



To begin to understand Gershwin the man, his musical prowess, output and the marvel of his music longevity, the listener needs to understand the context of his short time on the planet. Born and raised in an integrated (then) Harlem, of Jewish Russian descent, he was already showing musical skills at an early age on a piano purchased by his parents ostensibly to help his brother Ira learn music. Consider the fact that prior to 1920 there was no reproducible music for sale to the public (save piano rolls) since no such device came into being until that time. Also remember commercial radio broadcasting had not yet begun. Sheet music was a consumer item of great importance as many home's music entertainment system was a piano, including player pianos. George's first job as a 15 year old high school dropout was in fact working for a company that previewed new music from current composers (think Tin Pan Alley) and demonstrated it by hiring young piano players (song pluggers) who would play requested pieces for potential customers. By age 19 he had already produced and marketed his first commercial piece, "Rialto Ripples", a piano piece heavily influenced by ragtime although that was not the first piece he wrote. No mystery there! It was the ragtime era, also the beginning of Prohibition, WWI a recent memory, flappers, the Charleston and the beginning of speakeasies and all the social milieu that surrounded that period of the early twentieth century.

For virtually all of George's adult life he remained an engaged, energetic, athletic and well-groomed artist with intense interests in further developing his musical skills, taking on more and more responsibilities regarding the demands put on him by musical producers, writers, Hollywood, Broadway and also by his insatiable desire to be viewed by the people he most respected and revered to be a peer instead of a song-and-dance man. He studied with some of the most respected and renowned composers and music theorists of his time and was always seeking to gain greater insight into composition and structure. He was heavily criticized for some of his works during his life (and after) because they purportedly lacked the formal tenets set forth in higher musical education and practice. On the other hand he could be seen to have "loosened up" the historical constraints put on, for instance classical music, freeing it up to be more of an instinctive construction than one dominated by rules and educational format constraints. Certainly he was one of the first musician/composers to indulge in and recognize the freedom in jazz compositions-an understanding that modern jazz, blues and pop artists still revel in.

George managed to make it to the ripe young age of 38 before he was robbed of his skills, career and I suspect, an incredibly successful future. Following not far on the heels of his most famous career output in the form of an opera, the iconic Porgy and Bess production(s), he managed to create a fabulous last series of songs for the Fred Astaire/Ginger Rogers classic "Shall We Dance" including the title tune, "They All Laughed", "Let's Call the Whole Thing Off", "They Can't Take That Away From Me" and the lesser known "Slap That Bass" and "Walking The Dog". He was to begin working on a ballet piece in June of 1937 when after some preliminary undiagnosed medical issues involving, temporary loss of balance, excruciating headaches, irritability and unusual compulsive behaviors he sought in depth medical

attention which ultimately revealed nothing substantive and in the absence of the more sophisticated tools available today, his brain tumor, diagnosed as inoperable when finally discovered, led to his death in July of 1937.

Nearly 8 decades after his demise his work is still very much alive-not all of it but more than a modest amount. His work is viewed in a much less harsh light than it was during his lifetime and within the next two decades. By the 60's his output, whether the more classical forms, Rhapsody In Blue, Second Rhapsody, the Cuban Overture, Concerto in F, An American in Paris, Three Preludes and more were esteemed and totally validated musical exercises. Some of the Broadway and off Broadway productions fell by the wayside due to the demands of a more sophisticated listening audience-others were redone, enhanced, turned into Technicolor movies or updated stage plays and not only survived but flourished. Apparently the Gershwin trust/estate still has legal clout over what sort of performances are considered in keeping with George and Ira's wishes so absolute travesties of the original intent are not represented as the work of the Gershwin Bros. That's only fair.

I would encourage anyone interested in pursuing a greater enlightenment on the subject of the Gershwins to examine the fairly extensive selection of written documentation available and the substantial and sometimes expensive recorded works on the market. I used three primary texts for my written research-George Gershwin His Life and Music by Ean Wood, George Gershwin A Study in American Music by Isaac Goldberg (a close friend and critic) supplemented by Edith Garson and George Gershwin A new Biography by William G. Hyland. I listened to innumerable recordings of his work by George himself, the Paul Whiteman orchestra and a series of stage supporting bands and orchestras that seemed to mesh well w/ the Gershwin's output. Additionally reviewed was a 1956 stage recreation of Porgy and Bess, the original soundtrack of Blue Monday, a one-act opera included in George White's Scandals of 1922 and a very contemporary 1989 DVD of Porgy and Bess by the San Francisco Opera Company along with a substantial number of recordings by contemporary artists in many genres. In reviewing many of the stage productions, their sound tracks and the history/synopsis of the plots and premises it becomes ever more apparent how simplistic the times were, how tolerant the audiences were and how absolutely schmaltzy and goofy some of it was in this host's opinion. Nonetheless, some of the musical contributions to these unheralded or under heralded shows were incredibly appealing and endearing. "Isn't it a Pity" from the 1933 musical comedy "Pardon My English" comes to mind as does "Fascinating Rhythm" from the musical comedy "Lady Be Good". This in opposition to "Let 'Em Eat Cake", a 1933 sequel to "Of Thee I Sing", both political satires (not without some modern ironies). "Of Thee I Sing" produced "Love Is Sweeping the Country" and "Who Cares? Perhaps not stellar hits that resound today but "Let 'Em Eat Cake" produced no memorable songs and not surprisingly flopped as a stage play in fairly short order.

Clearly the complete story of Gershwin and his music cannot be related in 3 hours or 6 hours for that matter. I have taken the liberty as an on air host in highlighting what is generally accepted as his greatest works minus some of the classical work which would expend too much time and are regularly shared by classic hosts on this station. This has been a four month production for me and I have enjoyed every minute. Hope you enjoy the byproduct. As always you can comment on the show's strengths and frailties by emailing me at jeff@wxpr.org. If you're interested in the individual songs, their original source and current availability check out the Spintron listings for this show @ our website. This program will remain accessible for two weeks @ our website in archive format. Thanks for listening.

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