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GERSHWIN'S FASCINATING RHYTHM: THE RISE OF THE JAZZ MUSICAL

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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Abstract

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By Amy C. Baumgartner M.F.A.

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The shift in the American economic viewpoint before and after World War I left an indelible mark on the arts, allowing the only indigenous music to arise, jazz. In the transitory period following the war, it was George Gershwin who paved the way for jazz to become America's only indigenous music. Yet, the current definition of jazz is so racially polarized that it has lost focus on the music. This work explores George Gershwin's role in creating a jazz culture in a xenophobic country and argues for an inclusive definition of jazz, one based on the music itself.

Introduction

In published materials, you will find a plethora of books relating the history of jazz, theatre or musical theatre. However, how musical theatre and jazz music influenced each other is a topic left unexplored. Yet, jazz is an integral part of musical theatre, especially in jazz's transformation into rock music, leading in musical theatre to the rock musical. This document will explore not only how the two genres of musical theatre and jazz came together, but how the United States' victory in World War I allowed these two forms to succeed in a culture previously opposed to anything indigenously American.

Jazz, as an important part of the history of music, was mostly overlooked in scholarly study until recent years. It was not covered in music history curriculums or was merely mentioned with a passing wave. The same is true for American musical theatre. Why is it that these two incredibly popular forms were overlooked for so many years? The answer lies in the disparity between "high" and "low" art forms. "High" art refers to the art forms cultivated by the upper classes (i.e. Mozart, Beethoven, Verdi, etc.), while "low" art refers to popular art forms. Popular art forms were considered fleeting and not worthy of scholarly study, which is why jazz and musical theatre were overlooked for so long. Paul Whiteman, an early advocate of jazz in the 1920s, wrote a book entitled *Jazz*, which was published in 1924. However, it served as more of a promotional piece about jazz and an autobiography of Whiteman himself, rather than a documentation of the development of

an important art form. It was only in the last thirty years, after both of these art forms had been popular in both upper and lower class societies for more than fifty years, that these two art forms began to proper consideration. In the last five years, a tremendous amount of material has been published on jazz, but scholars are still resistant to musical theatre.

Musical theatre as a genre resists study by academic discipline. It is a stepchild of both musicology and theater history. Its in-between status, at least from an institutional, academic point of view, is a disadvantage and a discouragement to research. ('If you want to get promoted,' the deans will candidly tell you, 'don't mess with interdisciplinary subjects.') Such research, on the other hand, does offer rare virgin territory and a wide and fascinating variety of sources. It is stimulating but time-consuming. (Riis 95)

Although this condescension toward musical theatre is beginning to change as well, scholars are still afraid of tackling the interdisciplinary nature of musical theatre. Those that do tend to display a listing of popular shows, with only the most recent considering their social history. Therefore, no one has taken this study a step further to see how jazz and musical theatre relied upon each other to gain their footing as indigenous to America and critical to its identity as seen today.

Prior to World War I, the musical theatre genre was controlled by the influence of operetta, especially that of Gilbert and Sullivan. Although jazz was beginning to be established in New Orleans and as ragtime was in Missouri, the popular world was not ready to accept these new, closely-related genres. Scott Joplin's opera, *Treemonisha*, in its poor reception, demonstrates an American populace not yet ready for an indigenous, politically polarizing art form.

[*Treemonisha*] probes deeply into the pre-rag folk roots of black American music, as well as taps the full range of European operatic devices—the work comes complete with orchestration, overture, recitatives, arias, and ensembles. ... A

single performance took place, in 1915 in a Harlem hall, with an underrehearsed cast, no scenery or costumes, and without an orchestra—merely the composer playing the piano score. The work, staged in such a stark manner, generated little enthusiasm at the time among a Harlem audience more interested in assimilating established artistic traditions than in celebrating the roots of African-American culture. (Gioia 26-27)

Even in Harlem, where jazz would gain its footing to become popular, the people were more interested in adopting the status quo than in developing their own idiom.

Posthumously, Scott Joplin would be recognized with a Pulitzer Prize for his opera, *Treemonisha*, but the success of the combination of the ragtime / pre-jazz and musical theatre forms would come to the popular audiences through other artists.

A few white composers, such as Scott Joplin and George Gershwin worked to further the integration of jazz music with forms already established, helping jazz become a part of both high and lowbrow culture. But, this could not happen in the desperately hegemonic or even submissive cultural viewpoint of the U.S. prior to World War I. Joplin's efforts to explore African American musical influences were dismissed and ignored, even while his ragtime music, especially his piano rags, were exceedingly popular. Yet, Gershwin, building on the roots set forth by Joplin and the changing cultural viewpoint at the end of World War I, gained the footing necessary to successfully incorporate jazz into popular music.

Prior to World War I, the U.S. aristocrats still sought titled marriages for their children. Therefore, there was still a powerful influence by European powers. However, when the U.S. finally joined World War I in 1917, nearly two and a half years after the start of the war, the viewpoint of the American people began to shift to patriotism and an

intense xenophobia. This was first seen in the musical revues, but soon crept into full-length material, such as plays and musicals. Only during the nineteen-month involvement of the U.S. in the war did patriotism take hold in Broadway shows. During that time, nine shows opened on Broadway: one musical and eight revues (Jones 37). “The number of revues (compared to book shows) that contained war-related songs or scenes—some quite grimly serious—suggests that while Broadway producers wanted to keep audiences mindful of the war, they also kept the tone of the shows as a whole light and entertaining” (Jones 37). Yet, with only one full-length musical using the war as material, what about the rest of Broadway? Primarily, the musicals of this time were diversionary. Although there were some topical plays related to Prohibition and the Woman Suffrage Movement, the plays were a means of diversion and pure entertainment for a public regularly inundated with news from overseas.

With the end of World War I came a dramatic shift in perspective in the United States, from prizing all foreign influences to a search for everything American. Suddenly, the U.S. saw itself as an independent economic power. After many years of consistently importing theatrical plays and conventions from other countries, especially those of Gilbert and Sullivan, the American people became only interested in developing and pursuing plays that were deemed “American.” The time of actively seeking the influences of other cultures was over, at least for the time being.

At the end of World War I, Europe was left exhausted and largely bankrupt. In America, things were different. The nation had emerged with a vibrant economy and enormous self-confidence. As the 1920s drew near, New York led the way in new fashions, new dance crazes, new songs, new books and films, a proliferation of mass-circulation magazines and lively radio-stations, the pulse of jazz, the

competitive architectural audacity of each new Manhattan skyscraper towering above streets of well-stocked stores, their tills ringing praises to the strength of the dollar. New York had escaped the ravages of Europe's capital cities, and in the air was the excitement of a metropolis proud of its position as the cultural and economic heart of the world's most powerful country. (Greenberg 34)

The New York City composer perfectly situated to make his debut at the moment of this American patriotism was George Gershwin. Due to Gershwin's background working on Tin Pan Alley, he was bound to be successful. In addition, his interest in incorporating jazz music, the only truly American music of the time, brought him to the forefront of innovation in a commercially-driven culture now driven by extreme marketing and innovation. However, without the shift of focus to all things American, although Gershwin was exceedingly talented, he would not have been as successful nor become successful at that particular time. Although a great assortment of biographies about George Gershwin exist, his integral role in the development of jazz is rarely mentioned. "In standard surveys of twentieth-century music, Gershwin is given begrudging credit for bridging the gap between jazz and classical music" (Block 528). In addition, this credit is not mentioned in the majority of histories of jazz, except for those published in the 1920s. He is merely given a passing comment regarding his popular music or how Miles Davis recorded an album based upon his *Porgy and Bess*. Yet, his role in the development of music following the war should not be overlooked. It is time for scholars to consider how interrelated these art forms were in their inception, which further informs the importance of their continued impact today. Jazz and musical theatre are not disparate fields, but codependent idioms worthy of scholarly consideration, especially in their impact on 20th

century American culture. This thesis is a small portion of a larger argument that will explore how jazz became American.

Chapter 1: A British Tar is a Soaring Soul

In the years leading up to the outbreak of World War I, known then as the Great War, the primary influences and controlling forces of American theatre and music were European. The American peoples, especially those in the upper classes, were still interested in marriages to titled Englishmen. Although the U.S. was no longer under England's patronage, the idea that any and all European influences were superior remained. This demonstrated how revered English and European culture was at the time. "The general favor that America has always bestowed on virtually anything of European origin is especially pronounced regarding those things meant to appeal to the most elevated and paradoxically, the most lowly sensibilities; in respect to not only arts and letters, but also the decadent and the titillating, Americans looked to Europe first" (Knapp 23). Calling something "European" was a commerce upon which America would jump. A primary example of this focus on importing anything and everything European and at the same time squelching anything indigenous to the U.S., is demonstrated through the productions of Gilbert and Sullivan, which created a frenzy and commerce rarely seen in theatre history.

W.S. Gilbert (1836-1911) and Arthur Sullivan (1842-1900) claimed much of the control over the theatrical genre, especially in the U.S., with their innovative shows that instantaneously sparked competing productions and imitations. Up until the start of World

War I, theatre focused on the operetta and revue forms. The operetta took the opera form, adapted it to fit more popular musical forms, and, in some cases, made a mockery of the opera form itself. The dominating force of operetta belonged almost exclusively to Gilbert and Sullivan, with the exception of Viennese operetta, from which came the still present Viennese waltz. Gilbert and Sullivan's popularity and influence are reflected today by the constant remounting of their productions by theatrical companies ranging from professional opera companies to small colleges. In all of Gilbert and Sullivan's plays, "political satire or some other form of cultural critique is wedded to an ostentatiously, improbable plot sustaining songs with consistently clever lyrics set deftly by a master musical craftsman to memorable, even extraordinary, music. There has been much speculation regarding how the 'chemistry' between these two very different creative personalities could produce a series of (mostly) hits, in America as well as London, such as would remain an unrivaled achievement until a similar phenomenon occurred some seventy years later on Broadway," with Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II's *Oklahoma!* (Knapp 30). Gilbert and Sullivan's shows locked America in their grips, keeping it from wanting or even caring to produce any indigenous productions, unless they were direct imitations of these operetta forms. Although many revues and other forms of entertainment produced American artists and composers, they were only a secondary shadow to the masterful European operetta of the time.

One of the main reasons for the popularity of the shows was the interesting combination of Sullivan's songs and Gilbert's lyrics. The biting cleverness of the lyrics combined with the warmth of the songs aroused the curiosity of the audience. The quick

and entertaining lyrics of “Modern Major General” from *Pirates of Penzance* left the audience wanting more, causing them to come see the play multiple times, in order to understand more of the poignancy behind the lyrics and whistle a catchy tune. In addition, “they managed to provide an extraordinary amount of sometimes wicked fun without transgressing the then-current bounds of respectability. This was no accident, as the team’s rise in general popularity in England corresponded precisely with their concerted effort to purge their work of elements that might offend this respectability” (Knapp 33). Although there was still some political transgression that ended up hidden by the extreme popularity of the works, and in some ways was undermined by that popularity, the shows of Gilbert and Sullivan were good, clean fun that left the audience humming their favorite tune and anxiously awaiting the next opportunity to see the show. The emphasis in the works of this time was on pure enjoyment, while maintaining the status quo.

Gilbert and Sullivan’s *H.M.S. Pinafore* premiered in the U.S. in Boston on November 25, 1878, six months after its premiere in London. Unlike its premiere in London, where it had to be rescued by Richard D’Oyly Carte in order to be successful, Gilbert and Sullivan’s *H.M.S. Pinafore* gained instant popularity from the moment it first arrived in the United States in 1878. The format for the show, operetta form, became the model for all forthcoming productions, especially in its jovial form combined with social relevance. Although the form of musical theatre changed after Gilbert and Sullivan, especially with the introduction of the integrated musical, *Oklahoma!*, by Rodgers and Hammerstein, the ideas of utilizing musical theatre for social relevance and/or diversion remain.

Although *H.M.S. Pinafore* was the fourth collaboration of Gilbert and Sullivan, it was the first to make a profound impact on American musical theatre. *Pinafore* appealed particularly to an American audience due to its portrayal of the English seaman, a portrayal Americans not only enjoyed but welcomed, as they continued to rebuild their nation following the Civil War that ended just a few years prior. Yet, by supporting this English work, the American people were subconsciously reaffirming the hegemonic control of the European and especially English arts, the American people used *Pinafore* as a means by which to mock the stereotypical English.

Its timing for American audiences was especially propitious, coming immediately on the heels of the Centennial celebrations, and referring climactically if comically to one of that event's most celebrated technological unveilings, the telephone. *Pinafore's* comic engagement with English society's hierarchies and its oblique references to notorious naval abuses would have been comforting to Americans, not only through its suggesting, however satirically, that such abuses were a thing of the past, but also because its characters were, after all, English—*referentially* English, as historical abusers of personal freedom, and *representationally* English, as regimented, contented mannequins in sailor suits. (Knapp 34-35)

To Americans, *Pinafore* was a vehicle by which to ridicule the English and relish in their own freedom from that leadership. Yet, that freedom had not moved far and desperately clung to its colonized roots. For the upper class Americans concerned with title marriages to English suitors, *Pinafore* reinforced the importance of marrying within your class. Only when Little Buttercup reveals that Ralph Rackstraw and Captain Corcoran were switched at birth are the classes aligned in such a way as to allow Ralph to marry the Captain's daughter, Josephine. By reinforcing these class roles, Gilbert and Sullivan reinforced the hegemony that dictated those roles, in turn reinforcing the English colonization. By maintaining the status quo, the production appealed to all classes in both Europe and U.S.,

which is why it began the fanaticism for European operettas that dominated the theatrical world up until the first World War.

H.M.S. Pinafore quickly spawned a variety of competing productions due to the lack of copyright laws to protect the original. “But before international copyright, these lucrative productions weren’t actually piracies – opportunistic, perhaps, but not illegal” (Jones 6). Many companies resorted to gimmicks in order to fight for patron attendance. But, gimmicks were only one side of the coin; the fight for authenticity was the other. In the states, copies of the libretto and piano-vocal score could be purchased, the rest of the orchestrations and designs were the sole property of Richard D’Oyly Carte’s Comedy Opera Company. “It was not, therefore, uncommon for American producers to send the theatrical equivalent of industrial spies to London to sit night after night at *Pinafore*, surreptitiously sketching the designs or transcribing orchestral parts. American impresarios went to almost any length to capitalize on the *Pinafore* craze” (Jones 6). *Pinafore* was so incredibly popular that producers would do anything to use the *Pinafore* craze for their benefit. Prior to Gilbert and Sullivan coming to the U.S. to mount their official production, over one hundred and fifty productions were produced in the U.S. after *Pinafore*’s premiere in Boston. With the extreme popularity of *H.M.S. Pinafore*, the one-way progression of theatrical works was cemented. English works streamed into the U.S. as a matter of course and were readily accepted due to the success of Gilbert and Sullivan. Although the success of these operettas spawned American imitations, like Willard Spenser’s *The Little Tycoon* and the early works of John Philip Sousa, few of them received any success or press, because of the readily accessible and steady stream of

operettas from European sources, primarily British ones. The need for American compositions was not present; therefore, many would-be American composers did not even consider fighting the dominance of the European writers.

Although European operettas continued to dominate the American stage in the late 1890s and early 1900s, some American musical influences were beginning to be incorporated. “It is already possible to detect the undercurrents that were to erode the British dominance of the English-speaking musical theater. In the first place American dance rhythms had already become popular in Britain through the two-steps and cakewalks that had been brought over, most notably through the appearances of Sousa’s band in the late 1890s” (Lamb 39). Ragtime’s syncopated rhythm began to be seen in popular works by Sousa and Scott Joplin. In addition, as Tin Pan Alley’s group of publishing houses established themselves as the lead producers of popular music in America, European interest was peaked by these popular songs and new dance rhythms. The songs were soon interpolated into British shows, even when the songs were originally interpolated into completely different shows in the U.S. The most interesting piece is that prior to World War I, the American songs on Broadway were viewed by European sources as contributions to the database of popular song, but not to any theatrical works.

As Tin Pan Alley grew in popularity, the American people became much more interested in their published popular songs, which demonstrated the beginning of a shift of focus by the American people. “As far as American performers were concerned, the growth of America’s Tin Pan Alley meant that there was scarcely the need to look to Britain for popular songs—any more than there had been for Britain to look to America for

comic-opera scores” (Lamb 42). Yet, the English influence over America was still more pervasive than even the popular songs of Tin Pan Alley. Although Americans became more focused on popular music produced in the U.S., the interpolation of American songs into British productions sometimes resulted in the loss or hiding of the American heritage of the songs. For instance, the song by Harry von Tilzer, “Under the Anheuser Busch” was adapted for a British audience into “Down at the Old Bull and Bush,” a song about a popular inn in London, versus the original American context (Lamb 44). But, leading up to the war, American music was gaining more and more ground in England, while Americans were beginning to focus more on the indigenous music of Tin Pan Alley.

The composer who prepared the American populace for this transition to indigenous music and was integral to Tin Pan Alley was Jerome Kern. He utilized his many connections in London to gain the footing necessary to popularize his American music and productions, when other American music was not given the same opportunity, simply because it was American and therefore inferior.

The years between *Mr. Popple* in 1905 and *Nobody Home* in 1915 saw by no means a straight transition from the British to the American styles of musical theater. By 1907 the British dominance of the popular musical theater was being swept aside not so much by American works as by Viennese operetta in the form of *The Merry Widow* and later *A Waltz Dream*, *The Dollar Princess*, and *The Chocolate Soldier*. When, however, the fashion for such works began to wane—an event precipitated by the war clouds gathering over Europe—Britain had little left to reassert its traditional ascendancy over America. ...More important, the exposure that the British public had had to American rhythms and to the more incisive American song lyrics had achieved its effect. With the arrival of ragtime song in 1912, the British theater no longer had much to compete with the American product. (Lamb 45-46)

As the American musical gained its footing based upon the work of Jerome Kern and a change of economic perspective following World War I, the transfer of works from Europe to the U.S. reversed. In the 1920s, American musicals moved to London as a matter of course, just as the operettas had moved from Europe to the U.S. prior to the war.

This change in perspective was not simply due to the growing amount of popular American songs being produced on Tin Pan Alley and transferred to Europe. The disbanding of the Theatrical Syndicate in 1917 gave producers the freedom to produce works beyond the limited productions sanctioned by the Syndicate. Between 1900 and 1917, the Syndicate held control over the majority of American theatre, squelching its opposition through any means possible. These productions banked on the wide appeal of the star system, especially those stars with large contingencies of fans. Works with that diverted from the status quo were not allowed. Only those productions with guaranteed mass appeal were allowed to be performed under the watchful eye of the Syndicate between 1900 and 1917, leaving “the American theatre remained a conservative, largely commercial venue” (Brockett 384). These producers held a tight grip on what theatrical ventures were underway, which kept American composers and lyricists from being allowed to perform their works, the few that chose to write them in the first place. Safety in the operetta form was dictated by the Syndicate and followed by the rest of the theatrical world, due to a fear of being blacklisted by the Syndicate. Charles Frohman, one of the leading members of the Syndicate, was killed on the *Lusitania*, causing the Syndicate to disband shortly thereafter in 1917. Without the Syndicate dictated the productions,

American theatre was perfectly situated for the change in America's economic viewpoint at the end of World War I.

Chapter 2: I Can't Be Bothered Now

With America's involvement in World War I came a change in the American viewpoint, from a welcoming of foreign influences to complete xenophobia. The American people craved anything and everything indigenous to the U.S.. This was the opportune moment for jazz music to develop and be instantly marketed as one of the only arts uniquely American. America went into the war convinced of its own inimitable tyranny. But, it took the U.S. three years from the start of the war to change from a sense of perceived neutrality to a willingness to back other countries and enter into alliance with them. The U.S. viewed itself as the rescuer who swept in to "fix things" and generally make the world better through its unprecedented domination.

Prior to the start of World War I, America was changing more rapidly than it ever had before, in its comparatively short history. The massive industrial revolution that had followed the Civil War had greatly changed the American viewpoint due to increased immigration, city growth, and technological advances in communication. America was still recovering from the Civil War and attempting to build a new, unified identity. The start of World War I "aggravated the tensions of a society in flux" (Harries 7). Due to the geography of America and its lack of involvement in all things European, it is no surprise that it chose to remain neutral in the opening years of the war. Plus, the U.S. could only gain from this outbreak of hostilities by trading supplies with both sides of the war.

With America not being directly involved in the war for the first three years, they reaped the benefits of being a nation “at peace” with both sides. Instantaneously, there was a call from both sides for arms, something the U.S. was well situated to supply. Both Germany and the Allies recognized the importance of having America’s material resources, so they each attempted to keep the other from retrieving and utilizing these resources. Britain bottlenecked the seas, impeding the vessel trade to and from Germany. Germany, in turn, gave its submarines and U boats the go ahead to fire on any foreign vessel, resulting in such travesties as the sinking of the Lusitania. In a way, the war was over trade embargos with America, not just the control of European affairs. But, America’s role in the war was also about petitioning for a better position as a world leader, or even as the primary world leader.

With war raging in Europe, [Woodrow] Wilson cast the United States, and himself, in the role of peacemaker. He had long believed that America was destined to exercise world leadership in the twentieth century; he saw his own course in foreign affairs as charted ‘by the hand of God.’ After the war in Europe was over, he planned to use America’s influence to make peace permanent and universal. It could be guaranteed, he believed, not by force of arms but by replacing the present discredited system of a balance of power by a new apparatus of collective security arranged among the nations of the world. The idea was hardly new, having been current well before the war, but it obsessed Wilson—and he believed that as President of the most powerful nation on earth, he had it within his power to bring such a scheme to fruition. (Harries 51)

Wilson’s lofty goal of bringing the U.S. into a position to enforce world peace was no doubt ambitious. However, he continued to supply arms to both sides of the fight, thus exacerbating the problem and moving farther from his end goal of permanent and universal peace.

Even though Wilson kept exacerbating the war by providing arms for both sides, his advisors at home began pushing to increase the military preparedness in the U.S. With the help of these advisors, Wilson gradually adopted the idea of defense readiness.

“[Wilson] was now to be found in the front rank of preparedness parades, banner in hand. After years of digging in his heels against a military buildup, the President took a flying leap into the vanguard. As early as July 21, 1915, he wrote formally to his Secretaries of War and the Navy calling on them to ‘prepare adequate programs for national defense’” (Harries 56). But, this military readiness was not to in preparation for formal entry into the current war, but to be prepared for future wars or attacks. The majority of the planned military buildup, especially for the Navy, was only set to begin in 1916 with completion not slated until 1925. At the opening of 1917, “the total ‘mobile’ army in the United States was smaller than anytime since the Civil War.” (Harries 57) The navy was slightly more prepared, but was led by a very controversial Secretary, who was a teetotaler and extremely naïve as to what his role as Secretary of the Navy Department actually meant. As pervasive as Gilbert and Sullivan were at this time, an unkind parody of Sir Joseph Porter’s song from *H.M.S. Pinafore* was adopted by Secretary Daniels’ critics and was called the U.S.S. Pantalette.

When I was a lad a kindly fate
Preserved my morals in the Old North State
I shunned the flagon and the vile cigar
But I sometimes went a-boating in the raging Tar.
I went a-boating every now and then
So now I am Dictator of the U.S.N. (Harries 58)

Combined with the inadequate leadership of the Navy, it did not have enough ships. As the Germans were proving the usefulness of submarines, the bulk of the Navy's ships were capital ships, without many troop transports. Just as the Army was lacking a mobile army, the Navy lacked the ships required to launch an effective attack or defense, should one arise. Although the U.S. had increased its intent to enhance military preparedness, "the country had not yet come to terms with the essence of modern war. Americans were not yet ready to make the sweeping sacrifices on the home front that total war demanded, nor did the nation have in place the organizations that would be needed to make them" (Harries 59-60). The U.S., still convinced of the importance of its neutrality and of its invincible nature, still sat in the sidelines of the war, providing a cheering section, in the form of arms and supplies, to both sides.

Although the U.S. worked to maintain its neutrality, a line of events literally forced the U.S. to enter the war, leaving them no other option than to join the Allies. In 1917, the German Imperial army was severely troubled. They were running out of manpower and resources to support their endeavors, as the war drudged on, far past their original projected victory date. They chose to take 1917 to focus on the acquisition and rehabilitation of resources, including the acquisition of Ukraine and parts of Russia, forcing their peoples into slave labor and seizing their resources. In addition, they stopped planning major offenses and withdrew their troops to safer positions at the Hindenburg Line. Yet, their Imperial Navy developed its own plan to continue the offenses at sea and limit the resources of the Allies, while allowing the Imperial Army to recoup its resources. This plan was for the German government to reopen unrestricted submarine warfare. This

warfare had previously been banned after the sinking of such ships as the *Lusitania* that caused President Wilson to threaten to sever diplomatic relations and resources if the unrestricted submarine warfare was not stopped. By attacking the ships of the Allies, specifically those of Britain, the British would be forced into starvation that would result in a requirement of peace with Germany. Although the German government was not sure of whether or not this starvation would ensue, they recognize that this renewed unrestricted submarine warfare could play a vital role in the war. On January 9, 1917, the Kaiser consented to allow submarine warfare to resume on February 1, 1917.

The German consent to allow submarine warfare to resume went unnoticed by the U.S., even though the debate was public in Germany and covered regularly in the *New York Times*. But, it was not until 4:10pm on January 31, 1917 that a German ambassador delivered the news to U.S. Secretary of State Robert Lansing that American ships would be sunk as of midnight that night, except for one vessel per week as long as it kept to a specific route, “was clearly marked with stripes ’like a barber’s pole, and flying at each masthead a flag resembling a kitchen tablecloth’” (Harries 65). With less than eight hours notice before this German action would take place, Lansing sent the message to the President, who did not receive it until 8:00pm that evening with only four hours left. The following day, Wilson severed diplomatic relations with Germany, as promised, but maintained that this new development would not lead to the U.S. entrance into the war.

Although this new development alone did not bring the U.S. to join the war, when it was combined with what immediate followed, the U.S. was left without a choice. On February 24, 1917, Britain passed intelligence to the U.S. of a telegram that was sent to the

Mexican government from the German minister, disclosing hopes for an alliance with Mexico and Japan if the U.S. entered the war. In return, Mexico would receive its territories back, Arizona, New Mexico, and Texas. As headlines across the U.S. announced this German plot, the anti-German and pro-war sentiments grew to tremendous heights amongst the U.S. citizens. In addition, the Allies were in desperate need of a financial loan from the U.S., a loan that if the U.S. were to finance would mean a backing of the Allied forces and an essential declaration of war. More merchant vessels were sunk and American lives were lost as the submarine warfare continued, but it was not until the Russian Romanov government was overthrown that Robert Lansing provided the means by which Wilson could go to war while maintaining his original agenda.

The revolution, by dislodging the autocratic Romanov regime from the ranks of the Allied leaders, 'had removed the one objection to affirming that the European War was a war between Democracy and Absolutism. ...To go to war solely because American ships had been sunk and Americans killed would case debate.... The sounder basis was the duty of this and every democratic government—to suppress an autocratic government like the German.' (Harries 70)

With this new viewpoint on the war, Wilson called Congress to assemble the evening of April 2, 1917. With the consent of Congress and later the House of Representatives, Wilson signed the war resolution on April 6, 1917.

Since there was not a direct threat to America's land, it was imperative that this war fever and patriotism be maintained beyond the initial entrance into the war. George Creel was appointed to handle war publicity. Creel said, "Administration activities must be dramatized and staged, and every energy exerted to arouse ardor and enthusiasm" (Harries 165). Creel was able to control the information coming in from foreign sources and, with

the Trading with the Enemy Act could control domestic communications as well. Creel used every means of publication to fuel patriotism, from media sources to poetry to dramatic narratives to cartoons. But, it was not the fight for patriotism at home that dealt the major blow to the hopes of America's role in the war.

President Wilson's dream of an American-led victory in the war was shattered in a short three days as the plans for the Saint-Mihiel operation were finalized. Ferdinand Foch, coordinator of the allied armies on the western front, wanted the Allies to attack the Germans from Verdun to the sea at the same time, as the biggest battle in history. But, he wanted to split up the American army to work with the Allied armies. John Pershing, American Chief of Staff in France, did not want the army broken up, because it would defeat President Wilson's goal of an American-led victory. An American-led victory would give the U.S. tremendous bargaining power at a peace conference. In negotiations between Foch and Pershing, it was agreed upon, as a compromise, that the American troops would not be divided, but would instead perform two major operations back to back.

By agreeing to this strategy, Pershing "risked the total collapse of his command in order to support a strategy devised by the Allies that, if it succeeded, would quite possibly give them and not him the lion's share of the credit. And this in its turn would make it harder for his President to exert anything but a modest influence at the peace conference. Pershing made this crucial decision to seek victory in 1918, a decision as much political as military, on his own, without seeking guidance from Washington. In retrospect, he might seem to have betrayed his President's trust." (Harries 333-334)

On top of agreeing to such a difficult mission, without the backing of Washington, Pershing's plan was contingent upon receiving tank support from the British. Yet, when

he heard that Britain could not supply any tanks, much less the 150 needed, Pershing committed to the operations anyway. Although the battle was more successful than it should have been, because they caught the Germans retreating with their artillery out of place, the battle was by no means a victory, as the attack on Metz was not realized.

The Americans continued to support the Allied efforts, but their role in the war had changed dramatically. The Allies, with American support, won the war, but it was the battle for peace that instilled xenophobia in the American people. As the peace treaties were negotiated, the Allies worked to belittle what the Americans had achieved during the war, paying little to no attention to the supplies of American resources and loss of American life. Wilson's representative, Edward House, had minimal bargaining power at the table with the Allies. When the Armistice was finally signed, President Wilson's hopes of America's role in peace making were entirely shattered. Both German and the Allies accepted Wilson's Fourteen Points, principles of justice, but his League of Nations was not yet realized. Wilson put on a façade of success, but his ultimate goals for entrance into the war were not accomplished.

With the European forces of influence decimated after the war, combined with the intense animosity towards them from the peace treaty discussions, the American people were not content to go back to the pre-war cultural hierarchy and hegemonic control.

In the words of one popular song, 'How you gonna keep 'em down on the farm after they've seen Paree?' It was all part of a social upheaval that the war had accelerated dramatically. The prewar guardians of 'high culture,' who were closely associated with the value system that had brought America into the war, were under siege as never before; the 'liquidation of genteel culture' was under way in earnest. One of the most efficient solvents was the war's redistribution of wealth, which had tilted the balance of cultural power away from respectable middle-class, fixed-

income America. Those who set the cultural standards now were younger, and the war gave them the opportunity to express their sense of alienation and rejection of conventional values with the extraordinary ferocity that drove the Roaring Twenties. (Harries 438)

But, this redistribution of wealth was not universal. The focus of the people was on self-promotion and exclusion of subaltern groups. The African Americans received the most intolerance. The American people were now focused on individual promotion and not on equality. The intolerance of subaltern groups, an economy freed from foreign influences, and an air of self-promotion allowed the U.S. to produce its own indigenous art forms that could be made popular by the younger generation now controlling the balance of cultural power.

Chapter 3: Nice Work If You Can Get It

With the outbreak of hostilities overseas, fewer plays were produced in the continent of Europe. Therefore, fewer plays were available to be imported into the U.S. Without the constant influx of new operettas from European countries; the U.S. began to look to other places to find new productions. George Creel's propaganda for patriotism surfaced in many of the productions, especially in popular song and musical revues, which required less time to produce. With the "haute couture" of art influence at war, upon which the U.S. had depended, the U.S. was forced to begin writing its own operetta and musicals. This was difficult, because there remained a void where the American composer should be. Not only did this shift to extreme patriotism leave a void, but it helped banish those few plays still trickling in from European countries, in addition to limiting the audience for those operettas that were popular prior to the war.

Musical comedy thus became almost exclusively the product of American librettists, lyricists, and composers—often naturalized American composers, but American nevertheless. ...Finally, by winter 1917, Broadway entirely banished European operetta from its musical stages until nearly a year after the Armistice. The cause of this about-face in audience preference had little to do with taste and everything to do with politics and patriotism. As the war persisted, Broadway audiences and producers became, in a sense, 'silent partners' in the escalating and often irrational manifestations of anti-German (and, by extension, anti-Austrian) sentiment that swept the United States almost as virulently as the killer influenza epidemic of 1918. (Jones 48)

With this change of focus to the capabilities and authoritativeness of the American people, anything related to Germany or Austria was burned and/or shunned. An anthology of

famous classical music, entitled *Masterpieces of Piano Music* and published in 1917, labels the countries of each composer in its brief dictionary of the composers included in the volume. For those composers of German or Austrian descent who needed to be included, such as Johann Sebastian Bach, the listing simply says, “Classical,” in place of the country (Wier 531-533). This publication is a prime example of how the extreme patriotism, marketed by George Creel, started the shift towards not only a xenophobic nation, but one completely anti-German. Even those Americans with German sounding names were spurned and, in many cases, those people chose to anglicize their names in order to regain their acceptance in society and conform to expectations. American culture was no longer about accepting everyone into the U.S. “melting pot,” but was more focused on conforming to a single ideal of a new America.

With the outbreak of war, the operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan lost their rank as the immitigable precedent for musical theatre, although their long-lasting effect can still be seen today. With America’s entrance into the Great War, they were deemed un-American. Without these operettas, a hole in the entertainment industry opened, where new American composers, lyricists, and librettists could avenues for their work to be shown to an awaiting public, no matter how unknown these new artists were. “Indeed, the catalogue of new American, including naturalized American, talent whose songs were first heard on Broadway during the Great War reads like a who’s who of what many consider the golden age of Broadway songwriting—the 1920s and 1930s” (Jones 50). With the switch to a focus on everything American, the door was open for new composers to join the Broadway scene. Most of these songwriters came from the already established workers and producers

on Tin Pan Alley, the main entertainment district of New York City, primarily due to their preexisting familiarity with the popular songs of the time. This knowledge proved immeasurable in their success, of which George Gershwin is a prime example. Gershwin's quick success on Broadway showed when his first work premiered when he was only eighteen years old.

This is not to suggest that these luminaries would have never written for the American musical theatre had European operetta not disappeared from Broadway. But the historical facts argue that the doors to the musical stage may have opened to them much later had there still been a glut of Old World waltz-time romances on Broadway during the war. And removing those operettas out of earshot of the theatergoing public doubtlessly induced them to listen sympathetically to idiomatically American music. That new American music, in productions that mostly flaunted style over substance, would mirror and express the lifestyle of the postwar 1920s. (Jones 50-51)

George Gershwin came to the forefront along with Sigmund Romberg, Irving Berlin, and Cole Porter. All four were young songwriters with distinct relationships with Tin Pan Alley, which left them uniquely situated to take advantage of an American culture desperately working to expunge all foreign influences and in turn cultivate indigenous ones.

George Gershwin's parents emigrated to the U.S. from Russia prior to the birth of their children to escape mandatory military service. The fact that both parents were immigrants seeking the American dream probably played a major role in George's focus on American-based songs to begin his career. As his family gained wealth and status, the stories of the hardships of Russia and the wealth of opportunities available in the U.S. probably played a major role in Gershwin's eventual incorporation of jazz techniques into his work. He and his family loved the U.S. and avidly adopted the culture. But, George,

unlike Ira, did not hang around the house very long absorbing influences from his parents. He absorbed the influences of the city instead. Since the George's father did not have a fixed trade, but pursued whatever opportunity he fancied, the Gershwin family moved around the city on a regular basis. This allowed George to gain the influences of not just one area of Manhattan, but a large variety of cultural influences in a city comprised almost entirely of immigrants.

Growing up amongst other immigrant families, George was exposed to a wide variety of music. "Happily, when George was not learning from books he learned in the streets of the Lower East Side. ...Amid the teeming alleyways and brownstone tenements, George's ears were assaulted by a never-ending tapestry of sounds that were storing themselves in his mind and which became part of his musical vocabulary" (Greenburg 20). George quickly picked up these rhythms and tonalities and quickly incorporated them into his piano playing, even from his first years of piano lessons. His focus on the popular music of the time drove away one of his first piano teachers, who wanted him to focus solely on the classical repertoire. Gershwin's later teachers, especially Charles Hambitzer and Edward Kilenyi, made sure he received a strong foundation in standard music, in addition to his popular, jazz rhythm tendencies. At the age of 14, Gershwin also began attending concerts, especially when a pianist was featured, which further influenced his compositional style. He was particularly influenced by the music of Jerome Kern, which inspired George's first song, *Since I Found You*, around 1913. Although Gershwin began composing at a very early age, he still had to work his way up through the system before he gained popularity or renown.

Two of George's earliest influences in his career were Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern. Since Berlin first gained popularity around 1911, his works hit the young George's ears at a very impressionable time, when he was first exploring the world of music. "There are no idols like your first ones, and although Gershwin would soon have other targets and more highbrow models, he would never forget that it was by aiming at Berlin and Kern that he had arrived at wherever he was now. And besides, his heroes hadn't precisely handed the baton over to him, but clung teasingly to it themselves, and kept right on running. 'You're pretty good, son. Now try to catch me,' and the three of them were still chasing each other's tails, unofficially of course, as they disappeared one by one over the horizon" (Sheed 52). George was constantly challenged to be better when these composers did not bow down to new works, but instead continued to push the envelopes within their own compositions. This helped propel George through his career, even when beginning the difficult business of breaking into publication.

Gershwin began his professional career as a piano plugger for Jerome H. Remick and Company, a publisher on Tin Pan Alley in 1913. Since Tin Pan Alley was the main entertainment district of the time, Gershwin's career, like many other composers of his time, logically began there. Like the Theatre District today, Tin Pan Alley was the hub of the entertainment world of New York City.

Tin Pan Alley is said to have taken its name from the jangling, tinny sound (likened to the clattering of kitchen pans) issuing from dozens of upright pianos being incessantly pounded in a small area of New York centered around 28th Street, from 6th Avenue to Broadway. This was the city's main entertainment district, crammed with vaudeville theatres and music halls. It was the ideal location for Remick's, a typical brownstone building crowded with song-pluggers and wily publishing executives for whom popular music was a frenzied, lucrative business. Hit songs

had to be manufactured and distributed at breakneck pace, in stiff competition with dozens of other enterprising publishing houses. Everything depended on sales of sheet music, from which the public could sing and play their current favourites. (Greenberg 25)

The nickname “Tin Pan Alley” was attributed not just to the area and publishers, but to the musicians, who were more commonly called “song-pluggers.” As a piano plugger, Gershwin marketed Remick’s songs to prospective clients, changing keys and adjusting each song to the needs and/or limitations of the client. His skills as a popular music pianist developed rapidly in this setting, as he constantly changed the music to fit the client. These skills proved invaluable in his work on Broadway, because he could quickly edit, change, and manipulate the music as needed. Or, he could “craftily rescue a song from a failed show and work it into another” (Greenberg 26). It was his facility at the piano that made him an asset to Remick’s. Soon, thereafter, when those at Remick’s began to notice his skills, he began recording piano rolls for player pianos. The piano rolls that survived long enough to now be recorded digitally still allow us to hear Gershwin play in our living rooms. In his years at Remick’s, from 1913-1917, Gershwin received the training necessary to successfully work in the field of composition. Through his piano plugging and recording piano rolls, Gershwin knew the ins and outs of the popular trends. He was also extremely versatile and agile as a pianist. This training at Remick’s and the timing of Gershwin leaving Remick’s to compose on Tin Pan Alley placed Gershwin in a unique situation of preparedness when the change in American consciousness occurred at the end of World War I.

After leaving Remick's, Gershwin took a position as the rehearsal pianist for a show called *Miss 1917*, written by Jerome Kern and Victor Herbert. Although the show flopped, Gershwin made connections with some of the major figures on Broadway. Being of draft age, Gershwin also practiced the saxophone, so he might join an army band, if drafted. Luckily, he was not. However, his work on *Miss 1917* brought him to the attention of Max Dreyfus, one of the biggest music publishers of the time, who established T.B. Harms publishing company. Dreyfus immediately hired Gershwin not to plug songs, but to compose them. This relationship with T.B. Harms "offered access to Broadway productions and a chance to interpolate songs in various shows" (Hyland 21). Although Gershwin wrote many new songs that were interpolated into Broadway shows, it was not until he wrote "Swanee" that he had his first hit song. The song originally premiered in a presentation called *Capitol Review*, but it was not until Al Jolson heard Gershwin play the song at one of Jolson's infamous parties that the song became a success.

The possessor of dynamic energy and a massive ego, Jolson developed a powerful stage presence and, made-up in blackface, would sing his heart out in Negro-inspired tear-jerkers such as *Mammy*. (In 1927 he starred in the first talking-picture, *The Jazz Singer*.) By 1919 he was already a megastar. His parties were thronged by celebrities, show-business magnates and starry-eyed gate-crashers. That the young Gershwin sat at Jolson's piano enthralled the gathering with his new song revealed much in common between the two men: both were supremely confident in their musical talents and greatly enjoyed displaying them. Common, too, were the familiar leitmotifs of Russian-Jewish parentage and of reveling in their own identification with all things American. (Greenberg 35)

"Swanee" was immediately interpolated into Al Jolson's show, *Sinbad*, that was a major hit upon opening in January 1918 at the Winter Garden. When the song was later recorded

by Al Jolson on January 8, 1920, Gershwin finally had his first hit song with substantial royalties.

Just prior to “Swanee”’s recording and his jump in popularity, Gershwin finally composed his first full-length musical, *La La Lucille*. It opened in the spring of 1919 to decent reviews. Although it was forced closed in August 1919 by the formation and first formal strike of the Actors Equity Association, Gershwin had finally made his mark on Broadway. Gershwin’s “life paralleled the carefree but brief Jazz Age. He lived it to the fullest, as though he knew his time would be limited. Handsome, stylish, intense, self-assured, and fast-moving, Gershwin mirrored the glamorous and exciting Roaring Twenties” (Perlis 184-5). Based upon his success and regularly being in the right place at the right time, George, along with his brother Ira, went on to become one of the biggest legends of and influences on the musical theatre genre. His music had a dramatic impact on not just musical theatre, but jazz and pop music, where it continues to be reinvented with each new adaptation of modern music. Gershwin’s music will be with us forever, as will Gershwin himself be a musical theatre icon who has yet to be unseated.

Although George Gershwin was exceedingly talented, had amazing facility at the keyboard, and a fantastic ear for music, it was not until the end of World War I changed the focus of the American people to extreme xenophobia and patriotism that he received his “break.” Gershwin’s sweet melodies and diversionary topics were embraced by the post-war society. With his finger to the pulse of the people from his days as a piano plugger on Tin Pan Alley, George Gershwin was uniquely situated to take advantage of

those who clamored for patriotic diversions as the stock market boomed and imported shows were obliterated from Broadway.

Chapter 4: Fascinating Rhythm

“There was every reason why jazz should have burst upon a startled world at the touch of a hundred or more orchestra leaders in 1915. The time was ripe for almost any explosion. The war spirit was on the loose. The whole tempo of the country was speeded up.”

-Paul Whiteman

With the banishment of all European theatrical forms came the banishment of European musical forms as well. The growing void in the absence of these forms left an audience that could not wait to be satiated by an indigenous American music. Jazz, which was slowly working its way through certain cities around the country, had just made its way to New York where the form would grow astronomically in an environment where the arts were searching for a new commerce. Jazz provided that avenue.

The history of jazz is not one that is easy to trace, as the form developed from a variety of musical styles and cultural traditions. In recent years, scholars have begun to consider jazz a viable field of study, even though it simultaneously fills the roles of both high and low art. Many books on jazz have been published, but with limited perspective on jazz's relation to other arts. Although these scholars provide a more thorough look at the history of jazz, this excerpt sets the stage to view jazz's relation to these other arts.

It took jazz awhile to reach New York City, even though jazz was already in New Orleans, Chicago, and San Francisco. According to Paul Whiteman, it was the original Dixieland Jazz Band that was hired by the Reisenweber Café to play a concert and officially bring the first jazz to New York City. They played a section of jazz, but the

audience sat rigidly, self-conscious, not sure what to do with this new kind of music. Until the manager told the audience it was music to which they should dance, the audience did not know how to react. However, once they began to dance, jazz made its debut as a music that would soon grip New York. From Whiteman's depiction, race is not mentioned as a part of this presentation, but it certainly played a factor, a factor reversed, but still present today.

Jazz's rise to the heights could be deemed a lateral and upward move at the same time. Even today, jazz remains both a high and low art, one you can find in the most renowned concert halls of the world, but also in the pubs. The spacial setting brings a different viewpoint and level of participation from the audience, but that is a separate argument. For now, the fact that jazz transcended, and continues to transcend, these social barriers between high and low art is what is important. But, this wide-ranging acceptance did not greet jazz upon its arrival, especially due to the extreme racism still gripping the U.S even many years after the Civil War. Paul Whiteman, the self-declared "King of Jazz" demonstrates this extreme condescension upon the African American roots of this incredible music. "[Jazz] appears now to be firmly established as a member of that long list of American words in good social standing that began their careers in the depths of moral and social disgrace" (Whiteman 18). As will be demonstrated in Chapter five, until this art form was consciously forwarded by white producers and musicians to be an art form that could be accepted, jazz was relegated to the "depths of moral and social disgrace," as Whiteman stated.

Although Harlem and the Harlem Renaissance are often viewed as the heart of the New York jazz culture, Harlem's transition into the environment where jazz could thrive was bumpy, scary, and faced with a tremendous amount of adversaries, including not just music critics, but finances, condescension, and communication barriers.

Only a few years earlier, Harlem had been a white neighborhood, of European immigrants and Lutheran churches, a community where the sound of lieder, not ragtime, was heard coming from the windows of apartment houses. Named after Haarlem, the Netherlands city, by the early Dutch settlers, the neighborhood retained its Old World roots well into the early twentieth century. But the years following the start of World War I witnessed a massive demographic shift, as the African-American population boomed, with southern migrants joining refugees from the overcrowded midtown tenements of Manhattan. Here they formed a new society; not just as transients, or even residents, but as proprietors—by the late 1920s, 70 percent of Harlem's real estate was under black control—with all the independence that ownership conveyed. (Gioia 94)

But, this ownership did not come easily. African Americans still faced tremendous animosity amongst business owners, receiving miniscule wages in comparison to the white employees in the same positions. This left the people of Harlem in great turmoil, in their attempts to simply pay their rent. It was from this lack of wealth that jazz sprung. Rent parties would be held in a home, where a jazz musician or band would be enlisted to play. The cover charge for these parties would be used for the host's rent, thus embodying the title "rent party." Jazz gained a tremendous amount of audience from these "bottom of the barrel" settings, as they were viewed by their white counterparts. However, certain white musicians attended these parties in the hopes of embracing this new style of music. "Jazz gained further appeal from its 'bad' heritage—just bad enough to be tantalizing! Newspapers declared it to blame for 'a serious moral crisis' and 'a burgeoning youth revolt.' Added to the fun was the sense of being off-limits. Prohibition became law in

1920 and a year later the New York State Legislature passed a law giving it the right to censor dances” (Perlis 184). But, to say that jazz’s progression through Manhattan did not have any effect on the genre would be a gross misrepresentation of its fascinating development.

A thread of development of jazz came from the musical genre of ragtime. The work of “ragging” a work meant added syncopated rhythms to an existing piece of music. Up until the start of World War I, anything and everything was “ragged,” from the popular songs of Tin Pan Alley to ballet music. Scott Joplin, now famous for his rag, “The Entertainer,” was one of the primary figures in the ragtime genre as he produced a tremendous amount of piano rags. “Ragging” a song meant changing a straight rhythm to a syncopated one. Many times, an existing song was chosen to rag, rather than composing new ones. The popularity of ragtime reached its peak between 1910 and 1915 and provided a foundation on which jazz could build. Although ragtime certainly played a role in the development of jazz, this perspective limits the impact of cultural traditions and social commentary that were integral to the development. Yet, Karolyi later provides a better explanation of jazz’s early roots, especially those in the years just before its widespread appeal.

It is a synthesis of largely Afro-American idioms, principally, Afro-Caribbean rhythm but also spiritual, Gospel and blues performing styles, minstrel music, ragtime and basic European harmony. At the beginning, blues and ragtime playing were hardly distinguishable from jazz but then rag players drifted into jazz. Jazz rapidly took over the scene and by the 1920s the jazz craze was in full swing both in America and in Europe. (Karolyi 25)

The limiting of the cultural roots of the jazz genre, as many did in the 1920s, demonstrated the lack of respect and extreme racism against the African American people. But, the influence of ragtime cannot be disregarded, especially in its prevalence on New York City's Tin Pan Alley. Since it was Tin Pan Alley that was creating the popular music genre, as jazz moved from Harlem and met ragtime at the Alley, the Alley composers were ready for the newest syncopated craze.

As the popularity of jazz spread from Harlem to all of Manhattan, it became the centerfold of all the hot programs of the time. It went from being something solely found in Harlem's hot spots to thriving in clubs throughout Manhattan, where you can still find it today. Although it began as a "low art," it soon saturated other markets. Jazz was adapted to every form of music, from "jazzing" or "ragging" the classics to complete improvisation to even the "high art" forms, such as symphonic works. The symphonic works of George Gershwin and Aaron Copland, among others, "bridged the gap between concert and popular music. For a brief time, until the sobering effect of the Great Depression, jazz reigned supreme in the clubs *and* the concert halls. No wonder F. Scott Fitzgerald, the writer most closely connected to the period, called it the Jazz Age" (Perlis 184). As Gershwin and Copland began twisting jazz into the new art form of symphonic jazz, their role in the creation of jazz history came under scrutiny. This cunning critique heightened as the years went on and grew into the extreme condescension that greets these composers today.

Although jazz received much derision from those who considered jazz to be corrupting the world's use, it, for the most part, saturated a willing public. You could hear it on the radio, in a local venue, or on the phonograph.

So it is no theory of mine that jazz is making America into a truly musical nation. There are facts and figures everywhere to prove it. The strange thing is the spectacle of the patrons of music in America, who for years have been keeping good music barely alive in this country by artificial stimulation, by maintaining splendid orchestras that had to be subsidized by the rich, while they lamented the lack of a musical public in this country. One would think they would rejoice, to see music rising like a wave and engulfing America, to see people music-mad. But a great many of them don't. Some of them raise their hands in horror, and say that jazz is vulgar. Well, it is, in the good old Latin sense of the word. It is vulgar; that is, it is the possession of the common people. (Whiteman 187-188)

As marketed by Tin Pan Alley, whose position as the leader of popular musical culture was unquestioned, jazz quickly spread. But, as this popular, "low" art developed, its transition into the "high" art forms met a wall of opposition. The rich, still attached to their status symbols in relation to foreign influences, especially England, were extremely vocal in their derision of this popular art form that could potentially upset the hegemonic control they painstakingly maintained. But, the American public, newly xenophobic, abhorred these tired art forms and mandated a new means by which to express their American nationalism. That means was jazz, the only music completely indigenous to America at that time. But, jazz required help in order to become a recognized art form in both popular and high culture.

Chapter 5: Rhapsody in Blue or Black

“Jazz I regard as an American folk music; not the only one, but a very powerful one which is probably in the blood and feeling of the American people more than any other style of folk music.”

-George Gershwin

George Gershwin's role in the development of jazz is an extremely controversial topic amongst musicologists and ethnomusicologists. Although Gershwin's music was considered and marketed as jazz when he was writing music in the Jazz Age, now his music is no longer classified as jazz. In fact, most jazz historians view Gershwin with contempt, feeling that his music provided a skewed viewpoint of jazz, from which the American viewpoint still has not recovered. Although Gershwin's music brought a somewhat limited perspective on jazz, due to his separation of ideology from African American jazz musicians, he was one of the first musicians to bring jazz influences to the forefront of popular culture. He paved the way for future jazz musicians, those today's musicologists consider “authentic” jazz musicians, to become an accepted part of popular culture.

Since the systems of classification typically happen after the events are no longer current, it is fascinating to look at how the definition of jazz has changed over the last century, especially in the last thirty years. In the 1910s and early 1920s, music that incorporated any sort of “blue notes” combined with syncopated rhythms was classified as jazz. As with any new form, jazz entered the world by being combined with other pre-

existing forms, as a reinvention of those forms. Yet it was these forms, whose influences are still seen today, that defined jazz. However, what remains controversial is where George Gershwin's music falls in that classification and also what role he played in jazz's development.

Proceeding less naively, one might attempt to define jazz first and then to evaluate Gershwin's music accordingly, although one discovers that the definition of jazz has changed since the 1920s, when Gershwin's music first achieved widespread popularity. Writers on jazz often flounder in their attempts to define the subject, owing in part to the uncertain status of jazz as popular, folk, or art music. Further complicating the task of definition are the characteristics of improvised performance, oral transmission, and living tradition. (Schneider 176)

Even at the time when Gershwin was composing, the world struggled to classify him. Composers at that time did not switch genres, but remained in their specialty (i.e. symphonic works, Tin Pan Alley, etc.). Yet, Gershwin received success not only in the popular song styles of Tin Pan Alley, but the carefree, diversionary stylings of musical theatre, as well as the extended classical and symphonic forms. This was a rare accomplishment at the time. On top of composing in a variety of areas, Gershwin was not content with sticking with one particular style. He combined, tweaked, and skewed the perspectives of the established forms, especially those prevalent prior to World War I. This left the public transfixed with his compositions, which were quickly cultivated in a time when the U.S. was searching for a music style completely indigenous of the U.S. culture. The general public anxiously awaited each new composition. Even once Gershwin was financially stable, as early as Al Jolson recording "Swanee," he constantly reinvented his style in order to remain on the cutting edge. Jazz provided a new canvas on which to paint a new popular, truly American culture.

Even today, when jazz is considered the only indigenous music to the U.S., musicologists and ethnomusicologists struggle to classify George Gershwin for the same reasons that transfixed his public. On top of concerns regarding his combinations of forms, the definition of jazz has changed to reflect race and ideology, completely eliminating the role of the music itself. With this elimination of the role of music, the definition no longer concerns the art form, but simply the means by which the art was produced.

In a color-blind society a definition of jazz might be sufficient if it determined whether or not a certain uncatalogued piece or performance fell into the category of jazz. But jazz is hardly color-blind music. Recent definitions of jazz acknowledge to varying degrees the racial stance of the music. Thus, one reads that jazz is an eclectic, expanding collection of twentieth-century styles, principally instrumental and of black American creation. Swing and improvisation are essential to several styles, but only an emphasis on characteristic timbres spans all musics called jazz, whether functional or artistic, popular or esoteric, instrumental or vocal, improvised or composed, “hot” or “cool”. Even here ‘black American creation’ may refer only to the origins of jazz or to the successive changes in style, sometimes in reaction to appropriation by the mainstream, established styles. More recently jazz has been defined as ‘a music created mainly by black Americans in the early 20th century through an amalgamation of elements drawn from European-American and tribal African musics.’” (Schneider 176)

But, if the current definition reflects only the black American compositions, where do the compositions of other races fall? Also, what happens when a black American composer creates a jazz piece based upon works written by a white composer, such as Miles Davis’ jazz album based on the melodies of George Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess* and titled the same? Plus, if jazz is an amalgamation of European-American and tribal African musics, how then can you limit the influence of one style by disallowing a race? If each side has such a distinctive ideology that is being combined through jazz, why cannot someone from

either side successfully combine the stylizations into jazz? Or, is it that the African influence holds precedence in the current classification of jazz, whereas the European-American influence held precedence in the Jazz Age? If so, then it is not possible to completely limit the definition by dismissing the viewpoints of the time period. It is not possible to compare early jazz compositions of the 1920s to those of later decades, because the later decades built their forms on the early compositions. Jazz, just like every other art form, is a malleable form that does not stagnate, but regularly builds upon its predecessors' work in order to reinvent the form and keep it fresh. Yet, most jazz historians in the last thirty years insist that the jazz of white composers in the 1920s should not be classified as jazz, based mostly upon race. James Lincoln Collier provides a disheartening look at the racial polarization of the jazz industry, "Given this history, it is startling—and not a little disheartening—to observe the extent to which jazz has become racially polarized in the past thirty years. The claim that jazz is black (or African-American) music, and that whites are in it only on sufferance, has been pounded home so relentlessly and vociferously that it is today taken as a given" (184). The idea that jazz music only relates the experience of the African American completely eliminates the white American from being a part of the jazz culture. Since jazz is considered the only indigenous American music, the elimination of races from the definition of jazz in turn eliminates those races from being American.

What is even more interesting is that writers and scholars are afraid to contradict the current classification of jazz as a reflection of African American culture for fear of their reclassification being deemed a racial slur. Raymond Knapp, in his book, *The*

American Musical and the Formation of National Identity, is one of the only writers who states that perhaps our definition of jazz has gone from one extreme to another, from Eurocentric to Afro-centric. Yet, neither of these definitions accurately depicts the musical form itself, leaving some composers floundering for a place in this definition. The racially based definition of jazz was also a reaction to the definition in the 1920s. Jazz received severe censure and opposition when it first appeared in popular culture. As easy as it is to say that the world's objections to jazz simply came from the "newness" of the music combined with syncopated rhythms, many of them stemmed from the severe racism that penetrated the country at that time. The following quote depicts not only the strong objections to jazz music, but also the openness of the racial condescension of the time.

‘The objection of the physician,’ she explains, “is the effect that jazz has on certain human emotions. All sorts of excuses may be bade for it, but the consensus of opinion of leading medical and other scientific authorities is that its influence is as harmful and degrading to civilized races as it always had been among the savages from whom we borrowed it. If we permit our boys and girls to be exposed indefinitely to this pernicious influence, the harm that will result may tear to pieces our whole social fabric.’ (Whiteman 139-140)

Given the extreme racism and open critique of “uncivilized races” in the 1920s, a few integral white musicians made jazz acceptable in the popular eye, helping temper the racism of future years. George Gershwin, along with Paul Whiteman, was one of these integral composers that furthered the jazz genre and made it acceptable in the popular eye, especially amongst those with a preference for “high art,” who provided the most disdain for anything that altered their preexisting hierarchical realm.

George Gershwin's infatuation with jazz began as a young child growing up in an area of varied culture and immigrant families of New York City. When he was young, he

lived in Harlem and “throughout his brief life, regularly haunted Harlem nightspots in search of musical enlightenment” (Singer 67). In addition, his exposure to the “melting pot” of New York City immigrants, including those with a background in the jazz music of New Orleans and other jazz hot spots, gave him a knowledge that allowed him to fuse these influences and bring them into mainstream society. It was his use of these influences combined with the preexisting Tin Pan Alley and Broadway popular forms that allowed these influences to come to the forefront of popular culture. But, Gershwin needed help in order to market these material, as the level of influence, especially of jazz, slowly emerged in both popular and “high art” forms.

Paul Whiteman (1890-1967), a prominent orchestral leader, had a profound interest in the development of jazz, especially in its incorporation with classical and symphonic forms. Whiteman recorded his feelings about jazz in one of the earliest documented histories of jazz and its upbringings, entitled simply, *Jazz*, and published in 1926. Although this history certainly brings a skewed and in many ways racist perspective, it provides tremendous insight into how those white composers bringing jazz into American culture felt at the time. He explains why jazz was so important, “I sincerely believe in jazz. I think it expresses the spirit of America and I feel sure it has a future—more of future than of past or present. I want to help that future pan out. Other Americans ought to give jazz a respectful hearing. If this effort of mine helps toward that end, I shall be satisfied” (Whiteman 11). This book clearly depicts Whiteman’s aim at bringing jazz into the lives of the upper classes. It demonstrates some of the censure Whiteman received in his attempts to make a living leading a jazz orchestra. After getting his footing in New

York City as the self-proclaimed “King of Jazz,” Whiteman produced a monumental event, the Experiment in Modern Music.

At the peak of the Jazz Age, on February 12, 1924, Whiteman put together a concert entitled an Experiment in Modern Music at Aeolian Hall that was meant to chronicle the growth of jazz up until that point. The program was set historically, beginning with “Livery Stable Blues” and including some Irving Berlin songs, a fantasy on the “Volga Boatman’s Song,’ MacDowell’s “To a Wild Rose,’ Elgar’s ‘Pomp and Circumstance,’ piano pieces by Zez Confrey, *Four Serenades* by Victor Herbert and the premiere of Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*. This concert was not only controversial at the time, but remains a hot topic amongst musicologists. The question up for debate is whether or not this concert can be entitled jazz and whether or not George Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue*, commissioned by Paul Whiteman for this concert, can or should be classified as jazz. The controversy not only surrounds the programming of the concert, but the means by which the concert was presented. The choice of utilizing only white musicians for the concert is a point of contention where some scholars feel Whiteman intentionally removed the African American roots from the concert to better appeal to his current audience. Although this might be the case, a new viewpoint has emerged in recent years. It is true that Whiteman used only white musicians; however, Whiteman wanted to use black musicians, but his managers and producers would not allow it. A third perspective could be that by using white musicians, Whiteman allowed the music to appeal to his contemporary audience without the automatic dismissal of the music based upon the

racial presentation. Whatever Whiteman's intentions were for only using white musicians, there is no doubt that *Rhapsody in Blue* was a phenomenal success.

From the opening clarinet bending pitches into a glissando at the start of *Rhapsody in Blue* to the fully orchestrated blue notes and syncopations, the influence of jazz upon this symphonic work cannot be questioned. Whether or not this work as a whole can be considered jazz may be up for contention, based upon the race of the composer and the lack of improvisational material combined with an orchestrated symphonic form, but the influence this work had on the musical genre was profound. It brought jazz to the attention of the upper classes. By combining a popular form, jazz, with a "high" art form, the symphony, Gershwin blurred the lines between high and low art forms.

The music [of *Rhapsody in Blue*] telescopes a youthful rhapsodic temperament, the music of Broadway, Afro-American blues and jazz as well as what Gershwin had learned from his classical music studies, in this instance Liszt. All these ingredients were made to work by Gershwin's vigour and élan. With one inspired master-stroke he succeeded in bringing American popular music to the concert hall. The phenomenal success of *Rhapsody in Blue* made Gershwin a household name and American music acquired a new voice to be reckoned with. (Karolyi 28-29)

Although there is controversy regarding the specific music chosen by Whiteman to be performed in that concert, there is no doubt that *Rhapsody in Blue* was the highlight. What made *Rhapsody in Blue* such an important work was that Gershwin held the attention of the audience through all three movements through his inventiveness, which stemmed from his work on Tin Pan Alley and extreme versatility in arranging songs. Although other composers have attempted at making extended jazz symphonic works, few have succeeded and none to the level of *Rhapsody in Blue*. This is part of why it is difficult to classify this work. It, along with Gershwin's other jazz symphonic works, such as *Piano Concerto in*

F, stand alone, apart from jazz and classical music. Yet, it still remains one of the few major symphonic works that most people will recognize.

It was Gershwin's work with Whiteman and his "informal contact with the pianists of the Harlem rent-party circuit, that helped bring jazz rhythms into the mainstream of popular music" (Shipton 157). In Harlem, Gershwin encountered great jazz pianists such as James P. Johnson and Willie "the Lion" Smith that provided a tremendous education and set of tools for Gershwin to use in both his symphonic and popular works. Gershwin, by incorporating jazz, showed it was an acceptable form of music and not worth the censure prevalent at the time. Like any grassroots creation, the upper classes, which were predominantly white between 1910 and 1930, tended to object to anything that could potentially upset their comfortable status quo. Therefore, they were automatically skeptical of anything new. Much of the white population viewed jazz as a threat, but it was composers like Gershwin who used their popularity to bring controversial forms to the mainstream. As Whiteman wrote, jazz "is waking the people of America to a spontaneous interest in all kinds of music, giving all musicians a larger native audience. Not because of jazz, but through it, we are becoming musically a self-confident people. (Whiteman 158)

It was from within the system of "white supremacy" in the 1920s that George Gershwin took the pre-existing, popular forms and began adding more and more jazz influences. By a white composer adapting popular forms, the jazz genre rapidly gained acceptance in popular culture. By gradually adding more and more jazz influences to his popular and symphonic works, Gershwin gave jazz the ground it needed to become the successful indigenous music of America that is it today. It is still possible to hear jazz music at

esteemed venues like Carnegie Hall, but just as possible to hear it in basement pubs in New York City's Village for a small cover charge. Jazz permeates American culture and provides the world with the only indigenous American music. It is time that the world recognized the role George Gershwin played in facilitating the development of jazz into what it is today, a staple of American society.

Conclusion

As Paul Whiteman was gaining fame, prior to his Experiment in Music at Aeolian Hall, he visited England with his orchestra. Local orchestra leaders would come to his rehearsals with their musicians in order to hear this new American music. This was the first time jazz was ever heard in England. Yet, these English musicians were missing the ideology to be successful jazz musicians.

[English] orchestra leaders used to come to our rehearsals, bringing their men, and we were glad to show them what we could. They played beautifully, too, as long as they could imitate. Give them a perfectly scored jazz orchestration and they could do it so well that it sounded like the real thing. But when it came to originating, they fell down. Jazz was simply not in their blood. They lacked the spontaneity, the exuberance, the courage—I do not know what. The something, whatever it is we call American, the indefinable something that is jazz. They didn't have it and it isn't something that can be put on the outside like a plaster. Most of the jazz orchestras that have since sprung up in London have failed simply because of that fact. (Whiteman 74)

Although these musicians were unable to fully create jazz in the American way at the time when Whiteman was visiting, jazz is now something that is heard around the world. Just as Americans recognize English operetta or Russian Romantic piano works, jazz is inherently American and recognized as such by the rest of the world. Yet, it is the definition of jazz by Americans that is built on a premise of exclusion that stemmed from the shifting economic viewpoint following World War I. It is time that the definition of jazz was once again based upon the music. As the twentieth century was an era of progressive culture for the U.S., a difference in the music from each decade must be

expected, as each generation tried to further the genre and move it in a new, fresh direction. Therefore, it is impossible to compare 1920s jazz to 1940s jazz and choose which one should be classified as jazz. They are both jazz, but at different stages of progression. The classification based upon racial polarization needs to be expunged. George Gershwin and the other great jazz musicians who are not of African American descent deserve to be reinstated as a part of America's only indigenous music, jazz. In order to do this, it is necessary to explore what made jazz American in the first place, which is where the next phase of research will proceed.

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