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JAZZBO

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Why we still listen to Gershwin.
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The audience had grown restless, and some people were heading for the exits—the twenty-second piece on the program was about to start—when the clarinet let out an uncorked whoop that riveted everyone in place before its wildly rising cry began to tumble, unmistakably laughing, back down the scale. Nothing like it had been heard before. The tipsy clarinet had hardly been steadied by a burst of brass when a rushing piano part swept the music off to a realm somewhere between Rachmaninoff and ragtime. There was a swoony foxtrot, and a finale that seemed to leave the stage spinning as the audience roared for more. The conductor took several curtain calls that snowy afternoon, February 12, 1924, along with the slender young pianist: Paul Whiteman and George Gershwin, elegant in spats and starched shirts, were bringing jazz to New York's respectable Aeolian Hall. The concert was repeated twice in the next few months (once in the even more rarefied precincts of Carnegie Hall), and the showstopper, Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue," was recorded in June—as it has been dozens of times, of course, since then. Still, that performance was unique. Whiteman had put the concert together quickly, to beat out competition—"symphonic jazz" was a movement whose time had come—and Gershwin composed his contribution in about three weeks. There hadn't been time to finish: an arranger in the band had orchestrated the score, but on the scheduled day a page for piano solo was still entirely blank, and the composer, at the keyboard, simply improvised. The written direction for the orchestra's entrance in the big bluesy theme read "Wait for nod."

Gershwin, aged twenty-five and the author of various song hits, from "Swanee" to "Tee-Oodle-Um-Bum-Bo," was suddenly a serious composer and the most famous "jazzbo" in the country—a combination that made him a figure of intensely focussed expectation. Since the end of the war, Americans had been searching for a homegrown music to reflect the jittery new national rhythms, but the alternatives seemed bleak: the operettas of Sigmund Romberg and Rudolf Friml still flourishing on Broadway were old European hat, the shrieks and toots of "modern" composers like Edgard Varèse were unfathomable, and jazz was widely understood to bear some relation to blacks and bordellos which would make the nation's fair-haired children run riot. The announced purpose of the Aeolian Hall concert was to resolve the pressing question "What is American music?" A gold-plated jury had been appointed—including Rachmaninoff himself, Jascha Heifetz, and Fritz Kreisler, all seated in the audience—to support a verdict that Whiteman, the celebrated lily-white "King of Jazz," had carefully programmed in advance. To show how far jazz had come from its scandalous roots to his polished dance band's smooth effects, Whiteman opened with the raucous "Livery Stable Blues"—involving barnyard calls and a tin can—and proceeded through "Yes, We Have No Bananas" to a Victor

Herbert suite and, finally, to the rhapsodic pièce de résistance. A defining moment of the Jazz Age, Whiteman's concert made it clear that few people at the time had any idea what "jazz" was.

The word itself was of mysterious origin—according to F. Scott Fitzgerald, "jazz" had once meant "sex"—and the broader questions of where, what, and who fuelled the notorious "jazz debates" of the decade. Blues or ragtime? Black or white? Serious expression or musically illiterate pandering to the masses? The contemporary press was the battleground, and Gershwin himself went into print with a series of articles bearing such eagerly pedagogic titles as "Does Jazz Belong to Art?" and "Jazz Is the Voice of the American Soul," all now happily reprinted in "The George Gershwin Reader," edited by Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson (Oxford; $30). The volume also includes a selection of contemporary reviews, letters, interviews, and up-to-date studies that trace the course of the composer's fairy-tale career, from the Lower East Side to the heights of Gatsbyan glory, where the suave but ever marvelling fellow wrote to his brother Ira, "Flash! Mrs. Dodge Sloan is naming a horse after me. By Sir Galahad out of Melodia."

Given the easy beauty of the Gershwin production and the unpretentious and even naïve charm of the man—friends invariably attested to the music as a mirror of his personality—it comes as something of a shock to encounter the anger and bitterness of a large part of the Gershwin debates, which long outlived the quarrels over jazz while adopting many of the same racial and social implications, and which offer a view of what Gershwin called the American soul, along with the apparently inseparable issue of our musical style. The voice of that soul, according to Gershwin, is "jazz developed out of ragtime, jazz that is the plantation song improved and transferred into finer, bigger harmonies." Writing in 1926 in the magazine Theatre, he reassured a nervous public that he was claiming not that the American soul was "Negroid" but that "it is black and white . . . all colors and all souls unified." This was the ideal behind the work he had planned to call "American Rhapsody."

Yet, with the possible exception of the original melody of the derided "Livery Stable Blues," no composition by a black composer was played at Aeolian Hall that illustrious day; in accord with the standards of the times, no black musician performed. Nor—as has often been pointed out—has any black composer ever earned the fame or fortune that Gershwin did by "improving" the hard-won art of the plantation songs. In the decades after the "Rhapsody," the questions only intensified in the light of developments in both music and society: How had a popular tunesmith composed our best-known achievements in classical forms? How had a child of Russian-Jewish immigrants come to represent the African-American voice? (Implicit in both: how had he dared?) Aided by some judicious supplementation, the "Gershwin Reader" presents a portrait of the artist who, by writing some of the most fearless and beloved music of the American century, stood like a lightning rod in the storms of an emerging democratic culture.

"Didn’t you play anything when you were a boy?” the reporter asked. To which the composer replied, not without pride, “Only hooky.” Gershwin credited his unlikely achievement to “the combination of New York, where I was born, and the rising, exhilarating rhythm of it, with centuries of hereditary feeling back of me.” His father, Morris Gershovitz, was a dubious patriarch. He had arrived from St. Petersburg in the eighteen-nineties, and—dazzled by the possibilities—had gone into a new business nearly every year: ladies’ shoes, Turkish baths, a pool hall, even a bookmaking venture at Brighton Beach Race Track. He had simplified his name and married his Russian sweetheart, Rose Bruskin, whose restless ambition more than matched his own. The four Gershwin children—Ira, born in 1896, who everyone quickly forgot was actually named Israel; George, born (but never called) Jacob, in 1898; Arthur, in 1900; and the only girl, Frances, in 1906—grew up in nearly thirty different apartments, from Harlem to Coney Island, but mostly in the thriving ghetto around Grand Street. This was not a family tied to tradition. Morris’s grandfather had been a rabbi, but Ira was the only one of the three sons to be given a bar mitzvah, and this event appears to have been motivated more by Rose’s desire to impress her friends with a party at Zeitlan’s restaurant, the local kosher Versailles, than by any residual religious feeling. By the time George came of age, it was clear that his only religion was music.

He had been saved by the piano. On a fateful day in 1910, a secondhand upright was hoisted through the family’s Second Avenue window and, to general shock, scapegrace street-fighting George, age twelve, sat down and tore through a popular tune like a vaudeville virtuoso. He had never studied a note. Many years later, Gershwin recalled the musical epiphanies of his early childhood: sitting transfixed outside a penny arcade as an automatic piano emitted noises that turned out to be Rubinstein’s “Melody in F”; feeling a “flashing revelation of beauty” when the strains of Dvorák’s “Humoresque” reached him from the school auditorium while he was, in fact, outside playing hooky. But now a piano had flown in through his window like an angel on a mission—which is as good a way as any of explaining how he could play. “Studying the piano made a good boy out of a bad one,” he informed an interviewer in 1924. “I was a changed person after I took it up.”

His songs poured out of his playing; he said that the tunes came “dripping off” his fingers, although after the piano arrived he studied seriously—Debussy, Liszt, Chopin—for about four years. The word “genius” occurs for the first time in a letter from a teacher who wrote of trying to keep the boy away from jazz. But Gershwin was never much of a formal student. He quit high school at fifteen to become the youngest “piano pounder” in Tin Pan Alley, and the rest of his education was left to what he called “intensive listening”: in the concert halls (he favored Russian composers, like himself), at Broadway revues, in the Yiddish theatres, and, increasingly, in the clubs of Harlem. By 1916, the great black jazz pianists James P. Johnson and Luckey Roberts were telling Eubie Blake about “this very talented ofay piano player” who could perform their most difficult tricks. The point is not that Gershwin was crossing boundaries but that he didn’t recognize that there were any boundaries to cross.

He began imagining “big compositions” while he was still in his teens and his first published songs were being interpolated into the higgledy-piggledy formats of current Broadway shows. In 1922, just two years after Al Jolson made a sensation of Gershwin’s “Swanee”—performed in his customary blackface—Gershwin composed an ambitious one-act “jazz opera” titled “Blue Monday,” which was billed as “a colored tragedy enacted in operatic style.” Produced among the skits and high-kicking numbers of the “Scandals” that year, it earned the New York World’s verdict as “the most dismal, stupid, and incredible blackface sketch that has probably ever been perpetrated” and was yanked after a single performance. Undaunted, Gershwin maintained his optimistic faith in what he called a “transitory stage” of history, when everyone was awaiting a work that would fuse the nation’s disparate musical styles and transcend them all: an American work in the image of America. There was a tension about the age, he wrote, that could not last.

"Rhapsody in Blue” gave people everything they had been waiting for. Novelty with depth; virtuosity with passion; originality with a tradition strong behind it—their own too nervous, much too fast, thrillingly sad, and ineffably romantic lives, circa 1924, expressed in sound. Although the initial reviews had plenty of reservations—the piece was structurally incoherent, technically undeveloped—there was no getting around the fact that something new had taken place. In the Times, Olin Downes issued a challenge to both the jazz and the classical sides of Gershwin’s radically middle path, filling in Whiteman’s racial omissions (“The American Negro,” he wrote, “has surely contributed fundamentally to this art”) and blasting “the pitiful sterility of the average production of the ‘serious’ American composer,” as exposed by the vitality of Gershwin’s art. Until black jazz was given recognition, or dry classical branches again bore fruit, the undivided realm of contemporary music had a single heir.

And yet the “Rhapsody,” for all its fresh surprise, had an important precedent in the American imagination. One wishes that the “Gershwin Reader” had strayed into wider literary territory, because Gershwin was a phenomenon extending far beyond the musical life. The notion that a person may be so critical to an age that had he not been born he would have been invented seems startlingly true of Gershwin, who called his “Rhapsody” “a musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot.” He had been invented: Gershwin’s inspiration was first espoused by the poor Russian-Jewish musical genius whose American Symphony is the central (if unheard) theme of Israel Zangwill’s play “The Melting Pot,” which swept the country in 1908 and affixed its title forever to New York, where its drama of assimilation takes place. From The Nation’s welcoming tribute to Gershwin’s “Rhapsody” as “the first distinctive musical phase of the melting-pot” to the Times’ bright hope that Gershwin would soon produce something “racially important,” Gershwin’s work imparted a sense of the Jewish affinity with Negro music, both in its wailing sorrow-songs and in its ebullient long-awaited freedoms. The composer was fully conscious of his cultural role—Henry Ford’s anti-Semitic Dearborn newspaper had already taken to attacking “Jewish jazz” and its “abandoned sensuousness of sliding notes” (one can virtually hear the opening clarinet glissando of the “Rhapsody”)—and he appears to have revelled in it. By 1925, he was working on a series

of piano preludes titled “The Melting Pot” and a successor to the “Rhapsody” that he was calling his “New York Concerto.”

But, if Gershwin was a product of the age, he was also one of its heroes: the impresario Otto Kahn compared him, as a leader of youth, to Lindbergh. Others were put in mind of Fitzgerald, and there is more than a little of Gatsby in Gershwin’s endearingly awkward attempts to master his new social position, as when he announces a “very dignified and sedate” concert, in the magazine Singing, and assures readers that none of his numbers “will be cheap or trashy.” In appearance, he was immaculately turned out and preternaturally confident and cheerful. But people who came close often remarked on the sadness visible—it is there in many photographs—around his eyes or mouth. His many nervous physical ailments (he suffered miserably from “composer’s stomach”) were a standing joke among his friends. And his letters contain enough references to loneliness to form a leitmotif, like a blues line moaning low under a jaunty melody.

Never married, uncertainly attached to a series of women (preferably married), Gershwin lived surrounded by people and was renowned for his love of parties but also for spending all night at these parties alone at the piano. (“It will be different in every way,” a hostess in Cole Porter’s “Jubilee” brags of her next soirée. “Gershwin’s promised not to play.”) If music had an essential role in easing his loneliness, it was also the means of its preservation: an enclosing wall of sound that dazzled yet held off everyone in the room. Kay Swift, by all accounts the most important woman in Gershwin’s life, recalled that “nobody would move” while he was playing, “except toward the piano.” You had to listen, you might watch, but you could not break the spell to talk or touch; and neither, of course, could he.

The biographers Edward Jablonski and Joan Peyser—among the foremost authorities on Gershwin’s life—have laid blame for the vacancy in the composer’s personal history on his mother’s chilly disposition, and his sister corroborated stories of a woman with a yen for furs “who did not give herself to anyone.” Yet George’s siblings all managed to escape into the traditional warmth of marriage. In fact, Ira and his wife, Leonore, provided one of several domestic sanctuaries that Gershwin maintained as informal second homes—even though his own apartment, large enough for three grand pianos, did not contain a single guest room. The melodies that poured out of Gershwin’s hands at the keyboard seem to have been an echo of all that he poured in: the close fascination, troubled brooding, sexuality, fantasy, and love that more ordinary people spend upon each other.

But if the “Rhapsody,” in particular, contains a portrait, of a man or of an era, it is one that has been continually retouched. The most famous recording, Leonard Bernstein’s 1959 full-orchestra version—at the Gershwin centennial, in 1998, it was still the top recommendation of the Times—sounds less like twenties “symphonic jazz” than like fifties symphonized Freud: Gershwin’s giddy clarinet has become a cat in heat, his lilting central melody a swollen hymn to eros. The larky gaiety of the original is a wholly different experience: one can hear it best in Gershwin’s abbreviated 1924 recording. And one can understand its impact best in a passage from the working manuscript of “The

Great Gatsby" (also abbreviated, when the book was published, in 1925) about the composer Vladimir Epstien's "Jazz History of the World": a recent sensation at Carnegie Hall, the piece is played one summer night, at Gatsby's special request, for the pleasure of his guests, and Nick Carraway finds its effects indistinguishable from those of champagne. When it is over, he notes, "girls were swooning backward playfully into men's arms, even into groups knowing that someone would arrest their falls." All grace, no gravity, buoyed on music that reflected a world of expectation and yet marked its end.

In the fall of 1924, the return of Aaron Copland from his studies in Paris and the arrival of Louis Armstrong from the clubs of Chicago began to tear the ideal of an American synthesis apart. Serious music and jazz went their distinct ways—a composer's art and a performer's art; eternal verity and restless improvisation—leaving Gershwin in a no man's land that came to be known, with a curl of the lip, as "pops." (In an outstanding book about the "Rhapsody," David Schiff indicts "a century characterized by the unpopularity of its most prestigious music.") Gershwin's New York Concerto, soberly retitled Concerto in F, premièred in Carnegie Hall in December, 1925 ("There would not have been as much excitement," the Times reported, "if Brahms had come to town"), and was judged a major disappointment. The work was found to lack the substance of a real concerto—or, equally damning, of real jazz. But revolutionary energy defused in one place was already lighting up another: in the first full-evening music-and-lyrics collaboration of the brothers Gershwin, "Lady, Be Good!," which opened on Broadway late in 1924, Fred and Adele Astaire performed a song called "Fascinating Rhythm" and the old-world operetta hastened toward an inevitable, syncopated death.

From then until the 1930 hit "Girl Crazy"—introducing a young ex-secretary named Ethel Merman singing "I Got Rhythm"—the Jazz Age musical coincided with new developments in technology to reinvent people's idea of a good time. Recordings began to outsell sheet music, and proliferating radio stations made possible a new kind of mass popularity—which was, however, extremely short-lived. Despite all the changes, the new librettos remained as trifling as those of operetta and as loosely bound as a revue's. These shows were musical butterflies: light, colorful, and created without thought of survival. Gershwin feared that his songs would not outlast them long.

Instead, of course, the Gershwin scores led to a renaissance of vocal interpretation. Just as Gershwin's music was cast out from the redefined borders of jazz, the greatest jazz performers—never much for borders—were recording every Gershwin song they could; Ethel Waters covered "I Got Rhythm" almost before the opening-night rafters had stopped shaking at Merman's voice. (An essay by Richard Crawford in the "Gershwin Reader" lists seventy-nine recorded versions in the song's first dozen years. Max Roach later estimated the number of tunes written on the changes in "I Got Rhythm" as "about ten million.") But Gershwin's ambition to write larger and more enduring forms persisted, in symphonic works like "An American in Paris" and in experimental shows like "Strike Up the Band" and "Of Thee I Sing"—political satires with songs so cleverly embedded in the stories ("Wintergreen for President") that, ironically, most expired with

their shows, just as Gershwin had feared. And then, in 1929, Gershwin signed a contract with the Metropolitan Opera to write a full-length work, based on the Russian playwright S. Ansky's 1914 drama "The Dybbuk," about diabolical possession in a village of poor Hasidic Jews.

It was not the first subject that had awakened his interest. In 1926, Gershwin had been excited by Dubose Heyward's popular novel "Porgy," the story of a crippled Negro beggar, set in Heyward's native Charleston, but discussions bogged down because Heyward's wife, Dorothy, was turning the book into a play. Later that year, the Habima Players of Moscow brought Ansky's mystical drama to Broadway, accompanied by a score based on authentic Hasidic melodies. Inspired, Gershwin sketched in some scenes and was planning to go abroad to study Jewish folk and liturgical music; his plans were abandoned only when an Italian composer obtained exclusive rights to Ansky's play and the Met pulled out. But the idea of an opera remained: at the height of his fame, Gershwin was toiling away at lessons in harmony and counterpoint. In March, 1932, he wrote again to Heyward and, with the theatrical run of "Porgy" complete, the pair settled on the project that Gershwin called his "labor of love."

From Catfish Row to the Pale of Settlement and back again: worlds that had in common not a shred of language, tradition, or belief but—far more important, for Gershwin—were saturated in and sanctified by music. Heyward's book, like Ansky's play, flows on a stream of song and chant, the open-voiced thanks and lament of a devout people who have long been isolated from modern ways. There is a whiff of musical Eden in Gershwin's description of the South Carolina Gullah Negroes, among whom "Porgy" is set, as a people who express themselves "quite naturally by song and dance": if the comment seems today to carry a racial sting, it is important to remember that this was precisely how Gershwin saw himself. As for Heyward, he had grown up poor, was orphaned young, and, like Gershwin, had dropped out of high school; stricken with polio at sixteen, he had nearly lost the use of his arms. Personal history had drawn him to the story of a crippled beggar aflame with pride, a real individual whom he had read about in the local papers—not as a condescending outsider but as one who recognized his own. Years later, recalling the weeks that Gershwin spent in the South, going to church services and listening to spirituals, Heyward wrote that the visit had felt more like "a homecoming."

Gershwin began composing with "Summertime," in December, 1933. He was determined to write his own spirituals; only the cries of the Charleston street venders—some of the eeriest vocalizing in the opera—were drawn directly from reality. Ira, always close at hand, provided the urbane lyrics for the drug-dealing villain, Sportin' Life ("It Ain't Necessarily So"), while Heyward sent the libretto (honed from Dorothy Heyward's play) and the more pastoral lyrics from his home. The letters between Gershwin and Heyward form a wonderful record of their collaboration, in warm sympathy on the fundamental points: the necessity of an all-black cast (a decade after "Blue Monday," Gershwin recoils when Jolson tries to interfere with a blackface version) and as much emotional truth as possible. ("I have cut out the conventional Negro vaudeville stuff," Heyward assures the composer about a scene from the play.) But Gershwin is adamant (against Heyward's

advice) on using operatic recitative for the speech of the Negroes and spoken dialogue—flat, gruff, a break in the flood of music—for the intruding whites. The distinction is like that between Shakespearean characters who speak poetry and those limited to prose.

The cast consisted largely of conservatory-trained singers who would have had operatic careers if the country's theatres had not been closed to them. "Porgy and Bess" was produced not at the Metropolitan Opera—Marian Anderson was the first African-American soloist to sing there, in 1955—but by the adventurous Theatre Guild. Todd Duncan, the baritone who played Porgy, tells of auditioning for Gershwin with an eighteenth-century Italian aria because he refused to conform to the idea that blacks ought to sing spirituals, and he had nothing but disdain for popular songs. When Gershwin immediately offered him the leading role, Duncan coolly replied that he'd have to hear the music first. In a luminous account of this reverse audition, Duncan describes his conversion from skepticism to tears as Gershwin played and caterwauled at the piano ("My voice is what is known as small," Gershwin liked to say, "but disagreeable") and summed up his wonder at the results with the inevitable question: "Where did this man get this from?"

After eleven months of composition and nine months of orchestration—this from a man who could turn out a song in an hour or two—"Porgy and Bess" went into rehearsal in August, 1935. Of all his accomplishments, Gershwin was proudest of the thickly contrapuntal orchestral writing. ("Get this, Gershwin writing fugues!" he crowed. "What will the boys say now?") Although a hit in Boston, the three-hour show was severely cut before it reached New York, where many of "the boys" had been sharpening their knives since 1924. Cultural hopes occasioned by the "Rhapsody" had long since been deflated. On opening night, in October, the Alvin Theatre was packed with show-biz celebrities, but few classical musicians were in sight. (Aaron Copland, listing the country's most notable composers the following year, found room for Piston, Strang, Salzedo, and Citkowitz but refused to scrape as low as Gershwin.) The Times sent representatives of both drama and music; the drama critic objected to the use of operatic recitative (a device he seemed never to have heard before), while the music critic complained of the number of Broadway-style songs.

There were some ecstatic accounts. Marcia Davenport, in the magazine Stage, called "Porgy and Bess" the first true opera since Strauss, and wrote with something like the old melting-pot ardor of the scene of mourners at a wake, "its rhythms Negroid, its soaring, minor cadences yearningly Hebraic." Performing in the climax of that scene, the soprano Ruby Elzy was widely praised for the savagely beautiful aria "My Man's Gone Now," which concludes with a rising cry that Davenport characterized as "a wail, a minor arpeggio for which the composer's direction is glissando": a tragic pendant to the tipsy clarinet of "Rhapsody in Blue."

Of the reviews that were out for blood, the composer was reportedly most wounded by Virgil Thomson's assertion that "Gershwin has not and never did have the power of

sustained musical development." Thomson's review—it is not included in this "Reader" but can be found among his collected essays—is a dizzying mixture of perspicacity and poison. Asserting that Gershwin was a charming but not, of course, a "serious" composer and had adhered far too uncritically to his "melting-pot sources," Thomson conceded that "Porgy and Bess" was fully alive despite being afflicted by "fake folklore" and—as the phrase appeared in the journal Modern Music—"plum-pudding orchestration." (In Thomson's collection, the phrase is "gefiltefish orchestration." One suspects that the editor of Modern Music found this choice of delicacy distasteful.)

Thomson's charge that "Porgy and Bess" was racially offensive—"Folklore subjects recounted by an outsider are only valid as long as the folk in question is unable to speak for itself, which is certainly not true of the American Negro in 1935"—had some uneasy support from black musicians. Duke Ellington was quoted as objecting to Gershwin's dramatic characterizations, and to the opera's lack of a Negro musical idiom, but he claimed to have been misunderstood. Despite Heyward and Gershwin's lofty aims, the characters in "Porgy and Bess" are, after all, poor and superstitious; they speak in an uneducated dialect; the hero is a cripple and the heroine an addict. Porgy's upbeat anthem "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin' " might be intended as a noble Rousseauian cry of freedom, but it could also be taken as a bitter historical truth.

"Porgy and Bess" closed in just over three months, losing its entire investment. The sudden demise of his most beloved work prompted Gershwin to leave for Hollywood in the summer of 1936—he had had a big success there five years earlier—although Hollywood was not particularly eager to have him. The boy genius had fallen down hard. "Porgy" bore the dangerous mark of highbrow miscalculation, and—unlike Berlin, Porter, or Rodgers—he hadn't had a Broadway hit in a long time. ("I had to live for this," Gershwin grumbled, "that Sam Goldwyn should say to me, 'Why don't you write hits like Irving Berlin?' ") Given Gershwin's record of maladies, increasingly violent headaches were dismissed as just another of his nervous symptoms; his unprecedented swerves into foul humor were chalked up to the experience of failure. Doctors, finding nothing wrong, suggested psychiatric help, while members of his circle suspected him of being self-indulgent, even when his motor coördination began to falter. He was living then with Ira and Leonore in a large house in Beverly Hills. Long afterward, Ira recalled a night when George spilled food at dinner and Leonore ordered him to leave the table; Ira was still trying to exorcise his memory of the look in George's eyes when he helped him get upstairs. He was spending most of his time lying down by then, the headaches were so bad; but he was moved to a smaller house nearby. There was no more piano playing, the house was dark—sunlight hurt his eyes—and he complained that all his friends were leaving. On Friday evening, July 9, 1937, George Gershwin went into a coma, and there was no one with him but a nurse and the valet whose job had once been to keep people away.

In the hospital the following day, a brain tumor was detected. One of the country's leading neurosurgeons, vacationing on a yacht in Chesapeake Bay, was brought to shore by a military craft sent out by President Roosevelt's personal physician; but it had been too late for a long time. Emergency surgery was performed early Sunday, and that

morning Gershwin died, at the age of thirty-eight. The body was sent back to New York, and, despite terrible rain on the afternoon of the funeral, at Temple Emanu-El, there was, Variety reported, “a turnaway attendance.” That fall, a memorial concert was broadcast from the Hollywood Bowl, where Fred Astaire sang “They Can’t Take That Away from Me,” and Ruby Elzy performed a lacerating “My Man’s Gone Now.” In published accounts of Gershwin’s estate, which was estimated at more than four hundred thousand dollars, his most profitable musical property was listed as “Rhapsody in Blue,” assessed at $20,125. His least valuable work, “Porgy and Bess,” was worth two hundred and fifty dollars.

Barely five years later, in 1942, a New York revival of “Porgy and Bess” scored a commercial triumph, largely because Gershwin’s operatic recitatives were replaced with spoken dialogue. It earned the kind of reviews that Gershwin had craved: even Virgil Thomson discovered that the work’s “inspiration is authentic and its expressive quotient high.” But, if Gershwin was cheated of his vindication, he was also spared the fury of the next wave of reaction.

In 1953, another major revival of “Porgy and Bess”—starring the young Leontyne Price, fresh out of Juilliard—prompted James Hicks, the reviewer for the Baltimore Afro-American, to declare Gershwin’s labor of love “the most insulting, the most libelous, the most degrading act that could possibly be perpetrated against the Negro people.” In the following decade, Harold Cruse’s widely read manifesto “The Crisis of the Negro Intellectual” sought retribution for the injustices done to Negro artists.“The Gershwin-type musicians achieved status and recognition in the 1920s for music that they literally stole outright from Harlem nightclubs,” Cruse wrote. “Porgy and Bess” was nothing more than “a symbol of that deeply-ingrained American cultural paternalism practiced on Negroes ever since the first Southern white man blacked his face.” In a sad and dreadful coming full circle, Cruse called for a boycott of the opera by all black musicians and insisted that it ought to be performed only by whites in blackface.

Fortunately, few musicians agreed. Whatever Duke Ellington felt in the thirties, in 1953 he cabled Robert Breen, the director of the new production, “Your Porgy and Bess the superbest, singing the gonest, acting the craziest, Gershwin the greatest.” For generations, black musicians have kept this score in a state of grace. Sidney Bechet’s incandescent recording of “Summertime” is as close as one may come in this world to hearing Gabriel welcome you home; Billie Holiday sang the song as though the world contained no home at all. (Holiday once claimed that she had turned down the part Ruby Elzy played in “Porgy,” because she couldn’t bear to sing “My Man’s Gone Now” night after night: “It’s too sad. It’s the saddest song ever sung.”) In 1959, a bloated movie by Otto Preminger made Gershwin’s entire premise seem a stale mistake, but the bad air was blown away by Louis Armstrong and Ella Fitzgerald’s two-voiced brass-and-silk “Porgy” album, and by Miles Davis’s equally blithe reconfiguration of the score. Looking in the New Grove “Gospel, Blues and Jazz” these days, one will find Gershwin mentioned only as an adjunct to Davis’s “Porgy” recording. But close the book and listen—to Herbie Hancock’s Grammy-winning “Gershwin’s World,” to Marcus Roberts’s distinctly personal “Rhapsody” on “Portraits in Blue” (with a band that mixes jazz musicians and

the Orchestra of St. Luke's), or, for that matter, to the Minnesota Klezmer Band's recent "Gershwin the Klezmer"—and he is everywhere.

In our daily lives—in our elevators or our memories—we know the tunes even when we don't know exactly what it is we know. When the New York City Ballet orchestra launches into its Gershwin ballet, "Who Cares?," the audience inevitably starts to sway and bits of piping lyric escape into the air, uncontainable, from people who don't realize they have begun to sing. Gershwin was planning to compose a ballet when he died—but what wasn't he planning to do? In the last months of his life, he told his sister that he had not yet "scratched the surface" of his aspirations. He was thinking of a big work about Abraham Lincoln, he was asking Heyward for new ideas, and there was always his original idea of "an opera of the melting pot, of New York City itself," which would "allow for many kinds of music, black and white, Eastern and Western, and would call for a style that should achieve, out of this diversity, an artistic and an aesthetic unity." We'll never know what we lost when the sounds and the colors divided behind him. A brilliant 1986 Glyndebourne Festival Opera production of "Porgy and Bess," directed by Trevor Nunn and conducted by Simon Rattle, successfully reëstablished the work's recitatives, its dignity, and its composer's goals. Gershwin was lauded as an operatic genius and, by one critic deeply impressed with the composer's empathy for his characters, as "an archetypical White Negro." Small wonder that a history of Gershwin criticism often reads simply like history (that thing which people fail to learn from). More than seventy-five years ago, Gershwin had a better term for what he was. "My people are Americans," he wrote, and, lest we forget, "my time is today."