OF THEE WE SING:
ROOTS OF THE AMERICAN SONGBOOK

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Master of Music

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this thesis first and foremost to my husband, Dan Moreland, who has provided unending support for my educational efforts from day one. Throughout this lengthy journey he has generously donated financial resources, kept my spirits up with his steadfast love, and even provided me with research materials. He is my rock and my role model when it comes to knowing what makes a good writer and a committed worker. I also dedicate this thesis to all my professors at Cleveland State and Akron Universities, especially Dr. Robert Cassidy for patiently sitting through hours of my poor piano playing and for teaching me the joys of collaborative performance; Dr. Michelle Mills for the hours of one-on-one theory training which opened my mind and finally cemented some very difficult concepts in my tired brain; Mrs. Elizabeth Chesko for helping to mold me into both a better singer and teacher; and Dr. Brooks Toliver for being the very best friend, mentor, and history professor a girl could ever have. Finally, I dedicate my efforts to all the friends and family who never once stopped believing in me and lifted me up when my spirits were flagging. I couldn’t ask for a better cheering section and I felt you with me every step of the way.
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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>TITLE</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I.</td>
<td>A BRIGHT BEGINNING: EUROPEAN ROOTS OF THE SONGBOOK</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II.</td>
<td>THE GOLD STANDARD: YIDDISHKEIT EQUALS SUCCESS</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III.</td>
<td>DOWN HARLEM WAY: AFRICAN-AMERICAN TRADITIONS</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV.</td>
<td>ON THE SHADY SIDE OF THE STREET: TIN PAN ALLEY</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V.</td>
<td>WINDS OF CHANGE: (1920-1939)</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI.</td>
<td>MANY A NEW DAY DAWNING: (1940-1965)</td>
<td>102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII.</td>
<td>BIBLIOGRAPHY</td>
<td>127</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
CHAPTER I

BRIGHT BEGINNINGS: EUROPEAN ROOTS OF THE SONGBOOK

It is a cool, crisp night on the lower East Side of New York. Young Jacob Gershvin is hurrying back home after his piano lesson to share a cup of hot tea in the company of his older brother Izzy. Meanwhile, affluent, fur-draped patrons are settling in their seats at the New York Theater on Broadway and 44th St. reveling in the beloved melody “Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life” from Victor Herbert’s hit show, *Naughty Marietta*. Over on 14th street in Union Square, a smaller audience at Gus Edward’s Music Hall is laughing and singing along to the antics of The Six Mascots (later to become famous as the Marx Brothers). Under the bright lights of Harlem, jazz lovers at the Clef Club are swinging along to the sounds of the Clef Club Orchestra as they play the Overture to Will Marion Cook’s *In Dahomey*. Gathered around the piano in their modest Brooklyn home, the Miller family is harmonizing to “Kiss Me, My Honey, Kiss Me” by up-and-coming songwriters Irving Berlin and Ted Snyder; while down the street the Mr. Anderson turns on the family’s new Gramophone so they can sit back and listen to “That Lovin’ Man” by the famous singer-actress Sophie Tucker, last of the “Red-Hot Mamas.”

The confluence of events in the previous narrative is nothing more than an imagined glimpse into some of the landmarks that helped shape the rise and development of the American Musical Theater and led to the creation of the vast library of songs that is now referred to as *The Great American Songbook*. In attempting to chronicle the development and history of the songs, composers, and musicians that helped to shape this
uniquely-American medium, it is important to realize that no one influence—be it
Vaudeville, operetta, popular song, black theater—holds sway over any other. Instead, it
is a melding of all of these styles that served to inspire the musicians that created this
beloved American library. In this chapter we will focus on the European musical theater
and its influences on American songwriters.

**Light Opera Traditions.** Just as was the case with “high” art such as grand
opera, American musical entertainment was very often imported from Europe. Around
the turn of the century, American music hall theaters started showing productions of
famous “light operas” written by British composers such as **Gilbert and Sullivan.** Shows
like *The H.M.S. Pinafore, The Pirates of Penzance* and *The Mikado* were huge hits that
were lapped up by American audiences just as Puccini’s *Tosca* and Mozart’s *Le Nozze di
Figaro* had been previously. As for the singers, many of them came directly from grand
opera as well. That is because as with grand opera, singers had to have a large, well-
trained operatic sound to carry out to audiences in the days before the microphone. In
addition, using well-trained singers gave added credibility to a production; therefore
famous singers might sing in a Metropolitan opera one month followed by a role in an
operetta comedy the next month. Other Brits included **Lionel Monckton, Edward
German, Julian Edwards,** and **Ivor Novello;** famous composers from other areas of
Europe included the Belgian **Ivan Caryll** and **Ludwig Englander** of Vienna. As these
operettas continued to grow in popularity, American composers jumped on the
bandwagon. Famous writers of American operetta included **Julian Edwards, Reginald
de Koven,** native-born German **Gustave Kerker,** and even **John Phillips Sousa.** The
most popular of these American composers was de Koven, with more than twenty
operettas to his credit, the most successful of these being Robin Hood. Although for the
most part these operettas have been forgotten, the song “Oh, Promise Me” from *Robin Hood* achieved a lasting place in history thanks to its use in many American wedding ceremonies up through the 1950s.

A second generation of European composers trained in the classical opera tradition helped to refine the operetta style even further. Hallmarks of this later style included sophisticated melodies that were well-suited for classically trained voices; even more important, they composed solo songs that worked just as well outside of the productions and found their way into the popular repertoire. This is especially notable because these songs included techniques that would never have been found in popular songs of today—a high level of chromaticism, triadic and pentatonic melodies, and even coloratura-type passages usually associated with high opera. That these new composers were talented enough to create songs that transcended the stage and established a place in the popular consciousness is what makes them of particular note.

**Victor Herbert.** As the years passed, the operetta style became more refined and a new name rose to the forefront of American theater, presenting lilting melodies that lingered in the American collective conscious and writing shows that are still performed to the present day. This composer is Victor Herbert (1859-1924), who is recognized as the first composer in the American popular musical theater to create works that have withstood the test of time. While Herbert didn’t depart from the standard traits that made the early operettas famous—story-book plots featuring princes and princesses from magical, mythical kingdoms; the triumph of good over evil; and the hero and heroine living happily ever after—his graceful and charming melodies struck a chord with audiences and were just as successful off the stage as on it. Herbert wrote fifty-plus operettas over his forty-year career, including *The Wizard of the Nile, The Serenade, The*
Fortune Teller, Babette, Mlle. Modiste, and the Red Mill. As Herbert perfected his craft his success with the operetta form led to his most famous shows, Babes in Toyland in 1903 which featured the well-known instrumental work “March of the Toys” and Naughty Marietta in 1910. Naughty Marietta was written especially for Emma Trentini, who was a famous opera star with New York’s Oscar Hammerstein Opera Company; and tells the story of a French countess who falls in love with an American army captain, Dick Warrington. Even more important, the show left its mark on American theater stages by introducing wildly-popular songs written by Herbert and lyricist Rida Johnson Young—“Italian Street Song”, “I’m Falling in Love With Someone”, and probably the most well-known “Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life.”

After Herbert’s operetta career began to fade around 1917, he continued to work composing song for several editions of the Ziegeld Follies. He passed away of a sudden heart attack in 1924, but his songs had only begun to achieve their greatest success thanks to the new medium of radio in the 1930s.

Rudolf Friml. A native of Prague, Friml (1879-1972) was trained as a concert pianist and composer but failed to make a successful name for himself in America and turned to the fallback position of composing for theater. This was a smart move, as Friml’s first operetta, The Firefly, was an immediate hit in New York. He followed this up by three more shows—The Vagabond King, Rose-Marie, and The Three Musketeers. Combined, these four shows, which took place between 1912 and 1926, were the most acclaimed and profitable shows produced for the Broadway stage to date.

The Firefly (book and lyrics by Otto Harbach) served as a star vehicle for singer Emma Trentini of Naughty Marietta fame, thanks in part to Friml’s adeptness at writing for the voice. “Friml knew how to write for the voice as few others on Broadway could.”
Says author David Ewen in his book, *Panorama of American Popular Music*. “He knew how to make an ingratiating, ear-caressing melody emphasize the best qualities of a large operatic voice. Singer and song became one, and it is difficult to say which won the audiences more completely—melodies like “Giannina Mia,” “Love is Like a Firefly,” “The Dawn of Love,” and “When a Maid Comes Knocking at Your Heart,” or the beguiling way Trentini sang them.¹

In addition three of Friml’s long-running Broadway shows made it to Hollywood in the films *Rose Marie*, the *Vagabond King*, and the *Firefly*, and helped make stars of operatic film singers Jeanette MacDonald and Nelson Eddy. As for *Rose-Marie* (lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II and Otto Harbach, music by Herbert Stothart) several songs from the show, “Indian Love Call,” “Rose Marie,” and “The Mounties,” became huge popular hits. Other hit songs from Friml shows include “Only a Rose,” “Some Day,” “All for One, and One For All,” “Ma Belle,” “Queen of My Heart,” and “Heart of Mine.”

*The Three Musketeers* in 1928 was Friml’s last Broadway success and he made the permanent move to Hollywood where he composed songs for a few musicals. However, his fame along with his creative output dwindled and he was remembered more for his past glories in the realm of operetta rather than as a living composer.

**Sigmund Romberg.** Third in the triumvirate of European-trained operetta composers was Sigmund Romberg (1887-1951). Trained in Hungary as an engineer, Romberg was also an accomplished violinist and organist. When Romberg came to America, he was immediately employed by Broadway theater magnate Jacob Shubert and cranked out literally hundreds of songs for more than forty shows, many of them great

successes. The first of these operettas to achieve fame was *Maytime*, followed in 1921 by *Blossom Time* with a plot loosely based on the composer Franz Schubert and songs in the style of the composer. Probably the most famous of Romberg’s shows include *The Student Prince*, (1924) based on the German play *Alt Heidelberg* by Wilhelm Meyer-Forster; *The New Moon* (1928); and *The Desert Song* (1926) featuring a book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, Otto Harbach, and Frank Mandel. Some of Romberg’s important songs include “Three Little Maids,” “When I Grow Too Old to Dream,” “Blue Heaven,” “One Kiss,” “Stout-Hearted Men,” and “Lover Come Back to Me.”

Although Romberg’s songs were written for American audiences, they never lost the Viennese flavor of the city that influenced him to such a great degree during his years of musical study. “Romberg’s best music is essentially Viennese. He never forgot, nor did he ever tire of recalling nostalgically, the gay times spent in Viennese cafes, Heuriger, salons, and theaters. The world he knew as a young man was the one he loved to write about in his music.”

Romberg was the only composer to remain successful after his successful run on the Broadway stage. He moved permanently to Hollywood in 1929, writing for several motion pictures, adapting his own operettas into movies, and embarking on several concert tours with his own orchestra. These concerts, which were titled “An Evening with Sigmund Romberg” featured a winning mix of his operetta tunes, Viennese waltzes and other favorites. They were a rousing success and a delight to audiences. Romberg was even called back to Broadway in 1945 to write music for the new American comedy *Up in Central Park*, which featured a book based on the reign of the notorious Tweed Ring

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in 1870’s New York. The show ran for fourteen months and was Romberg’s second biggest Broadway success, proving that he could adapt his song-writing talents to other traditions than that of European-style operetta. Romberg died in New York City in 1951; his final production, The Girl in Pink Tights, was produced posthumously in 1954, but it featured a score that seemed stuck in the past and received neither critical acclaim nor public acceptance. This last downfall hardly negates the triumphant success Romberg achieved with all of his earlier shows, however.

**John Philip Sousa.** Former bandmaster of the United States Marine Corps, Sousa was best known for his many patriotic marches including “The Stars and Stripes Forever”, “The Liberty Bell”, “King Cotton”, “Semper Fidelis”, and “El Capitan”. These stirring marches were inspired in part by his childhood experiences as a witness to the excitement of troops preparing for the Civil War as well as his longing for home during his years touring with the Marine Band. However, few may know that Sousa also turned his compositional talents to the creation of ten serious operas as well as several comic operettas including Desiree, El Capitan, The Bride Elect, Chris and the Wonderful Lamp, and The American Maid. Several of his marches as well as some waltzes were lifted directly from these operettas. Sousa was a fan of Gilbert and Sullivan, often including their overtures in his live concert programs; he also wrote a march based on their comic opera The Mikado.

**British Music-Hall Traditions.** Going all the way back to medieval times, musical and comedy entertainment was the prime draw to patrons of British taverns, after the ale of course. This tradition continued to expand until in the early 1800s pub owners went as far as to build theaters inside of their taverns and offer sophisticated variety and musical acts. The Theater Act of 1843 attempted to slap controls on these taverns by
granting liquor licenses only to those establishments that agreed to operate as legitimate theaters. Even so, alcohol was still consumed on the premises and these new theaters became even more popular and profitable.

The rise of the urban working class, a result of the Industrial Revolution, led for an increase in demand for music-hall entertainment as folks looked for respite from the drudgery of their daily jobs. While the shows were inexpensive enough to attract these working-class patrons, they eventually brought in upper-middle and high-brow folks as well who were enamored of the raucous and sometimes bawdy variety shows. By the mid- to late 1800s, Britain was home to more than three hundred music halls.

All of the music halls operated under the same format—a “Chairman” or master of ceremonies who presented a wide variety of acts from singers to dancers, acrobats, and magicians. Even so, the theaters themselves ran the gamut from old garages or basements filled with discarded furniture to elaborately ornate theaters specially constructed for music hall productions. One of the earliest of these was Weston Music Hall, constructed around 1880; while the largest and most famous halls included the Oxford Music Hall, the Alhambra, and the London Pavilion. Patrons would often eat and drink for hours while watching the variety shows, joining in to sing popular songs and rooting on their favorite acts; second-rate acts were jovially booed off the stage. Subjects included comic or sentimental reflections on everyday life and send-ups of the rich and famous. For the most part, the shows remained family friendly and were only mildly risqué.

As was the case with operetta, the singers had well-trained voices and were excellent entertainers. Famous composer and conductor Lehman Engel once stated, “Up to about 1920, a singer was a singer. That is, he was someone with a highly polished and
sizable voice that gave evidence of having been “trained”.³ Stars of the genre included comic singers Florrie Forde, George Robey, and Harry Champion; singer Marie Lloyd; and stage stars Vesta Tilley, Lupino Lane, and Gracie Fields. Even American film stars like Stan Laurel and Charlie Chaplin began as performers in music-hall shows.

The advent of talking films led to the gradual decline of British music hall, but some of the theaters continued to operate into the 1960s. The setup of the theaters, however, changed after WWII when tables and food service were discontinued and traditional theater seating replaced chairs and tables. Still, these lavish theaters made their mark in several ways—introducing Brits to many popular songs which are still sung loudly and lovingly at pubs throughout the country, and serving as the inspiration for America’s own type of variety entertainment known as Vaudeville.

**Ballad Singers and Patter Songs.** Contrasting with operetta and songs performed in “legitimate” full-voice style, was a tradition which grew out of the fast-paced and highly tricky patter popularized in the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. One example of a patter song is “I am the Very Model of a Modern Major General” from the *Pirates of Penzance*. Characteristics of patter songs are fast-paced delivery with one word or syllable corresponding to each note in the score. It is interesting to note that the term “patter” comes from the Latin word *Pater* from the *Pater Noster* or *Lord’s Prayer*, which was often recited in rapid-fire repetition by Catholic postulants. These patter songs were a staple of Italian opera since the earliest times, most specifically opera buffa (comic opera). Famous examples of operatic patter songs include Leporello’s “Catalogue Aria” (*Madamina*) from Mozart’s opera Don Giovanni, and the “Cheti, cheti” duet in Act II of

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Donizetti’s *Don Pasquale*, in which two characters sing patter simultaneously. Another fact to consider is that with patter songs, the nimble facility with which the words are sung or recited is much more important than the quality of the singing voice, making these songs well suited for untrained singers.

It makes sense that the next evolution of such patter songs was the elimination of singing altogether, with some performers talking their way through songs much as in later years, actor Rex Harrison talked his way through the songs of the musical *My Fair Lady*. This style of talk-singing continued to rise in popularity during the British music hall period, with Victor Herbert operettas often featuring talk-singing right alongside the legitimate songs, both for individual characters and even choruses.

Another outgrowth of this talk-singing tradition was the Irish-American ballad singers. These second-generation singers, such as Edward “Ned” Harrigan (1844-1911) and Tony Hart (Anthony Cannon, 1855-1891), brought their ballad singing style to Broadway. Hallmarks of the style included an emphasis on consonants, a straight tone with little vibrato, and an avoidance of the rounded, pear-shaped vowels favored by traditional opera singers. These characteristics were essential to ballad singing since they allowed the audience to clearly understand the sentimental, dramatic lyrics.

In the 1870’s Hart and Harrigan joined with British composer David Braham to create musicals about the fictitious **Mulligan guard**, parodies of the local militias which ruled over the Lower East side of New York in the years following the Civil War. Since these militias were made up of lower-class men of various ethnicities, the ballad style of singing facilitated the understanding of each character’s lines and allowed audiences to follow the comedic action easily.
This Irish-American style of ballad singing made a star of American-born, Chauncey Olcott, who became known as the original “Irish Tenor”, and had major hits with his recordings of “When Irish Eyes are Smiling” and “Mother Machree”. They also served as inspiration for the famous American composer of early musicals, George M. Cohan (1878-1942) who honored Harrigan by writing the famous song “H-a-double-r-I-g-a-n spells Harrigan”. In addition to composing songs in this ballad style, Cohan also favored the talk-singing style of vocalization without pitch, writing and recording several songs in that style including “I’m Mighty Glad I’m Living,” That’s All”, and “Life’s a Funny Proposition”. Author Mark N. Grant calls Cohan’s recordings of these songs “iambic pentameter spoken with a musical lilt—Irish-American Sprechgesang.”

Sprechgesang is a term for a style popularized by mid-twentieth-century classical composers of atonal music such as Arnold Shoenberg who notated on his scores approximate pitches for spoken syllables. Depending on the style, speech singing can run the gamut from an imitation of traditional operatic recitative to the parlando (from the Italian verb parlare, to speak) singing found in Wagner’s romantic dramas. Similar examples can be found on the almost musical recitations of poetry recorded by American Robert Frost and British-born William Butler Yeats.

The exaggerated consonants and clear enunciation first noted in these patter songs and ballads soon became the hallmark style of many actors and performers on the early Broadway and burlesque stages, including W. C. Fields, Mae West, and even stripper Gypsy Rose Lee. For the rising middle class that enjoyed these affordable musical show, having a clear understanding of the sentimental or comedic lyrics allowed them to be “in on the joke” and get the most for their entertainment dollar.

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For the waves of Jewish immigrants from Poland, Germany and the Ukraine, however, these music hall shows based on Western European traditions were not relatable. They lived in their own segregated communities with the family members who had arrived in America before them—often speaking their own language (Yiddish, the primary language of Ashkenazi Jews, later adapted by Jews from throughout Europe and America) and practicing specified religious and cultural traditions. Luckily, they brought along their own unique theater and music traditions right beside the steamer trunks filled with clothing and household items. We will examine these in the next chapter.
Questions for Discussion

1. Outline the traditions and composers of the British light opera tradition.

2. Briefly trace the careers of American operetta composers including Victor Herbert, Rudolf Friml, and Sigmund Romberg.

3. Describe the contributions of John Philip Sousa to American music and operetta.

4. Outline the British Music Hall tradition including the important stars and theaters of this genre.

5. Briefly trace the traditions and contributors to the Patter Song and Ballad Singing style. Highlight each of the major style components of this genre.
CHAPTER II
THE GOLD STANDARD: YIDDISHKEIT EQUALS SUCCESS

When one thinks of Broadway musicals, especially the Broadway musicals of the 1930’s, the mind often turns to Cole Porter. Witty and urbane, Porter was known for the clever, refined lyrics and sophisticated melodies that defined successful shows of the late 1920s and 1930s—*Paris* (1928), *Gay Divorcee* ((1932), and *Jubilee* (1935). Therefore, it’s hard to believe that earlier in the 1920s, while living as an expatriate in Paris --part of a vibrant, Jazz-Age community of artists, musicians, and writers -- this same composer was struggling to achieve Broadway success. While his contemporaries like the Gershwin brothers and Irving Berlin were toasting one successful show after another, Porter was entertaining his friends in Paris at small dinner parties and still dreaming of having his first successful show on Broadway.

Was it simply that many of his songs were filled with “inside references” that had little meaning to those outside of his Paris set, or was it something more subtle? Upon reflection, Porter thought he had hit upon the one factor that could help him bridge the gap between “gentleman composer” and Broadway hit writer and shared his revelation with friend and fellow musician Richard Rogers one day in a casual conversation. “I’m going to write Jewish tunes” the story goes, as related by songwriter Maury Yeston in the documentary film *Broadway Musicals, a Jewish Legacy*. Just what did the composers who were finding success on the Great White Way—most of them Jewish—have that
composers like the Yale-educated, Protestant Porter wanted to emulate? We will examine a few of these traits in this chapter.

**Yiddish Theater in Europe.** Jews migrated to the United States in two large groups at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th century. The first group consisted mainly of young men of German-Jewish descent. When they arrived, they settled with relatives and friends from the same economic groups from which they descended; for the most part, they came seeking democracy and religious freedom and set themselves up in the family businesses. In the late 1800s there was a second large migration of Jews mostly from Russia and Poland. These Jews were seeking refuge from the pogroms—anti-Jewish persecution against cultural and religious practices including dress, language, and communal organization— instituted by the tsarist government. Unlike the young men who had come years before, this migration consisted of entire families who brought their entire way of life with them, including the rich Yiddish culture with its own language, fiction, poetry and theater. Once in America, they formed their own insular communities with the intent of keeping these traditions alive. This maintenance of Yiddish culture led to the term **Yiddishkeit** (all things Yiddish/Jewish).

One of the most important traditions of Yiddishkeit was the Yiddish Theater. The theater most likely had its start in Warsaw with performances staged by **Broder Singers** (who took their name from the progressive town of Brody, located on the Russian/Polish border). These productions included skits and songs often including satirical takes on wealthy Jews and the Orthodox culture; at times the songs were performed in costume. In Jewish culture women were prohibited from performing for men or even exhibiting their singing voices; therefore men dressed in costume and took on the female roles, but only during the yearly Purim festival which called for merry-making and fun. As Jewish
culture became more modernized, these restrictions were somewhat relaxed to allow the participation of women and these performing troupes found fame and success travelling throughout Europe.

The first official Yiddish theater production company was started in Jassy, Romania by Avrom (Americanized to Abraham) Goldfaden, who became known as the “father of Yiddish theater”. Goldfaden got his start performing the main role of a strong-willed woman in the Yiddish play Serkele by Shlomo Etenger. The original troupe consisted only of Goldfaden and one other actor, Shaker Goldstein, whom he hired to play both male and female roles. Goldfaden’s wife, Paulina took on the task of translating popular French and German plays into Yiddish. Characteristics of Yiddish theater included broad comedy and farce, melodrama, singing, and dancing—traits which attracted an enthusiastic, mostly secular and working-class audience who loved to get in on the action with noisy demonstrations, clapping, laughter, and shouted advice to the performers. There were no stage directions and the scripts and plot lines were of little importance to the audiences since they were often only semi-literate. The idea was to inspire a hearty laugh or a good cry to distract these hardworking patrons from their everyday worries as they gathered to enjoy performances in taverns and wine-cellars throughout Eastern Europe. Successors to Goldfaden included “Professor” Moyshe Hurvits (1844-1910), Yoysef Lateiner (1853-1935), and Nokhem Meyer Shaykevitsh (commonly known as Shomer).

Trans-Atlantic Transports. The second wave of Jewish immigrants brought with them to New York their beloved theater complete with its flamboyant acting style and audience participation. As was the case in Europe, the earliest productions were adaptations of Shakespeare, Ibsen and other great playwrights. However, they were
decried by many critics as being of relatively poor quality—little more than “junk theater.” As audiences and critics demanded higher quality, the productions became more refined and theaters quickly rose on the Lower East Side of New York, the Bronx, and Brooklyn to meet this demand. By 1918, more than twenty Yiddish theaters were attracting millions of patrons from all walks of life—sweatshop workers, merchants, Rabbis, scholars, day laborers and shopkeepers. Also by this time playwright Jacob Gordin used his background in Russian and western European literature to institute reforms in the Yiddish theater; these included training actors to perform in a more authentic style and encouraging audiences to accept this new sincerity. In his career he staged more than seventy plays. The audiences were to have the last word however, as Gordin’s later plays included the comic characters and musical scenes he had initially derided. Eventually, Yiddish theater became the glue that held the immigrant communities together, becoming much more than an entertaining night out. Characters acted out real-life scenarios, teaching new immigrants how to assimilate into America while maintaining their Jewish culture, heritage and religion. Gerald Sorin, Professor of History and Jewish Studies at the State University of New York at New Pals, puts it this way: “By combining aspects of Old World culture, American culture, and the transitional culture of the ghetto, and by dealing with many of the immigrant dilemmas of that transitional culture, the Yiddish theater held up a mirror to its audiences. It helped them gain a better understanding of their role in the historical process of relocation, and it gave them greater insight into the problems of creating new identities in the New World.”

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Theater Royalty. Out of all the producers and all the playhouses in the Yiddish theater, perhaps no one had the impact of famed couple Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky. Theater impresario Boris Thomashefsky was known as much for his lavish lifestyle and generosity as he was for being one of the first to establish a successful Yiddish theater in his adopted homeland of New York. Born in Tarashcha, Ukraine a shtetl (small village) outside of Kiev in 1868, Boris became known by the age of eight for the beauty and power of his voice. Even at that young age, he served as one of the primary cantors of his hometown schul (religious school) and took on additional work as a soloist. Familiar with Goldfaden’s Yiddish theater in Russia, the young Boris dreamed of a life on-stage appearing in one of his idol’s plays. That dream became one-step closer when the Thomashefskys fled the pogroms of their native Ukraine in 1881 and took the boat to America. There Boris again gained fame as a musician and soloist, becoming protégé of wealthy restaurant owner Frank Wolf. Thomashefsky convinced Wolf to raise the funds to bring a Romanian troupe of six actors to New York to stage a performance of Goldfaden’s play Koldunye (The Witch). All did not go off as planned however. A group called the Immigration Committee waged a campaign to put a halt to the production. Ironically, the Immigration Committee was actually composed of fellow Jews who had already established themselves firmly as leaders in the community. Made up of those who had arrived in America during the initial immigration wave, these Jews from Poland and Germany had thoroughly assimilated into the culture, adopting Western dress and customs and speaking with refined accents. They viewed the Eastern Europeans as a threat to their way of life and a reminder of all the “lower-class” ways they had left behind. The committee set up stands outside the theater on opening night offering patrons free beer in exchange for their tickets, bribed the star of the show (prima donna Madame
Kraunsfeld) to fake illness, and threatened to deport Thomashefsky. None of these tactics discouraged fourteen-year-old Boris, who did what any good performer would do: he donned Madame Kraunsfeld’s dress and brought down the house with his gorgeous voice and larger-than-life acting talents. Capitalizing on this success, Boris went on to play predominantly women’s roles in later productions. As the theater troupe later known as the Thomashefsky Players became more popular, Boris was able to convince Wolf to finance tours across America, where they played to packed houses of Jewish patrons every night. Thomashefsky’s first big hit production was *Alexander, Crown Prince of Europe* in 1892.

Back in New York, one person who saw beyond Boris’s drag disguise to the talented and handsome young singer beneath was a lovely 15-year-old girl recently transplanted to America from another small village in the Ukraine, by the name of Bessie Baumfeld-Kaufman. Bessie instantly became enamored with the flamboyant singer and introduced herself. Sharing many dinners with the Thomashefsky family gave her the opportunity to learn acting techniques from the pro himself. In fact, Bessie says that everything she learned about being a femme fatale was picked up by watching Boris in action. Boris quickly put Bessie on stage in the role of leading lady and invited her to go on the road with his acting troupe despite their seven-year age difference. Although Bessie’s father was against the idea, she lied about her age, married Boris and soon became a theater legend in her own right, taking on the ingénue roles and leaving Boris free to appear as the suave romantic lead.

Thomashefsky shows became known for the lavishness of their productions—red velvet seats and curtains, gold adornments, electric lights, spectacular sets and scenic effects, and excellent working conditions for the actors. As for the shows, Boris and
Bessie produced versions of many Goldfaden plays which featured a unique musical style that had already been well established—a mix of synagogue chants, religious hymns, Yiddish folk songs, Hasidic and Slavic melodies, and even European grand opera arias. Boris soon produced his own shows, however, with scores written by Joseph Rumshinsky who was well-versed in the music of the Yiddish theater. Most famous among these were the so-called “Green” plays, green being short for greenhorn, a slang term for a newly-arrived, naïve European immigrant. There were productions of The Green Millionaire, The Green Boy, and even a play called Green Children, which was a patriotic take on the popular Our Gang comedies. These comedies were all created on a single premise—they portrayed everyday situations shown from the viewpoint of newly-arrived immigrants with characteristic, old-world folk ways and contrasted them with slick and sophisticated Americanized characters. Plots centered on ideas like reunions with long-lost relatives, characters with speech defects or physical infirmities, reversal of fortune, etc. which were guaranteed to garner instant laughs. While the plays often offered tips on how to deal with these crises, the best advice usually came from the extremely reactive audiences who would shout out things such as “Remember what your mother said,” or “Don’t open the door!”

While these “green” plays and other comic farces brought in lots of cash, they were looked down on by the established Jewish community as shunt (junk) plays. Even Boris wanted better, so he used the funds brought in by the shunt plays to subsidize more cultural efforts such as a production of Wagner’s Parsifal and plays by Ibsen and Shakespeare, as well as new plays of his own, dealing with issues which had become important to him, including labor vs. capital, personal and social conflicts, and even women’s rights. He also wanted to build a new theater nearer the heart of Broadway and
away from the **Bowery**, which was a dangerous, high-crime area on the outskirts of several immigrant communities of poor Italians, Irish, and Jewish. By this time, the Thomashefkys had the capital to do so, as they were living in a grand mansion in Brooklyn, owned newspapers, and ran two theaters: *Paradise Gardens*, an open-air theater in Hunter, NY, and the *People’s Theater* which had the largest theater stage of any in New York outside of the famed *Hippodrome*.

Boris’s next step was to mount a capital campaign to finance this dream, the construction of the *National Theater* on Houston and 2nd Streets. Boris made a deal with the famed Burlesque producers, the **Minsky brothers**, to finance construction of his new theater, but then left for Europe without supervising the project. He returned to find a beautiful new theater with the lavish accoutrements he was known for, but with a stage that was substantially smaller than that of the theater he currently was running; it was not nearly of sufficient size for the type of productions he mounted. On the personal front, Boris’s fortunes took a similar bad turn. While he had always had a wandering eye that turned to many a young starlet during his marriage to Bessie, he began a torrid affair with the much younger actress Regina Zucherberg. Ms. Zucherberg, who had modeled herself on Bessie, copying her style of dress and mannerisms, quickly rose to fame as the star of several of Boris’s new productions and capturing the eye of her mentor. This affair, combined with Bessie’s unhappiness at Boris’s lavish spending prompted her to leave the marriage, although the two never divorced. Boris’s struggles, however, were in direct opposition to Bessie’s successes. Bessie pawned her jewelry to start her own artist’s theater company and open her own theater, achieving fame with her play *Chanshe in America* in which she played the title role. At last she was able to create plays on issues
that mattered most to her—voting rights for women, birth control, and other social issues. She also created what was to become her most enduring character, Minke the servant girl.

Boris’s star quickly raised again, thanks in part to the controversy stirred up in the media regarding the couple’s marital strife and their competing theater productions. Grandson conductor Michael Tilson Thomas speaking in the documentary musical *The Thomashefskys, Music and Memories of a Life in the Yiddish Theater*, states that later in life Bessie wondered if some of the conflicts in the couple’s marriage were not in actuality exacerbated by this media scrutiny. In any case, Boris’s shows continued to bring in money and he was able to devote more and more time to social issues of concern to him, such as the creation of the Hebrew Actors Union, the first labor union in America. Although the group was initially started as a type of social club—Jews being excluded from membership in most of the leading New York clubs of the day—it later achieved lasting reputation for negotiating fair pay, better working conditions, and other labor issues.

Although Boris stopped performing in the 1930’s he continued to hold court at his favorite New York restaurants and was revered by the theater community. Upon his death in 1939, the entire East side of the city closed down for a massive funeral parade in tribute to the great theater legend. Bessie moved out to Hollywood to try her hand at movie acting, but was unsuccessful. She remained a lively and vibrant force in her newly-adopted community, sharing many stories of a life lived on the great stages of the Yiddish theater.

**Other Titans.** Bessie was not the only competition that the flamboyant Boris faced. By the time Yiddish theater reached its pinnacle there were at least a dozen performing companies throughout New York and another two hundred that traveled
across America to packed houses. One of the most important of the day was Jacob Adler of the Union Theater. Adler first began performing in his native Odessa under the mentorship of Israel Rosenberg, who was a member of Abraham Goldfaden’s original acting troupe. Like Thomashefsky, Adler fled his homeland in 1883 to escape the pogroms, first settling in London where he performed several acting clubs before immigrating to America in 1889. Known as The Great Eagle, Adler achieved considerable fame in the Yiddish theater and became an international superstar after taking on the role of Shylock in the Broadway production of The Merchant of Venice.

Third in the triumvirate of Yiddish theater stars was David Kessler. As a teenager in his native Russia, Kessler put on amateur comic plays in the stable of his father’s inn while dreaming of living the life of a performer. When his father turned down his request to join Rosenberg’s theater troupe at the tender age of sixteen, Kessler bided his time and joined a smaller troupe three years later. He eventually immigrated to the United States, where he performed in Jacob Adler’s troupe as well as in all of the other great Yiddish theaters. As his fame grew, he established his own theater in 1913. The David Kessler Theater competed right alongside both Thomashefskys and Adler’s. Each of the three actors had their own rabid groups of fans—protesting loudly and vociferously during productions and even engaging in fist-fights. The impresarios contributed their own share to these battles, with Adler calling Thomashefsky the “King of Shunt” (junk) and Thomashefsky bragging about the fortune he was raking in with his shows. By the late twenties the Yiddish theater had reached its zenith and began a steady decline until it had virtually ceased to exist by WWII. It left a lasting legacy however, spinning off into Jewish vaudeville and early Broadway shows such as Show Boat, inspiring composers like George and Ira Gershwin and Irving Berlin, and serving as a training ground for
young Jewish performers who would go on to find film success in Hollywood. In the words of the late Jacob Adler, “Only dipped in blood and lit with tears of a living witness can the world understand how, without blood, without nerves, with the tears of our sleepless nights, we built the theater that stands today as a testament to our people.”

**Vaudeville and Burlesque.** Although many Jewish performers found fame and success on the stages of the Yiddish theater, others wanted exposure to a wider audience and lent their singing, dancing and comedic talents to the theaters of the vaudeville circuit. While vaudeville as a genre deserves more detailed examination in a later chapter, suffice to say that Jewish performers made their mark on the stages of famous vaudeville palaces such as *Tony Pastor’s 14th Street Theater*, New York’s *Palace*, and the nationwide *Orpheum* and *Pantages* circuits.

One particular subset of the vaudeville culture which has remained troubling to some is that of the **blackface** tradition, an outgrowth of the early minstrel show. Jewish performers such as *Al Jolson*, *Sophie Tucker*, and *Eddie Cantor* donned makeup and performed in parodic representations of black characters. While this tradition may shock and offend our modern sensibilities, the performers of the day claimed a kinship with black culture by viewing themselves as fellow outsiders in the homogenous white popular culture. As victims of religious persecution in their native Europe and to some extent in America as well, they empathized with the plight of black Americans. In addition, the use of blackface (especially in comic situations) was often seen as a sentimental reference to simpler times.

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Possibly the most popular of these blackface performers was Al Jolson. Born Asa Joelson in Srednike, Russia, this American-transplant had a forty-plus year career performing in vaudeville and minstrel shows. He also appeared in blackface in the movie version of *The Jazz Singer*, which was the first motion picture to feature synchronized speech. While he achieved great fame for his vibrant singing style and enthusiastic stage performances with audience interaction, critics derided him for his egomania and use of blackface (most stopped short of calling him a racist, however). These criticisms did not lessen the public’s love for him and certainly did not stop his records from climbing the charts: earning him millions from songs like “Swanee” (the song which made a young George Gershwin a millionaire as well) and “My Mammy” which became his signature song. In his defense, Jolson maintained friendships with famous black jazz musicians of his day Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle and argued that his signature song was performed as a tribute to his own mother rather than being a reference to the stereotypic black Mammy character. In addition, Jolson’s songs were sung in a straight-forward style without imitating African-American slang or including the comical exaggerations seen in earlier minstrel shows and he made sure that his “Negro” characters were never seen as the butt of the joke but instead outsmarted the white characters to come out on top. Indeed, more recently, some musicologists have fallen back on the aforementioned idea that Jolson’s portrayal was done as a way to honor a fellow minority group. In 1976, author Irving Howe was quoted in George Bornstein’s book entitled *The Colors of Zion*, as saying that Jolson’s style was a “natural outgrowth” of the Jewish traditions of his day. Jolson’s portrayal “brought together--for him, a quite natural thing to do—Yiddish schmaltz and blackface sentiment…but it is hard to resist the impression that some
deeper affinity was also at work…Black became a mask for Jewish expressiveness, with one woe speaking through the voice of another.”7

Although both Eddie Cantor and Sophie Tucker sometimes appeared in blackface as well, their performances were in a more comic vein. Eddie Cantor (born Edward Israel Iskowitz) was born and grew up on the tough Lower East Side of New York, where he danced, sang and juggled on street-corners on his way to fame. His show-biz career began as a singing waiter at a Coney Island restaurant, but once he started entering and winning talent shows he found a home first on vaudeville and shortly after as a member of the famous Ziegfeld Follies. While performing in the Follies, he created a blackface character (part of a fictional father-son duo) with comedian Bert Williams. He later created a second blackface character named Jefferson. Cantor later appeared in movies as well and became a well-loved figure through his long-lasting career on radio.

Sophie Tucker, known as The Last of the Red-Hot Mamas was another Ukrainian émigré, arriving in America as a young child. Her earliest stage was among the tables at her parent’s restaurant in Hartford, Connecticut. She first appeared professionally as a blackface performer at New York’s Music Hall Theater. She followed her triumphs on the Vaudeville stages with a successful recording career (often recording her songs in both Yiddish and English), and appeared in movies and on stage until well into her 60s. Hallmarks of her style were a bawdy sense of humor and vibrant personality.

While the blackface tradition may seem a racist one, it is important to note that each performer had his or her own specific reasons for choosing to do so. For some, such as Cantor, it was simply one character in an arsenal of many. In Jolson’s portrayal of his

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character in the movie *The Jazz Singer*, it was a creative plot device to tell the story of a young man who dreamed of a career on the jazz stage in opposition to his cantor father’s wishes for his son to pursue a religious life. As explained by author Andrea Most in her book *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical*, “…critics have tended to use *The Jazz Singer* to extrapolate the whole arena of Jewish blackface entertainment, making the mistaken assumption that all black face performances by Jews were essentially the same, with Jolson’s performance in *The Jazz Singer* as the epitome. I argue instead that performers use blackface in diverse ways and for different purposes.”

**Fanny Brice: Vaudeville Star.** Fanny Borach was a tall, gangly, eye-rolling comedienne and singer who became one of the greatest lights of the vaudeville stage. Her routine was full of comic sight gags and she often spoke on-stage in an exaggerated Yiddish accent. She was known for comedic parodies of sophisticated high-class society ladies and vampy Hollywood starlets to the delight of her audiences. Like Sophie Tucker, Brice got her start singing and dancing in her parent’s saloon; a win in a talent competition took her first to vaudeville and then earned her a spot on the **Columbus** burlesque circuit. Her singing brought her some fame as well, when she commissioned and introduced two songs by novice song-writer Irving Berlin, the more famous of which was “Sadie Salome, Go Home”. Her life story was portrayed in the musical and movie *Funny Girl* featuring Barbra Streisand.

**The Minsky Brothers.** When it comes to burlesque, the art form and the names of the four sons of Louis and Ethel Minsky—Abraham, Michael, Billy, and Herbert—are inextricably intertwined. Their operation started with racy films shown at eldest brother Abe’s **Nickelodeon** on the Lower East Side of New York. His unhappy father quickly shut down this operation, however, and attempted to pacify Abe by purchasing a theater.
the sixth floor of the *Winter Garden* building on Houston Street. Unfortunately, the poor location didn’t bring in large enough audiences to enable the brothers to purchase expensive, first-run films. They quickly hit upon the idea of staging burlesque shows which were much cheaper to put on since the shows travelled the country in circuits. Each week a new show would arrive in town, complete with performers, costumes, and scenery. The Minsky brothers soon found that these “clean” shows providing family entertainment did little to inspire the poor immigrant community to travel up six flights of stairs and put down their hard-earned money. Inspired by France’s *Follies Bergère* and *Moulin Rouge*, the Minskys installed a runway in the theater (the first in the United States) and offered shows featuring scantily-clad girls and songs and skits bordering on the risqué. While the Minsky’s *Winter Garden Theater* was raided multiple times, nothing could keep patrons from flocking to these fun-filled shows featuring comedians, strippers, and singers. Business only got better during the *Great Depression* since audiences who couldn’t afford high Broadway ticket prices could still get in to a Minsky burlesque.

As the Minskys got wealthier, they wanted to provide a classier environment for their patrons and leased the *Republic Theater* on famed 42nd Street in 1931. This put them side-by-side with the big Broadway houses, although the entertainment level of shows themselves wasn’t elevated to any great degree. The performers were of the highest quality, however, and included *Phil Silvers, Zero Mostel, Red Skelton, Red Buttons, and Abbott and Costello*. At the height of burlesque New York was home to fourteen theaters offering patrons a wide variety of shows. One of the divas of burlesque was the famous stripper *Gypsy Rose Lee*. Born Rose Louise Hovick, Gypsy was one of a duo of daughters pushed on to the stage by her overpowering mother Rose. Although the
younger daughter June was originally the star, when she eloped with a dancer at age sixteen “Mama Rose” was left without a star and forced the older daughter onto the performing stage. Gypsy first performed on the vaudeville circuit but was unsuccessful as a singer/dancer. She then developed a classy version of a strip-tease act which brought her attention to the Minskys and made her a star. Her witty repartee and smooth stripping style in which she actually never revealed much skin became her trademark and made her name a household word. She continued to perform at Minsky’s until the end of Burlesque in the 1940s, then made the move to Hollywood where she appeared in several movies, made many TV appearances and wrote three books, one a memoir and two mystery thrillers, The G-String Murders and Mother Finds a Body. Like Fanny Brice, her life in show business was immortalized in the fictionalized Broadway musical and movie Gypsy written by Stephen Sondheim and Jule Styne.

The Lights Are Dimmed. By the mid1930s New Yorkers began to protest against the racy, low-class shows of the burlesque stages and their anger reached the ears of legendary New York mayor Fiorello La Guardia. La Guardia found the shows to be crude and a corrupting influence, and had his police commissioners conduct frequent raids on Minsky's theaters. One final raid, in which a stripper was arrested for performing sans g-string led to strict regulations on the burlesque houses. The Minsky brothers were forced to close all of their theaters, but while on appeal were allowed to operate providing the shows did not feature any strippers at all. This final restriction soon put an end not only to Minsky's theaters but to the burlesque entertainment genre as a whole. The end of one genre couldn’t keep good entertainers down however, and many of the performers moved on to play in more traditional Broadway shows or found roles in the burgeoning Hollywood movie industry.
**Melodic Traits.** Just what were the elusive characteristics that Cole Porter was alluding to when he spoke of writing “Jewish” tunes? It turns out that there are several melodic traits of Jewish music that relate directly not only to the music of the black culture, but to American jazz. One of these is altered harmonies, which include **minor tonalities**, **blue notes**, **klezmer music** and **melodic sequences** adapted directly from liturgical chants. We will examine each of these musical ideas in greater detail.

**On a Sad Note.** The notion of writing melodies in minor keys is one of the melodic traits most evident in Jewish music (both the secular and liturgical variety). As in the music of contemporaneous black culture, these minor keys were often used to express sadness and longing. In the case of the Jews, they represent sorrow at being exiled both from their European homelands and from Israel in the greater religious context. This melancholy found its way into many of the songs written by early Tin Pan Alley composers like **George and Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, Harold Arlen, and Jerome Kern.** David Lehman, author of the book entitled *A Fine Romance: Jewish Songwriters, American Songs*, states it this way. “It (sadness) is there in the plaintive undertow, the feeling that yearning is eternal and sorrow not very far from the moment’s joy.”8 Aside from the notes in a minor scale itself, composers can make use of techniques which manipulate these notes to play on our emotions. Often, sad songs contain falling notes which mimic the sigh of a human voice, quavering notes which can mimic tears of sadness, and slowly descending melodic lines which induce a mood of melancholy.

While many listeners associate the notes of the minor scales with sadness, scientific research shows that this is mainly a Western phenomenon. According to

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musicologist Daniel J. Levitin these very same notes of the minor scale are used in societies including the Middle East and Brazil to portray happy emotions. Furthermore, in India music is based on scalar patterns called raga, each one assigned to a different mood, season, or even time of day.

For reasons that are largely cultural, we tend to associate major scales with happy or triumphant emotions, and minor scales with sad or defeated emotions. Some studies have suggested that the associations might be innate, but the fact that these are not culturally universal indicates that, at the very least, any innate tendency can be overcome by exposure to specific cultural associations.9

In other words, Western listeners often associate minor scales or modes with sadness because of previous cultural relationships. Whenever we hear a new melody, our brain associates it with songs we have experienced previously, so if we hear a melody that features a slowly descending, minor scale pattern resembling that of a sad love song heard once upon a time, the new melody will trigger that same remembered sadness and put us in a contemplative mood. Smart composers play on this notion, writing slow melodies in minor keys to trigger sadness and lively, energetic major-mode melodies to stir happier emotions.

Singin’ the Blues Klezmer Style. The Merriam-Webster online dictionary loosely defines klezmer as a Jewish instrumentalist who specializes in playing the traditional music of Eastern Europe. Other definitions are a bit more detailed, citing klezmer as being derived from a combination of two Hebrew words: klei, (vessel) and zemer (song) translating to mean instrument of song. Today, the term klezmer may be used to define not only an individual artist but the genre of this type of music as a whole. In lay terms, klezmer was the traditional music of the Eastern European villages or

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shtetls, which were home to thousands of Jews, many of whom made their way to America during the religious pogroms. It was played by troupes of wandering musicians at occasions and celebrations both happy and sad: weddings, birthdays, funerals, circumcisions, and even something as simple as the consecration of a newly built synagogue. There were many traditional melodies used, but several things defined them all. First off, they were built around musical elements drawn both from secular music (dances and popular songs) as well as the melodiously-minor chants of the synagogue. Second, they were usually played on a set variety of instruments—flutes, fiddle (violin), and tsimbel (a type of dulcimer or cymbalon). These instruments were originally chosen based on Ukrainian laws in the 18th and 19th centuries banning Jews from playing strong (loud) instruments such as brass and drums, and because they were cheap and easy to obtain for poor residents of these small villages. According to the Klezmer Music Website (Borzykowski.users.ch) these instruments had an extra advantage in that they were small and lightweight, allowing for easy transport when Jews fled the Russian pogroms. As time went on and the art of klezmer music became more refined, classifications developed which separated music for entertaining from that used for religious celebrations. These distinctions defined the bands of instrumentalists as well, with individual groups specializing in religious or secular music.

Aside from the fact that klezmer was the native music of those Jews who fled to America in the late 18th and early 19th centuries there are several unique characteristics which made it particularly suited for use in the popular standards written by Jewish composers of the American Songbook. One of the most important of these traits was the klezmer tradition of improvising melodies, which were drawn from a series of modes
pulled from both sacred and secular Jewish music. Melody, style, and even tempo were varied during each individual performance, because the musicians set the stage for each individual occasion: speeding things up to a lively beat to encourage dancers to make their way out on the floor, and slowing the pace when “grandma” came out to join the wedding dance. When it came to religious occasions, there were differences as well: solemn and stately tunes for funerals, and festive, lively dances such as those played during the Jewish feast of Purim (a holiday based on stories from the Torah book of Esther celebrating the Jews’ liberation in Persia), which called for gleeful group singing and dancing. Anyone who follows jazz knows just how important the art of improvisation is in this style, and needn’t look too far to make a connection between Jewish klezmer and American jazz.

Of course, jazz and blues also have deep roots in black culture, but here again there are commonalities between the Jewish and black cultures. We have already noted that Jewish music centers on minor modalities, but one additional characteristic of traditional Jewish music is what are commonly termed “blue” notes. These are flatted pitches or “microtonal lowering of the third, seventh, and sometimes the fifth degree of a major scale”¹¹. Common to both jazz and blues music of the black culture, these blue notes directly correlate to the improvised variations seen in klezmer. Of course, jazz and blues musicians were not playing violin (the traditional instrument of klezmer) so this correlation does not quite fit. The last piece of the puzzle linking the two musical traditions came about when Jewish musicians made the switch from violin to clarinet in the mid 19th century. There were several reasons for the switch: first, the fiddle occupied

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¹¹ Merriam-Webster Dictionary.com
a position of low status in Europe at the time and this transferred directly to lowered social status for the musicians who played it; second, musicians who heard the military bands of Russia and Germany soon became transfixed by the mournful sound of the C-tuned clarinet, and felt it to be particularly suited to klezmer. Furthermore, like the violin the clarinet was easily carried, perfect for transport by travelling musicians. So while the switch to clarinet as the preferred klezmer instrument had nothing to do with jazz per se, clever musicians soon realized that it was an excellent choice for the instrumental slides and improvisations that characterized jazz music. Perhaps the best correlation between jazz clarinet and klezmer can be seen in the iconic clarinet glissando that begins George Gershwin’s “Rhapsody in Blue.” Although Gershwin himself never spoke of this idea, it doesn’t take a big leap in musical thinking to make it. The score only indicates that there should be an opening, rising seventeen-note scale played on the clarinet to begin the piece. According to Simon Broughton, Gershwin specified only the seventeen notes of the opening scale and offered no real instruction as to how to interpret it. Basing his thesis on an account written by Henry Sapoznik, Broughton states that Gershwin had no intrinsic knowledge of traditional Jewish music, and says that the glissando (slide) was improvised by clarinetist Ross Gorman during one of the rehearsals for the work.¹² Gershwin may not have been an expert on klezmer, but he knew what he liked and wanted for the piece and advised Gorman to perform the clarinet intro just as he had in rehearsals. The result was an inspiring interpretation of the distinctively joyful and unrestrained clarinet sound often found in klezmer. Of course no one can state this as fact, for as many different musicians and critics who hear the work, there are just as many

interpretations. After the work’s premiere, critic Gilbert W. Gabriel described the opening glissando as a “fluttering tongued, drunken whoop of an introduction that had the audience rocking,”13 while Gershwin biographer Howard Pollack likens the opening clarinet melody to “a child—albeit a saucy American one—of the flute solo that begins Debussy’s Afternoon of a Faun.”14 Quite often however, Jewish composers of popular music note a direct correlation to klezmer--a style that Gershwin would have at least recognized when invoked by Gorman, whether or not he had detailed experienced with the music of his Russian homeland. Therefore, whether or not one considers this opening motive jazz, classical, or even klezmer most likely depends on that individual’s musical tastes and interests.

Whether or not we can point definitively to a link between klezmer and jazz, we can be sure that Jewish musicians did have a tremendous influence in the creation of the repertoire which comprises the Songbook. Both Broadway and our popular culture owe a great debt to these inspired individuals who turned the beloved music of their homeland into a great American art form.

14 Pollack, Howard, George Gershwin, His Life and His Work, University of California Press, Berkeley, CA, p. 29.
Questions for Discussion

1. What were the pogroms? Yiddishkeit?

2. Give a brief outline of Yiddish theater. Include its origins in Europe as well as its American interpretation.

3. Who were Boris and Bessie Thomashefsky?

4. Name two other titans of Yiddish theater in the United States.

5. What are some of the melodic traits common to Jewish popular music?

6. What is klezmer? Which instruments are used in the performance of klezmer music?

7. Briefly describe the tradition of Burlesque. Include details about some of the important performers.

8. What was blackface? Discuss the role of Al Jolson and the controversy surrounding his performances.

9. Give a brief description and history of Vaudeville. Who were some of the important figures on the Vaudeville stage?
Of course, white audiences were not the only ones having fun. Rising alongside the theaters staging European operetta and Irish-American ballad singers were those offering other options—the minstrel shows; jazz and blues clubs; and full-scale musicals featuring black performers. This chapter will examine these important traditions in greater detail and show how the experience of black music traditions, both religious and secular, influenced the American Songbook.

**Early Days.** The earliest black music traditions came directly from the folk songs and spirituals of the slave population. According to author Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. writing in his book *The Power of Black Music*, religion permeated every facet of the lives of those Africans who were transported to the United States as slaves. Regardless of religion, these blacks recognized one high or supreme God whose existence was essential to their survival; there was no separation between the religious and the secular, but rather a comingling of the two, each informing the other. In addition, most of them recognized a number of “lesser gods” as well as ordinary spirits and “living dead” who were pervasive in their everyday lives. They held many superstitions (including a belief in reincarnation in some quarters) and called upon their gods and spirits to help them make contact with departed loved ones through a variety of religious rituals. A central characteristic of these rituals was the drum circle or dancing ring—often including foot stamping, call and response, rhythmic dancing, hand clapping and shouting in an effort to call up these
spirits. Over time, these rhythms, songs and shouts became standardized into common forms which transcended the many different African religions. Regardless of the minor differences between the groups, these songs can be standardized into what was termed the ring style. Cultural musicologist Alan Lomax studied and recorded many of these traditions and discovered several common threads including a basic style which he noted as “repetitious, cohesive, overlapping or interlocked, multi-leveled, and hot.” Another musicologist, Olly Wilson, concurred finding that these different styles eventually were standardized into a definitive, heterogeneous mixture including interaction between a lead voice, chorus, hand clapping, and drums each of which was used to a greater or lesser degree depending on the cultural or regional group. It is also important to reemphasize that these musical ideals were a natural outgrowth of traditions which had begun in the native countries of the transplanted Africans.

**Negro Spirituals.** While the slaves did indeed bring their native music and dance-ring culture with them, changes eventually resulted when American Christians began their own efforts to convert their slave populations to their own Christian religion. The spiritual quickly became the slaves’ primary method of expressing their struggles in this earthly world and a longing to join their ancestors in the glory of the heavenly one. In addition, its style it was not far removed from the dance/drum circle and ritual singing style that was already a part of their cultural heritage. They retained the rhythmic patterns, call-and-response style, and other characteristics central to their musical past. In so doing, they made this new Christian religion their own, adapting it to their own cultural ideas. Overall, the spiritual was divided into several different types including the

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16 Floyd, Jr., Samuel A., p. 27.
lament or sorrow songs; the jubilee songs which told of happier times to come; and testifying or shout songs. Despite variations in style, these different song types were unified by repetitive lyrics, standard rhythmic patterns, and often a leader-oriented style. In addition, the songs often included remnants of a cultural heritage such as allegory, symbols and superstition. Rather than being a separate musical tradition, the spiritual became just another addition to the existing drum/dance circle as slaves adapted to a new life in America; these songs also offered them a way to practice and become accustomed to the English language, since they were prohibited from using their native tongues.

As with any other culture, the African-Americans soon developed secular songs in this new language. However, in doing so they fell back on characters and tales from their native cultures which eventually developed into mischievous animal characters such as Br’er Rabbit of the Uncle Remus stories, Anansi the Spider, the Signifying Monkey; and spiritual demons such as Legba, guardian of the Devil’s crossroads. There were also work songs which were an outgrowth of another tradition which was transported from Africa, one involving repetitive singing during work. Another style could be found in children’s game songs, which usually featured the offbeat accents and repetitive lyrics of adult work songs and spirituals.

With the gradual assimilation of blacks into the white European culture of America, came a natural intermingling of the two cultures with regard to music styles. African nurses would sing black spirituals to their young white charges while blacks danced cotillions, quadrilles and other European dances at slave balls. Around 1800, a development called the Second Great Awakening took place. It was one of several waves of similar Christian movements which arose between the early 18th and late 19th centuries in America. The purpose each of these movements led by evangelical Protestant
ministers was to inspire increased devotion to religion by way of religious tent revivals and camp meetings. An important outgrowth of this Second Great Awakening was the birth of the northern abolitionist movement, which began to give black slaves hope of a better life in America. Also in the North and at about the same time there arose efforts to publish and standardize written collections of black spirituals and the religious songs used by Northern congregations of free blacks who sought refuge from white churches and southern slave cultures.

**Repetoire Becomes Standardized.** Newport Gardner (1746-1826) was a former slave who escaped to freedom in Rhode Island, where he studied with white singing-school master Andrew Law and then left to conduct his own singing school and composed the famous “Promise Anthem” in 1764. Gardner eventually immigrated to Liberia so little is known of his life after leaving the U.S. However, more is known about another important African-American by the name of Richard Allen (1760-1831), who made great inroads in promoting a free black religious culture by creating the African Methodist Episcopal (A.M.E.) church. In addition, Allen compiled and published the first official collection of hymns for the A.M.E. church in 1818, along with a volume of hymns entitled* A Collection of Spiritual Songs and Hymns Selected from Various Authors* in 1801. Several other important black composers and publishers of the time include William Wells Brown (1814-1884) who compiled collection of songs entitled the Antislavery Harp; Edwin Hill (1845-1925) who wrote several famous songs in the European hymn tradition including “Hallelujah Christ is Risen from the Dead” and “Easter Anthem”; John Turner Layton (1849-1915) who edited the eleventh edition of the A.M.E. hymnal; and Henry F. Grant, composer of the well-known hymn “Jesus, Lover of My Soul.”
Tin-Pan Alley Traditions. The last and possibly most important step in the process of assimilation was the publishing of sheet music of spirituals and pseudo-spirituals for voice and piano designed for home playing as well as stage performance. The earliest of these saw publication around the year 1870. Unfortunately, several trends lingering from the days of slavery tainted much of this early repertoire. The pseudo spirituals and carry me back songs were the most innocuous of these new styles, which were written by black composers in pursuit of economic success. The carry me back songs were among the first types of published song to be a success in the music publishing market, but they had a slightly sinister undertones that appealed to white racist sensibilities. An early famous example of the carry me back song was the song “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny” written in 1878 by black entertainer and composer James Bland. This song, among others of the same type fueled a misleading impression among the white pro-slavery culture that blacks longed for “happy days” back on the plantations of the South. An adapted version of this song was even chosen as the state song of Virginia in the year 1940; it continued its reign as state song until 1997, when officials reconsidered the underlying racist sensibilities of the lyrics. The song “Shenendoah” took its place and remains the state song of Virginia to the present day.

Shortly after the end of the Civil War, pseudo spirituals began to find their way to the song publishing market. While they dealt with some themes taken from black slave culture, they were skillfully crafted to appeal to a broad population, lacking the authenticity of songs that came out of the ring circle with its particular rhythms, intonations, musical patterns of call and response, and cultural themes. In fact, these songs were little more than clever imitations of traditional spirituals; yet they reached a broad audience of both blacks and whites and made money for their composers. Popular
pseudo spirituals were “Oh Dem Golden Slippers” written by James Bland and “My Lord is Writin’ Down Time” by Jacob Sawyer, both from the year 1883.

At around this same time, black composers were turning out the first art songs in the European style. These songs were more straightforward, without the characteristic rhythm patterns and vocal harmonies of the earlier songs created in the ring style. However, once the publishers of Tin Pan Alley jumped on board the songs quickly morphed into other genres completely, many of them quite negative in character. For every well-crafted art song, there was another written in a way that denigrated the black population to appeal to the rampant racism that was still present after the Civil War.

This negative trend culminated in the rise of what were called the coon songs which also became popular immediately following the Civil War. The word coon, which was a pejorative term for a black person found its way directly into the title of many of these songs, which had particular appeal to the racist attitudes that lingered for several years after the Civil War. Millions of copies of sheet music, usually featuring stereotypically racist artwork, rolled off the presses of Tin Pan Alley music publishers, featuring titles such as “All Coons Look Alike to Me” and “Da Coon Dat Had de Razor”, both written by black composer and entertainer Ernest Hogan; “The Coons Are on Parade” and “New Coon in Town” by J.S. Putnam; and “A Trip to Coon Town,” an entire musical written by black composer Bob Cole. The idea behind the coon songs was comical in nature, presenting black males as “chicken-eating,” “fun-loving” gamblers and drunks—unfaithful to their lovers and razor-toting thieves. Black women on the other hand were portrayed in one of several ways, either as light-skinned lovelies or thick-lipped stereotypical Mammy characters.
Nevertheless, coon songs became so popular that they sparked a national craze, reaching a broad market of both blacks and whites, and were even used in many advertising campaigns to promote a variety of products. At the height of this craze in 1890, nearly every famous composer both black and white had at least one coon song in his musical repertoire, including Irving Berlin and Gus Edwards. These songs became a staple of both Vaudeville and the new genre of the Minstrel Show, where they were often sung out from the stage by white females called Coon Shouters. One of the most famous of these was Vaudeville icon Sophie Tucker. As for musical characteristics of these coon songs, they featured lively melodies and rhythms most often adapted from the polyrhythms, syncopations, and folk melodies of the ragtime style; however, these rhythms were rigid in nature and the songs themselves but, a pale imitation of the true black style which drew its inspiration from African music. While coon songs made a great deal of money for composers, producers and performers, they had a truly deleterious effect on the black culture, creating an ideal of the black stereotype that lasted in both the art world and society for decades—well into the era of the first Broadway musicals and even early motion pictures.

Minstrel Shows and Blackface. Another trend, which began at the start of the 19th century well before the Civil War and lasted until the early motion picture era was that of performing in blackface. This performance style is somewhat more difficult to get a handle on, since while it was once embraced by both black and white cultures, it has more recently come to be looked at as the personification of racism. With regard to issue of blackface, the truth of the matter most likely falls somewhere in the middle.

One of the most controversial aspects of the black experience with regard to the American Song Book is the case of minstrelsy and the use of blackface in entertainment.
It is easy to think in our modern day and age, that such portrayals are outright instances of racism. It is interesting to note, however, that this is hardly the case especially in the early days.

According to Michael Rogin in his book, *Blackface, White Noise—Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot*, the first instances of people blackening their faces for the stage took place in the courts of European Royalty as far back as the 1600’s. Performers, including Queen Anne, wife of England’s James I, performed in blackface in an effect to “try on” identities of Moorish inhabitants of England, and in their way attempt to show sympathy for a downtrodden people.

In the new world of America, this tradition continued as whites, blacks, and Europeans of all nationalities attempted to find their way toward peaceful coexistence—although there were many stumbles along the way. Dating all the way back to pre-Revolutionary times, whites played the role of blacks—these earliest attempts, however were probably the worst of all, showing as they did blacks as the lowest form of character, in effect creating the beginnings of a stereotype that was to last for many years in the American consciousness. With the arrival of the 19th century, whites at least made an attempt to ground their black characters in some sort of reality, although their performances were hardly authentic. These misguided efforts at appropriating their style of music and dance in an attempt to recreate a black art form, actually went a long way toward reinforcing existing stereotypes of blacks as “shiftless,” lazy, and inferior to whites. In a somewhat twisted way, white Americans blackened their faces with burnt cork and attempted “authentic” portrayals of black artistry by turning the artistic musical expression of the black slave culture into performances designed to entertain white audiences.
With the advent of the Civil War, politics in the form of the abolishionist movement found its way into black face productions. Anti-slavery proponents such as Harriet Beecher Stowe insisted that white characters in black face portray the characters of Tom, Eliza, and Topsy from her popular novel *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, claiming that putting whites in these roles would allow them to in some way experience the suffering of black slaves of the antebellum South.\(^\text{17}^\) As the show was re-imagined and performed over and over through the years, however, many later productions seemed to mourn the passing of the grand southern plantation and romanticize this lost culture rather than bring its failures and injustices to light. Furthermore, they often relied on the established stereotypes of black life and characters rather than attempting any sort of realism. These two differing types of portrayals epitomized the two opposing political camps of the slavery issue during and immediately following the Civil War—segregationists felt that plays like *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* showed sympathy for the slaves and offered up a negative portrayal of white slave owners, while abolitionists believed that they could be effective in bringing the plight of downtrodden black slaves to light, inspiring the nation to move toward abolishing the practice of slavery, and later helping integrate freed blacks into society. In actuality, these productions were most likely viewed as just another form of entertainment.

In the 1880s and 90s, minstrel shows became extremely popular and are recognized by some scholars as the first genuine American art form. Even some black performers such as singer Bert Williams donned black face before being allowed to perform in front of white audiences. He donned the false persona of the shuffling, shambling stock black character and stating that he was forced to adopt a stage language

\(^{17}\) Rogin, p. 41.
which mimicked that of a poor black and which was “as much a foreign dialect as that of the Italian.” Many famous black performers including blues singers Bessie Smith and Ma Rainey got their start in minstrel shows. Later shows, which played to packed houses of both black and white audiences from every economic strata, held to a standardized format—an opening act with dancing characters who strutted across the stage singing and telling jokes; a second act which was often a short dramatic or comedic play; and a third act which was usually a slapstick plantation skit which included all the stock characters referenced earlier, such as the mammy, the seductive mulatto, the gambler, etc. The more popular shows toured the country right alongside opera companies, circuses and similar shows featuring white performers. Unfortunately, blacks touring on the road were often likely to face poor conditions such as unsafe housing, discrimination and arrests on false charges, and theft of the troupe’s money by unscrupulous tour managers.

The minstrel shows were eventually replaced by traditional vaudeville shows which were a mixture of musical numbers, comedic skits, dance, and the like. Black theater troupes and vaudeville shows became one of the mainstays of both New York and the travelling theater circuit, with famous black entertainers making the transition from the minstrel show into the more legitimate vaudeville stages. Black theaters were not on a par with the white vaudeville shows, however. Although all major cities including New York, Chicago, Baltimore, Washington, Philadelphia, and even in the deep south of New Orleans and Florida, most of the theaters were owned by white owner/managers who ran the gamut from professional to dishonest and unscrupulous, in actuality not that different from the theater owners who ran houses for white audiences. Smaller cities throughout the country had their own vaudeville theaters (both black and white) as well.

18 Rogin, p. 43.
By the turn of the twentieth century, entertainers of all stripes were clamoring to make it to the vaudeville stages. Enter the booking agent, talent scouts of a sort who sifted through the numerous press clippings sent in by hopeful performers and arranged spots for their favorites on the vaudeville circuit. Unfortunately, since there were so many more hopeful performers than spots on the stages, these booking agents often simply bowed to the whims of the theater owners and employed those performers they personally approved. By 1909, a black vaudeville circuit was organized and the **Theater Owners Booking Association (T.O.B.A.)** placed performers into its theaters. This association (later called **Toby Time** by performers) started off in 1909 with just 31 theaters but grew to rule over more than 100 theaters by its height in the mid-1920s. Organization didn’t necessarily mean better treatment or wages for performers at first, but thanks to pressure from the New Negro press reforms were later put into place. At the height of the vaudeville era, several theaters were owned by black men and even women. In addition, some of the more prestigious theaters in Harlem, Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Washington found their way to the top of the heap and had no need for booking agents, handling everything on their own.

An interesting footnote to the segregation of vaudeville theaters is that this division came into play after vaudeville had it start as an art form. The author Mary Miley claims that turn-of-the century vaudeville theaters were home to a host of acts from all nationalities and countries. “…when segregation was at its peak, vaudeville defied the convention—it featured all kinds of performers on the same stage…It was actually unusual not to find a mixture of Asians, African-Americans, Jews, and recent immigrants
in the typical nine-act lineup, including men, women, and children.”

According to Miley, at first segregation was confined to the audience itself, with blacks forced to sit in the balcony. It was this type of segregation which inspired blacks to form their own theaters where they too, could have the best seats in the house.

As stated previously, nearly every great performer of the day got his or her start on vaudeville. This was true for white performers as well as blacks who performed first on travelling circuits and then later on legitimate mainstream circuits and top theaters. Performers including Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, Duke Ellington, Pearl Bailey, Josephine Baker, the Nicholas Brothers, and even Oscar-winning actress Hattie McDaniel, got their start in vaudeville.

**The Jazz Singer.** The black entertainment industry took a step backward in 1927, with the release of the now-controversial motion picture *The Jazz Singer*, recognized as the first full-length feature film to employ lip-synchronized music and dialogue. Starring famous vaudeville performer Al Jolson, the film tells the story of a young cantor who dreams of leaving religious life for a career on the stage. What makes the film controversial (especially in later years) is Jolson’s appearance as a singer in black face. Jolson, a Russian Jew, got his start on vaudeville stages and in minstrel shows, where performing in black face was a standard element of his stage routines. Within the confines of the film, the story portrayed a true duality of culture—that of the young, white cantor vs. the blackface performer who dreamed of success on the stage despite the wishes of his father. According to author Michael Rogin, who devotes a large portion of his book *Blackface White Noise* to this single film, Warner Brothers studio did all they could to depict the film’s story as a loose retelling of factual events mirroring Jolson’s

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own life story. Al Jolson, born Asa Yoelson, did in fact, change his name to Jolson along with his brother and pursued a career in show business despite the wishes of his conservative Rabbi father, but according to Rogin, the movie plot went far outside the life of one singer, condensing “…into a single film the entire history of American popular entertainment, from minstrelsy through vaudeville and silent films to talking pictures.”

Jolson and music scholars alike have addressed this controversy and have come up with several arguments both in favor and against the use of blackface in this film, some of which will be addressed here. It is important to note before these are pointed out however, that regardless of the blackface controversy the film would still have an important place in scholarly studies (especially for film scholars) as it is the first talking motion picture. In fact, Rogin gives the motion picture pride of place as one of four cornerstones that make up the basis for study of the early black film canon—Uncle Tom’s Cabin, D.W. Griffith’s Birth of a Nation, and Gone With the Wind being the other three.

Tackling the Controversy. While blackface is featured in both Birth of a Nation and Uncle Tom’s Cabin, there is one important difference that marks its inclusion in The Jazz Singer. That difference is that unlike the other two films, blackface is the subject of the Jolson film. The plot of this film examines the performing life of a young Jewish singer and son of a deeply religious cantor, Jakie Rabinowitz, and the conflicts that arise from his desire for a career onstage as a performer of popular song despite his father’s wish that he follows in his footsteps as a religious singer. In the film’s scenario, blackface is used as a metaphor to represent secular vs. religious life as well as a plot device that illustrates how the son’s choice drives the father to despair, perhaps even hastening his death. The two sides of this divide are vividly portrayed in a souvenir program for the

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20 Rogin, p. 91.
film which superimposes pictures of cantor, Jakie Rabinowitz and his blackface stage persona, Jack Robin. These programs portray the film’s dual characters as a “figure of both laughter and pathos,” and “a real representation of longing.”

Despite its status as the first “talkie”, for Jolson unfortunately, the film was a modest economic success and did not result in major career success for Jolson. This may be in part because of negative reaction from those who felt that the arrival of talking motion pictures would spell an end to vaudeville, just as in later years audiences felt that television would topple the reign of Hollywood movies. Whether the film’s inclusion of blackface was a contributing factor to the film’s low box office draw at the time however, is a trickier question to answer. On the one hand, Jews like Jolson, Eddie Cantor, Fanny Brice, and many others were still experiencing great success performing on vaudeville stages in blackface. Writers such as literary critic and social activist Irving Howe, saw the adoption of blackface by Jews as a way of identifying with blacks who they viewed as an equally downtrodden culture. “Black became a mask for Jewish expressiveness,” Howe writes, “with one woe speaking through the voice of another.”

Many Jews including Jolson felt an affinity with the black population, equating the issues of slavery, discrimination, and segregation with the European pogroms which forced them to flee to America in pursuit of religious freedom. Therefore these Jewish performers saw blackface routines as a kind of show of support with persecuted blacks, in part because they had readier access to vaudeville stages than their fellow black performers.

Jolson, for one, subscribed to this view, employing blackface as a sort of solidarity with African-American performers. Jolson’s main point in support of

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22 Rogin, p. 99.
blackface characterizations both his stage performances and on movie screens, was his unique characterization of the art form. He saw his blackface interpretations as a higher class representation of the art form’s early style. Writing in the book *The Colors of Zion* author George Bornstein states, “Jolson articulately distinguished his own blackface from earlier demeaning forms of minstrelsy, and he regularly championed African-American performers as both artists and friends…” For Jolson, modern blackface only suggested Black character and demanded much more sophistication than the old and often derogatory stereotypes.”

**All That Jazz.** Jolson and the film’s creators also claim to have had a *musical* reason for using blackface. This goes back to the aforementioned cordial relationship between Jewish and black musicians and is portrayed by Jack Robin’s longing to “sing jazz,” although no jazz music is played or sung in the film. Publications of the day (most specifically the Yiddish press) touted the loving relationship between black and Jewish performers both on and off the stage. Jazz, a rising new music tradition which came out of the black culture, quickly took hold among Jewish musicians and performers such as George Gershwin, Irving Berlin and many others. This idea was lovingly reciprocated by black entertainers *Cab Calloway, Louis Armstrong,* and *Billie Holiday* who recorded their own versions of jazz standards written by their Jewish friends from the music scene. (See Chapter 4).

However, other scholars and critics both then and now find the use of blackface to be much more problematic. Rogin, among other scholars and authors of then and now, felt that to equate the horrors of slavery with the anti-Semitic pogroms was highly

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erroneous, regardless of the performers’ intentions. At the very least however, Jews performing in blackface could offer up portrayals of woe as they mourned for their lost homeland, a more relevant comparison to the history of African Americans. Nonetheless, films like *The Jazz Singer* did return the topic of blackface to public consciousness after it had all but disappeared from the stages, illustrating the adage “One step forward, two steps back.” When it comes to the movie’s stature as a successful motion picture, however, the issues become even more clouded. In his book entitled *Movies for the Millions*, author Gilbert Seldes points out several mitigating factors, including that the movie was an economic success; that it pointed a way in which Hollywood studios could go with regard to talking pictures and particularly musicals; and that it was praised by movie critics of the day. However, he goes on to say that unfortunately it is not really possible to surmise the make-up of the movie audiences who attended the premiere and early showings of the film, especially since most of the written evidence comes from media reports of these screenings. Furthermore, it stands to reason that a large part of the film’s success came from its standing as the first official talking picture, an idea separate from the subject matter of the film itself. Seldes also states that audiences who heretofore had not thought much of Jolson’s recordings were captured by his magnetic on-screen personality and became fans of him as an artist. Finally, to further muddy the waters, others take issue with *The Jazz Singer*’s historical ranking as the first “talkie,” pointing out that even Thomas Edison had experimented with combining motion pictures with sound, and mentioning the film *Don Juan* starring Mary Astor and John Barrymore which was released in 1926, the year before *The Jazz Singer*.

These critiques seem to have arisen in earnest only with the advent of the Civil Rights movement of the 1960’s. Therefore, to have an honest representation of the
original audience reaction to the use of blackface in the film, it is necessary to view it through the eyes of the society of the period, rather than through our modern eyes. In an excellent article written for the Boston Globe entitled “Don’t Look Away, Why blackface still matters in American Culture,” movie critic Ty Burr states that though today’s audiences might be bewildered or even downright horrified by the blackface scenes in the film, it is wrong to discount the value of the film as a whole for these sequences.

“Blackface has been kept in a box labeled Things We Don’t Talk About ever since the Civil Rights era,” Burr states. When the film was reissued on DVD to celebrate its 80th anniversary, many critics used the blackface scenes to decry the entire film as an antiquated relic of racist art. This type of dismissal may instead be an attempt to portray ourselves as enlightened individuals, rather than being a true reflection of the film’s impact on the audiences of its day. In order to view blackface in its proper context, we must realize that we are “looking at a practice with roots deep in American history, one that had different meanings to the white mainstream, to immigrants, and to the African-Americans who turned it to their own expressive purposes.”

To truly examine the film’s historical significance, we must take into account that it is only as society became more enlightened and critics and scholars became further removed from the vaudeville tradition that the world began to take exception to both blackface and the characterizations of black characters on stage and screen. Blackface numbers appeared in Hollywood musical films including *Swing time* (1936), *Everybody Sing* (1936) and *Babes in Arms* (1939) both starring Judy Garland, and going all the way up to 1953’s *Bandwagon* starring Fred Astaire. It is only later that the guilt resulting from

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some of these earlier stereotypes (including blackface) lead us to become harsh critics of these earlier films.

**Taking Back Control.** Fortunately, there were a number of black composers and show producers who aimed to preserve the more authentic singing traditions, even as the songs themselves became ever more similar to western classical harmonies. By the late 19th century, groups like the **Fisk Jubilee Singers** toured Europe’s capitals with sweet renderings of traditional Negro spirituals embellished by these harmonies, thanks to their extensive vocal training. Author James Monroe Trotter tells of an eye-witness account of an audience member listening to a performance by the Fisk Singers, stating “The songs…possessed in themselves in a peculiar power, a plaintive, emotional beauty, and other characteristics which seemed entirely independent of artistic embellishment. These characteristics were, with a refreshing originality, naturalness, and soulfulness of voice of method, fully developed by the singers, who sang with all their might, yet with most pleasing sweetness of tone.”

Another type of black musical group which arose just a bit later were **quartet singers**, groups of one-on-a-part vocalists representing colleges, churches, and even companies. These groups toured the country performing to great success, especially in the North. By the 1930’s there were several major performing quartets including the aforementioned Fisk Singers, **The Golden Gate Quartet** and the **Blind Boys of Mississippi**. These musical groups further refined and revised the existing musical repertoire by adding a variety of sophisticated vocal techniques, such as slurs, growls, falsetto, and new rhythms. One success spurred on another until there were many groups

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25 Floyd, p. 61.
in both the gospel and secular traditions including the Famous Blue Jay Singers, The Soul Stirrers, Kings of Harmony, and the Fairfield Four among others.

Along with innovations in cinema and songwriting came changes to vaudeville houses and Broadway theaters. By 1917 a type of Negro Renaissance was taking hold in Harlem, the inspiration behind which being that all blacks shared a common culture and heritage which should be celebrated. Also a catalyst was the belief that awareness of such could be raised through the arts. Author Samuel A. Floyd, Jr. in his book The Power of Black Music, labeled this movement Pan-Africanism, and stated that it called for the unification of all black cultures (African, Afro-American, West Indians, European born) regardless of barriers of language, social and economic status, and individual cultural identity. This cultural uprising led to an increase in the number of black composers, musicians, poets and performers. Of singular importance was Pan-African composer Samuel Coleridge-Taylor (1875-1912) whose work with other African-American poets and musicians inspired generations to come, including Robert Nathaniel Dett, William Grant Still, and Florence Price. The result of these composers’ combined works helped lead the way toward the development of black nationalism, a cause championed later by Carter G. Woodson, and W.E.B. Du Bois. A graduate of Fisk University, Du Bois made special studies of spirituals, ring music and the shout tradition in his book entitled The Souls of Black Folk. Another scholar who documented black secular music was James Monroe Trotter, whose writings pre-dated those of Du Bois by nearly thirty years.

Between 1900 and 1920 there was a real movement toward creating a black nationalist music style, one led by musicians such as Scott Joplin, Will Marion Cook, Harry T. Burleigh, John Turner Layton, Robert Cole, Rosamond and James Weldon Johnson and many others. Of these musicians, perhaps the most influential were Burleigh and Cook.
Cook wrote, composed, and produced the first all-black musicals including *A Trip to Coontown* (1898), *Clorindy: Or the Origin of the Cakewalk* (1889), *In Dahomey* (1902) and *In Bandanna Land* (1907). As for Burleigh, his contributions came in the form of musical recordings of art songs and spirituals which were the inspiration for later black singers such as Roland Hayes, Marian Anderson, and Paul Robeson.

As for the theaters themselves, new and improved venues sprang up in Chicago, Philadelphia, New York and other large U.S. cities. The famed *Apollo Theater* in New York was originally built in 1914 with financial backing from Sidney Cohen and designed by George Keister. Following construction, theater impresarios Benjamin Hurttig and Harry Seamon took a thirty-year lease on the neo-classically styled theater and called it *Hurtig and Seamon’s New Burlesque Theater*. Unfortunately, the theater was closed down in 1933 as a result of New York Mayor Fiorello LaGuardia’s campaign against burlesque. Just a year later, Cohen reopened the theater with new partner Morris Sussman as manager and offered up a new kind of show with music and entertainment designed to appeal to the growing black audience in the Harlem area. In 1935, new owners Frank Schiffman and Leo Brecher took over the running of the *Apollo*; the theater remained in the hands of their families until the mid 1970s. The theater opened and closed again several times after that and finally received historic landmark status in 1983; in 1991 a non-profit foundation was established to oversee productions at the theater. The foundation still presents concerts and community arts outreach programs.

Another genre of black music had also begun to flourish at this time, that of blues and jazz. As with earlier vaudeville and black musical theater, blues and jazz clubs arose in all the U.S. big cities, and were particularly prevalent in Chicago and New York. The following chapter will trace the development of these new musical styles as well as the
explosion in the composing of standard songs, both styles fueled by that powerhouse of music publishing known as Tin Pan Alley. Of course, since the music business is in reality a business just like any other, it will not be surprising to note that everything was not smooth sailing for the fledgling popular music industry.
Questions for Discussion

1. What is a Drum Circle? Dancing Ring?

2. Briefly explain the development of the Negro Spiritual.

3. What was the Second Great Awakening? When did it occur?

4. Briefly trace the development of the pseudo spirituals and “cary me back” songs.

5. What were “coon songs”?

6. Give a brief outline of black face and the minstrel show?

7. What reasons did artists such as Al Jolson give in support of the blackface tradition?

8. Outline the development of a black vaudeville circuit.

9. What was Toby Time?

10. What was the significance of the film “The Jazz Singer”?


12. Trace the developments in the life of the famous Apollo Theater.
CHAPTER IV
ON THE SHADY SIDE OF THE STREET: TIN PAN ALLEY

Song writers and music scholars alike have long romanticized the early music publishing industry, creating the fiction of a quaint collection of offices populated by songwriters scribbling away and churning out hit after hit to meet a growing demand for sheet music created by both the public and Broadway producers. In reality, the area of New York located on 28th Street between 5th and 6th Avenues (an area currently known as the Flat Iron district) was a rough-and-tumble, money-making machine exploding with the energy of a growing America. Legends abound as to where this early music industry acquired its name, but a popular one states that the name Tin Pan Alley was first coined in an article written by journalist Monroe Rosenfeld. The writer likened the sound made by the many cheap pianos being pounded on by aspiring songwriters, heard while walking along 28th street, to the banging of pots and pans. This cacophony gave rise to another name for the district: Racket Row.26

Beginning in 1881 with the success of Thomas B. Harms (founder of Harms, Inc.) and continuing on all the way into the 1950’s, Tin Pan Alley was home to the greatest music publishing houses. While it is difficult to pin down just how many publishing companies there were since houses opened and closed as fortunes were made and lost, every important publisher had an office on the alley at one time or another. New

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York was not the only home to music publishing houses--others were found in Chicago, Philadelphia, Cleveland, Detroit, and many other major American cities--the sheer amount of talent seen in the young and aspiring black and Jewish musicians (among them Scott Joplin, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Harold Arlen, and Al Jolson) who were trying to make their way in Manhattan, quickly made Tin Pan Alley the heart and soul of popular music.

The first hits coming from 28th Street were novelty songs and the ballads of the “Gay Nineties,” (the decade between 1890 and 1900) which was marked by the emergence of American high society; the suffragette movement; “naughty” plays and artwork by artists such as Oscar Wilde and Aubrey Beardsley; and economic prosperity. The first big hit of the period was Charles K. Harris’s “After the Ball” (1891) which sold five million copies, making it the top seller in Tin Pan Alley’s history. This was due mainly to the song’s inclusion in the Broadway production “A Trip to Chinatown” along with a recording by singer George J. Gaskin. Lured by the sweet smell of success and promise of fame, young songwriters clamored to have their songs included in the collections published by the major houses. But, just how was it that making one’s mark in the New York scene could pluck a young musician from obscurity? We will examine a few of the factors which contributed to making Tin Pan Alley a goldmine of music marketing.

The Rise in Popularity of the Piano. As was the case with classical music before it, rising numbers of middle-class men and women were now pounding away on pianos located in their own living rooms. Families were gathering around to sing along with the latest sheet music selections displayed in the windows of corner stores, and musicians who could tinkle the ivories were the center of attention at parties both within
society and in the old neighborhoods. New production techniques made pianos ever more affordable, and the middle class had money to spend. Furthermore, playing music in the home had been a growing trend for the wealthier classes since the 1800s, when having the ability to play was a sign of culture and proof of suitability for marriage (especially for young ladies). Now the working classes wanted in on the action. Items such as sewing machines, bicycles, wallpaper, and even basics such as window glass and linoleum flooring which were once thought of as luxuries had become necessities for those who had both money to spend and free time to practice their hobbies, thanks to mechanization and streamlined job techniques which increased productivity for the American worker. By 1920, more than two million pianos had found their way into American homes; furthermore, these instruments were lovingly cared for and passed down as heirlooms from one generation to the next.  

Not everyone had the time to practice or the skill to become an accomplished musician, but that was hardly a limitation thanks to a new musical invention which found its way into an increasing number of upper-middle class homes—the player piano. Although the first player pianos were invented in the 1870’s in France, the decades from 1900 to 1930 saw a real explosion in the purchase of player pianos in the United States, with sales peaking at around 1920. The design and construction of player pianos were identical to traditional pianos with one major exception in that they featured pneumatic air pumps which were operated via either foot pedals or electricity. The first truly practical player piano was the Pianista, which was invented by Frenchman Henri Fourneaux in 1876 and shown at the Philadelphia Centennial Exhibition. The final step in the evolution from idea to practical application came the following year when

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German inventor Edwin Welte created the paper piano roll, which featured punched holes similar to the woven jacquard pattern used in cloth making. The basic idea is that the mechanism known as the tracker bar moves up and down along the 88 piano keys following or “tracking” the punched holes which correspond to the individual notes of the musical compositions (one hole per note for each of the eighty-eight keys).

There were changes and improvements made over the next several years until 1896, when the American, Edwin Votey of the Votey Organ Company, created the Pianola player piano in his garage workshop. His company went through various transitions during the next several years, until it was finally purchased by the Aeolian Organ Company in 1898. Aeolian went as far as to build a special factory in Garwood New Jersey dedicated to producing the Pianola as demand for it continued to climb, despite the high price. An early twentieth –century catalog from the Aeolian company lists a price range of $500 to $1,000 for a basic model; that is equivalent to approximately $6,000 to $12,000 in today’s market. The Pianola was not the only player piano on the market—companies such as Apollo and Wurlitzer were quick to jump in on this emerging trend in home music making, which soon surpassed even the fledgling recording industry.28

There were changes and improvements in the creation of piano rolls as well. They began as hand-transcribed master rolls which were marked with pencil and perforated according to the musical score and then copied. The next innovation came with machine-cut stenciled rolls. Finally, manufacturers began to employ assembly-line productions involving both skilled musicians and unskilled laborers. Using a high quality piano roll and some technical skill, a performer sitting at a player piano could employ devices such

as levers, buttons, and pedals to do his or her utmost to give the resulting music some expression. Still the tone remained basically flat and devoid of expression.

**A giant step forward.** The Recording or **Reproducing** piano gave the home musician the best of both worlds, allowing guests to sit back and relax while watching the keys move in the actual playing patterns of famous musicians such as George Gershwin and Richard Rogers from the jazz standard realm, and composers of art music like Gabriel Fauré and Edvard Grieg. In fact, George Gershwin made a substantial amount of money from piano roll transcriptions of his song “Swanee,” and supplemented his income in his early days of songwriting by recording more than 130 piano rolls featuring both his own music and that of other composers for **Aeolian, Welte-Mignon**, and the **Standard Music Roll Company**.

Here again, the path to success was uneven, with the first reproducing pianos transcribing via systems of dropped crayons and pencils. Later models like the ones Gershwin used featured rotating punches which matched the notes the musician played; they also incorporated levers and buttons the pianist or an editor could manipulate to replicate pedal techniques, dynamics and the like; these playing changes resulted in additional markings cut alongside the basic melody, prompting the same interpretations when the piano roll was used. As interest in player pianos rose, so did advances in technology, with manufacturers offering rolls which mimicked full orchestral accompaniments, duets (these were actually transcribed by two pianists playing side by side), and more nuanced dynamics and interpretations. Of course, the final results were usually touched up by the publisher, with notes added and “mistakes” removed before final production, so it is difficult to know how much of the original musician’s style
remains on the actual roll. The culmination of the player piano rage came in the form of the Welte-Mignon grand reproducing piano, the standard-bearer of expressiveness in the realm of the player piano, a model which even found a place in the concert halls of America and the world.

Unfortunately, as meteoric as was the rise of the player piano, its downturn happened just as quickly. From its height in popularity in 1920, sales and production had been gradually declining due to several factors including economic decline brought on by WWI and the growth of radio which was a much less expensive method of bringing musical entertainment into the home. America’s Great Depression in 1929 put the final “nail in the coffin” for sales of player pianos, especially the more expensive models. However, the player piano has left one lasting legacy to the musical world: the hundreds of piano rolls which allow us to experience the actual playing styles of some of the world’s greatest musicians from the worlds of jazz, ragtime, and classical music. Even today, record companies still release compilations of music written and played by the original artists including George Gershwin, Scott Joplin, Jelly Roll Morton, Fats Waller, and many others.

Singing for One’s Supper. Of course, getting a publisher to print a song or even being lucky enough to have it turned into a piano roll was only the first step toward success for aspiring songwriters. In order to make real money, the song had to make it into the public consciousness just like a best-selling book, with buyers clamoring to have their own copy for playing and singing at home. Thus, savvy publishers came up with lots of tricks to promote new songs. One method was to pay the admission price of a ticket to young singers who would clap along wildly and sing the choruses of new songs that were slipped in to the vaudeville shows of headliners who were under contract to
promote the songs of publishing houses. These “plants” would give audiences the impression that the new song was already a favorite and send them on their way home humming the song and longing for a copy of their own.

**Song Pluggers** or **Boomers** were another integral link in assuring the success of new songs. These musicians were savvy salesmen under contract with music publishing companies and their job was to sell a song to the performing artist. They would bring artists into the publishing offices and bang out new tunes, all the while singing the songs’ praises and convincing performers that each new song would be just the hit guaranteed to pack audiences into the theater and make them a star. In addition, song pluggers were the salesmen who made sure that new songs were performed in restaurants, theaters, parades and even department stores—playing the songs themselves if need be. George Gershwin first made his name as a song plugger working for the **Remick Publishing Company**. Other famous musicians who got their start as song pluggers included Irving Berlin, **Vincent Youmans**, and Jerome Kern. Author Isaac Goldberg sums up the job of a song plugger this way: “The Plugger is—he hopes—the man who can tell why, **before** the hit is made, because it is his business to make it. He is the liaison-officer between Publisher and Public [sic]. He is the publisher’s lobbyist wherever music is played. He it is who, by all the arts of persuasion, intrigue, bribery, mayhem, malfeasance, cajolery, entreaty, threat, insinuation, persistence and whatever else he has, sees to it that his employer’s music shall be heard.”

One of the more innovative methods of promoting new songs was the employing of **singing waiters**, who worked in the fine dining establishments of the city. Perhaps the

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most famous of the singing waiters was the composer Irving Berlin, who worked his way up from singing on the streets for coins to a job at Pelham’s Café in the Bowery area of New York, an establishment that drew high-class, swanky crowds from uptown neighborhoods. Berlin wrote songs by day and sang by night, working right up until the publishing of his first hit, “Marie from Sunny Italy.” Other singing waiters included singers Jimmy Durante and Eddie Cantor who both worked on Coney Island.

Change in the Wind. As the song pluggers, singing waiters and music publishers did their utmost to get new songs into the hands of music-loving Americans, the songs themselves underwent changes. Since the idea was to get folks singing and dancing along to the new hit tunes, compositions became more streamlined—all the better to hum along with and sing around the piano. New songs were often composed in a standard form: thirty-two bars of melody, divided into four even units and written in an AABA sequence. This form made songs easy to remember and even easier to sing, consisting of a simple repeated melody varied with an eight-bar “bridge,” followed by a return to the melody. The tight constraints of this song form posed some difficulty for lyricists. While the less innovative composers merely employed hackneyed rhymes and the most basic poetry, others like the great Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, and Ira Gershwin, viewed these constraints as a challenge and crafted clever, witty lyrics that stuck in the minds of listeners and became “standards” that have remained popular from their day to the present. Take for example the following lyrics from the Cole Porter song, “You’re the Top.”

You're the top!
You're the Coliseum.
You're the top!
You're the Louver Museum.
You're a melody from a symphony by Strauss
You're a Bendel bonnet,
A Shakespeare's sonnet,
You're Mickey Mouse.
You're the Nile,
You're the Tower of Pisa,
You're the smile on the Mona Lisa
I'm a worthless check, a total wreck, a flop,
But if, baby, I'm the bottom you're the top!

One of the cleverest lyric writers of early Tin Pan Alley was the great Ira Gershwin, brother of songwriter George. Few lyricists could fit such poignancy and heartache into so few words, like this example from the song “Someone to Watch Over Me.”

I'm a little lamb who's lost in the wood
I know I could, always be good
To one who'll watch over me

Although he may not be the man some
Girls think of as handsome
To my heart he carries the key

Won't you tell him please to put on some speed
Follow my lead, oh, how I need
Someone to watch over me

While it may not have taken much for a lyricist to rhyme “June” and “spoon” the best of the best (of which there were many during the height of these early songwriting days) left us with a library of timeless standards.

Of course, this standardizing of the popular song form didn’t hamper true artists from other music realms, either. Jazz and Blues artists from St. Louis, Memphis and New Orleans were quick to leave their stamp on the popular song as well. Hallmarks of the early blues style included flatted pitches (blue notes) and sensuous lyrics which were soon incorporated into the popular Tin Pan Alley songs being written in New York. One
of the major trends incorporated from jazz was the “riff” which is the equivalent of the
ostinato noted in art music: a short, repetitive melodic or rhythmic phrase which in the
case of jazz forms a framework which supports an improvised solo section.

Once the pluggers and publishers did their job, hundreds of songs flooded the
market to meet the demand of the evermore popular Vaudeville and Music Hall shows.
Buyers scooped up sheet music and piano rolls, and the piano became the center of
entertainment in the home. Performers, songwriters, and orchestral arrangers brought
productions to the stage to satisfy a public that clamored for entertainment after the dark
days of WWI. While some composers were content to create basic thirty-two bar pop
songs, others like George Gershwin dreamed of fusing the realm of popular jazz with art
music.

Gershwin was considered to have superior talent for composition (at least in the
jazz/pop style) as well as excellent abilities as a pianist. Unfortunately, he was known to
have had a gargantuan ego to go along with these talents. He was a true showman and a
great promoter of his works, having the ability to “spin a story” to suit his needs.
Therefore, he had no qualms when it came to the idea of whether or not he was capable
of composing “classical” works that could stand up to the modernist composers he
sometimes idolized—European composers like Berg, Schoenberg, and Stravinsky as well
as the classical composers like Bach and Haydn, whose works he had studied. After
examining the opinions of several musicologists and authors, my conclusion is that what
Gershwin was attempting to do was create a uniquely American counterpart to the
repertoire of the European modernist composers of his day by fusing jazz, blue notes and
black music traditions with classical music “forms.” Several biographers have portrayed
Gershwin as a somewhat naïve and inquisitive scholar who absorbed music through his
pores, soaking up influences from all around him. Fellow song pluggers at Remick said Gershwin was always interested in art music and had expressed interest in trying his hand at a concert jazz work.

Gershwin’s first concert work was *Lullaby* for string quartet published in 1919. This was followed by *Blue Monday*, Gershwin’s first attempt at what he termed folk opera; it was part of the George White production, *Scandals of 1922*. Luckily, when it came to his dreams of realizing success in the art music realm, Gershwin found a compatriot in arranger Paul Whiteman, a famous bandleader and arranger who felt a like affinity for jazz music. Whiteman scheduled a concert of new works by emerging composers which he termed “An Experiment in Modern Music.” Whiteman wanted to cap off the event with a symphonic jazz concerto which George had earlier committed to. However, when the time for the concert drew near, he had completely forgotten the project and felt that he would not be able to write a full concerto in the short amount of time remaining. He composed instead the now famous “*Rhapsody in Blue,*” arranged by composer Ferde Grofé; the piece was featured as the highlight of the event which premiered at *Aeolian Hall* in New York on March 17, 1924. The piece was a huge hit with audiences and the public alike; whether or not it can be considered a true fusion of jazz and art music is still up for debate in musical circles.

While Gershwin dreamed of success as a composer of classical music, many of his colleagues were content to lend their artistic skills to creating the simpler songs in demand for the Vaudeville stages. However, even these composers (or some of them, at least) were soon on the road to riches, thanks to a new and emerging New York genre, the *Broadway Musical.*
Questions for Discussion

1. How did Tin Pan Alley get its name? What is another name for this area of New York?

2. Name three of the important composers of Tin Pan Alley.

3. Explain some of the characteristics of the historical period known as “The Gay Nineties.” Which years encompassed this time period?

4. Briefly explain how piano rolls were created. What was the difference between a standard player piano and a reproducing piano?

5. Who were song pluggers? How did they contribute to the publishing of new music?

6. What was the Experiment in Modern Music? Who were the main musicians involved and what were their contributions?
CHAPTER V
WINDS OF CHANGE: (1920-1939)

At least once and sometimes more often in each generation a confluence of advances and improvements in the fields of science and technology combine with societal and cultural shifts, giving rise to corresponding changes in the arts and humanities. The span between the early- to mid-1920s and 1930 was one such time. Factors influencing this momentous change included the advent of talking pictures such as 1927’s *Jazz Singer*; the rise of phonographs in the home (thanks to the introduction of the long-playing 78-RPM records in 1915 and the invention of electric loudspeakers in the early 1920’s); and the rapid spread of radio programs which were delivering entertainment into nearly twelve million American homes by 1930, the dawn of what was to become known as the **Golden Age of Radio**. Songwriter Cole Porter was already making a name for himself as the darling of the Paris set, while Irving Berlin and George Gershwin were contributing songs to the new musical revues gracing Broadway stages. Of course all of the changes were not positive: by the end of the decade Vaudeville had already reached its zenith and was beginning a slow yet steady decline (the genre as well as the great Vaudeville houses would completely disappear by 1940.)

**The Musical Review.** The entertainment industry and the world were clearly on the cusp of change following the turbulence of WWI, and audiences were looking for the next big thing. The innovation which bridged the gap between the old and new however,

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was not the Broadway musical as we came to know it later but rather the **Review** or “**Revue**”. Glamorous and lavish, it was the perfect form of entertainment for the decade which came to be known as the **Roaring Twenties**. The musical review was based on a standard format of songs, skits, comedians, and production numbers featuring beautifully dressed chorus girls, dancers, and professionally-trained singers. It was similar to vaudeville yet a step above, and no one put on a better show than Florenz Ziegfeld with his **Follies**; these were productions filled with spectacularly garbed showgirls in grand numbers, who were backed by gorgeous sets and huge orchestras. As for the girls, they were quite possibly the real stars of his shows; at least on a par with the fabulous music contributed by all the up and coming songwriters of Tin Pan Alley. Ziegfeld himself wrote an article highlighting all the characteristics that went into creating the perfect **Ziegfeld Girl**: “Beauty of course, is the most important requirement and paramount asset of the applicant. When I say that, I mean beauty of face, charm, poise, and manner, personal magnetism, individuality, grace, and poise. These are details that must always be settled before the applicant has demonstrated her ability either to sing or dance.”\(^31\) Only after Ziegfeld found a girl who embodied all these characteristics, would he turn his attention to her performing abilities. Even after she made the initial cut, her work was far from over if she wanted to achieve success in her chosen role, according to Ziegfeld. Beauty and talent had to be complemented by a strong work ethic and hours dedicated to practice in order for a Ziegfeld girl to remain a permanent member of the company.

Producers who were more dedicated to the music than glamorous girls and huge production numbers were quick to stage their own style of reviews. **George White**, a former Ziegfeld dancer, broke away to start his own company and became famous for his

shows entitled *Scandals*. White quickly became known for his keen eye for talent, and introduced innovations to the art form such as using a single songwriter for each production and finding talented dancers to highlight the latest dance crazes, introducing them to an adoring public. Songwriter Irving Berlin built a small, yet elegant theater called the *Music Box* to house his yearly reviews and present his latest songs, many of which became enduring favorites long after he abandoned the review format in 1924.

More in the Ziegfeld vein but less wholesome were producer **Earl Carroll’s Vanities**, which featured scantily clad or even nude girls draped across his stages; Carroll taunted Ziegfeld by posting a sign over the stage door of his shows stating “Through These Portals Pass the Most Gorgeous Girls in the World.”32 Like George White, however, Carroll had a knack for spotting great performers and introduced the public to famous names like Jack Bennie, Sophie Tucker and Milton Berle.

Other minor players in the review format were the **Garrick Gaieties**, three editions of which were quickly put together and staged by the New York Theater Guild in 1925 as fund-raising events. Despite lesser production values and staging, songwriters such as **Richard Rodgers** and **Lorenz Hart**, **Johnny Mercer** and **Vernon Duke** first came to public attention in *Gaieties* productions. Composer **Arthur Schwartz** and lyricist **Howard Dietz** created four elegant reviews which were designed to give audiences some respite from the excess of the Ziegfeld and Carroll productions. There were also Black-American reviews gracing the stages of Harlem: productions like Lew Leslie’s **Blackbirds of 1928** which introduced the talented tap-dancer **Bill “Bojangles” Robinson** to both American and British audiences; and **Hot Chocolates** which was produced in 1930 and featured jazz trumpeter **Louis Armstrong** in the pit band.

Despite the high level of talent and superior music, the review had a singular drawback in that there was nothing to hold the show together; since the productions had no plot to connect the musical numbers or hold audience interest, patrons eventually tired of the format as they became more sophisticated and jaded. Critics joked that one could walk in at any time during a performance and not really feel as though they had missed a thing. While this was accepted by audiences who were living the high-life in the “Roaring Twenties” and just out for a good time, it quickly became less acceptable to Depression-era audiences who hungered for more substance. While they were still looking to entertainment from movies and Broadway as a means of escape from the trials of everyday life, the audiences themselves became more serious, wanting to latch onto a meaningful story and get caught up in dramas that more accurately mirrored society of the day. The time was again ripe for change, which came in the form of the scripted musical.

**Toward a More Grounded Future.** As America moved on through the jazz age and toward the era of the Great Depression in 1929, society turned its mind to more serious topics and devoured novels by popular writers *Ernest Hemingway* and *F. Scott Fitzgerald*: authors who treated such dissimilar topics as war (Hemingway’s *A Farewell to Arms*) and the jazz age “(Fitzgerald’s *The Great Gatsby*) with the same seriousness and gravity. Other popular books of the day included *William Faulkner’s The Sound and the Fury*, *Edith Wharton’s The Age of Innocence*, and *T. S. Eliot’s The Wasteland*. It was almost as if society could see the changes to come and braced themselves for trouble, or as if on the other hand they were simply reacting to the revels of the flappers and young men who populated the “*speakeasies*” by looking toward subjects of a more serious vein.
As has always been the case, entertainment is most often one of the truest reflections of societal attitudes. Therefore, composers and musicians who had turned their eyes and ears toward creating the soundtrack to the jazz age reacted to this new hunger for more serious fare by searching through the literature of the day in an attempt to find stories that were entertaining enough to be set to music, yet with deep enough storylines and interesting characters to build a frame upon.

Of course, it wasn’t as though Broadway composers flipped a switch--changing themes from light to dark and going from lavish production numbers with scantily clad girls to serious stories. The change was instead more gradual, with the first “story-musicals” being a natural outgrowth of the aforementioned operetta format, since both Victor Herbert and Rudolf Friml were still producing successful shows in the early 1920s. However, new ideas were being brought forth by younger musicians like George and Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein, and Jerome Kern, who were looking to make their own mark. The difference was that these young musicians wanted to represent their own cultural identities and stories rather than focusing on shows dealing with the white, Anglo-Saxon characters and plot lines of the European operettas brought to Broadway by their forebears. These early musical plays included the Florenz Ziegfeld show Betsy (1926) by the up-an-coming song team Rodgers and Hart, which was set in the Jewish sub-culture of New York’s Lower East Side, and Sigmund Romberg’s Desert Song with book and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein, Otto Harbach, and Frank Mandel. Another young songster, Irving Berlin, who was making his mark on the 1920’s Broadway scene, tried in his own way to introduce the universality of immigrant cultures who made up the new America in his reviews and musical comedies--writing songs such as “Sweet Italian Love” and
“When Johnson’s Quartette Harmonize,” the cover of which featured four black singers; and “Cohen Owes Me Ninety-Seven Dollars,” the lament of a Jewish businessman. Even though many of Berlin’s songs dealt with stereotypical portrayals of these ethnic characters, it was becoming clear that Americans had begun to long for entertainment which more accurately reflected the society in which they lived. This was especially true of New York, which had become a true mix of ethnic cultures and societies by the 1920s.

**On the River.** Still, the world was still waiting impatiently for something completely new: a show which would seamlessly integrate a well-developed plot and interesting characters with quality music and dancing, lavish sets, and sweeping production numbers. It was to come in the year 1927 in the form of the show which has come to be recognized almost universally as the first integrated musical, *Show Boat*. The musical was based on the 1926 novel of the same name, written by [Edna Ferber](https://www.ednafferber.com/), and featured songs by Jerome Kern and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein, both of whom had already found success writing songs for European operetta. Just what was it about this particular novel that made it well-suited to be the premier offering of this new genre, better known perhaps as the story show? The answers to this question lie within the pages of the book itself. First off, Ferber herself set up the novel as a play, devoting several opening pages to scene setting and character introduction just as would be found in a play program. Equally important was the high drama of the novel, which covered a fifty-plus year span, a huge cast of characters, and dealt with controversial topics including racial tensions and the cruelty of Southern society. Finally, since most of the action took place on a travelling riverboat inhabited by performers who put on musical reviews in ports along their travels, it was a perfect fit for the seamless incorporation of song and dance numbers.
Even so, it would take the perfect combination of artists to achieve such a feat as changing the very idea of what musical theater should be, and the *Show Boat* creators were just such a team. Kern was intrigued by the idea of creating a musical from the book from the start, believing that the span of the novel (covering three generations from the 1880’s through the 1920’s) would give him a chance to write songs in the distinctive styles of each of those generations, including coon songs, ragtime, jazz, and spirituals; and that the large cast of characters and high drama of the plot would provide plenty of fodder to support these songs. As soon as this decision was made, he went on the lookout for his lyricist. Being aware of Oscar Hammerstein’s growing unhappiness at the prospect of writing for musical reviews, he approached him with the project in hopes of finding a kindred spirit. Hammerstein jumped on board and the two went to work convincing Ferber to sell them the rights to the novel, which she did, despite being less than convinced that they could base a successful musical on the “dark” themes of the plot.

Fortunately, the novel was in good hands with Kern and Hammerstein: for Kern’s part, he was fond of drama and had plenty of ideas of how to turn the book’s themes into a stirring musical plot. As for Hammerstein, he had already begun to explore a musical technique which would serve him well throughout his long career in the theater: that of *textual realism*, in which the music and lyrics serve to tell the meaning behind the obvious. Unlike earlier music which employed other techniques such as *opulent adornment*, in which the musical melody was of paramount importance (often to the detriment of lyrics which might be little more than simple rhymes and hackneyed phrasing), with textual realism, lyrics were intended to portray character development, give insight into emotions and motivation, advance the plot, and tie scenes together. This
allowed these new types of songs to deal with more serious subjects such as those found in the Ferber book. It also allowed for a wider variety of song types within a show since individual characters had differing motivations, personality types, and were introduced to further various plot devices.

By the time *Show Boat* made it through its various road trials and revisions, it featured a beautiful and rich score unlike any other musical before it; it resembled an operetta in scope, yet was clearly in the musical comedy tradition, and with a wider scope and depth. Author Ethan Mordden, writing in the book *Make Believe*, describes *Show Boat* as “A musical comedy with epic dimensions, an amazing intimacy, and music of uncommon rightness, beauty and depth.” He goes on to write: “Musical comedy scores of the time were shallow. They were ‘Tea for Two,’ ‘My Heart Stood Still,’ ‘Let’s Do It.’ Nice tunes, sure, but nothing next to ‘Ol’ Man River,’ ‘You Are Love,’ ‘Mis’ry’s Comin’ Aroun’.”

Of course, such a big show called for a big producer and Florenz Ziegfeld was the perfect compatriot for the songwriting team. He filled the stage with his usual lavish sets, beautiful girls, and spectacular production numbers; and hired the top singers and comedic performers of the day. Kern and Hammerstein made Ziegfeld’s production job even easier by incorporating plot changes from the original story which brought back nearly every character by the end of the show for a lavish closing number (even though several of these same characters had died in the novel). The show opened on December 27, 1927 at the Ziegfeld Theater to wide critical acclaim and audience delight, and became the first integrated musical to have been perceived as a “classic” in that it almost

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immediately became an official part of the Broadway repertoire. *Show Boat* was revived for the stage just three years after its initial premier and was adapted for the movies three different times (in 1929 and 1936 by Universal Studios, and finally in a lush Technicolor adaptation from MGM in 1953).

**The Dawn of a New Decade.** The introduction of the integrated musical and changing musical tastes didn’t spell the immediate demise of more traditional review shows and lighter fare as Broadway moved into the 1930s. There were still many other songwriters such as Cole Porter, who was employing his clever lyrics to great effect on the popular scene (and trying his hand at story shows) and other teams like the Gershwin brothers, Lorenz Hart and Richard Rodgers, and Irving Berlin, who were still a big part of the picture as the decade rolled on. The rest of this chapter will focus on the shows created by these greats in the decade of the 1930s.

**Cole Porter, the Great Wit.** The cultured set in 1920s Paris would likely never guess that the witty and urbane young man who was gathering crowds around the piano nightly in the art deco salon, had come from rural Indiana stock. Cole Albert Porter, whose name was derived from those of his parents, Kate Cole and Sam Porter, grew up in relative wealth and studied both piano and violin from age six on. Disliking the harsh sounds of the violin, he turned his primary attention to the piano and would practice for up to two hours each day to the background music of pop tunes his mother played on the radio to keep the attention of the lively young boy.

Precocious and bright, Cole was guaranteed solos in community orchestra programs thanks to his mother, who often financed those organizations’ very existence. Cole graduated valedictorian of his class and took off to Yale University, where he took part in many school musical productions and wrote songs which are still a part of the
daily lives of current students. According to the Cole Porter Research Site, it was during his tenure at Yale that Cole first came to terms with his homosexuality, although this fact was not acknowledged publically. Porter wrote humorous and widely-acclaimed productions for university clubs, social organizations, and for his fraternity—many of which attracted enough notice to enable Cole and his friends to travel throughout the country performing for packed houses. It was also during this time that Cole first came to the personal realization that words and music were inextricably intertwined (Porter was one of few Songbook composers to write both lyrics and melodies for all his songs, rather than employ a writing partner.)

Since Cole’s studies were financed by his mother’s wealthy father, J.O. Porter, the young Yale graduate was marked for a career in law school by his strict grandfather, who felt that the over-pampered young man needed to develop a savvy head for business in order to follow in his own footsteps. Unfortunately, Cole did not share his grandfather’s ideas and secretly changed his major from law to music during his second year of graduate school, after spending much of his first year continuing to write plays and shows for his old Yale friends. Cole always had his mother’s approval and support, even when he abandoned college altogether and took off to New York to find fame as a songwriter. Unfortunately, his first show, See America First was a flop on Broadway, despite his fans in the highest echelons of New York society. Cole was always adept at spinning a story to suit his own needs and he took off for Paris in 1917, where he lived the high life as an American socialite (a result of his false stories of service in the French Foreign Legion, which he spread to the press back home.) For several years, Cole was the “darling” of the Paris social set where he attended lavish parties attracting a diverse society culled from the highest levels of society—gay, bisexual, international nobility, musicians, and
politicians. Drinking and drug use were the order of the day. It was during this period (in 1919) that Cole met the woman who he felt would be the perfect partner for him in the wealthy socialite and divorcee, Linda Thomas. The two soon married, forming a business partnership of sorts (she supported his dreams of becoming a musician and his wealth allowed her to maintain her social status) The two friends lived in a mostly sexless, yet loving relationship that worked as a successful public front until Linda’s death in 1954. She also acted as a helpmeet to him during the years of multiple surgeries and lengthy recovery periods that followed a crippling accident which shattered his legs (the result of a tragic fall from his horse in 1937.)

**The Man and His Music.** Cole Porter was perhaps the most important composer of the 1930s. Newcomers like Kurt Weill and the team of E. Y. Harburg and Harold Arlen had yet to achieve the heights of their fame, and others like the Gershwins and Irving Berlin had already moved on to Hollywood to try their hands at writing for the screen (even though Berlin moved back to New York in 1930, he continued to write music for many films throughout the 30s and 40s.) While the songwriting team of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart wrote more musicals—nine shows vs. Porter’s eight—author Ethan Mordden praises the music of Porter for its variety, overall artistry, and his desire to write music that favored individual expression over commercial success.³⁴ Therefore, while only four of his eight shows ran for more than six months (an accepted standard of success at the time), his music achieved a level of originality and complexity that could perhaps only be equaled by someone of George Gershwin’s genius, and by this time Gershwin had become more interested in exploring classical composition and had begun working on his folk opera, Porgy and Bess.

³⁴ Mordden, Ethan, Make Believe, The Broadway Musical in the 1920s, Ch. 5.
The eight shows Porter wrote during this period include *The New Yorkers* (1930); *Gay Divorcee* (1932); *Nymph Errant* (1933); *Anything Goes* (1934); *Jubilee* (1935); *Red, Hot and Blue* (1936); *You Never Know* (1938); *Leave It To Me* (1938); and *Du Barry Was A Lady* (1939). While some of these shows including *The Gay Divorcee, Anything Goes*, and *Jubilee*, have a quality reputation that has endured to the present day, they were innovative for their day as well. Porter was a genius at writing songs that dealt with the foibles, perils, and joys of love. Even more important, he wrote a great many songs from the woman’s point of view: “My Heart Belongs to Daddy,” “Most Gentlemen Don’t Like Love,” “Give Him the Oo-La-La,” “All I’ve Got to Get Now Is My Man,” and “I Hate Men,” to name just a few. Mordden even speculates that Porter’s homosexuality may have given him a unique role as an objective observer of courtship and marriage, but we can’t know for sure if that is the case. Another characteristic that separated Porter from fellow songwriters of the day was the way that his songs were not necessarily connected to plot devices or character portrayal; this allowed many of his songs to find a lasting place in the Songbook repertoire, regardless of whether or not they came from shows that were hits or just “passing fancies,” as the great Ira Gershwin would say. The list of hit songs still sung by famous artists and lounge singers is nearly endless: “I Get A Kick Out of You,” “Night and Day,” “Let’s Do It,” “Let’s Misbehave,” “Anything Goes,” “It’s De-Lovely” and many more. The fact that he wrote both lyrics and music and that his shows featured “cream of the crop” artists like Ethyl Merman only adds to his mystique.

**Giants of the Genre.** Equal only to Cole Porter in the realm of musical theater in the 1930s, with nine hit shows to their credit, was the songwriting team of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. This unlikely duo hit it off from their very first meeting and
worked together to create many enduring shows for the Broadway stage. Lorenz Hart was born to German-Jewish parents Frieda and Max Hertz on May 2, 1895 and grew up in the center of New York City (Max later changed the family surname to Hart). Young Lorenz (known as Lorry or Larry to his friends) spent summers in art and drama camps in the Catskills, where he was immediately drawn to music and theater. There, the young Hart dreamed of becoming involved in the theater in some way, whether it was as an actor, director, writer, or even as a producer. He would spend his formative years writing songs and directing amateur camp productions, and continued to do so even throughout his college years.

Diminutive in size at just five-feet tall and a closeted gay, Hart turned to drink during his college years as a way to escape his low sense of self worth. He quickly came to believe that drinking was necessary to facilitate his writing. During WWI, he requested deferral from the draft by registering as a pacifist, but was ultimately rejected anyway because of his height. Although he enrolled in the writing program at the new Columbia School of Journalism, Hart still longed for a career in some facet of the theater and therefore renewed an old family connection with Gustave Amberg, who was starting a German theater company in New York called United Plays. Hart’s facility with German made him the perfect fit to adapt Amberg’s play, Die Tolle Dolly (Crazy or Madcap Dolly); the one hit song from the show was “Meyer, Your Tights are Tight.” From then on, Hart split the majority of his time working for United Plays and writing productions and serving as a counselor at his old drama camp, Brant Lake. Hart eventually stopped going to classes at all, essentially dropping out of college and returning home to live with his mother.
When WWI ended, the city of New York entered into full-on party mode, with the cream of society drawn to lavish celebration parties where socialites from Newport and the Hamptons mingled with wealthy New York businessmen at luxurious hotels like the Ritz-Carlton and Waldorf Astoria. One young man who was drawn to these glittering festivities was Richard Rodgers, who at the time was only 16 years old. Hart, who was seven years older, wanted little to do with this high society except to make a mockery of them with his sarcastic wit. Rodgers however, jumped right into the fray, writing sixteen songs for a charity show hosted to benefit the Infant’s Relief Society (his first publishing credit). He continued writing songs for other charities and social clubs including the Akron Club, which was an all-male, social and athletic club. It was there that club member Phil Leavitt thought to pair the two young songwriters and arranged a meeting at Hart’s home on West 119th Street in New York. Hart was extremely shy and didn’t say much of anything at this initial meeting (Rodgers described him as barely five feet tall, with a head too large for his body which gave him the appearance of a gnome), but perked up as soon as Rodgers began to play some of his melodies and began to expound on the virtues of writing good song lyrics. Although the two young men had a few commonalities—both were Jewish and enjoyed opera to a greater or lesser extent (in the case of Hart)—they were otherwise completely different in personality and spirit. Rodgers was serious and hard working, while Hart was temperamental and often ambivalent with regard to work. In speaking of this first meeting, Rodgers was quoted as saying that in Hart he discovered “…a career, a partner, a best friend, and a source of permanent irritation.”

Hart would spend one final summer working at the camp at Brant Lake, before turning his attention to full-time composing with Rodgers. The two would spend days working at one another’s homes in a business-like, nine-to-five setup. Hart would listen to Rodgers’ melodies and when he found one he favored, would jot down a basic lead sheet to which he would later set lyrics. At the beginning of their partnership, Hart held off drinking until the cocktail hour which followed the end of each work day, but eventually he began to drink earlier and earlier each day, somehow feeling that the drinking was essential to his songwriting. Their breakout hit was the song “Any Old Place with You” which was featured in the 1919 Broadway musical comedy *A Lonely Romeo*. While they had limited success writing amateur shows, they didn’t really earn a living wage until they were asked to work with New York’s Theater Guild as composers for the group’s *Garrick Gaieties* reviews. They continued to climb the ladder to fame by composing songs for Ziegfeld’s famous *Follies*—writing songs for other composers including Irving Caesar of *No No Nannette* fame. The two found time to work on their own shows for Ziegfeld, many of which debuted in both New York and London productions: *Dearest Enemy, Betsy, Peggy-Ann, the Girlfriend, Chee-Chee*, and *A Connecticut Yankee*.  

These Broadway successes spurred Hollywood to come calling and the duo moved to sunny California to write for the movies in 1930. Unfortunately, cracks were already beginning to form in their partnership. Hart fell in love with Los Angeles and its balmy weather, while Rodgers was bored by Hollywood film society and longed to return home to his wife Dorothy in New York. Besides, a glut of movie musicals was beginning to turn off movie-going audiences who were in search of broader fare. Regardless, the two stayed in Hollywood for four years, contributing songs to hit movies including *Love*
Me Tonight with Jeannette MacDonald and Maurice Chevalier; Hallelujah, I’m a Bum, with Al Jolson; and The Phantom President, starring George M. Cohan. What separated Rodgers and Hart from the rest of the pack was a desire to remain on the cutting edge—repeating neither musical themes nor plot lines; creating innovative and smart rhyme schemes and lyrics; and offering a fresh, adult approach instead of the tame and lightweight stories of traditional musicals both on Broadway and in film.

In 1935 Rodgers and Hart returned to Broadway where they were commissioned by producer Billy Rose to write the songs for his circus musical Jumbo. The show introduced three hits which found a lasting place in the American Songbook: “The Most Beautiful Girl in the World,” “My Romance,” and “Little Girl Blue.” They followed this success with On Your Toes in 1936; Babes in Arms and I’d rather be Right in 1937; I Married an Angel and The Boys from Syracuse in 1938; and Too Many Girls in 1939. While some of their biggest successes were yet to come, their personal differences were soon to bring an end to one of the best songwriting partnerships the Broadway and Hollywood stages had ever seen.

The Fabulous Gershwin Boys. George Gershwin and his older brother, lyricist Ira, started off the 1920s writing for the popular musical reviews of the day. On his own, George wrote scores for five editions of the famous Scandals produced by George White. In 1924, however, he devoted himself primarily to working with Ira where the two turned their hands to the standard plot-musical format. At the tender ages of 26 (George) and 28 (Ira) the two composed their first hit show, Lady Be Good in 1924; this was followed by the musical Primrose that same year. It was not too surprising, as George had left school at the age of fifteen to find work as a song plugger, while Ira says he had already had the early ideas for some of the lyrics which he would turn into famous show-stopping songs.
while still in grade school. Next up were the musicals *Tell Me More* and *Tip-Toes* in 1925, but the boys’ biggest success was still to come in 1926 with the musical *Oh Kay*, which premiered at the Imperial Theater in 1926. Adopting the name of George’s dear friend, composer Kay Swift, the show tells the story of a woman bootlegger and her adventures with a wealthy playboy. The show was an immediate hit (running for 256 performances) and introduced one of the Gershwin brother’s most famous songs “Someone to Watch over Me,” a huge hit that remains popular to this day. They followed this success with four more musical shows: *Funny Face* (1927); *Rosalie* and *Treasure Girl* (1928); *Show Girl* (1929) and *Strike up the Band* (1929). While George continued to work with Ira on four more musicals in the early 1930s—*Girl Crazy* (1930); *Of Thee I Sing* (written in 1931 and the first musical comedy to win a Pulitzer Prize); and *Let ‘Em Eat Cake* and *Pardon My English* (1933)—he had begun to explore other horizons, moving to Hollywood to contribute scores for *Damsel in Distress, Shall We Dance*, and *An American in Paris* (some of which he worked on in conjunction with brother Ira), while concomitantly turning his attentions to his classical compositions, “Blue Monday,” “Rhapsody in Blue,” and “Concerto in F.” He had also begun work on what he deemed his masterpiece: the folk opera *Porgy and Bess*. As for the Gershwin scored films, while few in number they introduced American audiences to famous movie stars like Fred Astaire, Ginger Rodgers, Joan Fontaine, George Burns, and Gracie Allen, and expanded the Songbook catalog with memorable songs like “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off,” “They Can’t Take That Away From Me,” and “A Foggy Day in London Town,” thereby cementing their reputation as Broadway and Hollywood Legends.

George was never satisfied with film scores and love songs, however, and longed to be taken seriously as a composer. By 1924, he had already traveled to Europe where he
developed friendships with the famous classical composers of the day, including Sergei Prokofiev, Igor Stravinsky, and Arnold Schoenberg. He was convinced that he had the “chops” to compose classical music on a level with these European greats. Gershwin was considered to have superior talent for composition (at least in the jazz/pop style) as well as excellent abilities as a pianist, and his gargantuan ego gave him the confidence to try his hand at the classical style. He was a true showman and a great promoter of his works, having the ability to “spin a story” to suit his needs. Therefore, he had no qualms when it came to the idea of whether or not he was capable of composing “classical” works that could stand up to the modernist composers he sometimes idolized, as well as the classical composers like Bach and Haydn, whose works he had studied. While Gershwin may have had little formal training he was known to be a “student of life,”—absorbing the spirit of music wherever he found it. He could sometimes be found sitting on the floor at black jazz clubs in Harlem, soaking in the atmosphere around him and marveling at the improvisations of the musicians.

Gershwin’s first concert work was “Lullaby” for string quartet, published in 1919. This was followed by “Blue Monday,” Gershwin’s first attempt at what he termed folk opera; it was part of the George White production Scandals of 1922. These two works were followed by the famous “Rhapsody in Blue,” arranged by Ferde Grofé and featured as part of what orchestra leader Paul Whiteman called his Experiment in Modern Music. This concert premiered at Aeolian Hall in New York on March 17, 1924 and was a huge hit with audiences and the public alike. However, it was a mixed blessing for the composer as it sparked the beginning of a heated debate among critics and musicologists not only of the time, but forever after. At the time of its premiere the classical music world was wrapped up in the idea that serious art music was the purview
of the well-educated and the wealthy—better suited for the concert hall crowd in
tuxedoes and furs, while the lowlier art form of jazz was low-class and out of place in
such a setting.

While there was much heated debate by critics and musicologists of that day and
for long after over the merits of Gershwin’s reputation as a classical composer, his
detractors quickly recognized that Gershwin’s technique both as a composer and as an
orchestrator continued to improve with each orchestral work he composed. Thanks to his
continuing theoretical study as well as to the fact that he orchestrated his later works
himself, critics were forced to give credit where it was due with regard to the works’
substance. During 1924, while George was scribbling away on several Broadway
successes including *Scandals of 1924*, *Primrose*, and *Lady Be Good*, his mind often
turned to thoughts of his serious music. Two commissions in 1925 gave him the chance
to pursue it. The first came from violinist Samuel Dushkin who asked George for a piece
that he could play in concert; the result was a small work for piano and violin entitled
“Short Story.” The second was a much bigger opportunity. Walter Damrosch, conductor
of the *New York Symphony Society* asked Gershwin to compose another major work
for piano and orchestra after hearing the “Rhapsody.” While he may not have had a true
appreciation for jazz, Damrosch knew a good thing when he heard it and saw the work as
a good publicity opportunity for the Symphony Society. Author Howard Pollack, writing
in his Gershwin biography, *George Gershwin, His Life and Work*, states that whatever his
true opinion, Damrosch praised Gershwin with flowery prose, making statements such as
“Gershwin (is) the ‘knight’ who had lifted ‘Lady Jazz’ to a level of respectability,” and
“Gershwin is the ‘prince who has taken Cinderella by the hand and openly proclaimed
her a princess to the astonished world’.”

The piece, which was initially titled “New York Concerto,” premiered to the world the afternoon of December 3, with a new title, “Concerto in F.” Reviews of the three-movement work were mixed, but many applauded Gershwin’s efforts at orchestration and his use of pentatonic scales and sophisticated harmonic structure. By the time of the concerto’s premiere the idea of jazz in the concert hall was no longer a novelty. Therefore, reviews dealt more with whether or not the new work was an improvement on the “Rhapsody.” On this point Gershwin faced a totally mixed bag in regard to critical reviews, with one reviewer (Samuel Chotzinoff of the World) saying, “He alone expresses us. He is the present, with all its audacity, impertinence, its feverish delight in its motion, its lapses into rhythmically exotic melancholy”; and another (Herald-Tribune reporter Lawrence Gilman) calling it a step backwards and stating, “in writing a symphonic work, Gershwin wound up producing something ‘conventional,’ ‘trite’, and ‘polite’.” Nonetheless, the “Concerto in F” was performed to many sold-out audiences throughout the United States and was a staple in Gershwin’s repertoire until his death. Gershwin further developed his compositional style with the tone poem, “An American in Paris,” written in 1928 and later incorporated into the film of the same name starring Gene Kelly and Leslie Caron in 1951. In 1926, following a week-long visit to Paris with friends Mable and Robert Schirmer, Gershwin sent a postcard of thanks which included a snippet of music which he marked “Very Parisienne” and titled “An American in Paris,” says author Pollack. Two years later, Gershwin would elaborate this short melodic motif into what he titled an orchestral or rhapsodic ballet; the title “An American in Paris” however, would stick. Even before the

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36 Pollack, p. 345-46.
37 Pollack, p. 352.
work was completed George granted first right of refusal to Walter Damrosch (now conductor of the New York Philharmonic-Symphony Society) in appreciation for his commissioning of the “Concerto in F.” Gershwin had grand ambitions for the project, stating that it would be very French in style and based on melodic ideals of Debussy and Les Six. He also likened the work to the French Impressionists by stating that “The rhapsody is programmatic only in a general impressionistic way, so that the individual listener can read into the music such episodes as his imagination pictures for him.” 38

In his own simple way, Gershwin’s sketch books divide the work into several large sections, stating the simple story of an American visitor strolling through the city and relaying his impressions of street life, the bustling city and the peace of the Champs Elysees; there is no discussion of harmonics or melodic motives. The books show only three musical themes—the sauntering theme, the taxi motif, and a humorous theme. Although Paris is the setting for the poem, Gershwin apparently was stumped for ideas outside of that initial small motif until he returned home from Paris to stroll along his beloved Hudson River. “I loved that river and I thought how often I had been homesick for a sight of it, and then the idea struck me—an American walking in Paris, homesickness, the blues. So, there you are. I thought of a walk on the Champs Elysees, of the honking taxi, of passing a building which I believe was a church…There are episodes on the left bank, and then come the blues—thinking of home, perhaps the Hudson. There is a meeting with a friend, and after a second fit of blues a decision that in Paris one may as well do as the Parisians do.” 39

38 Pollack, p. 433.
39 Pollack, p. 431.
The completed work is certainly far more detailed than the original sketch books show. As for the orchestration, this tone poem shows just how far Gershwin had come as an arranger from the days of the “Rhapsody” which was arranged by another composer; he scored every instrument in detail, including four pitched French taxi horns (specially chosen for timbre and carried from Paris in a suitcase by the composer.\footnote{Instruments in the score included piccolo; two flutes; two oboes; English horn; two clarinets and bass clarinet; two bassoons; alto tenor and baritone saxophone doubling on soprano saxophone; four horns; three trumpets; three trombones; tuba; timpani; percussion (snare drum, cymbal, bass drum, triangle, bells, xylophone, wood block, small and large tom tom, celesta and strings.})

George Gershwin’s masterpiece may well be his folk opera \textit{Porgy and Bess}, which was based on DuBose Heyward’s novel \textit{Porgy}. Heyward himself wrote the libretto for the play as well as the lyrics with co-writer Ira Gershwin. Both the novel and the opera tell the story of an impoverished, disabled man (Porgy) who tries to rescue his beloved Bess from her violently possessive, murderous boyfriend, Crown. While critics initially accused the composers of perpetuating black stereotypes with its use of the Gullah dialect and some semi-humorous elements in the story, time proved that to be far from the case. Gershwin’s careful study of the native dialect and speech patterns of the poor black inhabitants of the area called “Catfish Row” near Charleston, S. C. was later seen to be an attempt at \textbf{naturalism}, a movement inspired by French critic, philosopher, and writer Emile Zola. Naturalism requires that the artist step back and serve as an objective observer, thus creating a true representation of the culture or subject one is portraying. As the years passed and the public and critics both realized the true intent of the work and embraced the poignant love story as well as the beautiful music, \textit{Porgy and Bess} became recognized as the pinnacle of American opera. One of the most beloved songs from the musical is “Summer Time,” an aria repeated several times in the opera, but most notably as a lullaby sung early in the work by the supporting character Clara.
is definitely the most recognized song from the show and has been covered countless times by both popular and jazz singers.

Unfortunately, the world was never to learn just what heights George Gershwin would reach with regard to either his classical or Broadway/Hollywood composing, as he died in 1937 at the age of only thirty-eight years old of a brain tumor. It was a loss his brother Ira would never fully recover from although he continued to write lyrics with other musicians. The last motion picture score the two worked on together was for the 1938 film, *The Goldwyn Follies*. One story tells that one of the brothers’ most famous and enduring songs from that film, “Love is Here to Stay,” was completed by Ira on the very day he returned from George’s funeral; and rather than being a romantic love song, it is in reality a loving tribute to the brother he lost.41

**A Genius in Any Key.** By 1924, Irving Berlin had given up producing reviews at his Music box Theater and turned his hand to traditional Broadway story musicals and writing for Hollywood. During the 1920s and 30s, the prolific songwriter penned hundreds of songs and scored several movies. In fact, his two biggest movie successes came during these decades: *Puttin’ on the Ritz* (1929) and *Alexander’s Ragtime Band* (1938), which incorporated the 1911 hit from the Ziegfeld days which had helped to put the young composer on the map. Although Berlin lost his entire fortune in the Great Depression of 1929, his songwriting talent and strong work ethic quickly allowed him to amass another.

Irving Berlin was known primarily for two things by show business folk and the public alike. Above all was his strong sense of patriotism. Berlin enlisted in the U.S. Army in 1918 as a member of the Twentieth Infantry, 152 Depot Brigade, located in

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41 Rudmun, Bill, the Musical Theater Project.
Yaphank, Long Island. Once there, he soon found out that he disliked nearly all aspects of the soldier’s life, morning reveille being among the worst. He had gone from being a wealthy private citizen living in a lavish apartment with his own cook and having a thriving career in the music publishing business to being a humble private in the army: sharing cramped living quarters in a tent, enduring grueling hours of drills, and feeling that he was not even doing anything to fight the opposing forces as was promised by the war-rallying cry of George M. Cohan’s motivational song, “Over There.” The young Berlin used his earned weekend leaves to return to his luxurious New York apartment, where he turned his song-writing skills into a tune that won him the devotion of his fellow soldiers and the American public alike. The song entitled “Oh! How I Hate To Get Up in the Morning,” with its humorous promise to strangle the bugler who forced the soldiers out of bed each morning, hit a nerve with his army comrades and intrigued his superiors who asked him to compose a vaudeville type show to raise much-needed funds to build a type of “community house” where soldiers and visitors to the camp could congregate. Berlin wrote a number of songs to fill out the show, one of which was to have a lingering impact on his career and on our nation as well. The patriotic anthem, “God Bless America,” was originally written for this army show entitled Yip, Yip, Yaphank, but was quickly dropped from the score and set aside since both Berlin and his friend and fellow soldier Harry Ruby (to whom the song was originally dedicated) felt it was a bit too sweet, with its mentions of mountains, prairies, etc. It seems that wartime had brought a glut of patriotic songs onto the market and Berlin and the show’s producers decided to go off in a more humorous vein, describing the trials of life in an army camp. The song would be pulled out of Berlin’s trunk and dusted off in 1938, to be sung by the famous songstress Kate Smith in 1938 for an Armistice Day Celebration; from that day
on, it became both Smith’s theme song and one of our nation’s most famous patriotic anthems.

The second characteristic that is usually mentioned in conjunction with Irving Berlin is his famous transposing piano. Not having any formal musical training, Berlin played almost exclusively on the black keys of his piano since they were easier for him to use (this was a typical style of playing favored by self-taught musicians). The transposing piano was not new, having been introduced in England nearly one hundred years before. It was simply a traditional piano with a lever beneath the keyboard; when flipped, the lever permitted the pianist to play in any key he or she wished. The concept was adopted by the Calvin Weser Company of New York around 1910, where it was discovered by the young songwriter. This invention finally solved once and for all Berlin’s dilemma of just how he could collect royalties for composing both melodies and writing lyrics. The transposing piano allowed him to embellish his melodies with the necessary chords, frills, and harmonies, without having the need for a writing partner.

Irving Berlin followed the similar path of his fellow songwriters Porter, Rodgers, Hart, the Gershwin, et al.—first writing tunes for reviews, moving on to Broadway, and finally conquering Hollywood. Berlin became a charter member of the newly created American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) in 1914; by this time he had already earned the honorary title of “King of Broadway.” Following his stint in the army, Berlin returned to New York City and his songwriting career, contributing songs for musical reviews (see above). He continued to crank out hits, including two of his most famous songs, “What’ll I Do” and “Always,” which he dedicated to his girlfriend and soon-to-be wife Ellin Mackay (his first wife, Dorothy Goetz died after contracting typhoid while on their honeymoon in Cuba). Other hits of this period were
“When I Lost You,” “Blue Skies,” “Marie,” and the songs from the show, *Yip Yip Yaphank*. There was a slowdown in Berlin’s song output during the latter period of the 1920s, but he returned to top form with the Broadway musical *Face the Music* (1932), and *As Thousands Cheer* (1933), which featured one of his most enduring hits, “Easter Parade.” Like his friends, Berlin moved on to score films in Hollywood in 1933. Some of his best efforts came to fruition while scoring the films of top Hollywood performers, Fred Astaire and Ginger Rodgers. He scored several hit movies for the two, including *Top Hat* (1935), which included the Academy-Award-winning song “Cheek to Cheek”; *Follow the Fleet* (1936), and *Carefree* (1938). Other film scores came from *Alexander’s Ragtime Band* (1938) and *Second Fiddle* (1939).

**On the Yellow-Brick Road to Success.** Another songwriting duo just finding their feet as a team was that of Harold Arlen and E. Y. (Yip) Harburg. Although this pair didn’t have their first “big” hit (1939’s musical adaptation of *Frank L. Baum’s The Wizard of Oz*) until the very tail end of the period discussed within this chapter, they were both active as musicians—to a greater or lesser degree— in the years leading up to the well-known movie.

**Harold Arlen** (born Hymen Arluck in 1905) was known primarily for the sophistication of his melodies and harmonic structures, thanks in part to his years spent singing in his father’s synagogue congregation and the years he worked as a singer/orchestrator for Arnold Johnson, a well-known bandleader of the day. Author and fellow composer Alec Wilder states that Arlen fed off the sophisticated harmonies of late 1920’s sound which inspired him to create inventive melodies full of both inspiration and
improvisation. Arlen moved on from his work in the aforementioned capacities to writing songs for Earl Carroll’s *Vanities* in the early 1930s, turning out wonderful hits such as “I Got A Right to Sing the Blues,” “I’ve Got the World on a String,” “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” “Stormy Weather,” “Let’s Fall in Love,” and “Somebody Loves Me”; all of which were sung not only by the popular artists of the day but have been reinterpreted time and again by artists like Frank Sinatra, Lena Horne, Ella Fitzgerald, and many others. Arlen worked with a host of popular lyricists of his time, such as Dorothy Fields, Johnny Mercer, Ira Gershwin, and Jerome Kern, but it was his creation with lyricist Yip Harburg that cemented his place both in musical history and in the hearts of so many people around the world.

Born Isadore Hochberg, Yip Harburg was called Edgar as a child but later given the nickname “Yip” (short for the Yiddish word yipsel, meaning squirrel) by his parents for his lively spirit and unflagging energy. He went into the appliance business but turned to songwriting when his store went under during the Great Depression, thanks to the efforts of former schoolmate Ira Gershwin who loaned him some money and introduced him to some of his songwriter friends. Together with lawyer-turned-songwriter Jay Gorney, he began to contribute songs to Earl Carroll shows, writing what would become one of his best-known songs, “Brother Can You Spare a Dime,” in 1932. Over the following years he worked with many major partners (besides Arlen) including Vernon Duke and Jerome Kern.

The two young songwriters were both working in Hollywood scoring films when they were approached by MGM studios in the summer of 1938 to write lyrics and music for their big Technicolor movie spectacle, a retelling of the L. Frank Baum children’s

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novel *The Wizard of Oz*. According to the Harold Arlen internet biography, film producer Arthur Freed thought the two would be a good fit for the project because of Arlen’s whimsical and inventive musical style and Harburg’s gift for fantasy and satire (favorite authors included Jonathan Swift, Oscar Wilde, Mark Twain, and George Bernard Shaw). The two quickly got to work writing what they termed lemon-drop songs (due to their light-hearted nature)—“Ding-Dong the Witch is Dead,” “We’re Off to See the Wizard,” and “The Merry-Old Land of Oz,”—but did not see eye to eye on the melody Arlen composed for the ballad which would be sung by the young female protagonist, Dorothy Gale. While Arlen stated that the melody came to him all at once almost out of the blue, Harburg thought it was too sophisticated a song for a young girl to sing. Fortunately, before he turned Arlen’s idea down flat he played it for his old school friend, Ira Gershwin. Gershwin thought it was a great melody, so Harburg sat down and wrote a set of lyrics for it. That song was “**Over the Rainbow**”; and while it won the two songwriters an Academy Award for Best Original Song, it almost didn’t make the film’s final cut. The song was dropped on three separate occasions, but each time Harold Arlen fought to save it. It turns out that Arlen was right, as the song has gone down in musical history as one of the very best, and has been sung by nearly every great artist who has covered the Songbook repertoire. In 2001, “Over the Rainbow” was chosen by the National Endowment of the Arts as the greatest song of the Twentieth Century.43

**Blue Skies Ahead.** With the exception of George Gershwin, nearly all of the songwriters mentioned had yet to reach the summit of their fame by the end of the 1930s.

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They would all go on to contribute works which would seal their famous reputations for all time, as Broadway moved on to what would become known as the “Golden Age of the American Musical.”
Questions for Discussion

1. Name three of the technological and societal changes which led to corresponding changes in musical theater.

2. How and where did Cole Porter get his start in the music industry?

3. What was the musical review? Who was Florenz Ziegfeld and what changes did he bring to this format?

4. Who was George White and what were his Scandals?

5. What led to the demise of the review format?

6. Name three of the musicals that helped set the stage for scripted musicals.

7. What was so significant about the musical Show Boat? Who were the principle people who came together to create this show?

8. Briefly outline the musical career of George Gershwin.

9. Briefly outline the career of Irving Berlin. What musical invention allowed him to work without a songwriting partner?

10. Briefly outline the careers of Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg. What musical were the two most famous for creating?
CHAPTER VI
MANY A NEW DAY DAWNING: (1940-1965)

All the events of the previous chapters culminated in one moment which entered not with a bang, but with the proverbial whimper. On March 31, 1943 at the St. James Theater the curtain went up on a new kind of musical. There was no big orchestral opening number, no glamorous chorus girls, and no lavish set decoration--just a rising sun and a lone cowboy singing a song about a beautiful morning. The show was *Oklahoma!* and the composers were the new writing team of Oscar Hammerstein and Richard Rodgers.

Based on the 1931 play entitled *Green Grow the Lilacs*, written by Lynn Riggs, *Oklahoma!* has a notable place in history for its evolutionary revisions to the “integrated musical” format, an idea that Hammerstein had just begun to explore with *Show Boat* several years earlier. The musical’s rocky rise to fame is a story unto itself. Richard Rodgers was originally contracted to develop the new show for New York’s Theater Guild with his long-time partner Lorenz Hart, but things were difficult from the start. First off, Hart was not really attracted to the wholesome themes of bucolic farm life that were an intrinsic part of the show. Second, by this time Hart’s drinking had reached troublesome levels, making it difficult for him to devote any serious thought to work, especially a show he was not really interested in. During this period an interesting event in the development of the show arose: realizing that his partnership with Hart was nearly at an end, Rodgers contacted his old Columbia school chum Oscar Hammerstein to write
the libretto for show, while still holding out hope that Hart would settle down to work and compose the lyrics. Unfortunately, Hart slid deeper into depression and drink, spending more and more time at his clubs and eventually moving to Mexico where he could escape the well-meaning friends who were trying to reform him. Meanwhile, Hammerstein and Rodgers settled down into a profitable working relationship. After fleshing out the ideas for plot, character development, lighting, basic staging and the like, the two returned to their respective homes, sending song ideas back and forth until they had the basic outline of the show. Hart did return to New York to work on a variety of projects with other partners, but did not write the lyrics for Oklahoma! and was never able to recapture success on the level of his earlier work with Rodgers. Hart made it to the premiere of Oklahoma! (surprisingly sober) and was inspired to commit to working with Rodgers on a revival of their show, A Connecticut Yankee. While he finished the revisions, as soon as the writing was done he slid back into his old drinking habits and died of pneumonia on November 22, 1943 during a wartime blackout in the city of New York.

**New Partner, New Rules.** The musical duo of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein brought changes not just to the libretto and music of Oklahoma! but to the entire genre of the Broadway musical. These changes have held true to musicals up to and including the present day. As mentioned above, the musical expanded on two concepts introduced in Show Boat—textual realism in which songs are used to explain character motivation, reveal plot themes, and express emotion; and integration, which in this case means that every song must either advance the plot in some way or give insight into a character’s development. While this idea had been explored in England by operetta composers Gilbert and Sullivan, it was a totally new concept to American writers and
audiences. Gone were the days when a song served as a star-making vehicle for a famous singer, or when numbers were strung together in a loose organization with little regard to any underlying theme. Of course to accomplish these things, writers had to search out well-written works of literature with plots they could sink their teeth into. Riggs’s *Green Grow the Lilacs* was the perfect vehicle for such an experiment. Aside from the aforementioned life on the prairies of Oklahoma, the show explored several darker themes and characters including the farmhand, Judd (Jeeter in the play), who is revealed to be a psychopath and is murdered in an act of self-defense by the hero of the show, cowboy Curly. Another more serious (or at least historical) subject of the musical was the westward expansion of the Oklahoma territory. These ideas were hardly standard fare of musicals of the day. A second hurdle to get over was finding a way to portray singing cowboys, farmhands, and country girls in musical numbers without turning off audiences who had tired of the singing cowboy genre which had been portrayed to excess by Hollywood films.

The two made use of several innovative techniques to solve these dilemmas, thanks in part to the extremely large budget extended to them by the Theater Guild, which was facing bankruptcy and willing to try just about anything to turn the tide. One of the solutions came in Rodger’s own unique writing style, composing some of his lyrics in an almost conversational style that was better suited to more serious topics. As to the issue of how to help audiences get past the idea of production numbers filled with singing cowboys and farm girls, they hired famed choreographer Agnes de Mille to stage more serious ballet-style dances as an integral method of story-telling. Despite their efforts, the show (originally titled *Away We Go*) was a no-go on its off-Broadway tryouts and

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received a scathing negative review by famed *Variety* columnist and critic Walter Winchell. Not everyone in those first audiences had the same negative reaction, and Rodgers and Hammerstein were inspired to go back and make a few more changes. Most important of these was de Mille’s creation of a final lively, full-cast dance number which also gave the show its new name: *Oklahoma!* While the theater was not sold out for the opening night performance in 1943, those who attended were thrilled with this new style of musical. Author Max Wilk in his book *OK: The Story of Oklahoma!*, relates Agnes de Mille’s reaction to these early performances, “They were roaring. They were howling. People hadn’t seen boys and girls dance like this in so long. Of course, they had been dancing like this, but just not where the audience could see them!”

Aside from the energy and new style of *Oklahoma!* what was it about this show that made it such a hit for American audiences, playing for an unprecedented Broadway run of 2,212 performances before being made into an Academy-Award winning motion picture in 1955? Musicologists may have one theory, in this regard: with its setting in the year 1906 and focus on the Oklahoma territory and its eventual statehood, it was part of a movement called *cultural substitution*. With the advent of the 20th century, there was a shift in the place which classical music occupied in regard to culture and society: it was becoming part of a high-brow culture in which affluent audiences sat silently in elaborate concert halls to enjoy the works of the great European composers; in effect, classical music had become the purview of the rich and well-educated with middle and lower class America increasingly being left out of the picture. Of course, as a new country, America didn’t have a wealth of its own classical music to fall back on. What we did have, however, was a wealth of sprawling canyons, majestic mountains, and golden prairies.

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Therefore, artists who wanted to write works that would hopefully appeal to wealthy and privileged audiences throughout both Europe and America wrote odes to these natural wonders with works like Ferde Grofé’s *Grand Canyon Suite* (1931), Aaron Copland’s *Billy the Kid Suite* (1938), and Roy Harris’s *Symphony No. 3* (1937). What better topic for a new Broadway musical than the sprawling, new Western territory of Oklahoma?

**In a more serious vein.** Oscar Hammerstein had been interested in the idea of exploring serious topics and helping to move plotlines of the Broadway musical from the frivolous boy-meets-girl and dance-review format since his early days of working on *Show Boat* with Jerome Kern. Author Frederick Nolan wrote that Oscar Hammerstein was a kind, generous, and well-liked man but was also very determined and of strong principles. On the other hand, he had a dreaminess and sensitivity that was evident in many of his songs. His friend and fellow songwriter Stephen Sondheim once stated, “Oscar was able to write about dreams and grass and stars because he believed in them.” His partner Richard Rodgers agreed, stating “He always wrote about the things which affected him deeply. What was truly remarkable about him was his never-failing ability to find new ways to reveal how he felt about nature and music and love.”46

This new direction in musical style was a change for Rodgers, but he quickly jumped on board as the two worked to expand the traditional genre of musical theater. They also collaborated to form a publishing company, *Williamson Publishing* (in honor of their fathers, both named William) with the intent of publishing not only their own compositions, but those of other Broadway songwriters. This quickly became a fairly profitable venture for the two: they produced six plays and two musicals just between the

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years of 1944 and 1950. These included a revival of *Show Boat* and the Irving Berlin musical, *Annie Get Your Gun* (1946). In addition, they set specific rules for anyone who wanted to negotiate the movie rights to one of their shows, giving them artistic and financial control of these projects. While the two maintained a cordial and productive working relationship, they did not socialize with one another and had a somewhat strained personal relationship.

If *Oklahoma!* had explored the idea of opening up the musical to darker topics, their second Broadway show took that same concept to the extreme.47 The musical *Carousel*, (based on the 1909 play *Liliom* written by Hungarian author **Ferenc Molnar**) dealt with one of the darkest subjects to ever have been explored in a Broadway musical, that of spousal abuse. This show was a real departure for the musical genre; not only in terms of subject matter but also in that it was a true test of the composers’ ability to carry it off. In the first place, Molnar had refused other creators’ rights to his story, feeling its subject matter was too dark for the music theater genre. Second, even after they finally received the author’s green light, there remained the problem of getting audiences to accept the controversial subject matter—marriage between the young Julie and her damaged and abusive husband, carnival barker Billy Bigelow.

Their first step was to move the action from Hungary to a Maine coastline town and set most of the action around the everyday life of a bustling seaport in summer, with clam bakes, rough and tumble fishermen, and lively young girls who worked in the local weaving mill. The two lovers (mill-worker Julie Jordan and carnival-barker Billy Bigelow) meet each other at the Carousel and, in the duet “If I Loved You,” imagine what life might be like if they explored their burgeoning feelings for each other. They

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47 In between the two musicals, they wrote the homey, Oklahoma!-style film *State Fair.*
eventually do marry when Julie finds herself pregnant; however, we are still left with a
dilemma: Julie loves Billy and he loves her, but how can we accept such a troubling
situation? In an ingenious move, Hammerstein and Rogers give Billy a famous, nearly
ten-minute-long number right in the middle of the show which explains his motivation
and paints a poignant picture of a troubled young man facing the thought of impending
fatherhood. This “Soliloquy” turns the tide for audiences and makes Billy a sympathetic
character—someone the naïve, young Julie can see as being worthy of loving despite his
flaws. Of course, showing the motivation behind a character’s action and making us “fall
in love” with him, is not enough to win over an audience. Julie’s song, “What’s the Use
of Wonderin’,” eloquently tells her side of the story as she explains that a true
relationship involves seeing the best in someone and loving them despite their foibles. In
the end, however, things don’t work out as planned for the young couple. Billy involves
himself in a shady robbery attempt to get money to support his wife and child and kills
himself rather than face arrest. This left the playwrights with another dilemma—
audiences would never accept such a dark finale to this love story. Again, they chose
songs to help solve this dilemma. The defiant Billy makes it to the door of heaven where
he sings “The Highest Judge of All” proclaiming his belief that he is worthy of entrance.
Billy is granted one final chance to earn redemption by returning to earth to help his
young daughter Louise, who has lost her way, in part because of her role as offspring of
the town outcast. When Billy achieves his goal, offering support to his daughter and
reminding Julie of the true love he has always felt for her, he finally makes it to the
pearly gates of heaven. The show ends with the uplifting song, “You’ll Never Walk
Alone.” Although today’s audiences may consider the song somewhat schmaltzy, in the
context of the show it fits quite well, encapsulating the themes of the play and providing
a moment of inspiration for audiences who have struggled with some of the show’s more troubling themes.

As with *Oklahoma!*, the writers made drastic cuts to *Carousel* following road tryouts, cutting two complete songs, eliminating verses of others, and eliminating one of the show’s ballets. However, unlike their first show, *Carousel* begins with a sweeping grand waltz which sets the scene and draws audiences into the atmosphere of the small seaside town. Such grand instrumental opening numbers became a characteristic of some of their other shows such as *The King and I*, and they remain some of the most endurably popular overtures of all time. Also as was the case with *Oklahoma!*, the musical *Carousel* was an immediate hit with audiences, running for two years and winning a New York Critics’ Award for Best Musical.

As their songwriting partnership flourished, the two remained committed to the winning formula of exploring more serious topics—creating endearing characters, and hauntingly beautiful melodies along the way—often turning to literature and even suggestions from friends to find story material. Their shows included the hits *South Pacific* (1949) which was based on the *James Michener*'s wartime novel, *Tales of the South Pacific*, and won the Pulitzer Prize for drama in 1950; *The King and I* (1951) with a libretto adapted from *Margaret Landon*'s *Anna and the King of Siam*; *Cinderella* (1957) which was their only collaboration written for television; *Flower Drum Song* (1958) taken from the book of the same name by *C.Y. Lee*; and the everlasting hit, *The Sound of Music* (1959), a slightly fictionalized adaptation of the life events written in the autobiography of former nun *Maria von Trapp*. Nearly every one of these shows successfully incorporated some controversial themes and tackled serious societal issues: *South Pacific, Flower Drum Song, and The King and I* each dealt with interracial
romantic relationships and cultural prejudice, while *The Sound of Music* was centered on life in wartime Nazi Germany.

Regardless of these darker themes, the two had the Midas touch when it came to creating hit shows; each one had a long run on Broadway, was later made into a big-budget blockbuster movie, and has gone down in history as a true classic of the American theater. *The Sound of Music* was the last show the two composers worked on together. By the time it was made into an Oscar-Winning motion picture in 1965, Oscar Hammerstein had already been dead for five years (he died of stomach cancer in August of 1960.) Rodgers was left to oversee production and complete new songs for both *The Sound of Music* and a new television production of *Cinderella* (1965).

**The Classicist and the Scholar.** Just as Rodgers and Hammerstein were beginning preliminary work on *Oklahoma!* in 1942, another pair of songwriters had begun collaborating on their own entries to the Broadway scene. Composer **Frederick Loewe** (born in 1901 in Vienna, Austria) was already performing as a pianist with the Berlin symphony by age 16, yet had trouble finding work in the classical music field when he traveled to the USA in 1924. Fortunately, his luck turned for the better when he met the Juilliard-educated lyricist and librettist **Alan Jay Lerner** (born in 1918 in New York) at New York’s well-known **Lamb’s Men’s Club.** Although the classically-minded Loewe was at times reluctant to devote his talents to Broadway projects, the two collaborated on some of the most enduring projects to ever have graced the New York and London stages. Their first two collaborations, *What’s Up* and *The Day Before Spring* (both written in 1945), could hardly be seen as major successes; the second show of the two resulted in two mildly memorable songs, “A Jug of Wine” and “I Love You in the Morning.”
Two years later, however, they found the pot of gold at the end of their musical rainbow with their first major hit, *Brigadoon*, a delightful musical which takes place in a whimsical Scottish town which appears only once each hundred years. While the fantastical plot could not compare in any real way to the more serious direction in which their compatriots Rodgers and Hammerstein were headed, the musical offered up some truly lovely songs, many of which have entered the repertoire of music standards: “I’ll Go Home with Bonnie Jean,” “The Heather on the Hill,” “Come to Me, Bend to Me,” and “From this Day On.” The most famous and enduring song from the show is “Almost like Being in Love.” The musical was made into a lavish Hollywood musical in 1954, featuring stars Gene Kelly, Cyd Charisse, and Van Johnson.

Unlike Rodgers and Hammerstein, the two didn’t work exclusively with one another during the time they were creating their biggest shows. After *Brigadoon*, Lerner collaborated with a number of other songwriters including Kurt Weill, with whom he wrote *Love Life* (1948), and Burton Lane on the motion picture *Royal Wedding* (1951) which starred Fred Astaire and Jane Powell. During this same time period, Lerner wrote the screenplay for the musical film, *An American in Paris*, which featured the music of George and Ira Gershwin; Lerner won an Oscar for this screenplay in 1951. Lerner and Loewe met up again in this same year to write songs for the gold-rush-themed musical *Paint Your Wagon*. Like *Brigadoon*, the show’s score offered up a number of memorable hit songs including “They Call the Wind Maria,” “I Talk to the Trees,” “I’m On My Way,” and “Wand’rin’ Star.”

**The Rain in Spain.** The duo’s biggest hit was still to come in 1956, with the evergreen *My Fair Lady*, based on the George Bernard Shaw play *Pygmalion*. Aside from the great number of hit songs featured in the show—“Why Can’t the English,”
“Wouldn’t it Be Loverly,” “The Rain in Spain,” “I Could Have Danced All Night,” “On the Street Where You Live,” “Get Me To the Church On Time,” and “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face”—audiences were enraptured by the tale of the young and golden-voiced, flower seller from the East End of London (Julie Andrews as Eliza Doolittle) and her mentor and elocution advisor (Rex Harrison as Henry Higgins). The show was a smash, running for nearly three thousand performances on Broadway and for the same length of time in London. The original Broadway cast album was a major success as well, remaining in the Top 40 music charts for 311 weeks and selling more than five million copies.\(^48\) In 1964 *My Fair Lady* was made into a sumptuous Technicolor film, with Rex Harrison reprising his role as Higgins and Audrey Hepburn taking over the role of Eliza Doolittle (although the singing was dubbed by Marni Nixon) since Julie Andrews was busy filming Disney’s *Mary Poppins*. The film was studio Warner Brother’s most expensive film to date at a cost of $17 million dollars, but the producers were rewarded when the film turned out to be one of the biggest grossing and most popular films of the year, garnering eight Oscar nominations including one for Best Actor (Harrison), Best Director (George Cukor), and Best Picture.

In 1958, Lerner and Loewe collaborated on what was to become one of the last original musicals to be made for the movie screen, *Gigi*, based on the 1944 novella of the same name written by author Collette. The film, which was set in turn-of-the-century Paris, featured Leslie Caron in the title role, Louis Jordan, Hermione Gingold, and the great French actor Maurice Chevalier. Hits from the film included “Thank Heaven for Little Girls,” “The Night They Invented Champagne,” and the charming song “I

Remember it Well.” The film earned Lerner an Oscar for Best Adapted Screenplay, as well as a Best Picture Oscar and another for Best Director (Vincent Minnelli).

The two had hit and miss success with their shows, which were mainly adapted from sources in the light musical comedy genre, unlike the weightier and more socially relevant subjects favored by Rodgers and Hammerstein. Their next show (1960’s Camelot) was no exception. Based on the legend of King Arthur and the Round Table and adapted from the T.H. White novel, The Once and Future King, Camelot followed the three-way love triangle between King Arthur, his queen Guinevere, and the French knight of the round table, Lancelot du Lac. Regardless of its somewhat frivolous plot, the musical features some of the most beautiful songs ever to have been written by the duo: “C’est Moi,” “The Lusty Month of May,” “If Ever I Would Leave You,” “How to Handle a Woman,” and “Camelot.” In spite of mixed reviews, the show ran for two years, and was remembered long after for a perceived association with the presidency of John F. Kennedy; its theme of an almost magically-perfect kingdom was resonant in the theme song of the show in the lyrics “For one brief, shining moment that was known as Camelot.” From then on, the term Camelot would be forever associated with John Kennedy and his first lady Jacqueline.

Shortly after Camelot, Lerner and Loewe dissolved their partnership due to Loewe’s ill health, although they would collaborate for brief periods in 1973-74 on two different projects: one was to compose new songs for a stage adaptation of their film Gigi while the second was to write the score for a film based on Antoine de Saint-Exupéry's novel, The Little Prince. Loewe spent his remaining years in Palm Springs, Florida and died in 1988. As for Lerner, he continued on in the business of creating Broadway and film musicals working with a number of partners including Burton Lane, who helped him
revise and finish the show *On a Clear Day* (originally begun with Richard Rodgers with the title of *I Picked A Daisy*) which premiered in 1965. The show dealt with the unlikely subject matter of the relationship between a psychoanalyst and his patient who claims to have ESP and believes in reincarnation. Other projects included *Coco*, a show based on the life of designer Coco Chanel starring Katherine Hepburn (written in 1969 with Andre Previn); the show *Carmelina* (also written with Lane in 1979); and *1600 Pennsylvania Avenue* (completed in 1976 with Leonard Bernstein). None of these shows would ever help Lerner recapture the success he had with Loewe; the two composers were celebrated in a 1993 revue titled *The Night They Invented Champagne* in celebration of Lerner’s 75th birthday. Lerner’s final show (written in 1983 and titled *Dance A Little Closer*) starred his then wife, British actress Liz Robertson; unfortunately the show both opened and closed on the same night. Lerner died of lung cancer (a disease which had taken both his father and brother) in June of 1986 at New York’s Sloan Kettering Hospital.

**Other Avenues of Song.** Of course, not all of the great Songbook songs came from the theater. Remember, this was the *Golden Age of Radio* as well, and listeners were soaking up contributions from a parade of songwriters composing songs for swinging Big Bands, Hollywood films and popular recording artists. Adding tunes to the canon were duos like Betty Comden and Adolph Green (creators of the shows *Peter Pan*, *Bells are Ringing*, and many others for both Broadway and Hollywood); Vincent Youmans (writer of songs like “Hallelujah,” “The Country Cousin,” “Tea for Two”); Arthur Schwartz (“Dancing in the Dark,” “Alone Together,” “By Myself,”); Harold Arlen (“Stormy Weather,” “I Gotta Right to Sing the Blues,” “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” “I’ve Got the World on a String”); Burton Lane (“How About You,” “Everything I Have
is Yours,” “Old Devil Moon”) and so many others including Vernon Duke, Yip Harburg, Hoagy Carmichael, Harry Warren, Duke Ellington, Sammy Cahn to name just a few.

Swing was the thing when it came to the Big Bands of the 1930s and 40s: Glenn Miller and his trumpet, Benny Goodman and his clarinet, Tommy and Jimmy Dorsey, Harry James, Artie Shaw, Duke Ellington, Cab Calloway, Gene Krupa, Woody Herman, and Lionel Hampton among the most popular. As for the singers, many of them got their start singing for these same bands; recording artists like Frank Sinatra, Doris Day, Ella Fitzgerald, Rosemary Clooney, Helen Forrest, Dinah Washington, Kay Starr, and even bandleaders Cab Calloway and Louis Armstrong. Others who made their way into homes via the radio were The Andrews Sisters, Nat King Cole, Bing Crosby, Fred Astaire, Billie Holiday, Dinah Shore, Tony Bennett, Peggy Lee, and Sammy Davis Jr. Furthermore, since there weren’t many boundaries between Broadway, Hollywood, and Big Bands in those days, songs from every genre travelled smoothly between formats, in what were to become the original cross-over songs.

The Granddaddy of the Theater. While Irving Berlin didn’t have as many Broadway hits as his fellow composers during this period, the two big shows he wrote for the stage were quite popular and yielded several memorable songs. The first of these was the aforementioned Annie Get Your Gun which was produced by Rodgers and Hammerstein’s Williamson Publishing Company. The show, which premiered on the stage of the Imperial Theater in 1946, was based on a fictionalized account of a competition between sharpshooters Annie Oakley and Frank Butler. Featuring a book written by the brother and sister duo Dorothy and Herbert Fields, the show made a star of Ethel Merman and yielded songs such as “Doin’ What Comes Naturally,” “The Girl
That I Marry,” “Anything You Can Do,” “They Say It’s Wonderful,” and the song that has come to define the Broadway Theater, “There’s No Business Like Show Business.” The musical was a major success, running for more than 1,000 performances in its initial run.

Berlin’s other big show of the period, also starring Ethel Merman, was 1950’s Call Me Madam, based on a fictional adventures of a female ambassador. The production featured a libretto by Howard Lindsay and Russel Crouse and helped to further enhance the reputation of dancer Jerome Robbins, who had come from the New York City Ballet to choreograph several shows including On the Town and High Button Shoes, before taking on the project. Robbins would achieve fame as the premiere choreographer of Broadway’s Golden Age, working on projects such as Peter Pan, The Pajama Game, Aaron Copland’s ballet the Tender Land, Gypsy, Fiddler on the Roof, and West Side Story among others.

While Berlin only wrote one more show, Mr. President, (1962) he left us with a library of more than 1,500 songs written for the Broadway and Hollywood stages including the Oscar Winning “White Christmas” which was originally featured for the 1942 film Holiday Inn, but reprised to greater success in the 1943 movie White Christmas. The song has gone down in history as one of the most enduring Christmas songs of all time and has been recorded by hundreds of artists. Berlin retired to his home in the Catskill Mountains after Mr. President, but lived to age 101, a beloved American figure.

The Last of the Old Guard. Cole Porter’s output slowed after his tragic 1937 accident which resulted in more than thirty operations and years of excruciating pain, but he still contributed several hits to the Broadway canon during the period of the 1940s and
1950s including the wartime musical *Something for the Boys* in 1943. His biggest hit of the period was the smash show *Kiss Me Kate* (1948), which was based on William Shakespeare’s play *Taming of the Shrew* and introduced the hit songs “Too Darn Hot,” “Wunderbar,” “I Hate Men,” and “We Open in Venice.” The show is important because it hit the landmark of more than 1,000 performances, the true measure of success for a Broadway show. Porter won an Academy Award for the song “True Love” from the Grace Kelly, Bing Crosby, and Frank Sinatra movie *High Society* in 1956, but retired both from public life and songwriting in 1958 following the amputation of his right leg. He died in Santa Monica, California in 1964 at the age of 73.

**A Most Happy Fella. Frank Loesser** was a part of a burgeoning trend on Broadway (later embraced by Leonard Bernstein and Stephen Sondheim), which was the expansion of both the stylistic musical themes and plot lines of the musical. Together, these composers evoked a bit of the long-gone style of European operetta while imbuing it with a fresh, modern approach. Frank Loesser was born in New York City in 1910 and had a background steeped in music, thanks to his pianist father. His brother, Arthur, was a pianist as well as a critic and educator. Loesser became famous for composing novelty songs and light tunes during his early career while under contract in Hollywood to Universal and Paramount film studios; songs like “Two Sleepy People,” “Snug as Two Bugs in a Rug,” and “Jingle, Jangle, Jingle.” He enlisted in the Air Force during WWII and wrote a tune which became the theme song for the American war effort, “Praise the Lord and Pass the Ammunition.”

After the war years, Loesser made the decision to devote his skills to composing both music and lyrics for Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley, eliminating the need for a writing partner. Loesser quickly expanded from writing novelty songs to creating finely-
crafted, mini masterpieces, songs such as “What Are You Doing New Year’s Eve,”
“Baby it’s Cold Outside,” and “On a Slow Boat to China.” His next career move was to
write complete shows. The first of these was “Where’s Charley” (1948), which ran for
two years—more than 700 performances—and gave Loesser the confidence to believe he
could create hit shows on his own, having progressed far beyond the level of his early
humorous songs. Loesser’s next show has gone down in the annals of Broadway history
as one of the best and most popular shows of all time, 1950s Guys and Dolls, based on an
Abe Burrows script featuring characters created by newspaperman and author Damon
Runyon. With offbeat characters like gamblers Nicely Nicely Johnson, Big Julie and the
suavely handsome Nathan Detroit; mildly risqué production numbers from Miss Adelaide
and the girls of the Hot Box Nightclub; and hummable songs like “Luck Be a Lady,”
“Sue Me,” “If I Were A Bell,” “A Bushel and a Peck,” and “I’ve Never Been in Love
Before.” The production was an immediate hit, reaching the standard mark of more than
1,000 performances in its initial run. Furthermore, the show has been produced for the
Broadway stage multiple times (the most recent revival was in 2009), and has never been
dropped from the rotation of both the amateur and professional arenas.

In 1952 Loesser briefly returned to writing for the movies, creating the score for
the film Hans Christian Andersen which starred Danny Kaye. The picture was a
fictionalized account of the famous creator of children’s fairy tales and included a lovely
score of songs such as “Thumbelina,” “The Ugly Duckling,” and “Inchworm,” and was
nominated for six Oscars including one for Loesser (Best Song, “Thumbelina”). Fresh
from this success, Loesser returned to Broadway where he set a lofty goal for himself: to
further expand the format of the traditional Broadway musical by taking it back to its
earliest roots of the operetta format. The show was The Most Happy Fella, based on the
play They Knew What They Wanted by Sidney Howard. The show included more than forty musical numbers, chosen from a broad mix of musical styles: semi-arias, folk tunes, and traditional musical standards. Hit songs from this show (which won the New York Drama Critics Award) included “Standing on the Corner” and “Joey, Joey, Joey.” His biggest hit was still to come however, with the 1961 show How to Succeed in Business without Really Trying. The show was unprecedented in Loesser’s career; running for four years, winning seven Tony Awards, and a Pulitzer Prize. In addition to his Broadway triumphs, Loesser was one of the great songwriters of his day; he expanded the canon of the American Songbook by writing tunes with many of the era’s greatest artists including Burton Lane, Hoagy Carmichael, Jimmy McHugh, Jule Styne, Victor Schertzinger and Arthur Schwartz. Loesser died at the age of 59 in July of 1969, but he would go down in history as one of the true greats of the musical theater.

More Than a Footnote. Between 1940 and the early 1960s when Broadway was a flourishing, money-making environment there had arose a host of songwriters, lyricists, and even choreographers eager to make their mark. This surplus of talent resulted in many different types of shows. There were the comedic, light-hearted productions like Charles Strauss’ Bye Bye Birdie (1960) which told the story of a fictional rock-and-roll star, a la Elvis Presley (Conrad Birdie) who drives the teens and parents of a small town to distraction when he comes in for a final concert before going off to war; Meredith Wilson’s one-man-masterpiece the Music Man (1957) which passed the 1,000-plus performance mark; and Damn Yankees written by the four-person creative team of songwriters Richard Adler and Jerry Ross and librettists George Abbott and Douglas Wallop, which relates the age-old story of a man who sells his soul to the devil to give his baseball team a chance at the World Series pennant. There were lighthearted musical
romps such as the Burton Lane and Yip Harburg show, *Finian’s Rainbow*, which was similar enough in style and theme that it has often been confused with that other Irish musical *Brigadoon*; and the *Fantasticks* written by Harvey Schmidt and Tom Jones which ran off-Broadway from 1960 through 2002, the longest-running musical of all time.\(^49\) There was also a return to the old-time, splashy production numbers with choreographer-driven shows like *Jerry Herman’s Hello Dolly*, based on Thornton Wilder's 1938 farce *The Merchant of Yonkers* (revised and adapted in 1955 as *The Matchmaker*) which was directed and choreographed by famous dancer, *Gower Champion*, who had also directed *Bye Bye Birdie*. Non-musical highlights of the show were dazzling and colorful costumes, and a scene in which an entire train filled with fancily-garbed passengers sang of the delights of taking a trip to New York City, in the number “Put on Your Sunday Clothes.” Jerry Herman would make another foray into this same musical style with his 1966 show *Mame*.

**Broadway Comes Full Circle.** While the 1950s and early 1960s saw an increasing number of lightweight shows especially in the musical-comedy genre, a number of composers longed for a return to the more serious topics and issues raised earlier in the period by composers such as Rodgers and Hammerstein. *Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock* was one such duo. The two wrote over a half dozen musicals, not all of them hits but several of which made it into the canon of the best. It was their second musical together, *Fiorello*, a biography of New York’s famous mayor Fiorello LaGuardia that brought widespread fame to the pair, earning them a Tony Award, New York Drama Circle Award and the famed Pulitzer Prize. They followed the hit with *Tenderloin*, which told the story of New York’s famously squalid red-light and entertainment district (1960);

\(^{49}\) [http://www.broadwaymusicalhome.com/shows/fantasticks.](http://www.broadwaymusicalhome.com/shows/fantasticks.)
then took a journey back into the world of European Operetta with the musical *She Loves Me* (1963). However, it was their next musical which introduced audiences to characters and a world that would long be remembered and reinterpreted many times both on Broadway and around the world at regional and national theaters. The play was *Fiddler on the Roof*, and the characters were a humble Jewish milkman trying to make marital matches for his daughters, his wife, and the people of small town Anatevka, who are trying to hold on to their traditional ways in the face of a changing society under threat from tsarist Russia. While critics were afraid the show’s themes might have been too specific to attract a wide audience, *Fiddler* became the first Broadway musical to run for more than 3,000 performances (it is still in the top twenty listing of longest-running Broadway shows\(^5\)). Harnick and Bock continued to work on a variety of other projects following *Fiddler*, both together as writing partners and with other collaborators.

**Finding Their Place.** Another gem in the Broadway crown was a vibrant production which combined the songwriting skills of the classically-trained composer **Leonard Bernstein**, the characteristic dance style of choreography-director Jerome Robbins, and a libretto written by renowned playwright and author **Arthur Laurents**. *West Side Story* (1957), a retelling of Shakespeare’s *Romeo and Juliet* transferred to the world of youth gangs in the lower-class slums of New York city, also introduced critics and audiences to the lyrics of a young talent who was to become one of the greatest names in musical theater history—twenty-seven-year-old **Stephen Sondheim**. *West Side Story* is another show that has never stopped running, whether on Broadway, in community theaters, or on a stage somewhere around the world. Furthermore, it included unparalleled dancing and unforgettable songs such as “I Feel Pretty,” “Tonight,” “One

Hand, One Heart,” “Somewhere,” “Maria,” and “America.” More important, the lyrics and vibrant musical numbers introduced audiences to a youthful and irreverent style that not only touched the heart, but set the standard for the future of the Broadway stage. The musical was made into a big-budget Hollywood film in 1961 starring Natalie Wood, Rita Moreno, Richard Beymer, George Chakiris, and other up and coming stars; it won ten Academy Awards (every one for which it was nominated, except Best Adapted Screenplay). This is especially memorable because the picture’s success came just at the time American audiences were becoming addicted to the entertainment medium of television.

Sondheim, Laurents, and Robbins teamed up again just two years later to create the show Gypsy (1959)—a starring vehicle for Ethel Merman which was based on the autobiography of famed stripper Gypsy Rose Lee and her rise to success in the world of Burlesque. In 1962, Sondheim was well on his way to establishing his reputation as a true giant of the Broadway stage, when he wrote the Tony-Award-winning musical farce A Funny Thing Happened on the Way to the Forum starring Zero Mostel. However, the writing was already on the wall for the Broadway musical as audiences had come to know it. Increased competition from movies and television, rising ticket prices, and the passing of some of the theater’s brightest stars, among other factors would conspire to create a completely new type of theater.

Curtain Call. By 1965, the Broadway Theater as we have chronicled it had undergone many changes, which spelled a sort of death knell for the entertainment culture that had taken more than a century and a half to develop. George Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein, and Cole Porter were dead; Irving Berlin had mostly retired from the music business; and the British invasion had changed the interests of
popular music forever. On the business side of things, there were other developments which had changed the face of Broadway over the preceding decades. One of these was the introduction of a second union created in direct competition to ASCAP (begun by Berlin and some of his fellow old-guard composers to collect royalties for songwriters and music publishers) which had maintained a kind of monopoly over the music publishing industry for twenty-five years. Run by just a handful of specially chosen industry insiders, ASCAP maintained a tight-fisted control over the music publishing market—excluding some black and country artists from full membership and allowing other artists to collect extra royalties through selective reward schemes—which eventually began to bother not only other composers, but radio station owners as well. Therefore, in 1939 **Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI)** was created to collect royalties for artists and publishers who had been neglected by ASCAP. In addition, it opened membership to artists from all genres: pop, rock, country, jazz, and even classical. Now finding themselves with a choice, many radio stations refused to renew their contracts with ASCAP, choosing instead to sign instead with BMI. This divisiveness led to bitter feelings between ASCAP supporters like Berlin and Kern, and those who went with BMI, resulting in a bitter feud between supporters of the two companies. The situation was exacerbated when the US Department of Justice initiated an anti-trust lawsuit against both ASCAP and BMI in 1941.

Also, by 1960 there were many changes to the mediums of radio and television as well as the publications which served these markets. **Billboard Magazine** was one such publication. While it had been in existence since 1894, the new wave of popular music in the 1960s resulted in major changes for the magazine. Rather than covering the entertainment industry as a whole, Billboard eventually decided to devote itself strictly to
covering the business of music recording and radio play of popular song. The magazine introduced its first **Hot 100 Chart** in 1940 (actually two separate charts—one devoted to airplay and one to record sales). In 1958, these two charts were consolidated into a single one that combined the two types of sales statistics.\(^{51}\) Right about this time, radio stations began to devote themselves to dedicated musical styles such as pop/rock, country, classical, etc.; this was spurred on in part by America’s increasing preoccupation with television, which had by the 1950s supplanted radio as the main entertainment medium. Therefore, in order to attract audiences, stations had to reach out to specialized groups of listeners in order to maintain their audiences and increase listener shares. Unfortunately for American audiences, this meant less exposure to standards and musical theater songs; because whereas radio had once been the center of home entertainment with families listening to the same programs and music together, there were now a variety of programming options on both TV and radio targeted to individual listeners.

The musical styles and subject matter of the American musical were undergoing major changes as well. Events like the **Civil Rights Movement** and the **Vietnam War** were driving a wedge between the generations, and young people were no longer interested in listening to their parents’ music. They wanted to see entertainment and listen to music that reflected the lives they were living. Shows that dealt with serious topics and featured stripped-down designs instead of big production numbers: musicals like *Hair*, *Company*, *Grease*, *Chorus Line*, and *Cabaret*.

Even the beloved **Times Square Theater District** had changed. No longer a family-friendly destination, by the 1970s it had become home to prostitutes, drug addicts, and vagrants. Although the area would undergo a major clean-up and redevelopment

effort in 1982 under the leadership of producer Joe Papp and his “Save the Theaters Campaign,” the Broadway of the beloved American Songbook was gone for good, the stuff of dreams only to be found in books, old movies, and the occasional revival production.
Questions for Discussion

1. Name and explain briefly some of the changes Rodgers and Hammerstein brought to the format of the Broadway musical.

2. Name three of the song types which are characteristic of the integrated musical and explain the purpose of each.

3. Name two Lerner and Loewe musicals and the literary source that inspired each.

4. Why is the musical Camelot so important historically?

5. Name two Frank Loesser musicals and briefly explain some of his important contributions to the musical theater genre.

6. List four of the musicals in the light-comedy style which flourished between the years 1940 and 1960.

7. Name four Big Band leaders. Four Big Band Singers. Four popular recording artists.

8. Who were Sheldon Harnick and Jerry Bock? What was so important about their musical Fiorello? Who was the subject of this musical?

9. Trace several developments which led to the end of the Golden Age of Broadway musicals.
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