

GEORGE GERSHWIN, THE COMPOSER AND THE STORY OF HIS TOO SHORT LIFE

Researched by George Plohn



The Best of Gershwin <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5cLZBeQEqq8>

Gershwin was of Russian Jewish and Ukrainian Jewish ancestry. His grandfather, Jakov Gershowitz, had served for 25 years as a mechanic for the Imperial Russian Army earning the right of free travel and residence, even though a Jew. This was a big deal because historically, from 1791 until 1915, under the Czarist rule, Jews were permitted permanent residency only within the so-called Pale of Settlement (meaning "borders of settlement"), which included the present day Lithuania, Latvia, Belarus, Western Ukraine, Moldova and Eastern Poland. The largest concentration — about 5 million —, representing 40% of Jews in the world at that time was located there. The Napoleonic Enlightenment, which emancipated the Jews of Western Europe, did not make it to Eastern Europe.

The son of Jakov Gershowitz, Moishe Gershowitz, worked as a leather cutter for women's shoes. He met and fell in love with Roza Bruskina, the daughter of a furrier in Vilnius (in today's Lithuania). She and her family then moved to New York due to increasing anti-Jewish sentiment in Russia, changing her first name to Rose. Moishe, faced with compulsory military service if he remained in Russia, moved to America as soon as he could afford to. Once in New York, he changed his first name to Morris. When he married Rose in 1895, Gershowitz Americanized his name to Gershwin.

Their first child, Ira was born in 1896. Their second son was born in 1898. His birth certificate identifies him as Jacob Gershwine, but he soon became known as George. He changed the spelling of his surname to 'Gershwin' when he became a professional musician, and other family members followed suit.

The boys grew up around the Yiddish Theater District. George lived a usual childhood existence for children of New York tenements – running around with his boyhood friends, roller skating and misbehaving in the streets. Remarkably, he cared nothing for music until the age of ten, when he was intrigued by what he heard at a friend's violin recital. The sound, and the way his friend played, captured him. His parents had bought a piano for lessons for his older brother Ira, but to their surprise, and Ira's relief, it was George who spent more time playing it. With a degree of frustration, George tried various piano teachers for some two years, before finally was introduced to a Charles Hambitzer who remained Gershwin's musical mentor and taught him conventional piano technique, introduced him to music of the European classical tradition, and encouraged him to attend orchestral concerts. At home, following such concerts, young Gershwin would essentially try to play, at the piano, the music that he had heard - completely from recall, and without sheet music. Dropping out from school

at the age of 15, Gershwin found his first job as a "song plugger" for Jerome H. Remick and Company, where he earned \$15 a week. A song plugger or song demonstrator was a vocalist or piano player employed by department stores and music stores in the early 20th century to promote and help sell new sheet music, which is how hits were advertised before quality recordings were widely available. Typically, the pianist sat on the mezzanine level of a store and played whatever music was sent up to him by the clerk of the store selling the sheet music. Patrons could select any title and get a preview of the tune before buying it.

His own first published song was "When You Want 'Em, You Can't Get 'Em, When You've Got 'Em, You Don't Want 'Em". It was published in 1916 when Gershwin was only 17 years old and earned him 50 cents. His 1917 novelty rag, "Rialto Ripples", was a commercial success, and in 1919 he scored his first big national hit with his song, "Swanee". Al Jolson, a famous Broadway singer of the day, heard Gershwin perform "Swanee" at a party and decided to sing it in one of his shows.

In the late 1910s, Gershwin collaborated with songwriter and music director William Daly on several Broadway musicals, such as *Piccadilly to Broadway* (1920) and *For Goodness' Sake* (1922) among many others.

In 1924, the two collaborated on a musical comedy *Lady Be Good*, and *Show Girl* (1929), *Girl Crazy* (1930), in which debuted Ginger Rogers, and "I Got Rhythm"; and *Of Thee I Sing* (1931),^[23] which was the first musical comedy to win the Pulitzer Prize for Drama.

In 1924, Gershwin composed his first major classical work, *Rhapsody in Blue*, for orchestra and piano.

In the mid-1920s, Gershwin stayed in Paris for a short period of time, during which he applied to study composition with the classical music composer Maurice Ravel, who rejected him because he was afraid that rigorous classical study would ruin his jazz-

influenced style. Maurice Ravel's rejection letter to Gershwin told him, "Why become a second-rate Ravel when you're already a first-rate Gershwin?" While there, Gershwin composed *An American in Paris*. This work quickly became part of the standard repertoire in Europe and the United States.

Back in the States Gershwin composed his first opera *Blue Monday*, not a financial success and has received only limited performances. His most ambitious composition followed in 1935, it was *Porgy and Bess*, which he called a "folk opera", and it is now widely regarded as one of the most important American operas of the twentieth century. From the very beginning, it was considered another American classic of the composer of 'Rhapsody in Blue'—even if critics couldn't quite figure out how to evaluate it. Was it opera, or was it simply an ambitious Broadway musical? 'It crossed the barriers,' says music critic and theater historian Robert Kimball. 'It wasn't a musical work per se, and it wasn't a drama per se, but the work has sort of always been outside category.'

Based on the novel *Porgy* by DuBose Heyward, the action takes place in the fictional, colored neighborhood of Catfish Row, Charleston, South Carolina. With the exception of several minor speaking roles, all of the characters are African-American. The music combines elements of popular music of the day, with a strong influence of African-American music of the period, with techniques typical of opera, such as recitative, through-composition and an extensive system of leitmotifs. *Porgy and Bess* contains some of Gershwin's most sophisticated music, including a fugue, a passacaglia, the use of atonality (music that seems to lack a clear tonal center), polytonality (use of more than one key simultaneously) and polyrhythm (simultaneous combination of contrasting rhythms), and a tone row (used as a basis for twelve-tone (serial) music.). Even the "set numbers" (of which "Summertime", "I Got Plenty o' Nuttin'" and "It Ain't Necessarily So" are some of the most refined and ingenious of Gershwin's compositions. The work was first performed in 1935; it was a box-office failure in the middle of the Great Depression... After suffering from the initially unpopular public reception due in part to its racially charged theme, a 1976 Houston Grand Opera production gained it new popularity, and it is now one of the best-known and most frequently performed American operas.

After the commercial failure of *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin moved to Hollywood, California. He was commissioned by RKO Pictures in 1936 to write the music for the film *Shall We Dance*, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Gershwin's extended score, which would marry ballet with jazz in a new way, runs over an hour in length. It took Gershwin several months to compose and orchestrate.

About his personal life, Gershwin had a ten-year affair with composer Kay Swift, whom he frequently consulted about his music. The two never married, although she eventually divorced her husband James Warburg in order to commit to the relationship. Swift's granddaughter, Katharine Weber, has suggested that the pair were not married because George's mother Rose was "unhappy that Kay Swift wasn't Jewish". *Oh, Kay*, one of Gershwin's compositions was named for her. After Gershwin's death, Swift arranged some of his music, transcribed several of his recordings, and collaborated with his brother Ira on several projects.

Early in 1937, Gershwin began to complain of blinding headaches and a recurring impression that he smelled burning rubber. On February 11, 1937, he performed his Piano Concerto in F in a special concert of his music with the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra under the direction of famous French maestro Pierre Monteux. Gershwin,

normally a superb pianist in his own compositions, suffered coordination problems and blackouts during the performance. He was at the time working on other Hollywood film projects while living with Ira and his wife Leonore in their rented house in Beverly Hills. Leonore Gershwin began to be disturbed by George's mood swings and his seeming inability to eat without spilling food at the dinner table. She suspected the onset of mental illness and she insisted he be moved out of their house to lyricist Yip Harburg's empty quarters nearby, where he was placed in the care of his valet, Paul Mueller. The headaches and olfactory hallucinations continued, and on June 23, after an incident in which Gershwin tried to push Mueller out of the car in which they were riding, he was admitted to Cedars of Lebanon Hospital in Los Angeles for observation. Tests showed no physical cause and he was released on the 26th with a diagnosis of "likely hysteria."

His troubles with coordination and mental acuity worsened, and on the night of July 9, Gershwin collapsed in Harburg's house, where he had been working on the score of *The Goldwyn Follies*. He was rushed back to hospital where he fell into a coma. Only at that point did it become obvious to his doctors that he was suffering from a brain tumor. Leonore called George's close friend Emil Mosbacher, a two-time America's Cup-winning yachtsman, and later Chief of Protocol of the United States during the administration of President Richard Nixon. and explained the dire need to find a neurosurgeon. Mosbacher immediately called the pioneering neurosurgeon Dr. Harvey Cushing in Boston, who, retired for several years by then, recommended Dr. Walter Dandy, who was however on a boat, fishing in Chesapeake Bay with the governor of Maryland. Mosbacher then called FDR at the White House and had a Coast Guard cutter sent to find the governor's yacht and bring Dandy quickly to shore. Mosbacher then chartered a plane and flew Dr. Dandy to Newark Airport, where he was to catch a plane to Los Angeles; however, by that time, Gershwin's condition was judged to be critical and the need for surgery immediate. An attempt by doctors at Cedars of Lebanon Hospital to excise the tumor was made in the early hours of the 11th, but it proved unsuccessful, and Gershwin died on the morning of July 11, 1937, at the age of 38.

Gershwin's many friends and fans were shocked and devastated, so was in fact the entire nation. He was interred at Westchester Hills Cemetery in Hastings-on-Hudson, NY, not far from here, a couple of miles east as the crow flies, on the other side of the Hudson.

A memorial concert was held at the Hollywood Bowl on, in Hollywood, CA, on September 8, 1937, at which Otto Klemperer conducted his own orchestration of the second of Gershwin's *Three Preludes*.

Gershwin received his sole Academy Award nomination for Best Original Song at the 1937 Oscars for "*They Can't Take That Away from Me*", written with his brother Ira for

the 1937 film *Shall We Dance*. The nomination was posthumous; Gershwin died two months after the film's release.