

Biography of george gershwin



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

George Gershwin was an American composer and pianist; considered as one of the most significant American composers of the 20th century, known for popular stage and screen numbers as well as classical compositions.

George Jacob Gershwin was born Jacob Bruskin Gershowitz in Brooklyn, New York on September 26, 1898, as the second son to Russian Jewish immigrants Moishe Gershowitz and Roza Bruskina. An older brother, Ira, was born December 6, 1896, and younger brother, Arthur, and sister, Frances, were born in 1900 and 1906 respectively. His parent's families fled Russia in the late 19th century due to the increasing anti-Jewish sentiment. Once in America, the couple married and Americanized their names to Morris and Rose Bruskin Gershwine.

The family lived at several locations over the years, as their father seemed to change homes with each new enterprise in which he became involved. Mostly, they grew up around the Yiddish Theater District of New York. George and Ira frequented the local Yiddish theaters, with George occasionally appearing onstage as an extra. During the first twenty or so years of their marriage, the Gershwins resided, by brother Ira's later estimate, at as many as twenty eight different New York locations, with father Morris pursuing nearly as many occupations, including leather worker, shoemaker, bookie, and proprietor of a stationery store, a cigar store, a summer hotel, Turkish baths, and numerous eateries, including a chain of bakeries called Wolpin and Gershwin (W&G). Scant evidence suggests steadily increasing prosperity. In 1900, for instance, Morris earned his living making "uppers" for women's shoes; by 1909 he had acquired two "eating houses" and in

1914 the Manhattan telephone directory listed no fewer than four Wolpin & Gershwin bakeries.

Gershwin encountered classical music at an early age. Two youthful musical experiences proved especially memorable. The first occurred when he was about six, as he recalled: “

I stood outside a penny arcade listening to an automatic piano leaping through Anton Rubinstein’s

Melody in F. The peculiar jumps in the music held me rooted. To this very day I can’t hear the

tune without picturing myself outside that arcade on One Hundred and Twenty-fifth Street,

standing there barefoot and in overalls, drinking it all in avidly.” He had a more decisive

revelation about 1908 when he was ten or so, as he stood outside his Lower East Side public

school and heard within a schoolmate, a violin prodigy two years his junior, Max (“Maxie”)

Rosenzweig (later Rosen), perform Antonín Dvořák’s Humoresque during recess. “It was, to me,” he said, “a flashing revelation of beauty.” At around

the same time, George’s parents bought a piano for lessons for his older brother Ira, but to his parents’ surprise, and Ira’s relief, it was George who spent more time playing it. When it was delivered, George immediately sat down and played a popular song of the day, according to the version related by Ira, who was impressed by George’s dexterous use of his left hand. The

family's surprise was explained by the fact that George had been playing and practicing at a friend's house imitating the movement of the keys on a player piano.

Ira began to take lessons, and George had to be "shooed" away from the piano. Ira soon gave up and George began to take lessons, probably sometime in 1911 when he was twelve or thirteen. His first teacher may have been the same Miss Green who was Ira's first. After about four months he began to study with the flamboyant Hungarian immigrant, Professor Goldfarb, who was famed for having written the "Theodore Roosevelt March". Many years later he said that he had three neighborhood teachers. With Goldfarb, he ran through the standard instruction manual and was introduced to the light classics. George went on to have more serious lessons with Charles Hambitzer who was a member of Joseph Knecht's orchestra at the Waldorf-Astoria Hotel and who usually appeared there as piano soloist.

After he began his studies with Hambitzer, George played in a program in March 1914 arranged by his brother Ira for the Finley Club (a literary club) at the Christador House on the Lower East Side. He was listed as "George Gershwin". Within months he left the High School Of Commerce to become a song plugger with the publishing firm of Jerome H. Remick & Company working on "Tin Pan Alley". Selling popular music was an active business in New York. There were no radios, so a song's popularity depended on live performances and "plugging" to sell sheet music.

Gershwin's introduction to popular music at Remick's came at a time of transition in musical styles. Ragtime was still a powerful influence. At first,

the rags were piano solos or instrumentals based on a strong rhythmic syncopation. The older tradition of operettas was still a major musical force on Broadway and a prominent third musical strain was the revue. Thus, Gershwin began his professional musical career at a time that one music historian characterized as the “most exciting in the history of the American Musical theater.”

Throughout his career, Gershwin was at the right place at the right time and his natural talents did the rest. His work for Remick's was quite significant. It led to a part-time job recording piano rolls, beginning in 1915. While he may well have thought song plugging for Remick's was a dead end, recording piano rolls widened his experiences considerably.

Sometime in 1919 Gershwin and Irving Caesar, composer, writer, and popular lyricist, deliberately sat down to write a popular song in the idiom of current favorite two-steps. The result was “Swanee”. It was published by Harms and inserted in the Capitol Revue, produced by Ned Wayberg in October 1919. The song languished until Al Jolson heard Gershwin play it at a party. Jolson was one of the most important Broadway personalities at the time and was so captivated by the song that he decided to interpolate it into his current hit show and more importantly to record it on January 8, 1920, for Columbia records. Suddenly Gershwin and Caesar were the authors of a major hit selling thousands of copies of sheet music, records, and piano rolls. George Gershwin had finally made his mark.

In the late 1910s, Gershwin had met songwriter and music director William Daly. The two worked jointly on the Broadway musicals “Piccadilly to

Broadway" (1920) and "For Goodness' Sake" (1922), and collaborated for the score for "Our Nell" (1923).

Gershwin had arrived on the musical scene at the dawn of the Golden Age of Songwriting which would flourish throughout the 1920s and 1930s. He soon joined the select circle of composers—Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers, Cole Porter, Sigmund Romberg, and Harold Aden—whose songs lifted the hearts of America.

Indeed, in less than five years, Gershwin's songs proved sufficiently fresh, natural, and schmaltzy to command wide attention. His scores for the "George White's Scandals" of 1920, 1921, 1922, 1923, and 1924 helped make those frothy extravaganzas major successes. "I'll Build a Stairway to Paradise", the first-act finale for the 1922 revue, often is cited as the true beginning of the Gershwin style.

It was on February 12, 1924; at Aeolian Hall in New York that Gershwin became lastingly famous with the introduction of "Rhapsody in Blue". The afternoon's program of new composition had aimed to prove that jazz was respectable music. Gershwin thought out his creation while riding on a train: "I heard it as a musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our national pep, of our blues, of our metropolitan madness." He composed the piece in 20 days.

American music had found a remarkable new composer. Gershwin had brought jazz into the concert hall. In time, "Rhapsody in Blue" would become one of the most frequently performed concert works by an American composer.

The scintillating “Lady, Be Good!” added further luster to that year, the first of Gershwin’s shows for which brother Ira wrote all the lyrics. Its “Fascinating Rhythm” formed a blazing backdrop for the dancing of Fred and Adele Astaire. The high-powered show, using melodies and rhythms based on jazz, pointed the way toward a hard-edged future for the American musical.

In “Oh, Kay!”, a frothy tale of bootleggers that opened in 1926, George and Ira Gershwin created a score one critic called “a marvel of its kind”. “Funny Face”, featuring the Astaires, had a 244-performance run the following year. During the show’s out-of-town run, George lost two tune books containing 40 song-roughs. He told Ira not to fret, confidently reassuring him that “There are more where they came from”.

A study in the unexpected, even Gershwin didn’t know what would happen at the keyboard. Composer Vernon Duke remembered his “racing through new tunes, adding new tricks, harmonies, changing keys after every chord, a born improviser”. One friend said that “George got most of his ideas just by playing”. Another observed, “George at the piano was George happy”.

By the late 1920s, Gershwin was recognized as just about the most famous musical figure in America. Convivial, dashing, and good-humored, he was as lionized in Europe as in New York. For some time, he had contemplated composing a musical homage to Paris. In the spring of 1928, while visiting the City of Light, he filled in many details. Gershwin called his finished work “An American in Paris”, aiming “to portray the impressions of an American visitor in Paris as he strolls about the city, listens to the various street noises,

and absorbs the French atmosphere". The swirling tone poem flavored with jazz, blues, dance, and symphonic elements premiered at New York's Carnegie Hall on Dec. 13, 1928. It met with instant audience enthusiasm and has remained an American classic for decades.

The popularly held image of George Gershwin was that of a debonair man of musical destiny—an extrovert who liked borscht, prizefights, and nothing better than the spotlight. An acknowledged “ladies’ man”, he counted chorus line dancers, actresses, and society women among his amatory acquaintances. Confidantes never quite could pinpoint the “one woman” in his life. Unlike his sister and two brothers, George remained unmarried. There seemed an air of wistfulness to his romances. Perhaps his obsession with music made it the be-all and end-all of his life.

“Girl Crazy”, opening in 1930, provided a stage debut for Ethel Merman, a leading role for Ginger Rogers, and a lineup of sparkling songs. The pit band included future musical luminaries Benny Goodman, Glenn Miller, Jimmy Dorsey, and Gene Krupa. It was the last and perhaps greatest of the musicals that Gershwin did in the rakish “Roaring Twenties” mood.

By the early 1930s, Gershwin's fame, earnings, and range of works had made him unique among American composers. With his talent deepening, he turned to political satires. “Strike Up the Band”, in 1930, took an acerbic view of war. “Of Thee I Sing”, which opened the following year, played for 441 performances, the longest run ever achieved by a Gershwin show. The semi-operatic “Let ‘Em Eat Cake” followed.

"Porgy and Bess", Gershwin's magnum opus, was to take two years of the most exhausting creative effort of his life. He had become intrigued by Porgy, a novel-become-play written by DuBose Heyward. It told a tragic tale of black fishermen, set in Catfish Row in Charleston, S. C. When Gershwin's labor of love was finished, he had written a full-scale opera in three acts and nine scenes, with a vocal score 560 pages long and a score for orchestra running 700 pages. Ira, listening to his brother play and half-sing sequences from the opera, joyfully exclaimed to the director: "He did it. Isn't it wonderful? Isn't he wonderful?"

"Porgy and Bess" opened at the Alvin Theater on Oct. 10, 1935. Gershwin's "American folk opera" bespoke his genius in its combination of operatic and jazz idioms. Such songs as "Bess, You Is My Woman", "I Got Plenty of Nuthin'", "It Ain't Necessarily So", and "Summertime" were to make his creation a landmark of the musical stage. The opera ran for a creditable 124 performances but entailed a financial loss for all concerned. At its last performance, Gershwin watched with tears running down his cheeks.

Hollywood took center stage as the Great Depression darkened Broadway. Gershwin decided to try his hand at writing music for motion pictures. On Aug. 10, 1936, he boarded a plane for Los Angeles. A woman friend of his recounted: "We said goodbye and he walked up the ramp. At the top, he waved. And I knew I would never see him again".

George savored Tinsel Town's golden life—the sun, swimming pools, and soirees. Within a year, he turned out the scores for the films "Shall We Dance", "A Damsel in Distress", and "The Goldwyn Follies".

In film's never-never land, however, something seemed to be going wrong with Gershwin. While dining with the Irving Berlin, he complained of headaches. He passed out in a Beverly Hills barber chair. Leaving the Brown Derby restaurant, he sank to the sidewalk. While rehearsing for a Hollywood Bowl concert, Gershwin became so dizzy he almost fell off the stage. X-ray techniques of the time detected nothing. Gershwin languished. By the first days of July 1937, he hardly could play a few notes on the piano.

On Friday afternoon, July 9, 1937, Gershwin lay down for a nap, which turned into a coma. At Cedars of Lebanon Hospital, he was diagnosed as having a far-advanced brain tumor. Before dawn on July 11, a team of surgeons began to operate. Their efforts met with failure. They worked for five hours, to no avail. As of 10:30 that morning, Gershwin was dead.

George Gershwin's music, with all its powerful emotions and novel ideas, proved to have broad universal appeal, and demonstrated, in a most spectacular fashion, the considerable extent to which a sophisticated and original twentieth-century composer could reach a worldwide public. When George Gershwin died the news of his death was featured on the front page of the July 12 New York Times: GEORGE GERSHWIN, COMPOSER, IS DEAD, and the subhead read "Master of Jazz Succumbs". He was described as a "composer of his generation and a child of the twenties". Eulogies would stress two themes: that Gershwin was a "bridge" between the world of jazz and the concert hall, and that he was the voice of America.

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