than his detractors would have us believe, and his analysis of *An American in Paris* is especially illuminating. Bill Evans was one of the musicians who loved the *Concerto in F*. When I mentioned to him that some academics had said it did not follow accepted sonata form, Bill said, "It has its own form." And when I urged him to look for a deal to record it, he said, "It would take me a year to get my classical chops in shape to play it." Bill's remark reminded me of Northrop Frye's almost mystical dictum that the identity of content and form is the first axiom of all sound criticism.

Why then the attitude to Gershwin, this unceasing attempt to portray him only as a conceited and ambitious amateur?

One of its sources, which neither Pollack nor Ewen cites, was the attitude Americans had to their own composers in consequence of backward U.S. copyright law in the 19th Century.

The late Russell Sanjek documents this thoroughly in his monumental three-volume history of American popular music (*American Popular Music and Its Business: the First Three Hundred Years*). Until early in the twentieth century, American music publishers did not have to pay royalties on foreign, mostly European, music, but they did have to pay on American works. This led to constant copyright theft from Europe, and to make this sheet music sell, the publishers bruited it about that American music just wasn't very good, creating an impression that Americans were at best second-hand and certainly second-rate. This attitude found its echo in Canada and the general impression that the Americans were superior in most matters of the arts. The American abjection has faded to a large extent but a little of it is still there, and the much-discussed Canadian inferiority complex still has not disappeared. Singer Ann Murray tellingly made the point that Canada didn't recognize her until the Americans did.

GERSHWIN WAS OF COURSE best known for his songs. And this leads us to consideration of what is and is not a song, particularly since some of the younger jazz musicians have taken to using it interchangeably with "tune" or "melody".

A song by definition is a piece, usually short, consisting of lyrics and music, which is why Mendelssohn chose to call one of his works *Songs without Words*. The great majority of Gershwin's songs had lyrics by his brother Ira, two years his senior. That is precisely what's wrong with them.

Ira Gershwin, who was peripheral to that celebrated Algonquin hotel group of self-admiring wits, including Dorothy Parker, George S. Kaufman, Franklin P. Adams, Edna Ferber, Alexander Woolcott and Clifton Fadiman, suffered from a case of the terminal cutes, inverting sentence orders tortuously in order to land on a rhyme.

Among his more egregious examples are *hear it you will* and *spiritual*; *blokes pass* and *faux pas*; *enjoy it* and *Detroit*; *We pack a wallop* with *We never doll up*. And one of the worst is *I'm bidin' my time, cause that's the kind of guy I'm*. "Time" and "I'm" are used on an awkward descending melisma, a falling fourth. Who in the world would ever end a sentence with "I'm"? At least one would say "I am." I played around with that possible rhyme. Two or three things came to mind. *I'm like Omar Khayyam, 'cause that's the kind of guy I am*. Or maybe, *I'm heading for Siam, 'cause that's the kind of guy I am*. Nah? Yeah, you're right. Okay, junk the whole idea and look for something better, in accord with the French aphorism that taste is the result of a thousand distastes. It's what you reject that matters. That song made me squirm when I was still a small boy, long before I ever wrote a lyric of my own. And then there's that doozy in *Someone to Watch Over Me*: "Won't you tell him please to put on some speed?" What kind of car is he driving?

In his Gershwin biography, David Ewen cites with admiration a line from the musical *Tip-Toes*, "the trick triple rhyming in 'there's a cabaret in this city . . . peeps you up like electricity . . .'" First of all, he's wrong. That's an awkward and affected rhyme, because the stresses don't match. And he cites another, "if you're in a crisis, my advice is . . ." That isn't even a rhyme, since the second s in crisis isn't aspirated and that in is, pronounced iz, is aspirated. Gershwin's coy rhymes don't come close in humor to the exaggerations employed by Howard Dietz in *Rhode Island Is Famous for You*. "Pencils come from Pennsylvania, tents from Tennessee . . . They know mink where they grow mink in Wyomink. . . . Kansas gets bonanzass from the grain . . . But you, you come from Rhode Island. Don't let them ride Rhode Island, for little old Rhode Island is famous for you."

It isn't that Dietz was unknown or unavailable to Gershwin. Quite the contrary. In 1926, when the Gershwins were writing their show *Oh, Kay!* (named for composer and pianist Kay Swift), Ira had an appendectomy, which put him in the hospital for six weeks. When he got back to work, he was depleted and exhausted. David Ewen writes, "Howard Dietz — a gifted lyricist as well as a treasured friend — graciously volunteered his services to Ira. He collaborated with Ira on two of the lyrics, and offered some useful suggestions in some, besides providing the title for the leading love ballad,

Someone to Watch Over Me.” Yes, and Gershwin slightly mucked it up by using one of his hideous sentence inversions in the opening line of the verse: “There’s a saying old . . .”

Ira Gershwin’s lyrics are mostly light weight, and although some have charm — *A Foggy Day*, *Soon, Maybe, Mine*, *Somebody Loves Me*, *Love Is Here to Stay* and, one of his best, the superb *They Can’t Take That Away from Me* — some of them are just dumb, as for example, “They all laughed at Christopher Columbus when he said the world was round. They all laughed when Edison discovered sound.” No they didn’t. All geographers and navigators knew it was round: the argument was about how big it was; and Edison didn’t discover sound.

Ira Gershwin seems to have been insensitive to the flow of sound, the way the lips and tongue and teeth articulate the flow of air that constitutes the vowels, like the valves of a trumpet. He was capable of writing clumsy phrases, as in *Liza*: “All the clouds’ll roll away.” In part, the fault is his brother’s: that descending figure is rather stumbling, and it certainly isn’t very vocal. Furthermore, Ira Gershwin lacks a sense of humor. He has wit, yes, but wit and humor are not the same, and in all the body of his work there is nothing to compare to the humor — and wit — of Johnny Mercer’s *Hooray for Hollywood*. You cannot write the dark, the sad, the tragic, without a sense of humor. There is a technique in graphic art called underpainting. Rembrandt was a master of it. The artist puts down layers of lighter tones in the brighter areas of the picture and then overpaints them with the darker tones. The underpainting shines through, giving light and life to the picture. Humor in writing is like underpainting, and Ira Gershwin didn’t have it.

When lyricists and composers collaborate, they influence each other. Notice how different the Oscar Hammerstein lyrics are for the melodies of Jerome Kern (*The Folks Who Live on the Hill*, for example) and those he wrote later for Richard Rodgers. He simply wrote better with Kern. So did Ira Gershwin: witness the exquisite *Long Ago and Far Away*, written for the movie *Cover Girl*. I have often wondered what George Gershwin’s songs would have been like had he worked with a lyricist better than the workaday Ira. His loyalty to Ira, I have been told, was encouraged by their mother, a make-work program, as it were, for his brother.

Nowhere in Ira Gershwin’s body of work is there anything approaching the philosophic depth of Dietz’s *Dancing in the Dark*, a love song at one level and reflection on another on the existential uncertainty of life’s brief journey in the universal and merciless night.

Dancing in the dark

*till the tune ends,
we’re dancing in the dark,
and it soon ends.
We’re waltzing in the wonder
of why we’re here.
Time hurries by,
we’re here and gone.*

*Looking for the light
of a new love to
to brighten up the night,
I have you love,
and we can face the music, together,
dancing in the dark.*

And when it came to humor, Dietz far excels Ira Gershwin. His long-time partner, composer Arthur Schwartz, told me that Dietz wrote all three choruses of *That’s Entertainment* in an hour or less. That lyric, which is dazzling, reads in its first release:

*The plot may be hot, simply teeming with sex,
a gay divorcee who is after her ex.
It could be Oedipus Rex,
where a chap kills his father
and causes a lot of bother.*

And this second release:

*It might be a fight like you see on the screen,
a swain getting slain for the love of a queen,
some great Shakespearean scene
where a ghost and a prince meet
and everyone ends in mincemeat.*

Ira Gershwin never came near to that, or to the lyrics of Leo Robin, Dorothy Fields, Yip Harburg, Johnny Mercer, or the too little remembered Tom Adair (*Violets for Your Furs*). One wonders, or at least I do, what Gershwin’s songs might have been had he been like a flint striking Howard Dietz’s adamant brilliant mind with its vast and versatile command of the language. It is of course a sacrilege now to express reservations about Ira Gershwin’s lyrics. I am emboldened to do so on learning that Stephen Sondheim, one of the most brilliant lyricists (and composers) ever to write for musical theater, has reservations about them too. Johnny Mercer didn’t much care for them either. The famous *The Man that Got Away*, written for Judy Garland in *A Star Is Born*, is a lousy lyric, which Mercer hated. (“The man that won you has run

off and undone you . . .” And “that great beginning has seen the final inning.” Then there’s *My Ship*, written with Kurt Weill (“if the ship I sing doesn’t also bring . . .”) And the awesomely awkward *I Can’t Get Started* (“the North Pole I have charted” and “I’ve got a house, show place, still I can’t get no place with you.” And more.

There is one thing Pollack doesn’t tell us, which is surprising in that he is Jewish, seems to have an acute ethnic pride, and is always aware (like Barbra Streisand) of who is Jewish and who isn’t, whether the information is pertinent or not. The extent to which the best American popular music is a Jewish creation, and what is more, of a body of Jewish composers and lyricists born almost within shouting distance of each other just a little before and a little after the turn of the twentieth century, is simply amazing. This is documented in a biography of lyricist E. Y. (Yip) Harburg written by his son Ernie and Harold Meyerson. *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz: Yip Harburg* (University of Michigan Press, 1993) makes note that Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein II, Howard Dietz, Harry Ruby, and Irving Caesar were all born in New York City to Jewish parents in 1895 and ’96. Composer Jay Gorney, Yip’s first collaborator, was also born in 1896, but in Bialystok, Russia, though his family moved to Detroit when he was ten.

George Gershwin was born in New York just a little later: in 1898. Hart, Hammerstein, and Dietz all went to Columbia College. So did Richard Rodgers, born in New York in 1902, and Arthur Schwartz, also born in New York, but in Brooklyn, in 1900.

Meyerson and Harburg argue that what they call the class of ’95-’96, in company with a few others, invented and set the standards of lyrics in what came to be considered an original American art form, the musical comedy. The hypothesis holds if the list is expanded to include a few persons born a little later and not necessarily in New York: Dorothy Fields was born in New Jersey in 1905. Cole Porter was born in Peru, Indiana, a little earlier than that distinguished group: 1891. Frank Loesser, eventually a composer as well as a dazzling lyricist, was born in New York in 1910. (His brother, Arthur, 1894-1969, was head of the piano department at the Cleveland Institute of Music, a revered musician.)

The hypothesis that the musical is an original American art form is dubious: the lineage goes back to European operetta and far beyond that to Greek drama. But that a small group of Jewish males born in the same city in a twenty-four-month span, along with a few others including Johnny Mercer and Cole Porter and one woman, Dorothy Fields, created the most brilliant body of lyrics in the history of the

English language is indisputable. There is nothing in England to compare to it. All of them practiced the craft at a higher level than Ira Gershwin.

THE GERSHWINS made the move to Hollywood in November, 1930, and George was commissioned to write a piece for piano and orchestra to be called *New York Rhapsody* for a film at Fox. San Francisco-born Hugo Friedhofer, then at the beginning of his illustrious career as a film composer (he’d actually started a little earlier, working on the Janet Gaynor film *Sunny Side Up* in 1928) helped with the scoring. Hugo, one of the truly dear friends of my life, and I once made a list of the major film composers — he’d known all of them. Then we went through it and noted which of them were Jewish. It came to something like sixty percent.

Thus when you add film scoring to the Broadway musicals, the contribution of the Jews to music in America, to its very definition, is awesome. Their presence in jazz is more limited — they are outnumbered by the Irish and Italians — but there are a lot of them all the same. Why then are the Jews so scarce in European composition?

It was the actor Joseph Schildkraut who pointed this out to me, and when I expressed shock, he challenged me to name European Jewish composers. I mentioned Schoenberg, Mahler, Block, and Mendelssohn, and stalled; later I would have added Castelnuovo-Tedesco, and Hugo Friedhofer named Solomon d’Ibreo, about whom I know nothing.

It is not hard to fathom why the Jews did not figure more prominently in classical composition in Europe. Music was subsidized by two primary elements: the aristocracy and the church. Jews were unlikely to get even a look in the door in that field. It was a different matter with instrumentalists, who were looked on as servants anyway, entering through the kitchen to perform. The body of brilliant Jewish *players* in Europe was tremendous. That is another thing that Joseph Schildkraut (born in Vienna) made me see. Jewish performers got gigs; composers didn’t. Most of the major violinists of the twentieth century, including Jascha Heifetz, Mischa Elman, Toscha Seidel, David Oistrakh, and Nathan Milstein, were Jewish, Russian, often from Odessa and in the case of those born elsewhere, such as Yehudi Menuhin (born in New York City) of families that came from Odessa. A lot of them had been trained by Leopold Auer.

To be continued

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