Richard Crawford

Where Did Porgy and Bess Come From? In October 1925, New York’s Vanity Fair published a page of caricatures by Miguel Covarrubias under the heading “Prodigious Figures in the World of Music,” depicting a patron (Otto Kahn), two violinists (Fritz Kreisler, Jascha Heifetz), two conductors (Leopold Stokowski, Serge Koussevitzky), and two composers (Igor Stravinsky, George Gershwin). Standing in a theater lobby, banker Otto Kahn, board chairman of New York’s Metropolitan Opera, is said to be “in the market for a Great American Opera about stenographers and subways.” Gershwin, the only American-born figure in the bunch, plays the piano and is alleged to have his eyes on loftier things than his popular song successes.

A decade later, Gershwin’s Porgy and Bess (libretto by DuBose Heyward with help from Ira Gershwin)—the stage work that has come to fit the Great American Opera tag (minus Kahn’s stenographers and subways) perhaps better than any other—opened in New York. Yet Porgy and Bess would not reach the Metropolitan Opera stage for half a century, and its operatic credentials were questioned from the start. Set in the black ghetto of Charleston, South Carolina, the new work met the operatic standard of having continuous music from start to finish. Nonetheless, the Theatre Guild, its first producers, presented this “folk opera” as if it were a musical comedy, in Broadway’s Alvin Theater, with eight performances a week (matinees on Wednesdays and Saturdays). Also like a Broadway show, Porgy and Bess received a pre-New York tryout “on the road” in Boston. During that weeklong run, cuts were made to reduce the running time to standard Broadway size. Even more questionable from the standpoint of operatic practice, at least to some observers, was the way Porgy and Bess sounded. In style


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1 Vanity Fair (October 1925), 47.
and form, as might be expected from a famous songwriter like Gershwin, some of the music resembled Broadway tunes more than operatic arias.

Why does it matter whether or not Porgy and Bess was received as a true opera? The appearance of the Great American Opera label in a popular magazine of the mid-1920s suggests that more than academic hairsplitting was at stake; it links opera and Gershwin to a fundamental debate in American culture that centered on the Great Divide between art—presumed to be elevating, enduring, and nourishing to the soul—and mere fleeting entertainment. More than a matter of intellectual perception, the Divide did much to structure America’s musical life, which revolved around institutions dedicated to serving either art (the “classical” sphere) or entertainment (the “popular” sphere), but seldom both. On the classical side, the operatic stage had long been a potent cultural force—an exotic import blending spectacle, drama, and musical artistry. In the early twentieth century, a good deal of energy was invested in encouraging, commissioning, and creating American operas that might stand alongside favorites by Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Giuseppe Verdi, Richard Wagner, and other European masters. Opera, as a glamorous onstage embodiment of art and a source of well-loved music, held a secure place in the public conversation of mid-1920s America, and so, more than any other home-grown composer of the day, did Gershwin.

At a time when musicians worked on one side or the other of the Divide, Gershwin won fame by moving freely between the two, delighting a huge listening public and seeming to revel in the acclaim that his music brought him. His personal history reveals a lifelong involvement in music as an art adaptable to a variety of purposes. The second son of Russian Jewish immigrant parents, Gershwin was born in Brooklyn, New York, in 1898, and raised on the streets of Manhattan’s Lower East Side. When his family bought a piano in 1910 or so, he developed a passionate interest in music, eventually finding a suitable teacher and becoming an avid concertgoer. Soon he was capable of playing classical piano pieces by the likes of Frédéric Chopin and Franz Liszt.2

2 Gershwin biographies in English now number more than fifteen and counting. The biographical sketch in this paragraph is synthesized from several of them. Isaac Goldberg, George Gershwin: A Study in American Music (New York, 1931), 61, quotes a letter from Charles Hambitzer, Gershwin’s first serious piano teacher, to his sister about Gershwin: “I have a new
In 1914, George Gershwin dropped out of school and went to work in Tin Pan Alley, New York City's popular music-publishing district. At eighteen, he jumped into the world of the Broadway theater and so-called “production” music; at age twenty he wrote his first Broadway score. In February 1924 he burst into the concert world as composer and soloist in the *Rhapsody in Blue*, billed as a “jazz concerto” for piano and orchestra. Hailed from the start as a musical landmark, the *Rhapsody* made Gershwin instantly famous as the man who “brought jazz out of the kitchen” (as conductor Walter Damrosch put it). He continued through the 1920s to write Broadway shows and occasional concert-hall pieces, while traveling five times to England and/or continental Europe, where many musicians and listeners embraced his fresh, original music.

By 1930, Gershwin was composing Broadway shows that amounted to political operettas, and he also wrote the score for a Hollywood movie released in 1931. By 1934, with more Broadway shows and concert works behind him, he moved into radio, broadcasting a weekly program, and opera, devoting the better part of two years to composing and orchestrating *Porgy and Bess*, which premiered in 1935. In 1936, he returned to Hollywood, wrote songs for two more films and was at work on a third when, in July 1937, a brain tumor cut short his life at age thirty-eight. By one report, he went to his grave with a new string quartet in his head but not yet written down.3

What does Covarrubias’ page of caricatures say about American music in 1925? Since *Vanity Fair* pledged itself to offer “a record of current achievements in all the arts and a mirror of the progress and promise of American life,” its gallery of “prodigious figures” celebrated a progressive culture of performance featuring symphony orchestras, opera, virtuoso soloists (Stravinsky and Gershwin had recently appeared as solo pianists in new works of pupil who will make his mark in music if anybody will. The boy is a genius, without a doubt; he’s just crazy about music and can’t wait until it’s time to take his lesson. No watching the clock for this boy! He wants to go in for this modern stuff, jazz and what not. But I’m not going to let him for a while. I’ll see that he gets a firm foundation in the standard music first” (61).

3 See Merle Armitage, *George Gershwin, Man and Legend* (New York, 1958), 77, on conversations between the author and Gershwin in 1937 about Gershwin’s plans for this string quartet.
their own), and the classics, old and new. By its testimony, foreign-born leadership had brought the United States a sophisticated, cosmopolitan concert life that included living composers. Moreover, with Kahn on the lookout for a Great American Opera, readers could expect more home-grown contributions.4

Vanity Fair’s celebration of classical concert life is noteworthy; historical narratives of music in the United States tend to take the concert hall of the 1920s for granted, if not to question its priorities. They depict the concert hall as Eurocentric and disconnected, for the most part, from two key developments: (1) the rise of the American composer and (2) the growing vitality of popular music, especially the fresh vernacular idioms of “the jazz age.” European modernism is the straw that stirs this historiographical drink. Slowly taking root on these shores during and after World War I, this movement, together with its New World counterpart, inspired a new generation of American composers, even though the concert hall, embodying the musical Establishment, resisted or ignored it.5

A growing supply of “modern music,” both European and American, emerged during these years, but the demand for it stayed small. Why? Presumably because the concert hall’s movers and shakers resisted giving new music—much of it short on tunefulness and long on unfamiliar harmonies, rhythms, and sounds—the hearing it required. Even new works now considered classics received too few performances to win the hearts of the listening public. As for new popular music, its instrumentation, simple forms, and informal—even trivial—character seemed to disqualify it from the concert hall, although its potential for inspiring com-


posers was becoming a subject for discussion and musical experiment by the time of the *Rhapsody in Blue*.

A major story in American music during the 1920s centers, therefore, on the gap between classical composers and their audiences, which persisted through the rest of the century, costing classical music much of its support and prestige. Composers, determined to express the spirit of the present, tended to follow their artistic vision wherever it might lead. Listeners, drawn to concerts that featured familiar styles, were slow to embrace music that diverged too much from them. Performers, through whom music reached the public ear, were caught in the middle, negotiating among composers’ priorities, listeners’ tastes, and their own artistic and economic interests. Impresarios and managers, who bore the financial risk of bringing music to the public, usually placed audience tastes above composers’ preferences. Critics, the concert hall’s chief reporters and interpreters, could favor either composers or, more likely, listeners, offer their own views, or even take a stand on behalf of music itself. Each group had its own priorities. The differences among them were debated, negotiated, and resolved within the arena of the concert hall—the infrastructure of orchestra and recital halls, opera houses, and the local, regional, and national agencies that recruited their customers.6

The authority of the concert hall lay in an economy that, in effect, mediated and balanced differences among the artistic, aesthetic, political, cultural, economic, and practical priorities of musicians and listeners. Its workings resembled those of a marketplace in which competing interests vied not only for customers and money but for performance opportunities. The outcome of that competition, the concert hall’s repertory, was a consensus of sorts, always open to change (theoretically, at least) as it balanced the claims of new compositions against those of so-called classics—that is, works for which demand persisted in the face of an ever-growing supply.

Gershwin’s presence in Covarrubias’ gallery marks his unique position in American music. The sole American-born individual on the page and the only one involved with popular music, he is

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the group’s outsider, using his talent, youth, and chutzpah to invade a realm seemingly off limits to a child of Tin Pan Alley. His presence also implies that the concert hall—a musical work’s ultimate and proper destination—is no private club but an arena open to fresh, listenable music, whether its pedigree be Old World or New. The force and appeal of Gershwin’s approach seemed strong enough to undermine the wall separating music’s classical and popular branches. In the previous year’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, he had composed a piece of new music nearly fifteen minutes long, notated prescriptively in a classical form, which ranged in style from blues and Broadway to the pyrotechnics of the nineteenth-century piano concerto. The 1925 concert hall public had generally welcomed it, even though its orchestration had so far kept it off-limits for symphony orchestras.7

Yet, even as the October issue of *Vanity Fair* was hitting the newsstands, Gershwin was finishing a second large classical work, the *Concerto in F* for piano and orchestra, commissioned in April 1925, with public fanfare, by the New York Symphony Orchestra under Damrosch, and scheduled for performance in December 1925 with Gershwin himself as soloist. As a modernist whose music could override the gap between composer and audience, therefore, Gershwin seemed not only to have “solved” a fundamental problem in modern composition but to have claimed a freedom from category that no other composer enjoyed. *Where would George Gershwin take American music next?* From this time forward, his concert works met with an anticipation that brought this question to mind.8

To understand where *Porgy and Bess* came from, we need to recognize Gershwin as a composer whose works, starting in the mid-1920s, carried a sense of historical expectation. Among American composers outside the Broadway circle, only he had mastered the idioms of popular music, tapping into their expressive power even as he extended and polished his craft in works for the concert hall. Alone among his contemporaries, he would seem

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7 His fellow “prodigious figures” were cosmopolitan, and most were middle-aged, including Kahn (fifty-eight), Koussevitzky (fifty-one), Kreisler (fifty), and Stravinsky and Stokowski (forty-five). David Schiff, *Gershwin: Rhapsody in Blue*, Cambridge Music Handbooks (New York, 1997), 4–5.

8 The contract for the *Concerto in F* was signed on April 17, 1925; the premiere took place in New York on December 3, 1925. See Edward Jablonski, *George Gershwin: A Biography* (New York, 1987), 98.
through the rest of his composing life to bear both the endorse-
ment and the burden of history. The endorsement added to his
opportunities, income, and fame. The burden proved a force to be
reckoned with, for better and for worse.

THE ORIGINS OF PORGY AND BESS On Sunday, October 20, 1935,
ten days after Porgy and Bess opened on Broadway, Gershwin’s ar-
ticle, “Rhapsody in Catfish Row: Mr. Gershwin Tells the Origin
and Scheme for His Music in That New Folk Opera Called ‘Porgy
and Bess,’” appeared in the New York Times. As an experienced
songwriter, he explained that he had conceived the work as an op-
era because of his belief “that music lives only when it is in serious
form.” To prove the point, he stated that if he had used the popu-
lar song form of the blues in 1924 to write separate songs instead of
the Rhapsody in Blue, those songs “would have been gone years
ago,” whereas the Rhapsody “is still very much alive.”

Today Porgy and Bess, approaching its eighth decade, also re-
 mains very much alive, and Gershwin has won a prominent place
among American music’s prodigious figures. Posterity’s appetite
for his music, and the august company he now keeps in the public
mind, would surely have delighted him. They probably would not
have surprised him, however, because his October 1935 article
identifies many of the sources of the opera’s enduring appeal.

By the time Porgy and Bess came into being, Gershwin had
been thinking for years about American opera’s unrealized poten-
tial. As embodied in New York’s Metropolitan Opera Company,
one of the nation’s flagship institutions, the operatic scene during
the 1920s and early 1930s seemed too tradition-bound and risk-
averse to be considered part of classical music’s progressive wing.
Opera was so costly that its economy relied heavily on one group
of listeners—aﬄuent patrons. Built around international stars, for-

die-language performances, and traditional repertory, opera was
coming to be perceived as an exclusive playground for the
wealthy. But in composing Porgy and Bess, Gershwin aimed at a
much broader audience. “I hold,” he declared, “to have de vel-
oped something in American music” that appeals “to the many
rather than to the cultured few.” Toward that end, and true to his

9 Gershwin’s article was reprinted in Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (eds.), The
George Gershwin Reader (New York, 2004), 217–221.
sense of history, he also claimed to have invented nothing less than "a new form, which combines opera with theatre." In his view, American opera, with *Porgy and Bess* as precedent, "should contain all the elements of entertainment."\(^{10}\)

Though admitting his hope for musical permanence, Gershwin’s article did not try to explain his attraction to the operatic stage, which offered opportunities and resources beyond any that he had so far enjoyed. Opera called for a whole evening of through-composed, sung drama; it provided access to accomplished, well-trained singers and an orchestra of near-symphonic size; and it linked him to a tradition that demanded full use of the composer’s idiom and its range of expressive power. As a seasoned writer of Broadway musical comedies, and a less experienced (though successful) writer of concert-hall material, Gershwin had tasted all of these elements. He had written hundreds of songs and a fair number of dramatic scenes; he had worked with talented performers who could act, move, and sing well enough to portray their characters and charm audiences; he had learned much about composing for an orchestra; and he had proved his capacity to sustain musical invention, in a personal idiom, over long stretches of time. On all of these fronts except the last, however, he had worked as part of a team—with producers, playwrights, and directors, as well as performers. Opera requires many collaborators, too, but the composer stands first among equals.\(^{11}\)

A lot is known about *Porgy and Bess*, from genesis to reception. Indeed, beyond musical matters, the work’s social implications—especially in matters of race—have been so deeply felt and widely discussed over the years that a more obvious American choice for a conference on opera and society would be hard to find. Still open, however, despite all of the published discussions, is the question of how the idea for *Porgy and Bess* took shape in Gershwin’s consciousness.\(^{12}\)

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10 Ibid., 218; my quotation is corrected, however, from Wyatt and Johnson’s version.

11 However seriously contested this principle about opera composers may or may not have been, Joseph Kerman’s *Opera as Drama* (New York, 1956) has helped make it into a musico-logical axiom.

Todd Duncan, the first Porgy, posed that question as early as 1935. As he told the story years later, he and the opera's producers repaired to Gershwin's residence on 72nd Street after his own audition. Ira Gershwin appeared, the brothers explained the new work's background, and then George sat down at the piano: "[H]e started out with the opening [imitating the trumpets with his voice] and I said to myself, 'Oh, my God. Gee, this is junk!' And then he segued with [hums the orchestral opening of "Summertime"]. . . . And Ira with his rotten voice starts, [horribly off pitch] 'Summertime, and the living is easy.' And he [George] looked up at me and smiled. Then George sang, 'Fish are jumpin'" with Ira finishing the verse, 'And the cotton is high.' Then George [now a raspy, guttural voice imitation, worse than Ira's] 'Oh, your daddy's . . . ' But when he got to the second verse I could have wept. I said to myself, 'Well this is so beautiful. Where did this man get this from?" ¹³

Duncan's question offers perspective on Gershwin's claim of "a new form" in his Porgy and Bess article. According to Gershwin, the form was new because it included elements never before united on the operatic stage. First was the subject, "Negro life in America," including "the drama, the humor, the superstition, the religious fervor, the dancing and the irrepressible high spirits of the race." Second was the musical variety, ranging from "light" to "serious" (catchy theater songs, elaborate aria-like songs, recitatives, choral numbers, and symphonically composed scenes). Third was the presentation—a cast, director, and conductor capable of realizing a theatrically convincing performance. Gershwin wrote Porgy and Bess to seize opportunities that his predecessors had missed. By the time the work had reached the theater, he knew that he and his collaborators had succeeded, and why. They had managed to bring together several theatrically potent, mutually reinforcing elements: an American story on an epic scale (though he did not use the word), with tragedy, comedy, and music that aptly supported them, and with characters who were more than stereotypes.¹⁴

¹³ For Duncan's words, see "Todd Duncan: From an Interview by Robert Wyatt (1990)," in Wyatt and Johnson (eds.), Gershwin Reader, 222 (emphasis added).

¹⁴ See Gershwin, "Rhapsody in Catfish Row: Mr. Gershwin Tells the Origin and Scheme
Gershwin’s claims about the originality of *Porgy and Bess* were true, and when he referred to the characteristics of “Negro life in America,” he surely intended to convey respect for his subjects. His comment, however, showed a failure to appreciate that two matters on which he presumed to speak for others were contested and sensitive—that of “the folk” in America and that of race. As an artist commenting from a theatrical perspective, Gershwin neglected to make the larger point that not all black Americans were superstitious, religious, irrepressible dancers. Moreover, although African Americans of that day viewed their place in the theater as distinct from that of any other group, the Broadway establishment tended to conflate issues pertaining to “the folk” and to race; black Americans were one of several groups that fit into its category of folk characters. Before *Porgy and Bess* was an opera, it was a play called *Porgy* (1927), and like other plays about “Negroes” during the 1920s, *Porgy* the play was an attempt by the theater to include groups outside modern urban culture.15

Folk dramas set in Appalachia or the Deep South, for example, enriched the stage by populating it with “others” from outlying social worlds. Such regions were home to people who, presumably living close to the land, tended toward simplicity and directness. Those responsible for plays about such people were not community members but outsiders, and they tended to create characters who seemed to exist on the edge of historical time, or even outside it. Their assumption that most community members shared “folk” traits distinct from those of city-dwellers was not meant to be condescending.16

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15 James Weldon Johnson, *Black Manhattan* (New York, 1930), for example, offers a contemporaneous view of New York’s African-American culture by an observer once active in the theater who later served as the secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People.

16 I have not found secondary literature on Broadway “folk” dramas during the second and third decades of the twentieth century. However, research on my behalf by Todd Decker on the output of the New York theater in these years shows a sprinkling of such plays. Furthermore, critical discussions suggest strongly that plays with black characters were a subset of the folk genre, and that in such works, quality was judged, at least in part, by the work’s presumed faithfulness to folk customs. To cite just one example, a comment by critic Morton Eustis about Hall Johnson’s *Run, Little Chillun* (1933) distinguishes folk authenticity from dramatic
In calling *Porgy and Bess* a “folk opera,” Gershwin applied a special label to his new form. As he put it in his article, “Since the opening of *Porgy and Bess* I have been asked frequently why it is called a folk opera. The explanation is a simple one. *Porgy and Bess* is a folk tale. Its people naturally would sing folk music. When I first began work on the music I decided against the use of original folk material because I wanted the music to be all of one piece. Therefore I wrote my own spirituals and folksongs. But they are all folk music—and therefore, being in operatic form, *Porgy and Bess* becomes a folk opera.”17

By 1935, when Gershwin wrote these words, many Americans had a concept of folk expression different from the one he offered. The rise of industrialization during the nineteenth century had created upheaval throughout the Western world, relocating substantial numbers of people and pressing social and cultural change on many groups. In 1888, the American Folklore Society was founded on the model of the Folklore Society of Britain to preserve some of what was being lost in the process. The organization’s charter stated its intent to gather and publish songs and stories from English, Indian, Mexican, French–Canadian, and African cultures in America. After 1900, many state folklore societies were organized to collect and preserve artifacts as well as songs and stories that, existing in oral tradition, seemed in danger of disappearing. Before the end of the 1920s, the Library of Congress endorsed the value of plain-folk expression by establishing the Archive of American Folk Song.18

In this context, folk music, performed orally as part of community life, was taken to be ancient, un–self-conscious, unmediated, and noncommercial. The outsiders who collected and studied this music deemed it, and the societies that practiced it,
authentic in a way that modern society and its composed music could not be. According to the canon of folk authenticity, a community, as a whole, un-self-consciously makes and selects its cultural products and artifacts over time. Collective acceptance, manifested in oral circulation, sanctions the music’s authority. Songs and melodies survive, presumably, by distilling something essential in the consciousness of the group. Folk songs are both hardy and vulnerable. Existing because people have remembered them, they may also be forgotten as modernity appears. Collecting them is a mission of cultural salvage work, carried on from a position of moral authority.

This idea of folk expression owes much to the imagination and idealism of its collectors. It also helps explain why folk culture and folk music came to be considered precious. Not only were folk melodies valued, admired, and performed; they were also thought to embody deep human value. Folk-song collectors analyzed the melodies and words of the songs, looking for patterns (scales, forms, and verbal formations) and poetic devices (narrative techniques and metaphors). They also speculated about songs’ origins and tried to account for their dissemination. These developments, well under way before World War I, received a boost during the Depression, when the U.S. government, seeking to shore up national identity during economic hard times, sponsored folk-related projects.19

Gershwin’s comments show no awareness of any such idea of folk culture or folk music. For him, “folkness” pointed to subject matter and style, not a body of human expression with sacralized overtones. When he called Porgy and Bess a folktale, he meant not a story originating among nonliterate people that they transmitted orally but a literary work about such people. As for the question of what his folk characters would sing onstage, he acknowledged that the cast of the Heywards’ play of Porgy had performed “original folk material.” Gershwin decided in Porgy and Bess, however, to compose his own “spirituals and folksongs”—musical numbers in the style of these genres—because he “wanted the music to be all of one piece.” With dramatic impact as his top priority, he dis-

carded the prop of pre-existent melody, betting that he could create a more powerful, convincing flow by keeping full control over the music.20

Gershwin’s decision proves that he conceived and composed Porgy and Bess with full knowledge of an opera composer’s prerogatives, which should come as no surprise, since he had been preparing to write a work like this one for much of his career. That preparation had two distinct phases: (1) the “history,” or the nine years between October 1926—when he discovered and read Heyward’s novella Porgy—and September 30, 1935, when Porgy and Bess opened in Boston at the Colonial Theater, and (2) the “prehistory,” the earlier years on which this article concentrates.21

Seen in light of the academic discourses surrounding folklore, Gershwin’s claim that he had composed his own “spirituals and folksongs” seems naïve, high-handed, or both. From an opera composer’s perspective, however, his claim treats the canon of folkloric authenticity—the notion that a group with a mediated folk culture possesses, and sets limits for, its own artistic representation and that only a community member holds the right to change, or to work outside, those limits—as strictly optional. As Gershwin saw it, although folk songs and stories may speak for a folk community, the operatic stage speaks to humankind at large through the universal mimetic medium of music. As a work of art, an opera makes its own truth, transcending the conventions of its subject. If Gershwin ever had worries about being an outsider to the community he was portraying, he seems to have put them to rest long before the winter of 1934, when he finally set to work in earnest on Porgy and Bess.

Yet the issue of Porgy and Bess’ authorship looms large in the work’s history. To some people it mattered a great deal that this tale of an African-American community in the South, was in-

20 In Porgy, folk material took the form of “spirituals,” preserved orally in African-American communities in and around Charleston, South Carolina, and sung at moments in the play when religious faith was collectively expressed. The texts of these spirituals appear in the published version of the play. See DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, Porgy: A Play in Four Acts (New York, 1928). From Gershwin’s perspective as a composer, the claims of folk authenticity, when weighed against dramatic effectiveness, were weak. In that belief he stood against the prevailing custom. In the early 1930s, stage dramas involving “the folk”—African Americans included—had generally been conceived with a show of respect for the folklore of the community involved, at least as perceived by the theatergoing public.
21 Frank Durham, DuBose Heyward: The Man Who Wrote Porgy (Columbia, 1954), 119. For the first phase, see, for example, Slonimsky, Music Since 1900, 610.
vented by a white South Carolinian and set to music by a Jewish composer from New York City’s Broadway stage, whose song-lyricist brother also contributed to the work. In what way did the background and experience of this creative team qualify them to bring such a work before the public? In an oft-cited review of *Porgy and Bess* published in November 1935, Virgil Thomson came close to denying that Gershwin and company had any such right: “Folklore subjects recounted by an outsider are only valid so long as the folk in question is unable to speak for itself, which is certainly not true of the American Negro in 1935.” “I don’t like fake folklore,” he added. Thomson’s edict places the issue in the context of the day’s growing awareness of folklore’s political implications. To claim the right to speak for a community not one’s own, even in the name of art, deserved to be questioned.22

But whatever the politics of folklore, the politics of race have loomed even larger in American life. In 1935, the disparity in social status between black and white Americans was vast. A comment like Gershwin’s inevitably carried a political edge, asserting the power to define someone who had neither a reciprocal right nor the means to object. Gershwin’s idea that African Americans were superstitious, religious, funny, and given to dancing was no truer than the notion that all white Americans were rational, secular, and of serious mien. Beyond the question of accuracy, though, lay that of exploitation. The Gershwins (and the Heywards), placing African-American performers on stage and putting music in their mouths while maintaining artistic control and economic leverage, built the potential for political conflict into *Porgy and Bess.*23

For the opera’s performers, however, the politics implicit in the opera’s authorship lost urgency in the face of a deeply reward-

22 Rouben Mamoulian, a Russian-born Armenian, should also be added to the list. He was hired by the Theatre Guild to direct DuBose and Dorothy Heyward’s play, *Porgy,* which opened in New York in October 1927. To prepare himself for that task, Mamoulian visited Charleston, with set designer Cleon Throckmorton, for several days, observing the comings and goings, the singing, and the expressive habits of the local Gullah Negroes. See James M. Hutchisson, *DuBose Heyward: A Charleston Gentleman and the World of Porgy and Bess* (Jackson, 2000), 81. Virgil Thomson, “George Gershwin,” *Modern Music,* XIII (1935), 17, 19. Thomson’s comment also implies the propriety of his own use of a black cast in the opera *Four Saints in Three Acts* (1934), because that work’s libretto by Gertrude Stein was in no way folklore; nor could it be seen as speaking for the African-American community members who were performing it.

23 For the political implications, see especially Cruse, *Crisis*; Crawford, “It Ain’t Necessarily Soul.”
ing experience. The words of principal cast members—some of whom would live with *Porgy and Bess* for years to come—attest to their belief in the rightness of the words and music they sang. Duncan testified that “I Got Plenty o’ Nuttin’,” a song Porgy sings early in Act II, spoke not only for his onstage character but his own outlook on life. It spoke, said the singer, for “me, Todd Duncan, as an artist and a negro man. It became my credo. . . . The things that really matter in life under God are things that you can’t buy: like love, like the sea, like the sun and the moon.”

Anne Brown, the first Bess, recalled her role as a “guinea pig” while the opera was being composed. She remembered a call from Gershwin’s 72nd Street apartment: “Annie, I’ve just finished music for Clara. I want you to come and sing it for me.” In other sessions there, with the composer at the piano, she would read through new numbers, and he would pepper her with questions: “Is this too high for a baritone?” ‘No, no, not if he doesn’t stay up there too long,’ I would say. ‘How’s this, should I change this note?’ ‘No, no. As a matter of fact, I’d like to do it higher,’ would be my answer. I even made a few changes in ‘I Loves You Porgy,’ notes which fit my voice better and he would say, ‘That’s good, let’s use that.’”

Choral director Eva Jessye also remembered Gershwin as a composer ready to learn from cast members. “George didn’t interfere during rehearsals; he let us do what we knew how to do. . . . He would add things and allow changes in rehearsal constantly. A lot of the gutbucket stuff he particularly liked had to be cut. And, you know, he had written in things that sounded just right, like our people.” In fact, according to Anne Brown, when Ruby Elzy, the first Serena, “embroidered her prayer with all sorts of ornamentation, he smiled and said, ‘That’s wonderful, keep it in.’”

Brown recalled the moment when the whole cast embraced *Porgy and Bess* as its own—“after weeks of rehearsals on the stage of the Alvin Theatre—when we had the first full orchestral rehearsal of the finished opera with soloists and chorus on the stage of Carnegie Hall, hired by the Theatre Guild for just that purpose. When the echoes of the last chords of *Porgy and Bess* had disap-

peared into the nearly empty hall, we were—all of us—in tears. It had been so moving. Todd Duncan turned to me and said, ‘Do you realize, Anne, that we are making history?’” For the original performers of Porgy and Bess—most of them classically trained singers, barred from the operatic stage by racial discrimination and the scarcity of roles for people of color—Gershwin and Heyward’s tale of Southern black life was a godsend, demanding their best as actors and singers while breaking down social, political, and racial barriers.27

DUBOSE HEYWARD  Porgy and Bess proved convincing to its performers in part because of what Gershwin learned from his longstanding interest in African-American music and musical attitudes. But no less absorbed in black artistic representation was his chief collaborator, DuBose Heyward (1885–1940), whose novella Porgy (1925) and play of the same name (1927), written with his wife, Dorothy, provided the opera’s subject, setting, and story. The more one learns about Gershwin, Heyward, and their collaboration, the harder it is to sustain the view that the ethnic and regional background of each—Northern Jewish and Southern white—compromised the quality of their work.

At least three aspects of DuBose Heyward’s background and career made it likely that his tale about an African-American community in Charleston, South Carolina, would be artistically truthful. First, he was born in Charleston and lived there for most of his first forty years. Second, he grew up in a household where the customs and lore of the local “Gullah Negroes” were a living presence, and from the time when he began to fancy himself a writer, he focused on African-American life in the South. Third, approaching that subject through close observation, respect for his characters, and an appreciation for black culture’s strengths, he found a milieu suited to his own artistic talents and the literary environment of his day.28

28 DuBose Heyward’s mother, Jane Screven Heyward (“Janie”), an energetic researcher into local customs and lore, had made the Gullah Negroes, whose culture she grew to admire, a focus of her interest and a presence in the family’s everyday life. By the 1920s, she was appearing as a dialect recitalist. Her stories sometimes focused on the emotional and cultural kinship between white and black women across the racial divide. Therefore, the “aristocratic white” background that DuBose Heyward brought to his poetry and fiction after World War I was grounded in a long, sympathetic, and multifaceted engagement with local black culture. See Hutchisson, DuBose Heyward, 6–9. Hutchisson supports these three points.
The phrase, “too poor to paint and too proud to whitewash,” was used to describe the Heyward family of Charleston in the late 1800s. DuBose’s father, who died when his son was only two, counted a signer of the Declaration of Independence as an ancestor, and his mother, whose maiden name was DuBose, descended from once-prosperous plantation owners. DuBose Heyward’s first biographer observed, “In the South generally and in Charleston in particular, birth is looked upon not as a beginning but as a continuation.” So it was with the Heywards, respected for their past but reduced in the post-Civil War years to an economic position well below their social standing.29

The family’s future man of letters did not flourish in school, dropping out before age sixteen and going to work to supplement the meager family income. Several of his jobs brought him into contact with South Carolina’s black population. Hired by an insurance company as a teenager, he canvassed black neighborhoods to collect “burial money;” during the summers of 1900–1903, he supervised black field hands on the nearby plantation of a relative; and beginning in 1905, working as a cotton-checker for a steamship line, he came to know something of stevedore life. Each of these jobs gave the young man a vantage point for observing a people who remained separate from, and imperfectly known to, the white population of Charleston. The obvious racial imbalance of power never claimed much of Heyward’s attention. What fascinated him was the mystery of cultural difference.30

Heyward’s path to a writing career was tortuous and more than a little improbable. He showed enough talent in the insurance business to fund a trip to Europe in the summer of 1914. He also began to dabble in local artistic activity, and to write poetry and stories on regional subjects. In 1920, he and several writing cohorts founded the Poetry Society of South Carolina, hoping to “stimulate an interest in the reading, writing, and critical appreciation of poetry in the community.” During the next few years, no one in Charleston took that goal more seriously than Heyward, who was the group’s corresponding secretary. Still a businessman and now in his mid-thirties, he supervised the Poetry Society’s guest series and managed trips to the Macdowell Colony in New Hampshire during the summers of 1921 and 1922. Contacts made

29 Ibid., xvii. Durham, DuBose Heyward, 3.
30 Hutchisson, DuBose Heyward, 9–10.
through the Poetry Society enabled him to publish poems in such journals as *Poetry, Atlantic,* and *Contemporary Verse,* and in April 1924, he gave up his insurance business and started a career as a professional writer.31

Two events with economic promise must have encouraged Heyward’s leap into the unknown. The first involved Dorothy Hartzell Kuhns, an aspiring playwright, whom he met at the Macdowell Colony and married in 1923. Kuhns had attended a workshop at Harvard University, where her play, *Nancy Ann,* won a $500 prize and a New York production, opening on Broadway in 1924. While *Nancy Ann* enjoyed only a short run, the prospect of future Broadway success for Dorothy probably made her husband’s decision to become a full-time artist a little easier. The second was that by the spring of 1924, Heyward, with no illusions about a professional career in poetry, had settled on the subject for a novel. Drafted during the summer of 1924 and published in September 1925 by the New York firm of George R. Doran, the novella *Porgy* launched Heyward’s literary career.32

*Porgy* became a best seller. As a serious portrait of African-American life, which white authors had treated lightly in the past, *Porgy* was also considered groundbreaking. Heyward’s literary debut drew upon his years of search for the “secret law” that seemed to animate the lives of the “alien people” with whom white people shared the city of Charleston. He later admitted to a feeling of envy toward them, having come to see “the primitive Negro as the inheritor of a source of delight that I would have given much to possess.” From this appreciation came questions that invited literary answers: “What was the mysterious force that for generations had resisted the pressure of our civilization and underlaid the apparently haphazard existence of the Negro with a fundamental unity? . . . What was the quality in a spiritual sung in the secrecy of some back room that brought the chance listener up short against the outer wall with a contraction of the solar plexus, and lachrymal glands that he was powerless to control?”33


33 Heyward & Heyward, *Porgy: A Play,* ix–x.
To answer such questions, Heyward settled on “a sort of race personality that dominated and swayed the mass,” making of it something “vastly greater” than the sum of its parts. Convinced that the “basic law” guiding individual behavior embodied that race personality, he decided that the key lay not so much in ideas as in a physical force, “rhythm.” The closest that Heyward came to defining the term appears in his introduction to Porgy the play. In adapting his novella to the stage, he explained, he and Dorothy were ever conscious of the collective “flow of life” that “had driven its dark stream on under our civilization, while generations came, were swept forward by it, and vanished.” That collective flow was precisely what the Heywards wished to capture on stage.34

In Heyward’s description of how the novella Porgy came to be written, the key moment arrived when, struggling with “the vast abstraction” of communal dynamics, he spotted an item in a Charleston newspaper that personalized the subject. Before reading the notice, Heyward had hardly imagined that among the city’s black residents, as among the “vanished” generations of the past, might be individuals worthy of literary attention in their own right. But this glimpse of a character whom he himself had seen on the Charleston streets proved him wrong: “Samuel Smalls, who is a cripple and is familiar to King Street with his goat and cart, was held for the June term of court of sessions on an aggravated assault charge. It is alleged that on Saturday night he attempted to shoot Maggie Barnes at number four Romney Street. His shots went wide of the mark. Smalls was up on a similar charge some months ago and was given a suspended sentence.” Struck by this incident, Heyward inquired further and learned that the news report had omitted a salient fact: “Smalls had attempted to escape in his wagon, and had been run down and captured by the police patrol.”35

The Smalls incident gave Heyward a new window on the life around him. He had thought that a life like Smalls’ “could never lift above the dead level of the commonplace.” Yet this brief notice contained the stuff of personal tragedy that Heyward had previously reserved for white people. In it lay the roots from which the character of Porgy sprang: “a creature of my imagination,”

34 Ibid., x, xiii–xiv.
35 Ibid., xi.
upon whom “I could impose my own white man’s conception of a summer of aspiration, devotion, and heartbreak across the colour wall.”

By early 1926, Heyward’s career change could be called a success. *Porgy* was widely noticed, well reviewed, and its author had a contract for a new novel, on which he was at work. Nevertheless, before the year was out, Heyward received signals from two separate quarters that, for all *Porgy*’s literary merits, its future might lie in the theater. The first came from the home front where, even before *Porgy* was published, Dorothy Heyward was drafting a script for a play based on *Porgy*. The other signal came from New York City—an enthusiastic letter from a famous musician he had never met. In October 1926, after reading Heyward’s novella at one sitting, Gershwin immediately wrote him, proposing that the two men collaborate on an operatic treatment of *Porgy* and the denizens of Catfish Row.

Heyward’s first response to his wife’s idea was skeptical. But once he saw her script, he realized that it offered “a much closer approximation” of the artistic ideal that he had imagined in the first place. The next challenge was to recruit a black cast. If that proved impossible, Heyward declared, “we would hold the play indefinitely rather than resort to the use of disguised white actors.” As for Gershwin’s letter, it sparked a friendship that would bear fruit in a successful collaboration. The prospect of *Porgy* as an opera delighted Heyward from the start. When the two men finally met in 1927, they began conversations about how such a work might come to pass. The better part of a decade would go by before it actually did.

**GERSHWIN AND AFRICAN–AMERICAN MUSIC** Thanks to the work of others, the path on which Gershwin’s encounter with *Porgy* set him is now well known. But Gershwin’s personal history contains ample evidence that, in one form or another, the idea of a “Negro” opera had been in his mind long before he heard of Heyward’s Catfish Row. What made Gershwin so sure, in the autumn of 1925, that *Porgy* would provide the right vehicle for Kahn’s fabled Great American Opera? Evidence shows that, by April 1925,

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36 Ibid., xi-xii.
38 Heyward & Heyward, *Porgy, A Play*, xii-xiii.
he had already decided that *the key to American opera lay in American performance*, that the nation’s best performers were black Americans, and that nobody was better qualified than he to compose an opera about black American characters. Gershwin also perceived in Heyward a kindred soul—a white man who, like himself, felt the power and mystery of black expression and had evoked them convincingly in work of his own.39

Although Gershwin had found his operatic subject, however, he still lacked two things for his opera—financial backing and confidence in his ability to compose it. Not until 1933 did the Theatre Guild, producers of *Porgy* the play, agree to produce a Gershwin–Heyward opera. By then, Gershwin’s continued study and his growing experience as a composer for the concert hall and popular theater made him feel technically ready to tackle the job.

In retrospect, several aspects of Gershwin’s musical life before October 1926 make it seem likely, if not preordained, that he and Heyward would cross artistic paths. One was his personal contact with black musicians; another was his acquaintance with, and his use of styles and genres pioneered by, African Americans; a third was his public identification with “jazz,” a label applied to much American popular music in the 1920s, and a hot subject for discussion and debate; and a fourth was the experience in the musical theater that had prepared Gershwin for his operatic adventure.

**Gershwin’s Contact with African-American Musicians**
The subject of Gershwin’s ties to black music and musicians is not easy to address. Part of the problem is that evidence on the subject is sketchy and sometimes unreliable. Another part stems, however, from American racial politics and its impact on music historiography, formal and informal.40

The American musical scene in the 1920s was a hierarchy

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40 Few people writing about music while Gershwin was alive considered this subject important. Later, those who might have addressed it from personal experience were no longer around.
topped by the European classics and their performance in the concert hall. Yet the rise of American-born composers and the appeal of new American popular music called attention to homegrown effort. As the musical and entertainment press of the time registered these developments, popular music’s trendsetters included songwriters Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern, bandleaders Paul Whiteman and Vincent Lopez—and Gershwin, whose engagement in both the popular and classical spheres seems to have escaped almost nobody’s notice. All of these musicians were white.

John Tasker Howard’s *Our American Music: Three Hundred Years of It* (1931), the first composer-centered history of the subject, emphasized the classical sphere but included a chapter on popular music (“Our Lighter Musical Moments”) that featured Berlin, Whiteman, Gershwin, and company. Howard’s chronicle discussed black musicians separately, in a chapter called “Our Folk Music,” linking them to a racial past that ran through minstrelsy, spirituals, and popular entertainment.

After World War II, however, laws upholding racial segregation began to topple as the Civil Rights movement addressed long-standing social inequities involving race. In this climate, the cultural contributions of African Americans, music included, gained new recognition. By the 1950s, black performers were receiving credit for some of American music’s more distinctive qualities and achievements. Researchers and critics, most of them white and many focused on jazz, were building a case that America’s coming of age as a musical nation owed much to the innovations of black music makers.

A changing idea of racial justice supported that view. The notion of righting past wrongs was surely in the air during the 1950s, and it blossomed in the 1960s. Changing social tides also received support from historical research. After World War II, study of the song and dance music called ragtime, which burst onto the scene

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41 The statement about trendsetters derives from (1) a thorough canvassing of the *New York Clipper* (defunct after 1924) and *Variety* from 1920 until 1927, and (2) a careful look through Ira Gershwin’s scrapbooks, which centered chiefly on press notices pertaining to his brother. References in these sources to white musicians outnumber references to black musicians by far. To their readers the musicians perceived as the leaders of jazz were the five mentioned in the text. John Tasker Howard, *Our American Music: Three Hundred Years of It* (New York, 1931).

WHERE DID PORGY AND BESS COME FROM?

in the latter 1890s and dominated popular music’s progressive wing for almost two decades, revealed origins not only on the white minstrel stage (with its syncopated banjo and bones), but in such black rural practices and genres as the sacred shout and the secular cakewalk, and even earlier in Africa. In a parallel vein, jazz research traced the music’s roots not to New York’s Tin Pan Alley (assumed a major source by many 1920s writers) but to specifically black communities—especially in New Orleans and Chicago’s South Side. Moreover, “the blues,” a tradition of ruminative, melancholy vernacular song that took hold alongside jazz, moderating the Jazz Age’s preoccupation with “pep,” was also traced to black Southern roots—most directly through the African-American composer, trumpeter, and music publisher W. C. Handy, who claimed the title “Father of the Blues” for bringing this folk form into print.43

By the 1960s, a consensus was taking shape with ample evidence to support it: Much of what sounded American in twentieth-century American music (and perhaps even earlier) had roots in popular music created chiefly by black Americans. Thus were people low on the social and economic ladder shown to have wielded extraordinary cultural power. By the late twentieth century, jazz—as created and played by black musicians from its inception—had come to be regarded in some circles as “America’s classical music,” sophisticated, artistically demanding, and typically American in its blend of elite and populist materials and attitudes. In this history, white musicians assumed secondary roles as processors, imitators, and exploiters of a music quintessentially African-American.44


44 Ralph Ellison noted the triumph “of enslaved and politically weak men [and women] successfully imposing their values upon a powerful society through song and dance” (quoted in John Remo Gennari, “The Politics of Culture and Identity in American Jazz Criticism,”
The question of Gershwin’s links to black musicians, touchy in his day, remains touchy in ours. From the Jazz Age to the present, the dominant white culture has perceived African Americans as a musically original and talented breed apart. In the 1920s, however, that talent was considered—to put it delicately—insufficiently mediated by a level of refinement suited to the public at large. Few white Americans at that time could imagine black cultural leadership. Moreover, the notion of an artistic powerhouse like Gershwin taking his cues from black musicians seemed improbable. Today, however, whether seen as a matter of payback, or taken as proof of the power of black musical traditions, the notion that Gershwin’s music could owe its distinctly American character to sources other than African-American ones has come to seem far-fetched.45

Such an idea is hardly surprising in the wake of the populist upsurge of rock and roll, beginning in the 1950s, with its black and rural white Southern roots and its emphasis on personal authenticity over expressive refinement. The notion that debts to black influence of a white musician like Gershwin might be less direct than present-day attitudes may assume is likely to start an argument. Like all orthodoxies, both the earlier view and today’s fit the assumptions of their time, and both can find support in facts. Even as fresh research on the subject continues, it remains hard to separate questions about musical influence from questions about social justice.46

Gershwin’s interest in ragtime in the later 1910s and his embrace of “jazz” thereafter are no secret, but details about his direct


45 For a recent interpretation of the years before 1900, see Ronald Radano, Lying Up a Nation: Race and Black Music (Chicago, 2003). See also Samuel A. Floyd, Jr., The Power of Black Music (New York, 1995).

46 Although better examples surely exist, the one alerting me that the issue of Gershwin’s debt to black musicians might be delicate was a conversation in 2000 with a foundation official (not a musician or musical scholar) who became visibly annoyed when I conveyed my doubts that Gershwin spent much of his youth “uptown” in Harlem, soaking up the musical atmosphere. The exchange was fleeting but the annoyance palpable enough to make me feel that I should wait a while before asking that foundation to support my Gershwin research.
links to black musicians remain shadowy. In the 1970s, for example, James Hubert “Eubie” Blake, then in his nineties, was quoted as having heard, as early as 1916, from New York pianists James P. Johnson and Charles Luckeyeth “Luckey” Roberts, about a “very talented ofay piano player at Remick’s . . . good enough to learn some of those terribly difficult tricks that only a few of us could master.”

Another source, not reliably documented, has Gershwin paying visits to Luckey Roberts’ Harlem apartment (date unspecified) and learning new techniques by watching him at the keyboard. Solid evidence establishes that by 1920, Gershwin and James P. Johnson, who both made piano rolls for the Aeolian company, were talking together about their similar aspirations as composers. Willie “The Lion” Smith’s autobiography tells how—most likely in 1924—he, Johnson, and Thomas Wright “Fats” Waller, at a party after a performance of the *Rhapsody in Blue*, playfully pushed Gershwin off the piano stool and proceeded to strut their stuff. According to Waller’s biographer, at some point in his life (date again unspecified), Gershwin was “uptown incessantly, making the rounds” of Harlem clubs and rent parties “and drinking in all there was to be seen and heard.” Gershwin was also said (though not documented) to have paid “frequent visits to Barron Wilkins’s nightclub on Seventh Avenue and 135th Street when, in his mid-teens, [the Gershwin family] was living on West 111th Street.” There he is supposed to have heard James Reese Europe’s famous orchestra.

Whatever the accuracy of these glimpses, together they suggest a personal ease between Gershwin and black professional musicians. By coincidence or not, all but the last concern pianists and piano playing, which Gershwin did very well but which, after he left Tin Pan Alley, remained secondary to his vocation as a songwriter and composer. Black piano players who are identified with their names will be mentioned in the biographical sections that follow.

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ragtime, blues, or jazz often performed in nightclubs, cafés, and speakeasies, or perhaps at rent parties and private socials. But the musical theater, where Gershwin thrived, was a more formal institution, geared to broad audiences, and sharply divided between shows with white casts and shows with black ones.\footnote{Edward Kennedy Ellington, Music is My Mistress (New York, 1973), 104–106, in a brief comment on Gershwin, notes his lack of social pretension. See also Vernon Duke, “Gershwin, Schillinger, and Dukelsky,” Musical Quarterly, XXXIII (1947), 108: “George was always admired by the Negroes and had a special understanding and liking for them. When he sang at his piano, his full lips and the peculiarly strident ‘reedy’ quality of his voice, plus the acrobatic goings-on on the keys, gave his performance a curiously Negroid quality.”}

The one black musician from Broadway known to have been close to Gershwin in the early years was Will Vodery, an arranger and orchestra director who worked in the mid-1910s with the Ziegfeld Follies. After Gershwin quit his song-plugging job at Remick’s in 1917, he went to Vodery’s office to ask what he “could do about getting into the musical-comedy field.” Vodery steered him to a piano accompanist’s job with Kern and Victor Herbert’s revue, Miss 1917, co-produced by his boss, Florenz Ziegfeld. Gershwin’s contact with Vodery continued into the next decade. In 1922, when Gershwin first gave opera a try with the one-act Blue Monday, Vodery orchestrated his piano score.\footnote{Richard C. Norton, A Chronology of American Musical Theater (New York, 2002), 3v., documents Vodery’s Broadway credits. See also Mark Tucker, “In Search of Will Vodery,” Black Music Research Journal, XVI (1996), 123–182. Goldberg, George Gershwin, 83, 87–88, 91. Gershwin also composed the music for Half Past Eight, a revue that opened and closed in Syracuse, New York, in December 1918. An orchestra from the Clef Club in New York, a booking agency for black musicians, was also on the program. See Jablonski, Gershwin, 33.}

\textit{Gershwin’s acquaintance with African-American Music} A quick inventory of the music Gershwin performed is enough to show that he was well acquainted with African-American styles and genres by the time he left Remick’s in 1917. When he entered the music business in 1914 as a boy with classical piano training, an appetite for concerts, and a passion for popular music, ragtime had been on the New York scene for more than a decade-and-a-half. Blues songs, on the other hand, were just starting to be published and recorded, and jazz was equally new, if not more so.\footnote{Jablonski, Gershwin, 16, reports the 1917 date.}

In the chronology of the piano rolls that the seventeen-year-old song plugger began to make late in 1915, ragtime selections or numbers with “blues” or some reference to jazz in the title start appearing in releases advertised in March 1916. The first one,
“Bantam Step” by Harry Jentes, is labeled “A Raggy Fox Trot”; “Chinese Blues” by Oscar Gardner came out in May; Artie Matthews’ “Pastime Rag: A Slow Drag” appeared in June. September releases included both James V. Monaco’s “Honolulu Blues” and Gershwin’s first published piano piece, the rag-like “Rialto Ripples.” In July 1917, the Universal company released Gershwin and Rudolph O. Erlebach’s version of Richard Whiting’s “Ain’t You Comin’ Back to Dixieland?” a “Jass-Fox Trot.” These selections, presaging the substantial body of music that Gershwin would record for player pianos into the mid-1920s, show that while still in his teens, he was mastering piano stylings pioneered by black musicians.  

In one of their first collaborations (1918), George and Ira Gershwin delivered what amounts to a historiographical statement in the form of a song. Folk music is its subject, as laid out in the verse, composed in a gentle, barcarolle-like 6/8: “Near Barcelona the peasant croons / The old traditional Spanish tunes; / The Neapolitan Street Song sighs—/ You think of Italian skies. / Each nation has a creative vein / Originating a native strain.” Soon, however, the Old World is abruptly swept away by the New as, in a new key and a stomping two-beat rhythm, the refrain explodes with a syncopated burst of our folk music: “The real American folk song is a rag—/ A mental jag—/ A rhythmic tonic for the chronic blues.” Ragtime in this didactic number asserts itself with muscular confidence and panache. Yet nowhere is there a hint that the national identity being asserted owes anything to black Americans.

The research documenting ragtime’s (and jazz’s) debt to black musicians lay far in the future. In fact, even a decade-and-a-half later, when elaborate piano versions of some of Gershwin’s own songs appeared in The George Gershwin Song Book (1932), the introduction’s references to ragtime and jazz carried no racial mark-


53 For Ira Gershwin’s account of how this song came to be written, see Deena Rosenberg, Fascinating Rhythm: The Collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin (Ann Arbor, 1997; orig. pub. 1991), 32–35. In 1918, the singer Nora Bayes interpolated it into the Broadway show Ladies First, but not until 1959 was it published.
ers. Roberts, the only African American listed among Gershwin’s influences, was not identified as such. “The evolution of our popular pianistic style,” he wrote, “really began with the introduction of ragtime, just before the Spanish American War, and came to its culminating point in the jazz era that followed upon the Great War. A number of names come crowding into my memory; Mike Bernard, Les Copeland, Melville Ellis, Luck[e]y Roberts, Zez Confrey, Arden and Ohman, and others. Each of these was responsible for the popularization of a new technique, or a new wrinkle in playing.”

The impact of ragtime, blues, and jazz on Tin Pan Alley and Broadway (the two venues where, professionally speaking, Gershwin was raised), as well as on Gershwin’s music, has yet to be studied seriously in light of how these styles and approaches were perceived in Gershwin’s day. But three general points seem clear:

(1) Tin Pan Alley songwriters and publishers sought both to shape and to follow public taste, and Broadway was also much concerned with the rise and fall of popular styles and genres. During the 1910s and early 1920s, blues songs and jazz-oriented numbers proved trendsetters in both venues. Gershwin could not have escaped an engagement with this music even if he had wanted to; it was in the air, in both written and oral forms. His piano rolls document an early phase of that engagement, but only part of it. If Gershwin’s trade demanded that he assimilate modern styles with ears and fingers, personal inclination led him also to absorb their spirit and to make it his own.

(2) Gershwin composed very few blues songs. But he did master the popular song trade’s blues conventions, including “blue notes” (free interchange of raised and lowered third and seventh scale degrees in major mode), blues rhythm (four strong beats to the bar, not two), and blues harmony (in four-plus-four phrase structure, a move from tonic to subdominant harmony at bar five of an eight-bar section). He applied such conventions to some popular songs, including “Yankee Doodle Blues” (1922, in which the verse follows the twelve-bar blues form), “Stairway to Paradise” (1922, in which the chorus moves in bar five from a tonic chord to a subdominant one, supporting the text phrase, “I got the blues,” with repeated four-to-the-bar chords), and “Somebody

54 George Gershwin, *George Gershwin’s Songbook* (New York, 1932), Introduction.
Loves Me” (1924, in which the first eight-bar section plays melodically with the “blue” contrast between a raised and a lowered third scale degree). For listeners of his day, such blues elements, together with timbres and rhythms drawn from jazz, gave Gershwin’s signature concert work, the Rhapsody in Blue, its arrestingly “American” character.55

(3) As a composer known for stellar piano playing, Gershwin shared with African-American contemporaries a vocabulary of rhythm and sound and a love of varied repetition. Recent scholars have recognized “signifying”—the custom, when performing preexistent material, of perpetually altering and commenting musically upon it—as an American practice with African roots. Signifying has come to be identified with on-the-spot musical invention, or improvisation, which in jazz historiography is tied to musical excellence. The earliest references to Gershwin’s live playing date from his rehearsal pianist days (1917/18). Although details are sparse, those who heard him play informally—in rehearsals, at parties, or at home—were near unanimous in praising his freshness and spontaneity. If he did not improvise in the manner of later jazz musicians, inventing ever-changing melodies over established harmonic progressions, he certainly played in the style of improvisation. Since his repertory centered on popular songs (chiefly his own), imaginative variation of their constantly repeating phrases and choruses proved fundamental to his approach.56

55 By blues song I mean numbers of reflective or melancholy mood based on the twelve-bar blues structure, including its characteristic harmonic progression, already becoming standard by 1920. For comments on blues numbers in the jazz repertory, see Crawford and Jeffrey Magee, Jazz Standards on Record, 1900–1942: A Core Repertory (Chicago, 1992), xiv. Gershwin also wrote a few “Dixie” songs about presumably black characters in the South, including “You-oo, Just You-oo” (1918) and “Swanee” (1919), both with lyrics by Irving Caesar. “Swanee” was the biggest commercial hit that Gershwin ever wrote. I do not consider these numbers antecedents to Porgy and Bess, however, because they follow stereotypical conventions traceable to blackface minstrelsy’s imitations of blackness, whereas ragtime, blues, and jazz are all rooted in African-American musical practices.

56 For signifying, see, for example, Floyd, Power of Black Music, 94–97. The earliest live solo recordings of Gershwin at the piano date from 1926. Earlier reports of his playing are secondhand, as in Goldberg’s flattering comment in 1931 about the rehearsals for Miss 1917 (Goldberg, George Gershwin, 83). Jerome Kern’s admiration for Gershwin is also said to have dated from this time (David Ewen, George Gershwin: His Journey to Greatness [Englewood Cliffs, 1970], 41). Oscar Levant had a vivid memory of hearing, as a twelve-year-old in Pittsburgh, Gershwin’s “inventive” accompaniment of Nora Bayes in an out-of-town tryout for Ladies First (Levant, A Smattering of Ignorance [Garden City, 1942], 148).
Gershwin’s Jazz Identity  Gershwin’s identification with jazz in the public mind brings historiography again to the fore. Unlike the recent canonizing of jazz music in a social environment eager to redress injustices borne by black Americans, the buzz surrounding the term jazz during the 1920s had less to do with music or race than with an awareness of social change: the spirit of youthful exuberance and liberation symbolized in the era’s new musical sounds and dances. Writing in the August 1925 issue of *Theatre Magazine*, Gershwin himself seemed to support that notion, while explicitly denying that the music called jazz carried a racial pedigree. “In speaking of jazz,” he warned, “there is one superstition which must be destroyed. This is the superstition that jazz is essentially Negro. The Negroes, of course, take to jazz, but in its essence it is no more Negro than is syncopation, which exists in the music of all nations. Jazz is not Negro but American. It is the spontaneous expression of the nervous energy of modern American life.”

No musical subject received more journalistic attention during the 1920s than jazz, whether from classical music critics and chroniclers, the popular and trade press, or musicians. Moreover, as the decade began, a new kind of dance orchestra appeared on the scene. Its stock-in-trade was a “jazzed” dance music centered on popular songs, elaborately arranged and fully notated as instrumental numbers, and played by wind-dominated ensembles of a dozen or more players. Earmarks of the style included a peppy two-beat meter, full of syncopation; constantly changing, sometimes unorthodox timbres, including trombone smears, clarinet wails, muted trumpets, and a saxophone section; and a menu of constantly varying repetition, ensuring that material changed on successive hearings. The most successful of these ensembles was led by Paul Whiteman, crowned the “King of Jazz” by his own resourceful publicity department. Whiteman’s orchestra boasted well-trained musicians dressed, like concert artists, in tuxedos. His technically polished performances sometimes entertained by mocking the concert hall’s solemnity.


58 In “The Jazz Problem,” *The Etude* (August/September 1924), a symposium of leading figures, all of them white, discussed the subject of jazz (reprinted with annotations in Robert...
Jazz in the 1920s was controversial as well as commercially successful; some writers of the period saw its rise as a mixed blessing. On the positive side, a new, distinctively American music was taking the nation by storm, as well as winning fans overseas. On the negative side, the music’s artistic character often seemed suspect. Rather than being inspired by the existential forces behind the European classical tradition—life and death, philosophy and history, the sacred and the profane—jazz was grounded in commercial entertainment and severely limited in expressive scope. By claiming jazz and its offshoots as quintessentially American, might not Americans be embracing an unworthy legacy?

Though Gershwin never addressed it directly, this issue lies behind his 1925 article. He found jazz most valuable for its representation of a “definite and vital” element in the American present. “We are living in an age of staccato, not legato,” he declared, with less than total enthusiasm. “The popular dances of today,” tuned to “the rhythms of American life,” expressed for him “the nervous, somewhat unthinking vitality of present-day America.” Assuming links between expressive forms and the people who used them, he lamented that “modern life is, alas! not expressed by smooth phrases.” In this and other statements, he granted that jazz was not for everyone. Declining to argue with its foes, he maintained, nevertheless, that the music called jazz had opened up fresh possibilities for authentic American expression.

As Gershwin imagined them, the first stirrings of jazz, more than a decade earlier, now seemed vulgar and ugly—crude expressions of the “animal vigor” and “discord” in the life of that day. Worthy artistic styles, however, were subject to change and refinement, and jazz seemed to be meeting that test. He advised composers seeking to use the jazz idiom to recognize its limitations and incorporate it with other styles into a larger framework, as in his own Rhapsody in Blue. Jazz may have originated as free, spontaneous dance music, but the time had come for composers to

Walser, Keeping Time: Readings in Jazz History [New York, 1999], 41–54). See also Henry O. Osgood, So This Is Jazz (Boston, 1926); Whiteman and Mary Margaret McBride, Jazz (New York, 1926). Within a few years, however, the African-American background of jazz was becoming more widely recognized, including by Gershwin himself. See Goldberg, Tin Pan Alley: A Chronicle of the American Popular Music Racket (New York, 1930), 267–268. For a detailed account of the first forty years of Whiteman’s life, see Don Rayno, Paul Whiteman: Pioneer in American Music. I. 1890–1930 (Lanham, 2003).
exert their influence on it, employing “melody, harmony, and counterpoint as every great composer of the past has employed them. Not of course, in the same way, but with a full knowledge of their value.” He saw the spirit of jazz surviving and prospering only if brought under composers’ control.

Gershwin claimed to owe his own “serious study of composition” to this belief, even against the advice of friends who feared that such study “would destroy [his] originality.” But he was convinced that “every composer of the past who had added anything vital to music had been a well-trained musician and . . . that the native talent which can be killed by study must be too frail to amount to much.”

According to Gershwin in 1925, the promise of jazz lay in its potential for linking American innovation with Western tradition. A composer technically equipped for the task could use jazz to express “the richness of life” in the present by connecting “the innate impressions of youth with the full resources of the masters of the past.” Thus did Gershwin outline an intellectual position in which piano improvisations, show songs, and grand opera could be artistically related, even dependent on each other. His idea of jazz obviously differed greatly from the improvisatory approach that enabled musicians as different as Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, and Bix Beiderbecke in the 1920s to make their mark in what would later be called “the jazz tradition” [emphasis added]. Nonetheless, it shared that music’s commitment to varied repetition, not to mention its harmonic coloration, dance-based syncopated rhythms, and some of its sounds.59

An article that preceded Gershwin’s by about nine months reveals how these matters relate to Porgy and Bess. On November 18, 1924, under the headline “Wanted: Jazz Grand Opera,” the New York Evening Mail carried a report that recalls Vanity Fair’s caricatures, mentioned at the start of this article. The story began with the statement, “Jazzed music portraying the life and loves of an American flapper may yet be a grand opera and produced in the Metropolitan Opera House.” The reason was that banker Otto Kahn, “whose son ha[d] a jazz orchestra of his own,” had indi-

59 Gershwin’s stance about the use of jazz follows a line of thought similar to the one introduced by Whiteman in the 1924 Aeolian Hall concert, February 12, 1924, in which the Rhapsody in Blue premiered. Martin Williams, The Jazz Tradition (New York, 1993; orig. pub. 1970).
icated to three “jazz” composers—Berlin, Gershwin, and Kern—his willingness to produce a jazz opera, so long as it was “not written along the lines of the Indian maiden who falls in love with the palefaced hunter and sings through several acts of oldfashioned romance.” Kahn was more interested in a contemporary plot (as Vanity Fair later suggested), like “the tragedy of a shopgirl, a stenographer—any one of the American types whose life is one of bobbed hair, subway riding, movies and flapperism.” The article further reported that Berlin and Kern had declared themselves ill-equipped for the task. Gershwin, however, had made it known “that he was going further in this sort of work, and to ground himself more completely had begun a study of harmony and counterpoint.”

Gershwin’s Theatrical Experience Not much research is available about Gershwin’s theatrical experience before Porgy and Bess, and understandably so. Aside from Porgy and Bess and the political operetta Of Thee I Sing (1931), none of his stage works survived long enough after their first Broadway runs to invite such study, though individual songs from them certainly did. In the 1980s, the Library of Congress launched a major Gershwin reconstruction project focused chiefly on recordings. Although the recordings confirm Gershwin’s inventiveness and skill as a composer, the music’s theatrical context, documented in scripts, dance descriptions, and data about the visual settings, remains mostly in the dark. How the shows actually played onstage—their dramaturgy, stagecraft, character development, musical coherence, and other matters that would also pertain to opera—has received little attention.

Nevertheless, Porgy and Bess did have a direct predecessor. In

60 For information about Roger Wolfe Kahn (1907–1962), see Roger D. Kinkle, The Complete Encyclopedia of Popular Music and Jazz 1900–1950 (New Rochelle, 1974), II, 1214–1215. The Metropolitan Opera’s earlier tendency in choosing American works was to lean toward operas on Indian subjects.

61 In the booklet accompanying the CD recording of George and Ira Gershwin’s Strike Up the Band (Elektra Nonesuch 79273-2, 1991), James H. Billington, Librarian of Congress, notes, “Through the generosity of Ira and Leonore Gershwin and other members of the Gershwin family, the Library of Congress has unique resources for the study and performance of the Gershwin musical legacy, resources now being used for the Leonore Gershwin-Library of Congress Recording and Publishing Project” ([4]). Among the many post-1926 developments that helped prepare Gershwin to compose Porgy and Bess stand the so-called political operettas Strike Up the Band (1927; 1930), Of Thee I Sing (1931), and Let ’Em Eat Cake (1933). All three contain substantial stretches of extended music supporting dramatic action onstage.
the summer of 1922, producer George White was rehearsing his *Scandals of 1922*, the fourth in a series of topical revues designed to compete with the all-powerful *Ziegfeld Follies*. A recent Broadway success was *Shuffle Along*, a show with an all-black cast—its words and music by the black creative team of Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake. Perhaps prompted by *Scandals* lyricist B. G. “Buddy” DeSylva, White seems to have imagined that a black-oriented segment in the new edition of his revue would capitalize on *Shuffle Along*’s appeal. Shortly before the show’s out-of-town opening in New Haven, Connecticut, he ordered the addition of such a segment.62

DeSylva’s script set the scene in a Harlem nightspot. It depicted a love triangle involving two men and a woman, whose jealousy leads her, through a misunderstanding, to gun down the man she loves. Gershwin, the composer of White’s *Scandals*, apparently eager (at age twenty-three) for a chance to tackle a fresh musical challenge, supplied the music for what was essentially a through-composed scene in operatic style. Vodery’s orchestration labeled the segment “Blue Monday (Opera Ala Afro American).” Gershwin provided it with several musical numbers, including a recitative-like prologue, a blues song, an aria-like “spiritual,” and some dance music. Whiteman and his orchestra appeared onstage during the *Scandals*, but Vodery orchestrated *Blue Monday* for the pit orchestra led by Max Steiner.63

George White’s *Scandals of 1922* had four performances in New Haven before moving to New York’s Globe Theater. The all-white cast of *Blue Monday*, which opened the revue’s second act, included Jack McGowan, who delivered the prologue and took a small role in the drama, Coletta Ryan as Vi, the tragic heroine, and Richard Bold as Joe, Vi’s lover and victim. These performers, who appeared in blackface, were not opera singers but principal players who took leading roles in other scenes of the revue. One New Haven critic found the episode historically important, despite its “crudities,” calling it “the first real American opera” and

62 The most complete published discussion is John Andrew Johnson, “Gershwin’s *Blue Monday* (1922) and the Promise of Success,” in Schneider, *Gershwin Style*, 111-141.
63 I have found no direct documentation for this point. However, if Whiteman’s orchestra had accompanied *Blue Monday*, one would imagine that Ferde Grofé, or another of Whiteman’s arrangers, and not Vodery, would have made the orchestration.
“a genuinely human plot of American life, set to music in the popular vein, using jazz only at the right moments, the sentimental song, ‘The Blues,’ and above all a new and free ragtime recitative.”

By the time the Scandals took the stage in New York on August 28, 1922, White was having second thoughts about his second-act opener. After the first night’s performance, he cut it from the show. Gershwin explained this action to his biographer some years later: “Mr. White took it out after because he said the audience was too depressed by the tragic ending to get into the mood of the lighter stuff that followed.”

As far as we know, Gershwin’s operatic aspirations lay fallow from Blue Monday’s demise until Kahn’s interest in a “jazz opera” hit the newspapers two years later. Many suggestions for an operatic subject were floated in the wake of Kahn’s announcement, including Bret Harte’s “Outcasts of Poker Flat” (by the New York World) and the life of Irving Berlin (by drama critic Alexander Woollcott). Gershwin’s thinking, however, took a direction all its own. As reported in Musical America on April 25, 1925, the starting point he envisioned would be “a fantastic, colorful book,” more “picturesque” than “topical,” and “with the exotic quality of jazz in it.” It had to contain plenty of opportunity for “the dancing which is essential to a jazz opera.” Jazz, he thought, was “easy to dance to and difficult to sing,” and therefore a jazz opera could not be “entirely jazz.” By definition, “an opera must be lyric,” he wrote, “and to me it must be fantastic.” Yet opera and jazz, he admitted, made strange bedfellows. Indeed, by Gershwin’s cool assessment, in jazz “the words seldom matter. The tune seldom matters. It is the rhythm that makes jazz. A whole opera in that vein would be inconceivable.”

64 The information on the original casting appears in Norton, Chronology of the American Musical Theater, II, 296. The New Haven review is quoted from Gershwin scrapbooks consulted on microfilm at the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trust in San Francisco. The scrapbook does not identify the original source.

65 Gershwin to Goldberg, June 15–16, 1931, quoted by Johnson, in Schneider, Gershwin Style, 112. Three New York reviews of the first night survive and, perhaps because Blue Monday disappeared the next day, the most negative has usually been taken as its proper epitaph. Its author was Charles Darnton of the New York World, who praised the Scandals as a whole but called some of its scenes a waste of time. For him, Blue Monday was the worst.

66 Woollcott’s choice was probably related to his authorship of The Story of Irving Berlin
Gershwin recognized, nevertheless, that a jazz opera would require some music identifiable as jazz, however ill suited for the lyric stage it might seem. To balance the fantasy and lyricism of operatic tradition against jazz's special ability to express "the nervous energy of modern American life," he proposed a wholly original "Negro opera": "Negro, because it is not incongruous for a Negro to like jazz. It would not be absurd on the stage. The mood could change from ecstasy to lyricism plausibly, because the Negro has so much of both in his nature." Gershwin’s thinking about American opera, fed by years of theatrical experience, had come by 1925 to rest on the question of who would perform it.67

Otto Kahn’s proposal had triggered public conversation about American opera, but Gershwin took the idea in a direction unsuited to Kahn’s Metropolitan Opera Company. Why not an American opera, he asked, “with a Negro cast,” staged as “an opera comique on Broadway?” Performers “trained in the old tradition”—opera singers, that is, with conventional classical training and experience—“could not sing such music, but Negro singers could.” Gershwin’s idea proved prophetic. A decade later, Porgy and Bess premiered in New York, not at the Metropolitan Opera but Broadway’s Alvin Theatre, where the company, like any other on the Great White Way, put on nightly performances, except Sundays, plus two matinees per week.68

An observer tuning in to the story at the moment of the Gershwin-Heyward encounter in 1926 might sniff exploitation in the air—white artists preparing to appropriate black subject matter for artistic and material gain. However, the intellectual and artistic lineage for Porgy and Bess, grounded in the personal histories of both men, make such an accusation seem flimsy. For one thing, rather than a starting point, the discovery of the opera’s subject was a hard-earned outcome of each man’s independent thinking as

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67 Malkiel, “Awaiting the Great American Opera.” Gershwin's quote about “the nervous energy of American modern life” is from his August 1925 article, "Our New National Anthem.”
68 Malkiel, “Awaiting the Great American Opera.”
an artist. For another, only an acute perception of what makes American culture distinctive and vital could have sparked such a discovery. Finally, recognizing that theatrically convincing American opera would depend as much on performance as on composition, the collaborators were determined to put their work in the hands of performers who could best embody its dramatic truth.

It is remarkable indeed that “a Charleston aristocrat” and “a New York Jew” created such an opera together—not because their backgrounds should have disqualified them from doing so but because they traveled such different routes to get there. Only American artists who understood what was at stake could have found their way to this particular place. Heyward’s journey turned a white businessman in a segregated society into a dabbler in poetry who became first a professional writer and novelist, then a playwright, and finally an opera librettist and lyricist. In Gershwin’s case, a piano-playing youth from New York’s Lower East Side became a Tin Pan Alley song plugger, a student of musical theory and composition, a writer of Broadway shows and hits, a composer of modern orchestra pieces, and eventually the composer of a grand opera about black South Carolinians. By October 1926, Heyward and Gershwin had learned things about the United States of America as an artistic subject that most of their fellow artists did not know. The years to come saw that knowledge blossom into a work worthy of being called the Great American Opera.

Mark Twain once said that, for a writer, the difference between the right word and the wrong word is like the difference between lightning and a lightning bug. If so, then Gershwin’s operatic bolt from the blue hit when he read Porgy. But a long, laborious, and uncertain path lay ahead before the task of composing Porgy and Bess could begin. He still had to acquire new skills, strengthen and sharpen his older ones, find the time and money to support the project, and recruit a cast capable of infusing Heyward’s (and Ira Gershwin’s) words, and his music, with convincing

69 See Alain Locke, “The Negro and the American Stage,” Theatre Arts Monthly Magazine, x/2 (February 1926). Some eight months before Gershwin first crossed paths with Heyward’s novella, Theatre Arts Monthly Magazine carried this substantial article by Locke, a respected African-American scholar and critic, which asserted, and described in some detail, the “genius” of black stage performance.
racial expression. Yet from the time he crossed paths with *Porgy*, and its author, his mind carried an imaginative frame for a staged, musical *Catfish Row*, whatever it might turn out to be. For a Gershwin biographer—and I count myself as one, since I have a biography in the works—an awareness of that frame’s abiding presence promises to illuminate facets of the composer’s working life between 1927 and 1933 that may, at first glance, seem unrelated to *Porgy and Bess*. 