

George Gershwin—One of America’s Greatest Composers

George Jacob Gershwin (1898-1937) was an American composer and pianist. Gershwin’s compositions spanned both popular and classical genres, and his most popular melodies are widely known. Among his best known works are the orchestral compositions *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924) and *An American in Paris* (1928).

Although born in America, George was of Russian Jewish and Ukrainian Jewish ancestry. His birth certificate identifies him as Jacob Gershwine, with the surname pronounced ‘Gersh-vin’ in the Russian and Yiddish immigrant community. He had just one given name, contrary to the American practice by then of giving children a first and a middle name. He was named after his grandfather, a onetime Russian army mechanic. 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.

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 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 his parents’ surprise, and Ira’s relief, it was George who spent more time playing it.

On leaving school at the age of fifteen, Gershwin found his first job promoting compositions and sheet music for a Detroit-based publishing firm with a branch office on New York City’s



“Gershwin was a man who lived in music and expressed everything through music, because music was his native language.”
– Arnold Schoenberg

Tin Pan Alley. In 1916, Gershwin started working for Aeolian Company and Standard Music Rolls in New York, recording and arranging. He produced dozens, if not hundreds, of rolls under his own and assumed names.

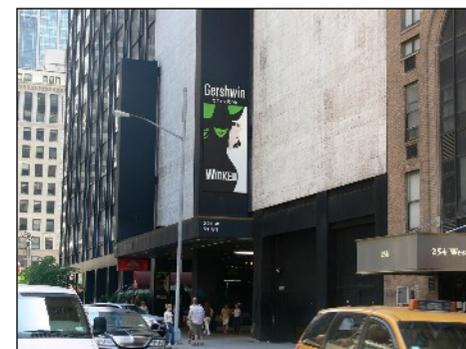
In 1924, George and Ira Gershwin collaborated on a stage musical comedy *Lady Be Good*, which included such future standards as “Fascinating Rhythm” and “Oh, Lady Be Good!” The Gershwin brothers introduced the standards “Embraceable You,” debuted by Ginger Rogers, and “I Got Rhythm.”

That same year, jazz musician and orchestra leader Paul Whiteman decided to organize a special concert to show that jazz was serious music. George Gershwin agreed to compose something for the concert before he realized how

little time he had to do it. The concert was just a few weeks away. Gershwin got busy. And, in that short time, he composed a piece for piano and orchestra. He called it *Rhapsody in Blue*. Gershwin himself played the piano part of *Rhapsody* at the concert. The audience included some of the greatest classical musicians of the time. When they heard his music, they were electrified. It seemed to capture, for the first time, the true voice of modern American culture. *Rhapsody in Blue* made George Gershwin famous all over the world. Several hundred thousand copies of the printed music sold immediately. Gershwin was satisfied that he had shown that jazz music could be both serious and popular.

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 on the morning of July 11, 1937, just days after doctors learned he had brain cancer. He was only thirty-nine years old. Newspapers all over the world reported his death on their front pages. Everyone mourned the loss of the man and all the music he might have written. George Gershwin is still considered one of America’s greatest composers. His works (over 500) still are performed by many singers and groups. They are probably performed more often than any other serious American composer.

In October 2009, it was reported by *Rolling Stone* that Brian Wilson was completing at least two unfinished compositions by George Gershwin for possi-



George Gershwin Theatre, 222 West 51st Street, Manhattan, New York City.

ble release in 2010. *Brian Wilson Reimagines Gershwin* was released on August 17, 2010. The album consists of ten George and Ira Gershwin songs, bookended by passages from *Rhapsody in Blue*, along with two new songs completed from unfinished Gershwin fragments by Wilson.

In 2005, *The Guardian* determined using “estimates of earnings accrued in a composer’s lifetime” that George Gershwin was the wealthiest composer of all time.

Today, the Gershwin catalog has been taken up by a younger generation who have delighted in vintage and contemporary recordings, revivals, and the “new” Gershwin musicals, *My One and Only* (1983) and the 1992 Tony Award winner for best musical, *Crazy for You*. The United States Congress awarded the Congressional Gold Medal to the Gershwins in 1985 (only the third time that songwriters had been so honored), and in 2007, the Library of Congress instituted the Gershwin Prize for Popular Song.

Article and Image Source: Wikipedia, Wikimedia, and the Library of Congress. More information at gershwin.com.

Tin Pan Alley refers to the traditional American popular music of the early 20th century, a time when a song’s popularity was determined not by the number of records it sold, but by the number of copies of sheet music. Tin Pan Alley was a real place, located in Manhattan on West 28th Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue; a large number of music publishers had their offices there, and the din from so many composers writing songs on their pianos inspired writer Monroe Rosenfeld to liken the neighborhood ambience to the sound of striking on tin pans. (Allmusic.com)

Publisher’s Note: The Internet is awash with information about George and Ira Gershwin. However, if you’d like to read about an up close and personal account of the famous brothers, I suggest the book, *Nice Work if You Can Get It: My Life in Rhythm and Rhyme* by Michael Feinstein. In 1977, Feinstein went to work for Ira Gershwin, cataloging his private collection of rare recordings. This led to a close relationship with the aged lyricist during which he acted as the older man’s archivist and formed a friendship that lasted until Gershwin’s death in 1983.