

A Fine Romance

Jewish Songwriters, American Songs, 1910–1965

“We must pick ourselves up, dust ourselves off, and begin again the work of remaking America.” When Barack Obama made this statement in his inaugural address of January 20, 2009, he was paraphrasing the lyric Dorothy Fields wrote for a Jerome Kern song that Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers joyously dance to in the 1936 movie *Swing Time*: “Pick yourself up, dust yourself off, start all over again.”

Americans have always responded to the optimism, no less than the wit and sophistication, passion and verve, of the jazz standards, ballads, torch songs, anthems, up-tempo dance numbers, and showstoppers that make up the American songbook. Like Hollywood movies, with which they have a symbiotic relationship, the songs beguiled multitudes and prove, in their enduring appeal, that the goals of popular culture and high artistic achievement can happily coincide.

The best songwriters combined a genius for melody, ingenuity at fitting the right words to it, and the ability to connect with a wide audience. A remarkably high percentage of them were Jewish by birth and heritage. Some (Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers) came from relatively prosperous families with the foresight to immigrate in the 1860s or earlier. Others were children of refugees from Eastern Europe, who risked everything to escape pogroms and persecution in the years just before and after the turn of the century.

Following the assassination of a liberal Czar in 1881, cruel anti-Semitic decrees made life miserable for Russian Jews—just as depicted in the 1964 musical *Fiddler on the Roof* (music by Jerry Bock, lyrics by Sheldon Harnick). And so it happened that Israel Baline, Yakov Gershowitz, and Chaim Arluck became Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, and Harold Arlen, and together they made musical history in the country that gave them the chance.

The land beyond the rainbow

Courtesy of Photofest

Though the Munchkins get more credit on the poster, Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg contributed the matchless musical score of *The Wizard of Oz*.

Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg cavorting with the cast of *The Wizard of Oz*

Courtesy of Photofest

This exhibition is based on David Lehman’s book *A Fine Romance: Jewish Songwriters, American Songs*, published by Nextbook/Schocken in 2009.

Topal as Tevye in the movie version of *Fiddler on the Roof*

Courtesy of United Artists/Photofest ©United Artists

Many songwriters came from Jewish refugee families escaping from persecution in Eastern Europe—the plight memorialized in *Fiddler on the Roof*, the musical based on the short stories of Sholom Aleichem. Here Tevye the milkman and neighbors lament Anatevka, the little Russian village they will have to leave.

America offered its newcomers not only a safe haven from anti-Semitic terror but also the promise of a fresh start, with upward mobility, and men and women of creative talent seized the chance to create the words and music of the American dream. The sky was the limit, or so it felt, to young people with big imaginations at a time when exciting new technologies—the radio, the microphone, the talking movie, the long-playing record—gave popular culture a huge assist as the twentieth century got off the ground.

What is the American songbook? You won't find it in your local branch of the public library, or even in the Library of Congress, because it exists not as a physical book in multiple volumes but as a term for a remarkable era of songs—songs that achieved enormous popularity when first introduced and that have since become the American classics, or "standards," that jazz musicians play and cabaret chanteurs sing.

"Body and Soul," "Night and Day," "It Had To Be You," "Love for Sale," "The Blue Room," "I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan," "Always," "Tangerine," "Among My Souvenirs," "Stormy Weather," "Thou Swell," "That Old Black Magic," "My Heart Stood Still": You can make a superb compact disc out of just the background songs in black-and-white Hollywood movies when the "studio system" was in its heyday, and MGM, Warner Brothers, Universal, Paramount, and Columbia were the main centers of activity.

The soundtrack of the American romance—as heard on the car radio and seen on the silver screen in the 1930s and 40s—was largely the product of a Jewish imagination. Would *Casablanca* be the same without Herman Hupfeld's "As Time Goes By" played on the piano and sung by Dooley Wilson? Would the progress of Dorothy and her friends toward the merry old land of Oz enchant half as much without "Over the Rainbow," "If I Only Had a Brain," "Ding-Dong! The Witch is Is Dead," and the rest of the score by Harold Arlen (music) and Yip Harburg (lyrics)?

Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire in *Swing Time*

Courtesy of RKO Radio Pictures/Photofest

©RKO Radio Pictures

Swing Time may be the finest of the Astaire-Rogers movies. From the score by Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields, "The Way You Look Tonight" won the Academy Award for best song of 1936, beating out Cole Porter's "I've Got You Under My Skin."

Dooley Wilson at the piano, Humphrey Bogart, and Ingrid Bergman in *Casablanca*

Courtesy of Warner Bros./Photofest

Rick, the owner of the gin joint, says, "You played it for her, you can play it for me. Play it, Sam." And the piano player sighs and obligingly plays "As Time Goes By."

"I'll Write Jewish Tunes"

The children of immigrants were eager to assimilate and adopt secular ways. Cantors' sons became songwriters (Irving Berlin, Harold Arlen) or performers (Al Jolson). They tended not to be observant of Jewish law and doctrine. Several married outside the faith. But they put the spirit of their Judaism into their creative work, as if the theater were a temple in modern disguise.

An anecdote in Richard Rodgers' autobiography illustrates the Jewish character of American popular song and how it was often wholly unrelated to religion or even ethnicity. When Rodgers (then twenty-four) and Cole Porter (thirty-five) met on the Lido in Venice in 1926, Rodgers and Lorenz Hart had already had a smash hit in "Manhattan." Rodgers' flair for melody went perfectly with Hart's impish wit. One couplet borrows a Brooklyn accent to summarize the attractions of a New York summer: "The city's clamor can never spoil / The dreams of a boy and goil." From then on, Rodgers and Hart were the toast of the town. A *Time* magazine cover story dubbed the duo the "boys from Columbia."

In contrast to the Jewish lads from Manhattan's Upper West Side, Porter—a wealthy, Yale-educated Episcopalian born on a farm in Peru, Indiana—had not yet scored with the critics and public. Nevertheless, Porter told Rodgers he had figured out the secret of writing hits. Rodgers leaned over. "I'll write Jewish tunes," Porter said. Rodgers laughed, but as time went by he saw Porter's point. The minor-key melodies of "Night and Day," "Begin the Beguine," and "My Heart Belongs to Daddy" were "unmistakably" Jewish. You didn't have to be Jewish to write Jewish songs; you just needed an ear for it. And the success of these "Jewish tunes" showed that if Jewish songwriters had fallen for America, American listeners responded with open arms and dancing feet.

Cole Porter on the Lido in Venice

Courtesy of Photofest

The soul of sophisticated wit ("Birds do it, bees do it, even educated fleas do it. . ."), Porter mastered the minor-key sound of the Jewish songwriters he admired, such as Irving Berlin.

Al Jolson has to make up his mind in *The Jazz Singer*

Courtesy of Warner Bros. Pictures/Photofest

©Warner Bros. Pictures

In this, Hollywood's first successful talking picture, Jolson, a cantor's son playing a cantor's son, has to decide between his ancestral religion and the lure of the Broadway stage.

The American songbook is “Jewish” in the broad sense that it favors the minor key, bent notes, altered chords. Commentators speak of a jazzy edge, a bluesy darkness. Even happy songs sound a little mournful. Sweetness mixes with sadness, a plaintive undertow emerges, and you feel the melancholy of future loss in the very instant of present happiness. A Hebrew prayer could generate a jazz melody. The opening chords of George Gershwin’s “It Ain’t Necessarily So” come straight from a benediction over the Torah.

A “Jewish” lyric may hedge its bets. Gus Kahn’s lyric for “It Had to Be You,” among the most cherished of love songs, sneaks in a line—“With all your faults I love you still”—that affirms the singer’s love but also insists that there are faults to be overlooked. The lyricists were masters of the mixed mood. They could sound “glad to be unhappy” (Lorenz Hart) or “gay in a melancholy way” (Oscar Hammerstein). If romance rests in the longing rather than the having, there is no purer expression of yearning than the Gershwins’ “Someone To Watch Over Me” (music by George, words by Ira), which wards off self-pity with melodious charm and cunning rhymes. The object of the singer’s dreams “may not be the man some girls think of as handsome,” yet she pines for him all the same.

Above almost all else, the lyricists valued wit—whether jubilant or downhearted, buoyant or wryly ironic, or somehow all of these at once, as in Leo Robin’s lyric for “Love Is Just Around the Corner” (music by Lewis E. Gensler). “I’m a sentimental mourner, / And I couldn’t be forlorn.” Robin compares his beloved favorably to the statue of the Venus de Milo at the Louvre Museum. You’re “cuter,” he says. “And what’s more you got arms.”

The prize for pithiest plot summary of a canonical work goes to Howard Dietz for “That’s Entertainment” (music by Arthur Schwartz). When a “ghost and a prince meet, / And everyone ends in mincemeat,” you have Hamlet in a couplet.

Line drawing of Ira Gershwin by his brother, George

Courtesy of Photofest

Ira was as brilliant a wordsmith as any in a group that placed a high value on clever rhymes and ingenious similes. In “But Not For Me,” deep melancholy means you have “more clouds of gray” than you would find in “any Russian play.”

That's Entertainment

In the era preceding the radio's centrality in every household's living room, home entertainment consisted of a piano and voices, and the music industry revolved around the sale of sheet music. Music publishers had set up shop on an undistinguished street in Manhattan's Flatiron district—Twenty-eighth Street between Broadway and Fifth Avenue—that came to be known as Tin Pan Alley.

Tin Pan Alley had produced such durable hits as "In the Good Old Summertime" (1902), "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" (1908), and "Let Me Call You Sweetheart" (1910). Then came "Alexander's Ragtime Band" by Irving Berlin in 1911. Technically a march, not a rag, incorporating elements as unusual as a bugle call and a quotation from Stephen Foster's "Old Folks At Home" ('Swanee River,' 1851), Berlin's vivacious hybrid sold a million copies and made ragtime the rage. "Alexander" also launched a craze for social dancing, since you could dance more easily to ragtime than to the vaudeville ditties or sentimental ballads it displaced. Thus began the American songbook. Kern and Gershwin added to it before the decade ended. Then came the 1920s and an astonishing proliferation of brilliant songs.

Cover art for "Alexander's Ragtime Band"

Courtesy of the Library of Congress, with permission of The Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, on behalf of the Estate of Irving Berlin and the Trustees of the God Bless America Fund

After Berlin's song became a monumental hit in 1911, Tin Pan Alley would never be the same.

Jack Buchanan, Fred Astaire, Nanette Fabray, and Oscar Levant singing *That's Entertainment*

Courtesy of MGM/Photofest ©MGM

"That's Entertainment" is a grand show-business anthem that doubles as the title of a popular anthology of MGM musicals. Displaying lyricist Howard Dietz's virtuosic skill and literary intelligence, the song consists primarily of couplets balanced between sentiment and satire. Here's how Dietz irreverently paraphrases the story of Oedipus Rex: "A gent kills his father / and causes a lot of bother."

Tin Pan Alley

Photo by Hulton Archive/Getty Images

West Twenty-eighth Street in Manhattan—home to American music publishing when the twentieth century began—was where you went if you wanted to become a songwriter.

The songwriters didn't set out to create a new art form in the thirty-two-bar song. But that is what they accomplished. The basic structure consists of a verse, or lead-in, followed by two eight-measure statements of the melodic theme; a bridge (or "release") of the same length; and then eight final bars returning to the refrain and sometimes varying it. The form is nothing if not elastic. In "That Old Black Magic," for example, Harold Arlen introduces leaps and drops that extend the melody to seventy-two bars.

During their effervescent heyday—a roughly fifty-five-year period between 1911 and 1965—popular songs fed a nexus of other arts and pastimes. The Broadway musical and its Hollywood counterpart in their prime; the jazz of Swing Street in midtown Manhattan and the Cotton Club in Harlem; the Big Bands of Benny Goodman and Artie Shaw, Tommy Dorsey and Glenn Miller; vocalists on the order of Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby, Judy Garland and Ella Fitzgerald: all depended on the songwriters for their material.

So, too, did the night clubs of a vanished era—the Copacabana, the Stork Club, and El Morocco in New York, and later the neon casinos of Las Vegas. The American songbook was the stuff of real or make-believe ballrooms, where people went (or imagined going) to dance the Lindy or the fox-trot at a time when ballroom dancing was all but universal, the very language of courtship.

**Sheet music for "That Old Black Magic," with music
by Harold Arlen and lyrics by Johnny Mercer**

Courtesy of Hal Leonard Corporation and the
Library of Congress

With Mercer, one of the most prolific and best loved of lyricists, Arlen teamed up to create such jazz standards as "That Old Black Magic," "Come Rain or Come Shine," and that saloon singer's standby, "One for My Baby (and One More for the Road)."

Benny Goodman and his band

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Nicknamed the "King of Swing," Benny Goodman—a clarinetist nimble enough to play a Mozart concerto or a Balanchine ballet—led his big band in such hits as "Stomping at the Savoy," "Don't Be That Way," and "Goody Goody." When Benny hired the black jazz pianist Teddy Wilson to join his trio in 1935, it was a momentous event in the history of integration.

Poster for the Cotton Club in Harlem

Courtesy of Photofest

Not only Cab Calloway but also Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong performed at the Cotton Club, which was as hot and risqué a night club as New York had to offer when Prohibition was still the law of the land. In 1931 Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler, the house musicians here, crafted songs that fuse ardor and resignation into a sublime ambivalence: "I don't want you, / But I'd hate to lose you."

Irving Berlin's America

Jerome Kern was asked to define Irving Berlin's place in American music. "Irving Berlin has no place in American music," Kern replied. "Irving Berlin *is* American music." Berlin, who had no formal music training and could play piano in only one key, told people that his earliest memory was of shivering in a blanket on the side of a road when he was four or five years old and watching his home burn down in a pogrom. Berlin (1888–1989) began his New York musical career as a busker (performing songs for tips) and a singing waiter in a Chinatown restaurant. He proved himself the most versatile of songwriters—one of the very few who wrote both the music and the words and was equally adroit at both.

Able to state his themes directly and without artifice, Irving Berlin wrote modern anthems. In "White Christmas" and "Easter Parade," he secularized the two most important Christian holidays. While the songs are full of sentiment and may be sung with piety, what they truly celebrate is a nondenominational American religion. In a riff in his novel *Operation Shylock*, Philip Roth exclaims that Berlin, "the greatest Diasporist of all," turns Easter into a fashion show ("O, I could write a sonnet / About your Easter bonnet") and Christmas into a snow holiday on the home front in the bitter December of 1942. "This is Jewish genius on a par with the Ten Commandments," Roth writes. The riff ends with a hearty endorsement of another "Jewish" Christmas song, this one by Jules Styne (music) and Sammy Cahn (lyrics): "Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!"

Kate Smith singing "God Bless America"

Courtesy of Photofest ©Warner Bros. Pictures

America needed a patriotic anthem to counter Nazi propaganda as war clouds gathered in Europe. So Irving Berlin fished an old melody out of his trunk, tinkered a little with it, and handed the result to Kate Smith, who sang it on the radio for the first time on Veteran's Day, 1938.

The Boerneplatz synagogue in flames during Kristallnacht, Frankfurt am Main, Germany, November 10, 1938

Courtesy of the United States Holocaust Memorial Museum

Kristallnacht was a pogrom raised to a genocidal level. With the anti-Semitic atrocities of November 9 and 10, the Nazis' hate campaign against the Jews entered its most virulent and destructive period.

Sheet music for "White Christmas"

Courtesy of the Library of Congress, with permission of The Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, on behalf of the Estate of Irving Berlin and the Trustees of the God Bless America Fund

A number of cherished Christmas songs were written on hot summer days by American Jews: "The Christmas Song" (Mel Tormé and Robert Wells, 1944), "Let it Snow! Let It Snow! Let it Snow!" (Sammy Cahn and Jules Styne, 1945). Irving Berlin wrote the all-time champ in 1942. The Bing Crosby recording of "White Christmas" is one of the top-selling hits of all time.

Berlin believed in America with the enthusiasm of a frightened refugee boy who finds acceptance, makes good, and takes the country's charter ideals to heart. "God Bless America"—a hymn reprised whenever a crisis erupts—made its debut on November 11, 1938, sung by Kate Smith on the radio. On that day, the twentieth anniversary of the armistice ending World War I, Americans could read in their morning newspapers about Kristallnacht in Germany and Austria the night before. Nazi-inflamed crowds burned down synagogues, smashed store windows, and beat and humiliated Jews as uniformed police looked on. Though Berlin had written "God Bless America" twenty years earlier—he rescued a draft from his trunk of discarded songs—it represented a vital counterforce to the Nazis' martial cadenzas.

Not everyone was happy that a Jew had written the nation's patriotic anthem of choice. One critic demanded that Berlin turn over all royalties from "God Bless America" to the public. Berlin rejected such challenges. Then he, a true believer, turned around and donated the proceeds to the Boys and Girls Clubs of America.

Berlin fashioned morale-boosting songs of simple sincerity and sentiment: Let's have another cup of coffee, Let's take an old fashioned walk, It's a lovely day today. In Cole Porter's estimation, "the Berlin ballad" was the top of its field: "What'll I Do?"; "How Deep Is the Ocean?"; "Always." But Berlin could do so much else. If it's wit that you want, he will give you a sultry beauty, who can incite a "Heat Wave" by "letting her seat wave." Berlin wrote for Fred Astaire and partners in Hollywood and for Ethel Merman and cast on Broadway. In 1945 Berlin inherited *Annie Get Your Gun* when Jerome Kern died. In record time he turned out one of the most memorable scores in theater history: "There's No Business Like Show Business," "You Can't Get a Man with a Gun," "I Got the Sun in the Morning," "Doin' What Comes Natur'ly."

He didn't make songwriting look easy. One observer said that watching Berlin work on a song was like watching a woman in labor. But he was fast enough when he had to be. At a Saturday meeting it was decided that *Annie Get Your Gun* needed one more song. Rehearsals were set to begin on Monday. Shortly after the meeting ended, Berlin phoned in the words and music of the competition song, "Anything You Can Do I Can Do Better." He had written it in the cab going home.

Letter from Irving Berlin to President Dwight Eisenhower

Courtesy of the Library of Congress, with permission of The Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization, on behalf of the Estate of Irving Berlin and the Trustees of the God Bless America Fund

Berlin became friends with President Dwight Eisenhower and even coined the phrase "I Like Ike," the most successful campaign slogan in American history. Here, Berlin autographs the lyrics of "God Bless America" for the President.

Ethel Merman in *Annie, Get Your Gun*

Courtesy of Photofest

Merman, the last of the old-time belters, could reach the theater's last row with no need of artificial amplification. She played Annie Oakley in Irving Berlin's 1946 crowd-pleaser.

Marilyn Monroe sings "Heat Wave" in *There's No Business Like Show Business*

Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox Television/Photofest
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Berlin ("I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm"), Cole Porter ("Too Darn Hot"), and Harold Arlen ("Right as the Rain") were among those who demonstrated that the weather could provide the pretext for a tune. Marilyn Monroe brought out the natural sexiness in Berlin's "Heat Wave."

Jerome Kern

Everybody's Favorite Composer

Jerome Kern (1885–1945) wrote “They Didn’t Believe Me” for a Broadway show called *The Girl from Utah* in 1914. The song consisted of sixteen bars, half the length of the standards to come. But Kern’s melody and its harmonic and rhythmical possibilities made it the prototype of the modern ballad. “No one had begun writing real songs in this style yet—until suddenly here it was: a perfect loosey-goosey, syncopate-me-if-you-care, a relaxed and smiling American asterisk-jazz song,” as author and critic Wilfrid Sheed has written.

Born on January 27—Mozart’s birthday—Jerome David Kern became the dean of American songwriters. Adapting the European operetta tradition (Offenbach in Paris, Strauss in Vienna) to American idioms, settings, and pace, he had a decisive influence on the teenage Richard Rodgers, a self-described “Kern worshiper,” and on George Gershwin, who signed on as a rehearsal pianist for two Kern shows.

For a composer who thought theatrically, Kern wrote music that lends itself equally to the requirements of opera and jazz. He composed the soaring melodies of some of our greatest love songs: “All the Things You Are” and “The Song Is You” (lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein), “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes” (Otto Harbach), “The Way You Look Tonight” (Dorothy Fields). Fields brought out the playful side of Kern in the sarcastic love song, “A Fine Romance.”

Jerry Kern collected rare books when he lived in the East and went to the track when Hollywood beckoned. He was an unusually lucky man. Because an alarm clock failed to ring, he did not wake in time to accompany the producer Charles Frohman on an Atlantic crossing on May 1, 1915. That ship turned out to be the *Lusitania*, which a German submarine sank on May 7, killing a majority of the passengers aboard.

Dorothy Fields and Jerome Kern

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

Kern and Fields wrote “Lovely to Look At,” “I Won’t Dance,” “You Couldn’t Be Cuter,” and the song that gives this exhibit its title, “A Fine Romance.” Kern had always been the master of the soaring melody. Fields’ sassy lyrics got Kern to swing in dance numbers written for “the nimble tread / of the feet of Fred” Astaire (in Cole Porter’s phrase).

Poster for *Swing Time*

Courtesy of RKO Radio Pictures Inc./Photofest

©RKO Radio Pictures Inc. Photographer: John Miehle

Dance critic Arlene Croce wrote that *Swing Time* “stands among the greatest of all screen romances. In no other Astaire-Rogers film is there anything like so exact, so tender, and so magical a sense of the spirit of romantic love.”

Kern wrote the music and Hammerstein the lyrics for *Show Boat*, a Broadway classic from the evening it opened on December 27, 1927. Unlike most musicals of its time, *Show Boat* was not just a miscellany of songs linked by a skeleton plot. Based on Edna Ferber's novel, it was an "integrated" musical: the songs served the telling of an emotionally complex story. This was a major advance. The show was "integrated" in a second sense as well. When Julie, the leading lady of the show boat troupe, is revealed to have Negro blood, the consequences are nasty, and neither her marriage nor her vocation can survive the injustice. This was grown-up stuff—proclaiming love at first sight, vows of eternal fealty, and the efficacy of fantasy in such a song as "Make Believe," and then proceeding to debunk these central tenets of the Broadway musical romance.

The score of *Show Boat* includes "Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man," and "Bill." But the Mississippi River is the true hero of the work, and there is nothing more majestic in the American musical theater than "Ol' Man River." As the black male chorus envisions the river Jordan, the "old stream" that they long to cross, Kern's music makes you feel that unreachable heaven looms as near as a prayer or a worker's dream of liberation from "the white man boss." The song ennobles singer and listener not because it acknowledges that failure is our common lot—we are all sick of trying, tired of living, and scared of dying—but because we are moved to sing about it with gusto and to celebrate something greater than ourselves: the natural wonder of the Mississippi, that keeps rolling along, powerful and timeless, like a divinity.

Paul Robeson singing "Ol' Man River"

Courtesy of Universal Pictures/Photofest ©Universal Pictures

Jerome Kern had never seen the Mississippi River when he wrote the stirring music that conjures its power. Oscar Hammerstein credited a Tennyson poem, "The Brook," with the inspiration for his lyric. Tennyson's poem ends, "For men may come and men may go, / But I go on for ever."

George Gershwin (left) and Jerome Kern

Courtesy of the Library of Congress

The young Gershwin admired Kern's "They Didn't Believe Me" so much he volunteered to serve as Kern's rehearsal pianist for two Broadway shows.

Helen Morgan as Julie, singing "Bill" in the original cast of *Show Boat*

Courtesy of Universal Pictures/Photofest ©Universal Pictures

"Bill" was originally written by Kern with lyrics by P. G. Wodehouse for the 1918 show *Oh, Lady! Lady!!* Dropped from the show before it reached Broadway, the song sat on the shelf until *Show Boat* came along in 1927. Oscar Hammerstein revised Wodehouse's lyric, and Helen Morgan stopped the show with it nightly.

Rodgers and Hart Rodgers and Hammerstein

For two decades, Richard Rodgers (1902–1979) wrote songs in an exclusive partnership with Lorenz Hart (1895–1943). With Hart's decline and untimely death in 1943, Rodgers commenced the collaboration with Oscar Hammerstein (1895–1960) that produced five landmark Broadway musicals and an Oscar-winning Hollywood movie. Working with Hart, Rodgers had written the music first. With Hammerstein, the order was reversed. And where Rodgers and Hart set store by irony and wit (rhyming "romance" with "those ants that invaded my pants" in "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered"), the later partnership favored the full-throated sentiment of "If I Loved You" and "Some Enchanted Evening."

Rodgers and Hammerstein were the blue-chip brand on Broadway from *Oklahoma!* in 1943 through *The Sound of Music* in 1959. It surprises people to learn that *Oklahoma!* was written by two New Yorkers who had never been to that state but had a gloriously optimistic vision to share. Rodgers and Hammerstein created an Oklahoma of the imagination to counter the grim images of uprooted Okies fleeing the "dust bowl" in the Great Depression. "The Surrey with the Fringe on Top" may sound like cowboy music but is entirely the product of Rodgers' imagination.

A musical in the "integrated" manner of *Show Boat*, *Oklahoma!* began its record-breaking Broadway run on March 31, 1943, to the strains of one of Rodgers' signature waltzes, "Oh, What a Beautiful Morning." Characteristically, Hammerstein had spent weeks on the lyric before showing it to Rodgers, who marched to the piano and wrote the tune in a matter of minutes. With the nation in a global war, the "bright golden haze on the meadow" struck a blow for American democracy. As the chorus sings in the title song, "We know we belong to the land, / And the land we belong to is grand."

Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart

Courtesy of Photofest

The partnership of Rodgers and Hart lasted for twenty-four years and produced "The Lady is a Tramp," "Bewitched, Bothered, and Bewildered," "Thou Swell," "My Heart Stood Still," "The Blue Room," "My Romance," and "Where or When," among other jazz and cabaret standards.

Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein with Mary Martin, Janet Blair, and Martha Wright, the leading ladies of *South Pacific*

Courtesy of Photofest

With *South Pacific* in 1949 and Frank Loesser's *Guys and Dolls* a year later, the Broadway musical reached its apogee.

Poster for stage version of *Oklahoma!*

Courtesy of Photofest

Oklahoma! began its historic Broadway run in 1943 when America was at war on two fronts. In addition to inspired singing and dancing, it offered a vision of optimism and union—the romantic union of cowboy Curly and Laurie the farmer's daughter, and the American union that the Oklahoma territory aspired to join in the early years of the twentieth century.

It may be that, of the works in the Rodgers and Hammerstein canon, *Carousel* has the finest music. The opening waltz alone confirms Rodgers as America's "waltz king," the successor to Kern as Broadway's supreme melodist. *Oklahoma!* has always been the most popular of the shows, long a beloved staple of summer stock and summer camp. *The Sound of Music* strikes some as saccharine, and yet one of Julie Andrews' songs did double duty as a John Coltrane jazz classic, "My Favorite Things." *The King and I* boasts the superb theatrical sequence culminating in the polka "Shall We Dance?" The movie *State Fair* has "It Might As Well Be Spring," Hammerstein at his most lyrically wistful.

But the greatest Rodgers and Hammerstein collaboration may have been *South Pacific*, which was the hottest ticket when it opened on Broadway in 1949 with opera singer Ezio Pinza and theater legend Mary Martin as the leads—and again in a Lincoln Center revival in 2008. The integration of a brilliant score with a coherent plot—and one with noble aims—reached its apotheosis in *South Pacific*. In parallel love affairs, racial prejudice stands as the main obstacle in the path of true love. The score ranges from the comic ("There Is Nothing Like a Dame") to the romantic sublime ("Some Enchanted Evening"). Set on an island in the Pacific theater during World War II, where the world is divided between friend and foe, sailor and nurse, officer and enlisted man, naïve Americans ('corny as Kansas in August') and exotic natives ("Bali Ha'i"), it is the most theatrical of musicals, the most musical of serious plays. Whoever would understand America in the middle of the twentieth century must see *South Pacific*.

Mary Martin in *South Pacific*

Courtesy of Photofest

The oversized sailor suit sported by Mary Martin for the "Honeybun" number was the actress's own idea. It became one of the show's signature motifs.

Bench scene in *Carousel*

Courtesy of Photofest

Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote integrated musicals in which the songs are meant to advance the action and be true to the characters and their predicaments. The bench scene culminates in the beautiful "If I Loved You" duet.

George Gershwin

'S Wonderful! 'S Marvelous

George Gershwin (1898–1937), the boy wonder of American music, could do it all. He wrote Al Jolson's mega-hit "Swanee," and then turned around and composed jazz-inflected orchestral pieces that bridged the gap between classical and popular music; he could write for the musical stage but also for the opera house. And he could play with percussive intensity: when the clarinet glissando kicked off "Rhapsody in Blue" for the first time in 1924, it was with Gershwin himself at the piano.

That same year he found his ideal lyricist when he and his brother Ira wrote their first Broadway score, "Lady, Be Good!" To Ira went the daunting task of fitting words "mosaically," as he put it, to such complex songs as "Fascinating Rhythm," "Embraceable You," and "They Can't Take That Away from Me." *An American in Paris*, the orchestral piece George wrote in 1928, may be heard in concert, or seen in the form of the eighteen-minute ballet danced by Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron in the MGM movie in 1951.

George was famous for his boundless self-confidence, lofty ambition, and zest for life. In the 1930s it wasn't an A-list Hollywood party if it didn't have George at the piano. His death of a brain tumor at the age of thirty-eight came as a shock. The novelist John O'Hara spoke for many on that July day in 1937: "George died, but I don't have to believe it if I don't want to." It took Ira years to recover, though he did, writing superb lyrics for the likes of Vernon Duke, Jerome Kern, and Harold Arlen.

George Gershwin painting a self-portrait

Courtesy of Photofest

Gershwin loved playing the piano and could reliably be found doing so at fashionable Hollywood parties. The composer had enough surplus time and creative energy left to take up painting.

Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron in *An American in Paris*

Courtesy of MGM/Photofest ©MGM

The all-Gershwin movie culminates in a full-length ballet performance of the title piece. Other Gershwin tunes in the picture include "I Got Rhythm," "'S Wonderful," and "Our Love is Here to Stay."

The affinities between Jewish songwriters and African-American musicians have often been noted: Miles Davis playing George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* on the trumpet is one celebrated example. To African-American musical idioms—ragtime, blues, jazz, spirituals—Jewish composers owed a profound debt. In the wail of a brass instrument, they heard the wail of the high priest or cantor translated into the city of the living present.

Porgy and Bess may be the most enduring of all of George Gershwin's ambitious efforts to wed the conventions of popular song with the structures and idioms of "serious" music. Leonard Bernstein maintained that with his opera "the real destiny of Gershwin begins to be clear. . . . With *Porgy* you suddenly realize that Gershwin was a great, great theater composer."

From the start, Gershwin insisted on black performers exclusively in *Porgy and Bess*, and over the years productions have featured major operatic talents. The representation of African Americans—poor uneducated folk who fight, drink, pimp, make love, and get high—has not escaped criticism. But the depiction of the denizens of Catfish Row in Charleston, South Carolina, goes beyond racial stereotypes. The characters are superior to their roles because they express themselves in magnificent music and because their conflicts and aspirations are universal.

The opera tapped into the Zeitgeist in an uncanny way. The hero is a crippled black man in a goat-cart. In 1935, when the opera was produced, the president of the United States was a crippled white man in a wheel chair but as redoubtable a statesman as any on the world stage then or since.

George Gershwin with the cast of *Porgy and Bess*

Courtesy of Photofest

Poster for the movie version of *Porgy and Bess*

Courtesy of Columbia Pictures/Photofest ©Columbia Pictures

Leonard Bernstein thought that Gershwin's 1935 opera surpassed in greatness even his celebrated concert pieces (*Rhapsody in Blue*, *An American in Paris*) and his many jazz standards.

Harold Arlen

I HEAR MY FATHER SINGING

Harold Arlen (1905–1986) broke through when Hollywood songwriter Harry Warren (“Cattanooga Choo-Choo”) heard him improvise on the piano and advised him to turn a certain riff into a song. Warren said he knew just the right wordsmith: Ted Koehler. Warren was right. The song was “Get Happy,” the year was 1929, and Arlen and Koehler were a natural team. They succeeded Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields at the Cotton Club, where they turned out two shows a year from 1930 to 1934. Arlen and Koehler wrote “I’ve Got the World on a String” and “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” and soaked up more than just the ambiance of the legendary club where Duke Ellington and Cab Calloway performed.

Arlen was jazz crazy. Ethel Waters, who sang Arlen’s songs when both worked at the Cotton Club, said that Harold was “the Negro-est” white man she knew. He composed the signature songs of Lena Horne (“Stormy Weather”) and Judy Garland (“Over the Rainbow”). *The Wizard of Oz*, which he wrote with the lyricist Yip Harburg, was his greatest popular triumph. With Harburg he also wrote “It’s Only a Paper Moon” and a ballad Sinatra turned into pure gold: “Last Night When We Were Young.” Arlen’s masterly collaborations with Johnny Mercer, starting with “Blues in the Night” in 1941, made him the natural heir to Gershwin as a composer of jazz songs.

Arlen’s love of jazz was matched by his debt to the Jewish liturgy. For Arlen, a Louis Armstrong “hot lick” on the cornet was the nearest thing to his father’s chanting in Temple Adath Yesurun in Syracuse, New York. “I don’t know how the hell to explain it,” he said, “but I hear in jazz and in gospel my father singing.” Unlike Al Jolson’s cantor father in *The Jazz Singer*, the Warner Brothers’ celebrated “talkie” of 1927, Arlen’s papa liked his son’s secular songs so much he sometimes sang the Sabbath prayers to the tune of “Over the Rainbow” or “Come Rain or Come Shine.”

Yellow brick road scene from

The Wizard of Oz

Courtesy of MGM/Photofest ©MGM

Ray Bolger, Jack Haley, Judy Garland, and Bert Lahr are off to see the wizard, the wonderful wizard of Oz.

Harold Arlen (right) and Yip Harburg

Courtesy of Photofest

Arlen and Harburg collaborated on songs as various as “Paper Moon,” “Last Night When We Were Young,” and “Lydia, the Tattooed Lady,” who “has eyes that folks adore so, / And a torso even more so.”

Poster for *Stormy Weather*

Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox Pictures/Photofest
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Lena Horne’s performance of the title song is a highlight of this 1943 movie from Twentieth Century Fox based loosely on the career of the dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson. Ethel Waters, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holiday, Judy Garland, Lee Wiley, and Frank Sinatra are among other singers with memorable covers of the song.

Lena Horne sings “Stormy Weather”

Courtesy of Twentieth Century Fox Television/Photofest
©Twentieth Century Fox Film Corporation

This Arlen and Koehler masterpiece begins dramatically with what the composer called a “front shout” of dejection: “Don’t know why / There’s no sun up in the sky.”

Thanks for the Memory

"I hear America singing," Walt Whitman wrote. People will always want to hear the songs Americans sang during the Roaring Twenties, the Great Depression, World War II, and on into the prosperous postwar era that lasted until the war in Vietnam polarized the nation in the 1960s. When rock-and-roll vanquished swing and syncopation, and television defeated radio for home entertainment dominance, the glory days of the great American popular song were over. But though no longer ubiquitous, the songs of Kern, Berlin, the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart, Arlen, et al. do more than survive—their genius has made them immortal. Without pretension the songs chronicle our culture and our history. A song could offer solace to an unemployed worker in the 1930s ("Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?") or to the lonely on the home front in World War II ("Saturday Night Is the Loneliest Night in the Week"). It could convey euphoria ("I Got Rhythm"), narrate a tale of revenge ("Goody, Goody"), provide a postmortem on an affair that's over ("Thanks for the Memory"), lift spirits ("On the Sunny Side of the Street"), celebrate a city ("My Kind of Town"), seduce a lover ("All the Way"). More than anything else, the American songbook is a testament to the genius of our composers and lyricists—and a monument to the idea of the American romance as conceived and celebrated by Jewish songwriters who captured the feeling stated in the title of a Rodgers and Hart song: "Falling in Love with Love."

Detail from group photograph taken at the convention of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers, September 24, 1940.

Special Collections and Archives,
Georgia State University Library, Atlanta, GA

Third and fourth from the left are Harold Arlen and Jerome Kern (glasses), arms linked. At the extreme right stands Leo Robin, who wrote the words for the Oscar-winning "Thanks for the Memory," Bob Hope's signature song.

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David Lehman is the author of *A Fine Romance: Jewish Songwriters, American Songs*, published as part of the Jewish Encounters series by Nextbook/Schocken. He is also the editor of *The Oxford Book of American Poetry*; the series editor of *The Best American Poetry*; and the author of seven books of poems, most recently *When a Woman Loves a Man*. He lives in New York City.

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