When George M. Cohan got an advance peek at Warner Bros.’ movie about his life, Yankee Doodle Dandy (1942) he exclaimed, “My God, what an act to follow!” As if daunted by the very notion, he died two months later, on 29 May 1942.

His astonishment at what Hollywood had wrought was disingenuous. He had conspired with the filmmakers to unleash upon the viewing public not his life, but the life that could have been, or should have been—the kind of life, as his daughter Georgette declared, “Daddy would like to have lived!”

Yankee Doodle Dandy is but one of dozens of Hollywood biopics purporting to tell the story of the great American popular songwriters, from Stephen Foster to the tunesmiths of Tin Pan Alley and the Broadway musical show. (See the Appendix for a selective listing.) These pictures came in a flood, from roughly the 1930s to the late 1950s, from the major studios like MGM, Columbia, Paramount, Warner Bros., and Twentieth Century-Fox, produced by heavyweights like Arthur Freed, Hal Wallis, and Darryl F. Zanuck. They boasted big budgets, glossy production values, and major stars. If occasionally they flirted with the truth, more often they careened wildly off into fantasy worlds of their own. For example, Yankee Doodle Dandy perpetuated the legend that George M. Cohan was born on the Fourth of July; Swanee River (1939) claimed that Stephen Foster (Don Ameche) introduced and sang “My Old Kentucky Home” with E.P. Christy’s minstrels; Stars and Stripes Forever, that John Philip Sousa (Clifton Webb) wrote “Stars and Stripes Forever” for the Spanish-American War effort; Till the Clouds Roll By, (1946), that Jerome Kern (Robert Walker) learned everything he knew from a student of Johannes Brahms; Words and Music (1948), that lyricist Lorenz Hart (Mickey Rooney) sang duets with real-life Judy Garland; Night and Day, that a battle-scarred Cole Porter (Cary Grant) wrote the title song while convalescing in a World War I hospital; and Alexander’s Ragtime Band (a thinly disguised biopic of Irving Berlin), that ragtime was introduced and first popularized in 1915 by a white, classically trained violinist.

Moreover, there was no trace of Jewish ethnicity in the lives of George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, and Irving Berlin; no direct references to Cole Porter’s homosexuality; and little evidence anywhere that African Americans made any contributions to the shaping of ragtime and jazz.

Ironically, considering the plethora of films touching on the subject, audiences learned little about the workings of Tin Pan Alley. According to the aptly titled Tin Pan Alley (1940), which chronicled the career of the fictitious songwriting team of “Harrigan and Calhoun” (John Payne and Jack Oakie), all the song writers were white, Protestant, and in search of beautiful singers to “put over” their tunes.
plugging, and publishing songs along the Alley is reduced to the following scrap of dialogue:

Question: What’s happening on Tin Pan Alley?
Answer: The same old grind—Irving Berlin is still ringing the bell with every number.

Question: Is Anna Held still packing them in at the Casino?
Answer: Yes, dear; and the Statue of Liberty is still packing them in at Bedloe’s Island!

As for the nuts and bolts of songwriting, the process apparently consisted merely of the composer’s accidentally stumbling upon a few musical notes which, in a furious montage of images, he instantly transforms into a full-fledged show number, replete with sumptuous strings, blaring brass, and high-stepping chorines. Success was simply a matter of determination and grit: “When you have something and you know you have it, nothing can keep you down,” explains Harrigan.

Apart from an occasional word of praise about the staging and performance of the musical numbers, most critics were appalled. A sampling of contemporary critical responses indicates the nature of their displeasure: The New Yorker complained about the “exasperating cliches” and the “foolish attempts to inject synthetic melodrama” into the life of Jerome Kern. Time lamented Swanee River’s superficial treatment of the creative urge: “In pictures about composers a vacant look, head noddings and rhythmic hand flourishes denote musical inspiration.” And in the New York Times Bosley Crowther’s complaints about Rhapsody in Blue sum up the whole sad business: “There is never any true clarification of what makes [Gershwin] run, no interior grasp of his nature, no dramatic continuity to his life. The whole thing unfolds in fleeting episodes, with characters viewing the genius with anxiety or awe, and the progression is not helped by many obvious and telescoping cuts.”

Audiences generally took a different, perhaps more enlightened view, as it were. Even if they knew better, they seem to have willingly subscribed to these reconstituted versions of history and biography. Critic Philip T. Hartung was speaking on their behalf in his review of Rhapsody in Blue—“In spirit the film succeeds in its purpose although the facts are selected and readjusted for dramatic unity, and characters are even invented to further the story and action.” Of course, film producers knew just how much they could get away with: They were well aware that unless the distortions and errors were particularly outrageous, or unless the history in question too recent to be tampered with, most viewers would accept the Hollywood version of history, even when they knew better.

If these films were badly made, if their aggregation of half-truths, distortions, and outright fabrications were solely the result of ignorance on the part of the filmmakers, and if they told us nothing of the cultural conditions that produced them, they could be dismissed outright. Indeed, they—and their more prestige-oriented brothers, the classical composer biopics—are conspicuously absent from current books about history and biography on screen. Yet, there are important reasons for giving them a
closer look.

In the first place, it is significant that they were made at the precise time that the Hollywood studio system was at its height, from approximately 1930 to 1960. Most film historians, notably Thomas Schatz and David Bordwell, refer to this as the “classical” period, when powerful producers and supervisors oversaw a “mature-oligopoly,” i.e., a system where a group of companies cooperated to control the market. MGM, Paramount, Warner Bros., RKO, Universal, Twentieth Century-Fox, and Columbia maintained through four decades “a consistent system of production and consumption, a set of formalized creative practices and constraints, and thus a body of work with a uniform style—a standard way of telling stories, from camera work and cutting to plot structure and thematics.”

Although a minor genre, far fewer in number than other genres, like westerns and horror films, biopics were shaped by the same pressures—the established agendas of producers and writers, the exigencies of the star system, the restrictions of the censorship codes of the Breen Office (reinforced after 1934 by proddings from the Catholic Legion of Decency), and the dictates of marketing research and audience demographics. At the same time, however, biopics stood somewhat apart from the herd in that they deliberately sought to exploit the prestige allure of the “great lives” of statesmen, scientists, entertainers, and artists. In other words, they pretended to be high art while they catered to the lure of popular acceptance. What resulted were sidelong glances, as it were, at history and biography; chronicles not so much of individual realities but of a collective American fantasy of consumer culture, what cultural historian Robert Sklar has referred to as “The Golden Age of Order.” Fantasy or not, contends George Custen in his pioneering study of the biopic, it insisted on its own reality: “The Hollywood biography is to history what Caesar’s Palace is to architectural history, an enormous, engaging distortion, which after a time convinces us of its own kind of authenticity.”

In other words, these biopics may be seen today as not individual biographies so much as contributions toward an ongoing American cultural autobiography.

As such, they are relevant to an ongoing discussion regarding what has been dubbed “meta-history,” or “The New History.” Heretofore, a founding presupposition of Western historiography has been the opposition of fact and fiction, and the presumed ability of the consumer to differentiate the two. However, as historian Hayden White has noted, we have seen in our time the abolishment of “the taboo against mixing fact with fiction.” New genres, in both written and visual form, have appeared, bearing tags like “parahistorical representation,” “faction,” “infotainment,” “transgressive history,” and “historical metafiction.” Movies and biopics like JFK (1991), Schindler’s List (1993), and, most recently at this writing, Amistad (1997)—and, of course, all the biopics under consideration here—“fictionalize” to a greater or lesser degree the historical events and characters which serve as their referents in history. In abeyance—as outraged critics and commentators claim—is our ability to distinguish between the real
and the imaginary. Everything is presented, explains White, “as if it were of the same ontological order, both real and imaginary—realistically imaginary or imaginarily real. . . .”

At the heart of this postmodernist discussion is the rejection of naive assumptions about the “knowability” of the past and the “reliability” of the supposedly objective scholar and historian. All claims to knowledge about past lives and events are inevitably provisional, or partial. Was there ever a time when the facts of an event or a life were presumed to be the meaning of that event or life? Rather, if facts have value at all, they can only deployed in the search for meanings. “What is at issue here,” continues White, “is not the facts of the matter regarding such events but the different possible meanings that such facts can be construed as bearing.” The best we can do is consider a wide variety of interpretations of “what was really going on” in a given subject.

Thus, postmodernist historians are not interested only in history and biography written by professional historians, but also in the more popular conceptions and reconstructions of the past—like the Hollywood biopic. As Robert A. Rosenstone has written in Revisioning History, the historical and biographical film “must be taken on its own terms as a portrait of the past that has less to do with fact than with intensity and insight, perception and feeling, with showing how events affect individual lives, past and present. To express the meaning of the past, film creates proximate, appropriate characters, situations, images, and metaphors.”

I propose, then, to do just that—to consider these popular composer biopics on their own terms—not to dismiss them as foolish fabrications, but to accept them as fascinating (and, admittedly, frequently hilarious) speculations on the unexpected intersections of biography, media, and culture.

At the outset, I must again insist that these “speculative histories” are the results of willful calculation at every level of the filmmaking process. In the first place, Living composers like Irving Berlin, George M. Cohan, Jerome Kern, and Cole Porter, actively participated in the fictionalizing of their lives. Berlin, whom Darryl F. Zanuck regarded as “show business incarnate, his life story the history of popular entertainment,” first came to Twentieth Century-Fox in 1936 to write the music for an Alice Faye vehicle, On the Avenue. It was not a happy experience for him, but it did lead to his being invited to write the scenario for his own life story, Alexander’s Ragtime Band. Convinced his life held no real dramatic value, and disinclined to refer to his Jewish background and early experiences at Nigger Mike’s on New York’s Lower East Side, Berlin fabricated a surrogate personna, “Alexander,” a classically-trained, WASP clarinetist who scores with the title song in a New Orleans honky tonk in 1915, makes his way to Broadway, enlist in the Army at the outbreak of World War I, goes to Camp Upton (where he meets a songwriter named Irving Berlin), and ultimately winds up at Carnegie Hall, where he conducts a symphonic arrangement of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.” Fox’s production chief, Darryl F. Zanuck, rejected the script, complaining of its lack of a romantic interest (Berlin had
omitted references to his two marriages). Discouraged, Berlin withdrew from the writing process, allowing scenarists Kathryn Scola and Lamar Trotti to take over. The story that emerged retained some of Berlin’s plot points, but transferred the story’s opening to San Francisco’s Barbary Coast, cast Tyrone Power as “Alexander,” and brought in Alice Faye as the honky-tonk songstress who can’t make up her mind between Alexander and his songwriting friend, Charlie Dwyer (Don Ameche). Ironically, Irving Berlin’s name, which appears above the title, is referred to only once in the film, when it is seen on the sheet music cover of the title song. The resulting film, directed by Henry King, featured thirty Berlin songs—ranging from the early songs, like the title number, patriotic World War I ditties like “It’s Your Country and My Country,” 1920s hits like “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody,” and the 1938 present with new Berlin songs, like “Walking Stick” and “Now It Can Be Told” (composed especially for Alice Faye)—cost $2 million, and received six Oscar nominations. Alexander’s Ragtime Band was the closest Berlin ever got to a biopic of his own.

George M. Cohan also had no hesitation in altering his own life story. By 1941 Cohan, who had not written a musical play on Broadway since 1928, and who had been unsuccessful in his foray into early talkies, was hungry for a comeback. But he still had enough clout that when he signed a contract with Warner Bros. for a musical biography, he stipulated that he retain script approval and that James Cagney play his part. Like Berlin, Cohan wished to avoid anything too close to his private life and personal obsessions—in this case, his rabid anti-unionism (his bitter opposition to the Actors Equity Strike of 1919), his two marriages (to Ethel Levey and Agnes Nolan), bitter battles with critics, etc. He rejected a preliminary script by Robert Buckner, who, after many hours of interviews and conversations, thought he had wrought a fairly credible storyline. Cohan insisted instead on fabricating everything. He sat down and wrote a 200-page screenplay of his own, which removed most of the domestic details and created a fictional girl friend, “Agnes,” whom he meets after his retirement from the stage. Now it was Cagney and producer Hal Wallis’ turn to be dissatisfied at what they felt to be a humorless script with no real love interest. A letter was immediately dispatched to Cohan. Dated 21 April 1941, it affords a revealing glimpse into the machinations behind the crafting of a Hollywood biopic:

“We do not wish to make your domestic life the main theme of the picture, but it is such an important and essential part of a man’s life that its complete exclusion is very likely to result in an unbalanced story. We are willing to follow any questions which you may have on this problem, either to ignore it completely or else to represent it as you wish. We could eliminate any reference to your first wife and depict only your present wife. If possible, we would like to include the children . . .

As I said, we are completely willing and anxious to fit our story to your own
personal wishes, and if you should disapprove of any representation of your family life, we will forget it at once.  

Eventually, a compromise story was hammered out, in which were added a composite sweetheart-wife named “Mary” (Joan Leslie), a moving death scene for Jerry Cohan (Walter Huston), and some anecdotal details (such as a meeting with Eddie Foy, portrayed by Eddie Foy, Jr.). Counterpointing these fictions were the authentic re-creations by Cagney and vaudevillians William Collier and Johnny Boyle of the staging of the classic “Peck’s Bad Boy” and routines from Little Johnny Jones, including “Give My Regards to Broadway.” The framing device of a meeting with President Roosevelt—like the flag-waving patriotism of the “Grand Old Flag” number—was directly calculated to bolster the morale of audiences still recovering from the shock of Pearl Harbor.  

When Jerome Kern was approached by MGM, he balked. He had guarded his private life from the public too long to readily consent to such an idea. Besides, he quipped, his relatively dull life would not be an interesting subject. “If you tell the truth,” he said, “it’ll be the dullest picture in the world.” When the studio executives persisted, Kern finally granted permission, but with the stipulation that his story be largely fictitious, confining itself to a few well-known anecdotes. Writers Guy Bolton and George Wells took him at his word.  

In his negotiations for the scripting of Night and Day, Cole Porter willingly signed away his rights to a factually accurate account. Encouraged by his wife and mother, Porter agreed to a contract that stipulated that “it is understood that Producers in the development of the story... upon which the photoplay shall be based shall be free to dramatize, fictionalize, or emphasize any or all incidents in the life of the Seller, or interpolate such incidents as Producers may deem necessary in order to obtain a treatment of continuity of commercial value.”

He had his reasons. This not only cleared the way for a strapping Cary Grant and a youth, elegant Alexis Smith to play the diminutive, balding Porter and his older wife, Linda, but it provided Porter the opportunity to construct a movie “life” that could confirm the public image he so avidly sought. After all, he never had been averse to fictionalizing his own life; and he had already expended considerable energy in embellishing and embroidering it. “Considering the numerous fibs about himself that Cole had foisted on an unsuspecting public for decades,” writes biographer Charles Schwarz, “one could hardly expect a Hollywood film biography to come any closer to the truth.”

Problematic as far as Hollywood was concerned, for example, were inconvenient realities such as the substantial inheritance that allowed Porter a life of relative ease, his many extra-marital affairs, his indulgence in the New York-Paris-Beverly Hills cafe society, and career successes that had come to him easily. Accordingly, producer Wallis ordered that the script depict scenes suggesting Porter’s solid work ethic, sturdy individuality, and romantic attachment to Linda. This “new” Porter now bravely rejects his grandfather’s
support, declaring, “I can’t come back here and live on your money and all the time wonder what would’ve happened if I’d gone out on my own. . . .” Later, adrift in Tin Pan Alley and on Broadway, Porter lives hand to mouth while struggling to get his shows produced. Then, after the outbreak of World War One interrupts the run of his show, See America First (“I guess it was just one of those things,” the disappointed Porter muses meaningfully as he emerges from the darkened theater), he enlists in the French Army and is wounded during an enemy artillery barrage. Coming to his rescue is his wife-to-be, Linda, who just so happens to be serving as a nurse in the hospital, who immediately assists him in writing “Night and Day.” The subsequent rifts in the marriage with Linda are to be explained away not by Cole’s lusts for other partners but by his all-consuming obsession with his musical shows. “You shouldn’t have gotten married in the first place,” scolds Porter’s friend, Monte Woolley (played by himself). “In the second place, as long as you did, act like a husband instead of a guy who shouldn’t have gotten married in the first place!” As for the riding accident in 1937 that disabled Porter for the rest of his life, even Hollywood couldn’t have devised anything more appropriate to its purposes. Here was the ideal opportunity to confirm his nobility and strength of character. In all the foregoing ways, insisted Wallis, Porter and his work could be seen as “springing from the heart of a normal American homelife.”

But the biggest problem still had to be addressed—Porter’s sexuality. Specifically, Porter was gay in an era when “coming out of the closet” was tantamount to professional suicide. He had carried on the pretense of an active heterosexual public life while maintaining an actively gay private life. Moreover, his marriage to Linda was probably a marriage of mutual convenience, as she purportedly carried on lesbian affairs on her own. The subject of homosexuality, if not exactly forbidden by the Motion Picture Production Code, was certainly discouraged. Thus, it was in Porter’s best interests to support Wallis’ determination to “normalize” his sexuality. If Porter were forbidden by the script to look at another woman, now he was also abjured not to look at another man. As the script tap dances around these issues, the effect is occasionally rather comic, intended or otherwise. Witness this exchange between Porter and a singer in a sheet music store:

Girl: I work with lots of piano players. They make propositions. They’re always trying. You haven’t made a single pass. You treat me as if I were a lady. Frankly, Mr. Porter, I resent it!

Porter: I never realized. Here, have a sandwich.

Girl: I know I’ve got natural attributes. I’ll be frank, Mr. Porter, you’ve got natural attributes, too. Seems a shame we can’t “attribute” with each other.

Porter: You’re extremely attractive, Carol. But you’re not eating your sandwich.

Girl: I know I’ve got natural attributes. I’ll be frank, Mr. Porter, you’ve got natural attributes, too. Seems a shame we can’t “attribute” with each other.

Porter: You’re extremely attractive, Carol. But you’re not eating your sandwich.

Just as the composers themselves could not be counted upon to safeguard the historical accuracy of
their lives, their friends, admirers, and associates were no more trustworthy. Their admiration for their subjects amounted to reverence, and it derailed any possibility of a factually responsible account. The opening title card of *Till the Clouds Roll By* pretty well sums up the process as well as the attitude:

This story of Jerome Kern is best told in the bars and measures, the quarter and grace notes of his music—that music that sings so eloquently his love of people, love of country, love of life. We who have sung it and will sing it to our children can only be grateful that he gave his life to music—and gave that music to us.”

The scenarist of *Rhapsody in Blue*, was Sonya Levien, who had worked with Gershwin in Hollywood and had been a good friend during his last days. Co-starring in the cast was Oscar Levant, who portrayed himself and who provided the keyboard support on the soundtrack. The producer of *Till the Clouds Roll By*, Arthur Freed, and the writer, Guy Bolton, were both longtime admirers and associates of Jerome Kern. Bolton had been a friend and collaborator with Kern since 1915, when they began their run of the legendary Princess Theatre shows. Freed was a Tin Pan Alley graduate himself, an accomplished lyricist who had been with MGM since the 1929, writing such memorable hits as “Singin’ in the Rain” and “You Are My Lucky Star.” Freed had known Kern since 1917, when they met during the run of *Oh, Boy!* It was Freed who first approached Kern about the possibility of bringing his life to the screen. Later, after Kern’s death, Freed assured his widow, Eva, “Jerry Kern was always an ideal of perfection to me, as an artist, as a showman and as a friend.” Freed and Bolton also collaborated on *Words and Music*. Their contract with Richard Rodgers and the estate of the late Lorenz Hart granted them script approval.

Quite apart from the censorial restrictions of the Motion Picture Production Code and the donning by composers and their acolytes of self-protective camouflage, these biopics were also the direct results of the very structure and purpose of the aforementioned Hollywood studio system as it existed in the years 1925-1960.

In many respects Hollywood and Tin Pan Alley were joined at the hip. Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, both had been participating in the fashioning of an indigenous, nationally homogenous culture—“reinventing America,” as today’s parlance would have it. Both, in their beginnings, were centered in New York City. Both were shaped and dominated by foreign-born and first-generation Jews in a hurry to assimilate themselves into the American mainstream. And both developed efficient systems for the mass production and distribution of their products—powerful publishing houses established and guided by the likes of Jerome Remick, Max Dreyfus, and Isidore Witmark; and monolithic movie studios—vertically integrated structures controlling movies’ production, distribution, and exhibition—organized by men like Adolph Zukor, Louis B. Mayer, and William Fox. These entrepreneurs shared in common an
understanding of public taste, an expertise in merchandising and marketing stemming from their backgrounds in sales and retail, and, as the 1930s wore on, a willingness to promote a “mainstream” American fantasy that had little to do with the contemporary realities and controversies of labor unrest, Depression woes, women’s issues, sex and violence, and racial and/or ethnic problems. Even if these entrepreneurs themselves were barred from the “real corridors of gentility and status in an America still fraught with anti-Semitism,” as cultural historian Neal Gabler states in his *An Empire of Their Own: How the Jews Invented Hollywood*, they could fashion in their songs and in their films “a new country—an empire of their own, so to speak. . . . They would create its values and myths, its traditions and archetypes.”

A cultural language was evolving that became common currency all across the nation, the result of the “commingling of disparate and ethnic influences that Dvorak had predicted in 1893—of high and low culture, Old World classicism and New World multi-culturalism.” It appropriated them all but remained bound to none.

The biopic genre played its own part in this process. Almost three hundred biopics were released by the eight major Hollywood studios—MGM, Paramount, RKO, Warner Bros., Twentieth Century-Fox, Columbia, United Artists, Universal—during the classical Hollywood period, roughly 1930-1960. Warners and Fox were the leading producers. One-sixth of that total are biographies of either classical or popular composers (as well as a good number of concert and stage entertainers).

Although popular composers hardly offered movie producers the kind of “prestige” value afforded by their classical brethren, they did possess something just as important—and perhaps comparable—to audiences in the 1930s and 1940s, the aura of money and success. The year after he published “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” for example, Berlin’s royalties amounted to more than $100,000; and a decade later he was worth four million dollars. In their peak years during the 1930s, Porter and Rodgers and Hart each earned more than $500,000 annually from their songs alone. Kern was wealthy enough to pursue his passion for rare book collecting, amassing libraries worth millions. Gershwin enjoyed a lifestyle that rivaled that of the movie stars whose company he cultivated.

Furthermore, according to Edward Pessen in his recent study of Tin Pan Alley songs, about eighty-five percent of them were about love. Hollywood, always preoccupied with romance, took notice. These were songs of a smarter, at times more worldly cast than the earlier sentimental effusions of songwriters like Victor Herbert and Reginald De Koven. While the tunes and lyrics thus paid a certain lip service to the realities of Depression and wartime America, they also offered the solace of a carefree optimism and occasional loving, backward glance at a simpler, rural past.

Yet, significantly, beyond their high profiles, the Tin Pan Alley composers were, as far as the general public was concerned, vague figures hidden in the shadow of their music,
who led lives more fraught with hard work than dramatic incident. As far as Hollywood was concerned, this was as it should be. Filmmakers could recast them into any desired shape, creating a contrapuntal weave of fact and fiction, frequently sacrificing biographical detail to the music itself.

The films themselves reveal striking similarities. Most of them are set between the years 1865 and 1920. The composers are a fresh-faced lot, young, handsome, and dreadfully in earnest—indeed, they seem to be distantly-related members of the same family. They are either born in humble circumstances and yearn for the big city, or they come from an urban environment and long for a simpler, rural life. Though gifted with the knack of popular songwriting, they restlessly yearn for classical training and legitimacy. Just to get established, they opt for the former. Once established, however, career setbacks (quirks of fate, a weakness to drink, an ill-starred romance, or just plain overwork) trigger a sentimental backward glance at their classical ideals. Somewhere in all this, there is a Great Love, a girl of exceptional qualities, who is left behind in the composers’ desire to work themselves to death. It is only when they reject the siren song of High Art, accept their status as spokespersons for the masses, and reunite with their Great Love, that they realize the true value of their genius and their manhood.

Swanee River, the first in chronological order of production, establishes the essential paradigm. Stephen Foster (Don Ameche) is a struggling composer torn between the inspiration of the chants of the black stevedores working on the docks of Louisville, Kentucky—“It’s—it’s music from the heart, from the heart of a simple people... by jingo! the only real American contribution to music”—and the desire, supported by his old music teacher, Professor Kleber (Felix Brassart), to write classical music. Against his parent’s wishes, he leaves his desk job and pursues a career in music. But while his “Negro songs” find favor with minstrel man E.P. Christy (Al Jolson) and popular audiences, his Suite for chamber ensemble is a crushing failure. Foster and Kleber both learn a lesson. “Stephen can write American folk songs,” opines Kleber, “but classical composition needs another kind of training. I don’t want to see a first-class Stephen Foster turned into a tenth-rate Beethoven.” Now estranged from his wife, Jeanie, Foster relocates to New York, where more rejections and loneliness lead him to indulge his “weakness” (the film’s euphemism for his alcoholism). He dies, but not before he fulfills his true genius by returning to the wellsprings of his art and writing “Old Black Joe” for a dying black servant (and not before he reunites for a few last moments with the beloved Jeanie). We are left with the assurance that his musical legacy is secure when a performance of “Old Folks at Home” brings tears to the eyes of a concert audience.

Of course, most of this is nonsense. Despite the efforts of the Fox research department, writers John Tainter Foote and Philip Dunne ended up rewriting everything. The film reveals the lengths producer Darryl F. Zanuck and his ilk would go to rework the clay of a particular genius into a shape recognizable to their mass audiences. Yes, genius must be
normalized and chastened if it pursues
elitest tendencies, ignores the needs of
the common folk, and rejects romance
for the sake of career ambitions. And
yes, the distressing realities of the
African-American slave experience
must be replaced with a more cozy and
comforting series of outrageously
patronizing and (perhaps unintended)
racist stereotypes. In the meantime, the
whole thing is bound together and
summed up by a “theme song,” a
leitmotif, as it were—in this case, the
song that Foster wrote in tribute to his
wife, “Jeanie with the Light Brown
Hair”.  

Like Foster, the other
composers represented here are also
portrayed as being bedeviled by ill-
advised elitest ambitions that
jeopardize their true populist calling.
You can almost sense a Hollywood
scenarist off in the wings, shaking his
gerfinger reprovingly at such temerity:
What’ll the folks in the audience say?
Thus, when George M. Cohan in
Yankee Doodle Dandy fails in his
ambitious attempt to write a dramatic,
non-musical play, he becomes the
laughingstock of Broadway; and only
when he publicly denounces his own
show does he regain his artistic
balance. In Alexander’s Ragtime Band
Alexander’s High Art pretensions are
rebuked by the saloon singer, Stella
(Alice Faye): “Maybe I don’t know the
tripe they play up Snob Hill, but I know
what they like down here; and that’s
more than you’ll ever know.”
Subsequently, a dutifully chastened
Alexander reunites with Stella after
shrewdly blending the best of both
worlds by dressing up ragtime in
symphonic clothes for a Carnegie Hall
concert. In Rhapsody in Blue
Gershwin’s first attempt to write a
“Negro Opera,” “Blue Monday Blues,”
for a George White’s Scandals revue, is
soundly rejected as audience members
leave in boredom and confusion.
Publisher Max Dreyfus (Charles
Coburn) grumbles, “Gershwin must
have lost his mind.” Even the more
sympathetic Paul Whiteman (played by
himself) advises, “George, it’s great,
but it doesn’t belong in this kind of a
show.” Elsewhere in the film, none
other than Maurice Ravel is on hand to
remind Gershwin of the real genius of
his populist, vernacular gifts. His
words are an echo of Kleber’s in
Swanee River: “Gershwin, if you study
with me, you’ll only write second-rate
Ravel instead of first-rate Gershwin. .
Tell me, how did you get your
inspiration for your rhythm. . . ?” In
Words and Music the usually
effervescent Larry Hart goes into a funk
whenever he falls in love and tries to
write serious romantic lyrics. When
asked by partner Richard Rodgers
(Tom Drake) about his problem, Hart
replies: “No more love songs, that’s
all, Just those fast, bright things from
here on in.” Later, Hart confesses
sardonically, “I’m just a guy that writes
lyrics, runs away, hides, has a few
laughs, comes back and writes. .
Lyrics.” In Stars and Stripes Forever
John Philip Sousa abandons writing art
songs when he finds out that one
particularly mournful effusion, “My
Love Is a Weeping Willow,” comes off
better when quickened into march
tempo and re-titled “Semper Fidelis.”
Later, a newly enlightened Sousa
proclaims, “Our job, our only job will
be to put on a good show. Which
means that if our audiences prefer
“Turkey in the Straw” to “Parsifal,”
we’ll play “Turkey in the Straw.” In
Till the Clouds Roll By Jerome Kern is
congratulated by none other than Victor Herbert (Paul Maxey) for his populist musical achievement: “You’ve got a song to sing. Look down at that city, Jerry. It’s made up of millions of people. And music has played a part in all their lives. Lullabies, love songs, hymns, anthems.” A misty-eyed Kern replies, “It makes me feel grateful, and very humble.” (Even the cab driver, to whom Kern tells his life story, pronounces his admiration for Show Boat: “That was a swell show!”) The worst comeuppance, of course, is reserved for the snootiest songwriter of them all, Cole Porter in Night and Day: When Porter disdains the “people’s music”—“I’m fed up with the riverboats, honky-tonks, and music counters”—his wife deserts him, his friends disappear, and he suffers a terrible riding accident. Later, suffering brings him enlightenment, and, after writing “Don’t Fence Me In” for Roy Rogers, he returns to hearth, home, and songwriting.4

Sharing in the songwriters’ comeuppance are their Old-World mentors. We’ve already met the model of this character, Stephen Foster’s teacher, Professor Kleber.46 In Alexander’s Ragtime Band the wholly fictitious Professor Heinrich (Jean Hersholt) monitors the performances of his classically-trained violinist pupil “Alexander” with this stern advice: “You did very well, my boy, but your pizzicato, we still have to work on it.” Later, however, when Alexander gives a ragtime concert in Carnegie Hall—the newspaper headline reads, “POPULAR MUSIC OUT TO WIN Highbrow Recognitions”—an enlightened Heinrich occupies a box seat and nods his approval. In Rhapsody in Blue it’s Professor Otto Franck, a former pupil of Johannes Brahms, who potters among the busts and paintings of Schubert and Beethoven and disapproves of young Gershwin’s attempts to “improve on the classics” with jazzy riffs. Eventually he gives way to the grudging acceptance of his pupil's true calling: “I have such hope for you, my boy,” he confesses finally. “America is a growing country, a mixture of things that are very old with more that is new. Your nature has the same contradictions, ideals and material ambition. If you can make them both serve, you will give America a voice.” On his death bed, Professor Franck listens to the radio broadcast of George’s Rhapsody in Blue, after which he dutifully expires.47 In Till the Clouds Roll By an academically-trained composer and arranger named “James Hessler” takes one look at his new pupil, Jerome Kern, and declares: “The trouble with you songwriters is that all you ever think about is making money. You never think about doing anything big or worthwhile. . . . No, all you fellows want to do is write sugary little tunes and make a lot of money.” He changes his tune, so to speak, in the face of Kern’s genius, and, after abandoning his Symphony, collaborates with him on his musical shows. Finally, on his death bed, Hessler confesses to Kern: “You were writing the real music, the folk music of America. Thanks, Jerry, for letting me stick around.” Gasping his last, Hessler whispers, “It looks like a time for strings”; and the film’s soundtrack obediently wells up in a funereal burst of string music.48 Even if other biopics don’t feature a mentor figure like Heinrich, Kleber, Franck, and Hessler, there is always the implication of one. For example, in Night and Day Monte
Woolley (who plays a Yale professor inexplicably named “Monte Woolley”) fits the professorial model; and in *Stars and Stripes Forever* a bearded, monocled Clifton Webb (who looks for all the world like he strayed in from the latest “Mr. Belvedere” picture) does double duty, alternately functioning as a March King and a High Art Counsellor.

Issues of gender, racial and ethnic identity were problematic in the Tin Pan Alley biopic. The peak studio years in Hollywood, as we have seen, contributed to a collective fantasy on screen wherein they were conspicuously absent. For example, as we have seen, Foster’s Jeanie, Porter’s Linda, “Alexander’s” Stella, and Kern’s Eva, etc., were women who were present mostly to perform the songs and/or provide their men with inspiration and support (except when they were chiding them for neglecting domestic duties for professional goals). They were never professional composers in their own right.  

If Hispanics, Jews, Native Americans, African Americans, and other minorities and people of color appeared, they were, with few exceptions, secondary characters (like servants, maids, and other “faithful family retainers”)—caricatures that served as the targets of stereotyped humor. This was not just true of the songwriters’ biopics, but of Hollywood movies in general during these years. One looks in vain for a trace of Jewish heritage evident in the portraits of Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, Larry Hart, and George Gershwin.  

The situation with African American characters and culture was particularly problematic. With the exception of *St. Louis Blues* (1958), a biopic about W.C. Handy, these biopics give no indication that there were any black publishers or composers on the Alley, or that white composers benefited from connections and/or affiliations with them. “Hollywood during the depression provided few new opportunities for blacks,” writes Thomas Cripps in *Slow Fade to Black: The Negro in American Film*. “[They] were represented only by memorable bits in films not really dealing with their needs or problems.” During these years, for example, there were only twelve biopics made about non-white Americans, and only one was about a black composer, *St. Louis Blues* (1958).

On those rare occasions when African Americans do appear, they merely serve as a kind of obbligato to the main action, as in *Swanee River*, when they provide musical cues for Foster’s writing of “Oh! Susanna” and “Old Black Joe”; and in *Stars and Stripes Forever*, when they dutifully obey Sousa’s injunction to accompany him in a performance of “Battle Hymn of the Republic.” This sort of appropriation of black culture by a white consumer class is spelled out in no uncertain terms in *Till the Clouds Roll By*: In the Prologue, a black performer, Caleb Peterson, sings “Ol’ Man River” with a simple, and moving dignity. But in the Finale a white-garbed Frank Sinatra takes over the song: Standing atop a white pillar, surrounded by a vast pink-and-white art deco set and surrounded by a bevy of leggy chorines, young Frankie belts out the song in his smoothest crooner’s manner (endowing the words “jest keeps rolling along with a little too much emphasis). Critic James Agee
was appalled by this White Apotheosis, objecting to its “misplaced reverence,” as if it were a musical translation of the Emancipation Proclamation: “This I realize is called feeling for music; for that kind of feeling I prefer W.C. Fields’ cadenza on the zither...”

More difficult to classify are those occasions when the viewer can’t precisely determine a performer’s racial identity. There was nothing accidental about this feat of Hollywood sleight-of-hand. The staging of the “Blue Monday Blues” number in Rhapsody in Blue, utilizes a whole complement of dancers and singers who are dressed and made-up in a manner carefully calculated to keep viewers guessing about their racial identity. And in Stormy Weather, an all-black musical revue purporting to chronicle the career of legendary black tap dancer Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, skin color seems to be relatively irrelevant to the plot. At first glance this 25-year survey of African-American music might seem to be the black alternative to Alexander’s Ragtime Band. On closer inspection, however, the two films display not only a resemblance, but a similarity that borders on exact identity. As film historian Gerald Mast has pointed out, with the exception of Fats Waller’s gutsy rendition of “Ain’t Misbehavin,’ ‘black life and entertainment look no different from white life and entertainment in the Fox films that survey the same turf with the same plot.”

Most of the music numbers “take the high white road,” in Mast’s words, like those featuring Cab Calloway in his trademark white tails, the Nicholas Brothers in their impeccable tuxedos, the Katherine Dunham Dancers in their stylish ballet, and a light-skinned Lena Horne in her “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love” number.

Creative processes, too, had to be presented in a manner consistent with the biopic paradigm—i.e., they had to be normalized and rendered understandable to the the average viewer. The long hours of training in composition, harmony, and instrumentation seemed to play little part in the process. A favorite Hollywood ploy was to place the composer in a setting whose sights and sounds could be counted upon to stimulate a creative response, provoking in the inspired artist a sort of musical “automatic writing.” “Every time I pick up a law book,” explains Cole Porter to his mother, “I hear a tune. Every contract I read turns into a lyric. I don’t know how it happens or where it comes from. But there it is.” After listening to the chants of black slaves unloading a merchant ship, Stephen Foster rushes into a saloon to bang out “Oh! Susanna” on the piano.

When George M. Cohan hears a trumpet call at a World War I rally, “Over There!” is instantly born. In a burst of imaginative reconstruction, Jerome Kern’s scenarists depict him writing “Ol’ Man River” while in Memphis, his interior monologue accompanying his nocturnal walk along the banks of the Mississippi River:

“I walked along the river that night,” intones his interior voice as a riverboat silently glides by, “with the river wind in my face and the taste of it on my lips. And I stood there, listening. The sudden excitement was thrilling to me, listening to the song of a river that makes its way right through..."
the heart of America. and the
voice of that river was the
laughter, the tears, the joys, the
sorrows, the hopes of all
Americans.\textsuperscript{58}

And, in a similar situation, John Philip
Sousa strides the deck of a ship under
foggy night skies, musing to himself:

Suddenly, as I paced the
dock, I began to sense the
rhythmic beat of a band playing
in my head, ceaselessly,
echoing and re-echoing the
most distinct melody. Though I
did not know it then, my brain
band was composing my most
popular march—not one note of
which, once I had transferred it
to paper, would ever be
changed.\textsuperscript{59}

In Tin Pan Alley Jack Oakie spends
most of his screen time trying to
fashion lyrics to a catchy tune.
Determined that the words should refer
to a geographical place name, he tries a
variety of two and three-syllable
options, including “Dixie,” “Hawaii,”
‘Ireland,” “Australia,” and “Bermuda”
(“Bermuda, lovely Bermuda, where the
onions and the lilies scene the air. . .”).
It’s not until near the end of the film,
when our frustrated lyricist stumbles
over the name of his pal’s girlfriend,
“Katie,” that the song achieves its final,
familiar form: “K-K-K-Katie.”\textsuperscript{60} Lest
we dismiss this example of fortuitous
bi-association as just another
Hollywood hallucination, we should
remember that more than one song
standard has evolved under similar
circumstances.\textsuperscript{61}

By far the most elaborate and
(in this writer’s opinion, at least)
beautifully crafted creative

“reconstructions” in these films—at
least in a cinematic sense—are two set
pieces in Night and Day and Rhapsody
in Blue. In the first, Porter is
convalescing from wartime wounds in a
French hospital (as explained earlier, a
wholly fictitious scene). A high-angle
shot reveals him in his dressing gown
sitting at the piano, his cane resting
against the bench, a clock ticking
audibly in the stillness. Absently, he
strikes a note on the keyboard. He
repeats it. When the clock interrupts
and strikes the hour, he imitates the
sound in the bass register. As if in a
trance, he speaks: “Like the tick-tick-
tock of the stately clock as it stands
against the wall.” A pause. Rain
spatters against the window. Porter
touches the keys again, intoning, “Like
the drip-drip-drop of the raindrops
when the summer shower is through.
So a voice within me keeps
repeating—you, you, you!” His hands
sweep across the keyboard. At that
moment his wife-to-be, Linda, enters
the room and turns out the lights.
Seating herself beside him, she joins in
and declaims: “Night and day—” He
instantly finishes the phrase: “—You
are the one.” Another pause. He
murmurs to her, “It’s giving me much
trouble.” They chat a few moments as
he fiddles with the tune. Impulsively
he kisses her. He unexpectedly
modulates the phrase and exclaims,
“Wait a minute! I think I’ve got it!”
The music swells up on the background
music track, fully instrumented, as the
camera retreats up and away from the
scene. . . \textsuperscript{62}

Gershwin’s creation of his
famous American in Paris transpires
thus: It’s a bright morning and the
composer is seated in his Paris
apartment, listening through the open

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window to the street sounds below. A car horn blares. Gershwin goes to the piano and taps out the three-note phrase. Without a pause, he leans forward and inscribes the title, “An American in Paris,” on the music paper. As the now-fully instrumented music wells up on the soundtrack, the scene dissolves to a train station. A montage of shots, seen from the subjective point of view, follows the arrival of a traveler, the transfer of his bags (labeled “G.G.”) to a waiting taxi, and a drive through the streets and boulevards. Cut to Gershwin’s studio (the time is later in the day). The composer gestures with his hands, as if conducting the soundtrack orchestra. Dissolve to a view of Notre Dame as the music’s mood grows more stately. Again, from the subjective point of view, our traveler alights from the cab and enters a hotel lobby, where he signs the register “George Gershwin.” Cut to a street scene as the trumpet wails its memorably bluesy melody while we amble past an outdoor café. Cut to a ballet performance as the trumpet theme shifts to the strings (Gershwin’s shadow is thrown against the wall of his box seat). Cut back to Gershwin’s studio again: It’s twilight now, and the composer has left the piano to stand at the window. Cut to Paris again, the Folies Bergere as the raucous brass theme accompanies a line of high-kicking dancers. Cut to streams of water flowing along a brick pavement. Cut back to Gershwin’s studio, as he signs his name to the music. Cut to a concert hall where Walter Damrosch conducts the finale. The sequence, which roughly follows the programatic notes that Deems Taylor and Gershwin wrote for the work’s premiere, is a masterly example of image and sound editing and prefigures the music videos of today.

In conclusion, I said at the outset that as these biopics partake of what today is called a “metahistorical” speculation about the elusive meanings of biography and historical events, so, too, do they engage the knowing viewer in an amusing game of “peek-a-boo” with fact and fiction. It’s a game most of us willingly subscribe to. An amusing example in Words and Music demonstrates the point.

Larry Hart (Mickey Rooney) throws a lavish party in his Hollywood estate (“Who built this place, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer?” he quips). Among the attendees is Judy Garland, appearing as herself. Immediately, she and Hart launch into a song and dance rendition of “I Wish I Were in Love Again.” Think about it. It’s not so much that Hart and Garland probably never danced together (that’s a justifiable quibble, but hardly an important consideration). Rather, remember that this 1948 film has situated this particular scene in the mid-1930s. Judy Garland would have been a child of thirteen, up ‘way past her bedtime. But we accept the scene because we know she’s not dancing with Larry Hart but with Mickey Rooney. This is a “reality” that overrides the fictive “reality,” because we’ve seen them perform so many times together in previous films (made for MGM, of course). The moment even acquires a special poignancy when we realize it was to be the last time they were to appear together on screen.

What is it to be: The lives that late these songwriters have led (to
paraphrase a Cole Porter song); or, as we saw at the outset with George M. Cohan, the lives they would wish to have lived? When these worlds collide, we’re hard put to identify the results.

It’s always a tough call. My best advice is to follow the immortal Yogi Berra’s advice, “When you come to a fork in the road, take it!”

John C. Tibbetts
ENDNOTES


2 For the record—
   Yankee Doodle Dandy: Despite Cohan’s persistent assertions to the contrary, his birth certificate states that he was on 3 July 1878.
   Swannee River: It is doubtful that Foster ever met Christy. Moreover, while actor Don Ameche might sing beautifully in public, composer Foster’s almost terminal shyness prohibited him from such displays. See Ken Emerson, Doo-Dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1997), 102.
   Stars and Stripes Forever: The title song was written in 1896, before the outbreak of the Spanish-American War. Sousa himself claimed he wrote it after receiving the news of the death of his manager. See Paul E. Bierley, The Works of John Philip Sousa (Columbus, Ohio: Integrity Press, 1984), 85.
   Till the Clouds Roll By: Kern’s teacher, one “James Hessler,” has no basis in fact. the New Yorker critic at the time dismissed this fiction sarcastically: “Maybe Guy Bolton, who cooked up the story on which the film is based, confused Hessler with Marie Dressler, for whom Kern was once accompanist, but it doesn’t seem likely.” See “Well, the Songs Are Good,” The New Yorker, Vol. 22 (14 December 1946), 88.
   Words and Music: As this paper later demonstrates, Judy Garland would have been only thirteen at the time of the alleged incident with Larry Hart.
   Night and Day: Biographer Charles Schwarz asserts that while little is known about Porter’s wartime activities in France, it is probable that he never served in the American Army or the French Foreign Legion, as he alleged, nor did he sustain any war-related injuries. See Charles Schwartz, Cole Porter (New York: Da Capo Press, 1979), 45-48.

3 Unavailable for screening, unfortunately, is an exception to this, a biopic about W.C. Handy, St. Louis Blues (Paramount, 1958), starring Nat King Cole. It is the only songwriting biopic from the studio era about a black composer. Since I have not seen it, and since little information is available about it, I am forced to refer to it in only general terms.

4 Songs attributed to the fictitious “Harrigan and Calhoun” include “K-K-K-Katie,” composed by Geoffrey O’Hara in 1918; “America I Love You,” by Edgar Leslie and Archie Gottler in 1915; and “Good-Bye Broadway, Hello France!” by Francis Reinsner and Billy Baskette in 1917.

5 “Well, the Songs Are Good,” The New Yorker, Vol. 22 (14 December 1946), 88.


Darryl F. Zanuck allegedly remarked: “No one, in my opinion, will ever pin us down to dates except the later dates in the past two or three years which are clearly remembered.” Quoted in George Custen, The Bio/Pic: How Hollywood Constructed Public History (New Brunswick, New Jersey: Rutgers University Press, 1992), 37-38.

For an overview of classical music biopics, see my “The Lyre of Light,” Film Comment, Vol. 28, No. 1 (January-February 1992), 66-73. A useful overview of the biopics of Ken Russell, a preeminent figure in the field, is Robert Phillip Kolker, “Ken Russell’s Biopics,” Film Comment, Vol. 9, No. 3 (May 1973), 42-45. As far as popular composer biopics are concerned, it is indeed strange that, aside from several references to the subject in the afore-mentioned Bio/Pic by George Custen, none of the many book-length volumes that have appeared in the last twenty years investigating issues of history and biography on film has devoted any attention to the subject.


For one of the finest and most lucid examinations of this period, see Robert Sklar’s Movie-Made America: How the Movies Changed American Life (New York: Random House, 1975), 175-214.

George Custen, Bio/Pics, 7.


In his detailed history of the writing and performance of Berlin’s “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” Charles Hamm contends that, contrary to myth, “it was a hit with audiences from the moment of its first performances” by Emma Carus at the American Music Hall in Chicago, 17 April 1911. However, it was not his first song to attract international attention, nor was it his best-selling song (“White Christmas” enjoys that distinction). (See Charles Hamm, “Alexander and His Band,” American Music, Vol. 14, No. 1 (Spring 1996), 65-101. For background on the Fox film, see W. Franklyn Moshier, The Alice Faye Movie Book (Harrisburg, PA: Stackpole Books, 1974), 101-103.

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Despite the fact that several later films were virtual cavalcades of Berlin’s music—including You’re in the Army Now (1941) and There’s No Business Like Show Business (1954)—no “official” biopic on Berlin’s life was ever made. Producer Arthur Freed attempted the task in the early 1960s in the never-completed Say It with Music (the title derived from a song Berlin had written in 1921). As Berlin’s biographer, Laurence Bergreen notes in As Thousands Cheer, “the durable legend of Berlin’s career—the rise from busker to Tin Pan Alley and Broadway, the death of his first wife, the famous courtship of Elin Mackay—offered splendid material for another exercise in cinematic hagiography.” Berlin, as usual, demurred. It was decided to drop the biographical angle and develop an original script that would showcase Berlin tunes. Within a year’s time, however, the project was dropped.

The portrait that emerges of “Alexander,” by the way, is now so vaguely conceived that it could also fit several other figures in American music, notably Paul Whiteman (whose career in popularizing ragtime and jazz took him from San Francisco to the concert halls of New York and Europe).

Cohan had attempted a Broadway comeback in 1940 with an original drama, The Return of the Vagabond, but the show failed after just seven performances. Cohan’s film career is far more extensive than is generally acknowledged. While his biographers duly note that he made his talkie debut in The Phantom President (1932) for Paramount, they tell us little about his extensive career in silent films. In 1916 he signed with Artcraft Pictures, a producing entity for Paramount, and during the next two years appeared in movie versions of Broadway Jones, Seven Keys to Baldpate, and Hit-the-Trail Holliday. Subsequently, throughout the 1920s, he also wrote and/or produced other adaptations of Forty-Five Minutes to Broadway, A Prince There Was, Little Johnny Jones, and other plays. Near the end of his life he bitterly summed up his experiences in Hollywood: “If you want the truth... I can only say that my Hollywood experience was the most miserable I have ever had in my life... On the level... Hollywood to me represents the most amazing exhibition of incompetence and ego that you can find anywhere in the civilized world.” The irony is that, in the assessment of historian Audrey Kupferberg, “Yankee Doodle Dandy has done more to keep the memory of George M. Cohan alive than any of his plays or films, any history book or statue.” The only detailed information to be found on this subject is in Audrey Kupferberg, “The Film Career of George M. Cohan,” American Classic Screen, Vol. 4, No. 1 (Fall 1979), 43-52. The quotations are from page 51-52.

Letter to George M. Cohan, dated 21 April 1941. Although the copy in the Warner Bros. Museum in Burbank, California is unsigned, it was probably written by Finlay McDermitt, Chief of the Warner Story Department.

The speech written for Cagney/ Cohan regarding America’s entry into World War I was really tailored to refer to the recent Pearl Harbor attack: “Seems it always happens—whenever we get too high hat and too sophisticated for flag waving, some thug nation decides we’re a pushover, all ready to be black-jacketed. And it isn’t long before we’re looking up mighty anxiously to make sure the flag is still waving over us.”


Quoted in George Custen, Bio/Pics, 119.

Charles Schwartz, Cole Porter, 223.


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Under the heading, “Particular Applications,” Section II (“Sex”), Subsection 4 of the Motion Picture Production Code, March 1930, appears this prohibition: “Sex perversion or any inference of it is forbidden.” (This was amended in 1961 to permit “sex aberration” when treated with “care, discretion, and restraint.”) Correspondence from Code executives warned producers to eliminate “pansy action,” which was the code word for gay or lesbian behavior (although this did not preclude the ridiculing of same). For a complete text of the 1930 Code, see Jack Vizzard, See No Evil (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1970), 366-380.

Levin scripted Delicious for Fox in 1931, which featured many Gershwin tunes. She was also present with Gershwin in the hours before his final collapse.

Levant and Whiteman were longtime friends and associates of Gershwin’s. Among the many anecdotes Levant added to the film’s script are George’s lines to Levant regarding why he, and not Levant would occupy the upper berth of a passenger train: “Upper berth, lower berth—that’s the difference between talent and genius.” Whiteman’s band, with Gershwin as soloist, introduced the Rhapsody in Blue at Aeolian Hall in New York, 12 February 1924. Whiteman himself was the subject of an extravagant biopic, King of Jazz (1930), a wildly fictionalized account of his jazz career which featured an elaborate staging of the Rhapsody in Blue.

Kern died of a stroke before the picture was completed. As a result the original opening, which depicted a birthday party in Kern’s Beverly Hills home, was changed, and a new ending was written. Quoted in Hugh Fordin, The World of Entertainment, 181.

It is therefore odd that in later years Rodgers would voice his dissatisfaction with the film: “The most terrible lies have been all those Hollywood musicals which purport to be the life story of people like Gershwin, or Porter, or Kern. They give no insight whatsoever into the working patterns of the men they’re supposedly about. They did it to Larry and me. The only good thing about that picture was that they had Janet Leigh play my wife. And I found that highly acceptable.” Interview quoted in Max Wilk, They’re Playing Our Song (New York: Atheneum, 1973), 66. Rodgers fails to mention the film in his autobiography, Musical Stages (New York: Random House, 1975).

Recent waves of immigration from Eastern Europe had brought a majority of the Jewish emigrants to New York City. It has been estimated that at this time only 36 percent of the city’s population was native born, while blacks accounted for 60,000 and Jews approximately one million. See Charles Hamm, Music in the New World (New York: W.W. Norton and Company, 1983), 340-341.


Since around 1865 American composers had sought academic respectability and public recognition by studying and imitating the classical European traditions, particularly in Germany. In American classrooms, pioneering musical educators like John Knowles Paine of Harvard and Horatio Parker of Yale had emphasized conservative musical studies. Well into the Twentieth Century Parker continued to use as his text Waldo Pratt’s, particularly in Germany. In American classrooms, pioneering musical educators like John Knowles Paine of Harvard and Horatio Parker of Yale had emphasized conservative musical studies. Well into the Twentieth Century Parker continued to use as his text Waldo Pratt’s The History of Music (1907), which emphasized the history of Austro-German music and paid relatively little attention to the moderns.

However, as the result of many factors, including the popularity of the minstrel shows before mid-century, the achievement of Stephen Foster and Louis Moreau Gottschalk in the Civil War era, the preachments of Antonin Dvorak during his three-year sojourn in America in 1892-1895, the emergence of black-inspired ragtime near the turn of the century, the pioneering work of proto-ethnomusicologists like Arthur Farwell, and the increased dissemination of music by means of the growing sheet music...
industry, player piano rolls, the nickelodeon, and the phonograph, American music was rapidly finding a more indigenous voice—or constellation of voices, so to speak. See Alan Howard Levy, “The Search for Identity in American Music, 1890-1920,” American Music, Vol. 2, No. 2 (Summer 1984), 70-81.

Similarly, while several of the pioneering motion picture studios, like Famous Players, produced so-called “photoplays” that drew upon the classical models and personnel of the legitimate theatrical establishment, other film studios, like Biograph, Keystone, and Ince, were drawing heavily upon “lower” forms of entertainment, like vaudeville skits, slapstick chase comedies, and open-air western melodramas. See my The American Theatrical Film (Bowling Green, Ohio: The Popular Press, 1985).

37In a remarkably prescient written statements published during his New York sojourn, Dvorak defined what he called the “music of the people” as deriving from “all the races that are commingled in this great country”—i.e., “the Negro melodies, the songs of the creoles, the red man’s chant, the plaintive ditties of the German or Norwegian. . . the melodies of whistling boys, street singers and blind organ grinders.” To our modern ears, he seems to have anticipated the rise of the ragtime song and the work of the Tin Pan Alley songwriters. See Antonin Dvorak [assisted by Edwin E. Emerson, Jr.], “Music in America,” Harper’s New Monthly Magazine, Vol. 90, No. 537 (February 1895), 433. For the full text of this and his other newspaper articles, see my Dvorak in America (Portland, Oregon: Amadeus Press, 1993), 355-384. For a discussion of Dvorak’s pronouncements, see my “Conference Report: The New Orleans Dvorak Sesquicentennial,” The Sonneck Society Bulletin, Vol. XVII, No. 3 (Fall 1991), 100-102.

38The undisputed king of the Hollywood biopics was Darryl F. Zanuck who, during his years as production chief at Warner Bros. and Twentieth Century-Fox, oversaw dozens of screen biographies of statesmen, inventors, entertainers, and composers. As far as the latter category is concerned, Zanuck left the classical composers to Columbia and MGM while he doted on the popular songwriters, like Stephen Foster (Swanee River, 1939), Irving Berlin (Alexander’s Ragtime Band, 1938), Paul Dresser (My Gal Sal, 1942), Ernest R. Ball (Irish Eyes Are Smiling, 1944), Joseph E. Howard (I Wonder Who’s Kissing Her Now, 1947), Fred Fisher (Oh, You Beautiful Doll, 1949), John Philip Sousa (Stars and Stripes Forever, 1952), and the team of B.G. DeSylva, Lew Brown and Ray Henderson (The Best Things in Life Are Free, 1956). Many of these were produced in conjunction with former vaudevillian George Jessel. A particularly pertinent discussion of Zanuck and his work can be found in George F. Custen, Twentieth Century’s Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood (New York: Basic Books, 1997).


40Words and Music begins with Richard Rodgers (Tom Drake) addressing the camera with the following apology: “This is the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer sound stage No. 1. I am Richard Rodgers. If in telling you about Larry, I talk quite a bit about myself, it’s because there hasn’t been a day in my life that didn’t have something to do with Larry Hart. I’m almost sorry to say there were none of the standard trials and tribulations you would ordinarily expect. In fact, we were just two lucky fellows who had success very young. From the dramatic standpoint, we didn’t even have the advantage of being very poor. We weren’t very rich, either. . . .”

Leo Braudy defines the phenomenon this way: “Such people are vehicles of cultural memory and cohesion. The ability to reinterpret them fills them with constantly renewed meaning, even though that meaning might be very different from what they meant a hundred. . . years before. . . . they allow us to identify what’s present with what’s past.” See Leo Braudy, The Frenzy of Renown: Fame and Its History (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 15.

41Two other biopics have been made about Stephen Foster, Harmony Lane (Mascot, 1934), starring Douglass Montgomery as Foster; and I Dream of Jeanie (Republic, 1951), featuring Ray Middleton. Both are unavailable for screening at this writing.
In an interview with this writer, Deane Root of the Stephen Foster Memorial recounted a visit by Twentieth Century-Fox researchers to the Memorial in the late 1930s. “All people know about Stephen Foster is what they’ve seen in the movie Swanee River,” noted Root. “the people at Fox came here to research the picture, then threw everything out and rewrote his life!” See my “In Search of Stephen Foster,” The World and I (July 1991), 253-259.

Ironically, Fox’s scenarists ended up following the usual “line” handed down by Foster’s brother, Morrison, in his 1896 biography. That remarkable document established what today—and for the movies—remains the core myths about Foster: that he was an untutored genius, that he longed for the past and the Old South (and thus was a glorifier of slavery), and that he was inept at the practicalities of life. Regarding Stephen’s relationship with his wife, Jane, whose family’s sympathies with anti-slavery causes ran counter to those of the Foster family’s politics, there was little account. According to Deane Root, Morrison “altered and perhaps destroyed documents that might have given us countering versions.” See Deane Root, “Family, Myth, and the Historical Sources: Why We Don’t Know the Truth about Stephen Foster” (a paper delivered at the American Music at Illinois Conference in Urbana, Illinois, 29 September, 1990).

Oddly, although “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair” is heard on the background score, it is never sung or performed in a full-scale rendition.” There has been some dispute as to whether or not “Jeanie,” written in 1854, was a tribute to Foster’s wife, Jane Denny McDowell (nicknamed “Jennie”). For a discussion of the issue, see William W. Austin, Susanna, Jeanie, and the Old Folks at Home: The Songs of Stephen C. Foster from His Time to Ours (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 1975), 89-99. The selection of a particular tune as a leitmotif throughout a film is, of course, standard practice in the biopic. Just a few more examples include “My Funny Valentine” in Words and Music and the eponymous tunes in Till the Clouds Roll By and Night and Day.

44 There are several versions of this anecdote. The most famous is that George visited Ravel in Paris in 1928, at which time Ravel declared, “Why should you be a second-rate Ravel when you can be a first-rate Gershwin?” Charles Schwartz concludes that because Gershwin himself spread this and other variants of the story, none of them may be regarded as definitive. See Charles Schwartz, George Gershwin: His Life and Music, 125-126. Biographer Joan Peyser notes that it is probable that Gershwin first met Ravel in New York City in 1928 at a party given by Eva Gauthier for the French composer. Gershwin responded by taking Ravel with him for a visit to the Harlem nightclubs. Later that year, while Gershwin was in Paris, Ravel told an audience in Houston that he hoped the American school of music would “embody a great deal of the rich and diverting rhythm of your jazz and a great deal of sentiment and spirit characteristic of your popular melodies.” Joan Peyser, The Memory of All That: The Life of George Gershwin (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993), 159.

45 There is no question that most of these composers harbored what might be best described as “classical” ambitions. For example, John Philip Sousa yearned to write an American opera, but it never materialized. He did write, however, hundreds of "art" songs and several influential comic operas, like The Queen of Hearts (1885) and El Capitan (1895), which, as Paul Bierley writes, “rivalled the works of more prominent composers in the field.” As the movie implies, Sousa was hurt that these works were not as popular as his marches (see Paul Bierley, The Works of John Philip Sousa, 5). Irving Berlin frequently inserted classical references into his rags, including quotations from Bizet’s Carmen in “that Opera Rag,” from Gaetano Donizetti’s Lucia di Lammermoor in “Opera Burlesque”; and from Mendelssohn’s “Spring Song” in “that Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune.” Like Joplin before him, he often spoke of writing “an opera completely in ragtime,” which would be set in the South. “A grand opera in syncopation may sound like a joke now,” he said, “—but someday it’s going to be a fact—even if I have to write one” (Quoted in Laurence Bergreen, As Thousands Cheer, 78). Although Jerome Kern rarely dabbled in ragtime or jazz stylings, he struggled to revolutionize the revue-oriented musical theater with a more integrated form of show, as in the epoch-marking series of “Princess Theatre” productions and, of course, Show Boat. He idolized Gershwin who, in his words, was “the first composer who made me conscious that popular music was of inferior quality, and that musical-comedy music was made of better material” (Quoted in Max Wilk, They’re Playing Our Song, 12). Gershwin most successfully fused the classical and popular worlds in works like the Concerto in F and the opera.
Throughout his career,” writes Charles Hamm, “even during the periods of his greatest success as a writer of popular songs, he insisted that there need not be an irreconcilable gap between popular and serious music, and attempted to write music that would reach listeners of both persuasions” (see Hamm, Yesterdays (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1979), 349.

There really was a Professor Kleber, a German immigrant who had come to Pittsburgh in 1832. He was a man of many parts in the community, a composer, church organist, teacher, and music store manager. Emerson says he was very eclectic in his musical tastes and “epitomized the genteel tradition and exploited it to the fullest with entrepreneurial energy.” See Ken Emerson, Doo-Dah! Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture, 100-101.

“Otto Franck” is probably based on Gershwin’s piano teacher, Charles Hambitzer, who did indeed teach the music of Beethoven, Bach, Chopin, and Ravel. While generally sympathetic to Gershwin’s interests in popular music, he insisted on traditional training first. Gershwin concluded his lessons with Hambitzer at age sixteen. Hambitzer died in 1918, bitter over what he regarded as George’s “defection” from the classical world. Gershwin’s later teachers included Wallingford Riegger, Henry Cowell, and Rubin Goldmark (a former associate of Antonin Dvorak’s at the National Conservatory). By all accounts, Gershwin’s evenly divided interests in popular and classical music was genuine. For more information about Hambitzer, see Charles Schwarz, Gershwin: His Life and Music, 16-18.

Hessler might be modeled after the two music arrangers who played a prominent part in Kern’s life, Frank Saddler, who orchestrated the Princess shows, and Robert Russell Bennett, the arranger who worked with him in Hollywood. In either case, the professional relationship likely had nothing whatever to do with classical music. Indeed, Bennett recalls that Kern once derided the music of Beethoven and Brahms. See Max Wilk, They’re Playing Our Song, 20.

Even in the MGM classical composer biopic about Robert and Clara Schumann, Song of Love (1947), the compositions of Clara are neither mentioned nor performed. She is portrayed solely as a performer, not as a composer. Acknowledgement of her gifts had to wait for the 1985 biopic, Spring Symphony, starring Nastassja Kinski as Clara.

St. Louis Blues ignores issues of race to concentrate instead on the complications Handy (Nat King Cole) faces in romance and in the oppositions to his career of his Bible-loving, show-business-hating father. Handy’s achievements as one of the first black music publishers on the Alley are almost mostly omitted.

Among the many composers who avidly cultivated the acquaintance of black composers and performers and acknowledged their influences were Berlin and Gershwin. The lyrics of a number of Berlin’s early songs have black musicians as protagonists, like the persona “Mose” that appears in “He’s a Rag Picker” and “That Humming Rag.” As Charles Hamm notes, “[Berlin] did develop an honest and deep appreciation for black musicians and their music.” Even the sheet music cover of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” reveals a racially integrated ensemble. See Charles Hamm, “Alexander and His Band,” American Music, 73-74. Gershwin’s absorption in the black experience was intense, and he maintained contacts with black artists like James P. Johnson and Luckey Roberts. His research into the African-American culture for his opera, Porgy and Bess would alone demand an entire volume—See Charles Schwartz, Gershwin: His Life and Music, 243-271. “There was something in the music of black Americans that struck a responsive chord somewhere deep in Gershwin, something about their music that he grasped in an instinctive way. In turn, this same indefinable quality found its way into many of his songs, to which black Americans responded in a similarly instinctive way.” See Charles Hamm, Yesterdays: Popular Song in America, 352.

Thomas Cripps, Slow Fade to Black, 268. Although the appearance of Bill “Bojangles” Robinson as Shirley Temple’s dancing partner might seem an important exception, it should be noted that he was never permitted to touch his diminutive partner. See George F. Custen, Twentieth Century’s Fox: Darryl F. Zanuck and the Culture of Hollywood, 210-211.

James Agee, “Till the Clouds Roll By,” The Nation, Vol. 163 (28 December 1946), 766. George Sidney directed this concluding sequence, which is a veritable movie with a movie. “All the gaudy and indulgent vulgarity [MGM] had suppressed throughout the picture is slopped all over the screen, as if MGM simply could not hold it in any longer.” Moreover, “the spectacle of this scrawny kid [Sinatra] in his bulky white suit singing ‘You and me, we sweat and strain’ brought audible titters from audiences and a few well-deserved swipes from the press.” See Miles Kreuger, Show Boat: The Story of a Classic American Musical (New York: Oxford University Press, 1977), 172.

When the number first appeared in the George White Scandals of 1922, white actors in blackface appeared in the leading roles.


The celebrated black composer, William Grant Still, withdrew as the film’s music supervisor because the film “degraded colored people.” But in Hollywood everything is relative, so to speak, and the fact that Zanuck and Fox would produce an all-black revue at this time merits some admiration. Zanuck himself at this time hosted a Hollywood luncheon in which the NAACP was given a forum to plead for a more enlightened treatment of blacks in motion pictures. He publicly urged that “the program of casting colored persons in more normal roles be put into effect at an early date.” Still and Loeb are quoted in Daniel J. Leab, From Sambo to Superspade: The Black Experience in Motion Pictures (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1975), 124-130.

“Oh! Susanna” was actually introduced at a gala concert at the Eagle Ice Cream Saloon in Pittsburgh, 11 September 1847. Ken Emerson in Doo-Dah!: Stephen Foster and the Rise of American Popular Culture notes its mixture of sources—such as the use of black vernacular in the words and of musical allusions to the European troubadour (the banjo on the singer’s knee) and English balladry. The name “Susannah” probably refers to Foster’s late sister, Charlotte, whose middle name was Susannah. The song “marks the birth of pop music as we still recognize it today. No popular song is more deeply rooted in American consciousness than ‘Oh! Susanna.’” (127-130)

Contrary to the movie’s suggestion, it was Kern, not Hammerstein, who first came up with the idea of writing a musical based on Edna Ferber’s novel, Show Boat. Through the agencies of Alexander Woollcott, Kern got an introduction to Ferber and received permission to proceed. It was only thereafter that Kern brought the 31-year old Hammerstein in to the project. See Miles Kreuger, Show Boat: The Story of a Classic American Musical, 18.

See f.n. 2 for the circumstances of the song’s composition.

See f.n. 3.

The most notorious example of this sort of lyric-switching is Irving Berlin’s “Easter Parade.” It began life as an unsuccessful song called “Smile and Show Your Dimple.” In 1933 Berlin exhumed the song for a musical, As Thousands Cheer and substituted the lyrics best known today. See Laurence Bergreen, As Thousands Cheer, 317.

Porter’s own accounts of the writing of “Night and Day” vary. In one interview he claimed that he had been inspired by hearing the monotonous wail of Moroccan music. But Charles Schwarz contends that it was written for Fred Astaire in 1932 for The Gay Divorce. See Charles Schwarz, Cole Porter, 142-143.
Although Gershwin initially downplayed the programatic aspects of the work, describing it as “programmatic [sic] only in a general impressionistic way”—he prepared more detailed notes with the assistance of Deems Taylor for the work’s premiere. The stimulus for An American in Paris did indeed derive from two trips to Paris in April 1923 and March 1928. The taxi-horn inspiration is authentic, and Gershwin brought four French taxi horns back to America with him. Walter Damrosch, who had come to the New York Philharmonic during the 1928-1929 season, premiered the work at Carnegie Hall on 13 December 1928. See Charles Schwarz, George Gershwin: His Life and Music, 153-170.