
George Gershwin:

His life, times and music

The American Dream

“Music must reflect the thoughts and aspirations of the people and the time. My people are American. My time is today.” – George Gershwin

The American Melting Pot

The father of George Gershwin, Morris Gershovitz arrived in New York City in 1890 from Russia. He immediately set out to find his uncle, Greenstein the tailor, because Greenstein knew where to find Rose Bruskin, the girl Gershovitz had fallen in love with before she left Russia. He did indeed find her and married her in 1895. Although they were poor and lived in overcrowded conditions in New York, they were happy. Anything was better than the pogroms (murderous raids) with which the Jews in Russia were threatened daily.

The Gershovitzes had four children: Ira (1896), George (1898), Arthur (1900) and the only daughter, Frances (1906). In time, they Americanized their name to Gershwin. The family all loved music. Ira was a talented lyricist, who collaborated closely with George. Frances could sing well enough to appear on stage. Arthur enjoyed a career as a successful stockbroker, although he loved writing songs.

A Pretty Wild Boy

In an interview in 1990, Frances Godowsky described the young George, her brother, as “...a pretty wild boy. People used to say, ‘Mrs. Gershwin has nice children, but that son of hers, she’s going to have trouble with that son, George.’” And indeed, George was not a particularly good student. He preferred roller-skating and sports, and was resentful if he didn’t win. Poor report cards, skipped classes, and petty pilfering marked his school career. It was Ira who went to his teachers to get him out of trouble. Ira’s protectiveness of George lasted his entire life.

George spent a lot of time exploring his surroundings, and the sounds of his childhood were replicated in his music: car horns, the overhead railway, riveting machines, a hurdy gurdy, a Yiddish street singer, market vendors, marching bands, ragtime pianists, jazz bands, phonograph records, the music of American blacks were all fodder for his fertile imagination.

Musical Beginnings

Piano entered the Gershwin household when Rose bought a piano in 1910, so that Ira could take lessons. George meanwhile, had discovered his own love of music through his friend Max Rosenzweig, an eight-year-old violin prodigy, and another friend who had a player piano. George immediately sat down at the new piano in his home and played some popular tunes he'd taught himself to play on his friend's piano. He loved listening to ragtime. He took piano lessons and attended concerts if they featured a pianist. Eventually he ended up as a student of Charles Hambitzer, an excellent pianist regarded by Gershwin as the first great musical influence in his life. Hambitzer recognized Gershwin's talent and his attraction to jazz and other modern trends, but insisted on grounding him in the classics first.

Tin Pan Alley

Rose enrolled George in the High School of Commerce in 1912, but that didn't last. George left school one year later. In the meantime, he had enjoyed a summer job entertaining guests at a resort in the Catskills, playing the piano. He had earned \$5 a week! George was able to get a job with Jerome H. Remick and Co., one of New York's foremost publishers of popular music. There he worked for \$15 a week as a "song-plugger" or "piano-pounder." He spent up to ten hours a day at an old piano in a tiny cubicle. He had to be prepared to play any of Remick's songs at sight in any key for a constant stream of vocalists, theatre managers, bandleaders and vaudeville entertainers, for the purpose of selling as many as possible. It was very valuable experience for him. He met the legendary dancer and actor Fred Astaire in this way. They remained friends until his death.

The name Tin Pan Alley supposedly came from the jangling, tinny sound (like kitchen pans) of dozens of pianos being constantly pounded in a very small area of New York City. The purpose was to

manufacture and distribute songs as quickly as possible; everything depended on sales of sheet music to the public, and the competition was fierce.

As a means of supplementing his income, Gershwin took to recording piano rolls for use in player pianos. Between 1915 and 1926, he recorded about 130 rolls, sometimes under false names, so that customers believed they were getting different pianists for their money. He began to get frustrated at Remick's because they insisted he play only their music, not his own.

In 1916, Gershwin published his first song, written in collaboration with Murray Roth. Titled *When You Want 'Em, You Can't Get 'Em (When You've Got 'Em, You Don't Want 'Em)*. It was the longest title in his collection, and he received \$5 for it. "'Em" refers to girls. It was 1917 before Remick's published a Gershwin song (*Rialto Ripples*).

Swanee

By 1919, Gershwin had become quite popular. He and his friend Irving Caesar wrote *Swanee* over dinner and a bus ride home one night. He played it at a party hosted by Al Jolson, who liked it and included it in his own show. It became Gershwin's most popular song. *Swanee* was followed three years later by the very successful *Somebody Loves Me*, and *I'll Build A Stairway to Paradise*.

Gershwin was also immensely popular at social gatherings. Very aware of his own lack of a formal education, he would listen avidly at parties as guests discussed politics, literature and the arts. George would usually play the piano, while Ira, who was often a guest as well, would sit quietly beaming with pride as his brother was the centre of attention. George could improvise endlessly on his own music, so that no two performances were ever quite the same. George's talents were not restricted to music. He was a gifted artist, for whom painting was a hobby. He amassed a very valuable art collection.

Mating Call

Tall, dark and muscular with lots of personality and a sense of humor, Gershwin was a great favourite with the ladies. There were numerous

women in his life, but he never married. He wrote a little waltz-song, which he would play and sing to his current girlfriend. It was described as his mating call, because he left a blank space in the lyrics so that any name could be inserted.

Gershwin made his first public appearance as both composer and pianist in 1923 when he accompanied Canadian-born singer Eva Gauthier in a program that included several of his compositions. He was received enthusiastically, his achievement described as “the beginning of sophisticated jazz.”

Rhapsody in Blue

In 1924, *Rhapsody in Blue* was performed in public for the first time. It was included in a program featuring several performers and compositions. The program was very long, and by the time it was Gershwin’s turn, some people were already leaving. The audience was getting bored and the ventilation system had broken down. By the end of *Rhapsody*, however, an excited audience brought him back for five curtain calls! That summer, Gershwin recorded *Rhapsody*. The recording is now available on compact disc. In 1979, Woody Allen used *Rhapsody* in his film *Manhattan*. A few years later, in 1984, *Rhapsody* was played at the opening of the Summer Olympics in Los Angeles. 84 pianists on 84 white pianos performed the solo part. It is an indelible part of the American musical landscape.

That same year, George and Ira scored yet another success when their musical comedy, *Lady, Be Good!* opened on Broadway. It was the first time Ira had revealed himself publicly as George’s lyricist. Previously he had used the pseudonym Arthur Francis - until he discovered a lyricist in England whose name really was Arthur Francis!

More Successes

In 1925, George Gershwin became the first American-born musician to appear on the cover of *Time* magazine. He was a prolific composer. He once said that he liked to write six tunes a day, just to get them out of his system. His musical, *Of Thee I Sing*, enjoyed the longest run of all, and in 1931, became the first musical comedy to win a Pulitzer Prize. Since there was no category for music, the prize was awarded to Ira and two other lyricists, not George. Ira was angry for years at

what he felt was a great injustice. (In 1943, the Pulitzer committee changed its policy to include composers).

Serious composers of the likes of France's Maurice Ravel recognized the talents of George Gershwin as composer and pianist. While touring the United States in 1928, Ravel met George Gershwin at a party held to celebrate the French composer's 53rd birthday. When asked by Gershwin if he would take him on as a student, the more senior composer refused, telling Gershwin he had no need for a teacher as his writing was fine just the way it was.

Over the next several years, Gershwin continued to travel and to compose. He spent a few months in California composing music for a film called *Delicious*, and went on holiday in Cuba. He was fascinated by the Latin-American musical instruments, and managed to work them into his *Cuban Overture*. A wealthy man, he moved into a 14-room duplex, complete with a gymnasium, an artist's studio, and ample space to display his own paintings and art collection.

At this time, Gershwin turned his attention to *Porgy and Bess*, which went on to become one of the most successful American musicals ever. It has been made into a film as well. According to the terms of the Gershwin estate, *Porgy and Bess* must always be performed by an all-black cast.

By 1937, Gershwin's health was failing. He suffered from increasingly severe headaches and would collapse in the street from pain. In July of that year, he was admitted to hospital after collapsing in the washroom. He died on July 11, 1937, never regaining consciousness after five hours of surgery to remove a deeply embedded brain tumor. There were 3,500 people at his funeral, held at Temple Eman-El in New York.

Gershwin's Music

Gershwin's Strike Up the Band

In 1929, in response to the stock market crash and the Depression, Gershwin revised an earlier musical, *Strike Up the Band*, an anti-war, anti-tycoon satire that was a resounding Broadway success.

Gershwin's Rhapsody in Blue

In 1924, Gershwin was invited to compose a "concerto-like" piece in which he would be the solo pianist... "a jazz concerto" for a concert. According to Gershwin, the *Rhapsody* had its origins on a train to Boston. Inspired by the steely rhythms of the train, he suddenly heard and saw on paper the construction of the rhapsody from beginning to end. "I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America – of our vast melting pot, of our incomparable national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness." It was composed mainly on an old upright piano in the back room of the Gershwin family apartment. It was named *Rhapsody in Blue* after Ira went to an exhibit of Whistler paintings with names like "Nocturne in Black and Gold." Listen closely to the *Rhapsody*. You should be able to hear strains of the blues and also of the Jewish folk tunes familiar to Gershwin's ancestors in Russia. Note also the clarinet glissando that opens the *Rhapsody*. That was initially a joke by the musician, but Gershwin liked it so much, he incorporated it.