

George Gershwin: 15 facts



Words highlighted in yellow appear in the glossary at the bottom of this article.

George Gershwin wrote great songs and shows for the theatre, but he always fancied himself as a serious composer. And he was - in fact, one of the 20th century's greatest (plus, he was a world-wide **influencer** of other composers with his **jazz** style...especially those classical composers in Europe).

1. Humble beginnings

George Gershwin was born in New York City into a Russian Jewish immigrant family in 1898. As a boy, George attended the local **Yiddish** theatres, ran errands for them and appeared onstage as an extra. Around the age of 10, he started playing the piano his parents had bought for his older brother Ira. His friend Max Rosenzweig had learned to play Dvorak's *Humoresque* on the piano, thus introducing George to "serious" music. George would go to "Maxie's" house to be taught by his buddy. This was his first **foray** into classical music. He was also influenced by Scott Joplin's ragtime music, and he spent hours listening to rags on café pianos in the neighborhood.

2. 'The boy is a genius'

The acclaimed piano teacher Charles Hambitzer accepted Gershwin as a student at the age of 14 and immediately realized the level of talent George had. "I have a new pupil who will make his mark if anybody will. The boy is a genius," Hambitzer wrote to his sister. Gershwin was sent off to concerts and given significant pieces by the great composers to learn on the piano. Hambitzer's efforts certainly paid off. George became a magnificent pianist.

Here is a video clip of Gershwin playing his version of the song *I Got Rhythm*.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oQdeTbUDCiw> (3:00)

3. Tin Pan Alley

Gershwin began his career as a song "**plugger**" in New York's Tin Pan Alley when he was 15 years old. Back in those days the best way for singers, producers and other music lovers to learn about the latest music was to go to publishing houses on 28th Street between 5th Avenue and Broadway in New York City. This was in the day when there were no radios, no televisions, and no phonograph recordings, and certainly no streaming services! The main family entertainment was centered around the piano, where the family would gather to sing the latest popular songs. When a person entered a department store, the two most popular counters in the front of the store were the candy counter and the sheet music counter!



Several music publishers bought a row of brownstone buildings on a back street and moved in. Upright pianos were placed in rows of small cubicles crammed with an upright piano, where pianists were paid to “plug” (advertise) new music all day for any and everybody who wanted the latest hit. The **cacophony** of many pianos (probably out of tune in many cases) playing at the same time sounded like tin pans beating together, hence the name. To earn extra money, Gershwin also worked as a rehearsal pianist for Broadway singers. Tin Pan Alley gave him the experience of sight reading new music day after day, furthering his piano technique.

4. His First Hit Song

Gershwin’s first big hit was *Swanee*, composed in 10 minutes on a bus. Not long afterwards, the singer Al Jolson heard it and recorded it. *Swanee* sold a million sheet music copies, and an estimated two million records. It became the biggest-selling song of Gershwin’s entire career.

5. Early works for the stage

In his 20s, Gershwin started composing Broadway musical theatre works with his big brother Ira writing the lyrics. They even created an experimental one-act jazz opera *Blue Monday*, set in **Harlem** – a **pre-cursor** to his later opera, *Porgy and Bess*. In 1924, the brothers **collaborated** on the stage musical *Lady Be Good*, which included the classic song *Fascinating Rhythm*. George would write the melody and Ira would then set lyrics to it. This particular song gave Ira more trouble than normal, but as usual, he succeeded in writing the perfect lyrics to the song.

Here is a photo of George and Ira at work.



The link below is a recording of Fred Astaire and his sister Adele singing *Fascinating Rhythm*, with Gershwin at the piano. (This recording on YouTube contains a bunch of photos, including one of a very young Fred and his sister.) If you haven’t heard of Fred Astaire, he is DEFINITELY worth your while to research. He was a fantastic dancer, a fine actor, and a highly respected singer...some song composers have remarked that Astaire was their favorite singer (even though he didn’t have a particularly beautiful voice) because he had such fine delivery of the lyrics. (I’m including the lyrics below because this recording isn’t the greatest.)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6BTM07B0U64> (2:27)

LYRICS TO FASCINATING RHYTHM

VERSE:

Got a little rhythm, a rhythm, a rhythm,
That pit-a-pats through my brain.
So darn persistent, the day isn't distant
When it will drive me insane.
Comes in the morning without any warning,
And hangs around all day
I'll have to sneak up to it,
Someday and speak up to it,
I hope it listens when I say:

CHORUS:

Fascinating Rhythm
You've got me on the go!
Fascinating Rhythm
I'm all a-quiver

What a mess you're making!
The neighbors want to know
Why I'm always shaking
Just like a fliver

Each morning I get up with the sun (start a-hoppin,' never stoppin')
To find at night no work has been done

I know that once it didn't matter
But now you're doing wrong
When you start to patter
I'm so unhappy

Won't you take a day off?
Decide to run along
Somewhere far away off
And make it snappy!

Oh, how I long to be
The man I used to be!
Fascinating rhythm
You gotta stop picking on me

Perhaps George and Ira were the perfect partners. George was outgoing by nature while Ira was a retiring person and shunned the limelight. He is quoted as saying, "I always felt that if George hadn't been my brother and pushed me, I'd have been contented to be a bookkeeper." He actually was the bookkeeper for their musical endeavors, and at George's death, he inherited the lucrative royalties from his brother's musical scores and priceless collection of artworks, valued at untold millions of dollars.

6. *Rhapsody in Blue*

In January 1924, Gershwin reportedly learned from a newspaper article that he was meant to be writing a 'jazz concerto' for a program of new American music to be given by the popular dance band leader Paul Whiteman a MONTH later. Writing at a manic pace, Gershwin composed a two-piano version,

which was then **orchestrated** by Whiteman's arranger, Ferde Grofé. *Rhapsody in Blue*, with Gershwin as soloist, was the last number on a very long program, and the audience was getting restless. Some people were actually were walking up the aisle, but when that opening solo clarinet started to play, they rushed back to their seats, thinking "NOW we are going to hear something!" The piece was a triumph, and today it is hailed as a landmark in American music. (People in the audience included Sergei Rachmaninoff, Igor Stravinsky, Victor Herbert, conductors Leopold Stowkowski and Walter Damrosch, violinist Fritz Kreisler, and the "March King" John Phillip Sousa.) If you get a chance to see Disney's *Fantasia 2000*, there is a great cartoon set to this work.

Gershwin tells the backstory of his composition:

"It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty bang, that is so often so stimulating to a composer.... I frequently hear music in the very heart of the noise. And there I suddenly heard—and even saw on paper—the complete construction of the Rhapsody, from beginning to end. No new themes came to me, but I worked on the thematic material already in my mind and tried to conceive the composition as a whole. I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America, of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our metropolitan madness. By the time I reached Boston I had a definite *plot* of the piece...."

Although this is an old video, it is one of my favorites...the set is outlandish and outdated and very fun! It is from a movie called *King of Jazz*, and they had trouble filming a true blue, so people laughed and said Gershwin's piece should have been called *Rhapsody in Turquoise*. Don't you love that giant piano!

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oadzppD9Rv8> (9:21)

7. *Concerto in F*, for Piano and Orchestra

One year after *Rhapsody in Blue*, Gershwin extended his innovative jazz-influenced classical style even further with his piano concerto. It was premiered by the composer with the New York Symphony Orchestra, conducted by Walter Damrosch. The conductor described Gershwin as 'the Prince who has taken Cinderella [jazz] by the hand and openly proclaimed her a princess to the astonished world, no doubt to the fury of her envious sisters.' The orchestral opening of the first movement of this work used the famous rhythm of the Charleston, a dance craze of the time. (Even in writing his serious music, he couldn't get away from popular influences!) Here is the finale of the concerto. (6:39)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q4yJVszuzimo> (6:39)

3rd movement of Concerto in F played by Peter Jablonski

8. *An American in Paris*

In the mid-1920s, Gershwin stayed in Paris for a short period, during which he tried to study composition with the noted Nadia Boulanger (Aaron Copland's teacher) who, along with several other prospective tutors such as Maurice Ravel, rejected him. She was afraid that rigorous classical study would ruin his jazz-influenced style. While in the French capital, Gershwin wrote the **tone poem** *An American in Paris*. He captures the feel of an American tourist strolling down the Champs-Élysées and hearing all the sounds of the city around him. He even includes French taxi horns...listen for them in the opening of this fantastic composition. In 1951 Gene Kelly appeared in the movie by the same name with ballerina/actress Leslie Caron. It is a fun movie for the whole family to watch, with beautiful music throughout.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K4I2OzMltM4> (22 min)

Frankfort Radio Symphony performs a symphonic version of *An American in Paris*

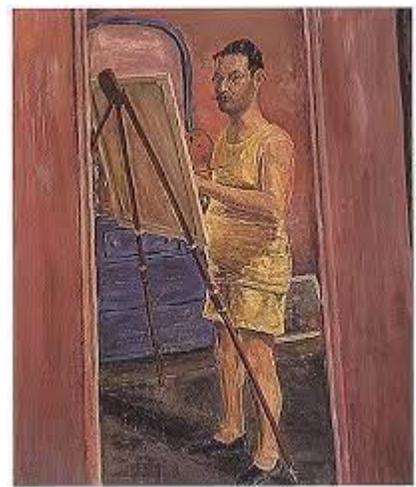
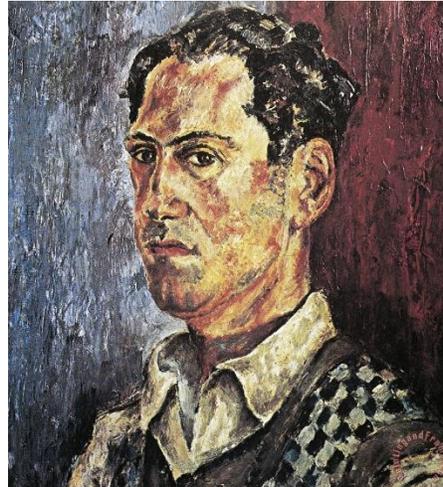
9. Friendships

On the occasion of **Maurice Ravel's** 53rd birthday, Eva Gauthier hosted a dinner party, and Gershwin performed selections of his works at the party. According to the hostess, "Gershwin's playing left Ravel dumbfounded. The thing that astonished Ravel was the facility with which George scaled the most formidable technical difficulties and his genius for weaving complicated rhythms and his great gift for melody." Ravel and Gershwin became good friends. Ravel was influenced by Gershwin's use of jazz, and later visited George in NYC. George took Maurice to Harlem to the famous Cotton Club to hear jazz. (In the photo below, Ravel is seated at the piano and Gershwin is on the right at Madame Gautier's party.)



10. Gershwin as painter

George was an avid art collector, and both George and Ira shared the hobby of painting. George started with watercolors and moved to oils. He did many portraits, including this one of his mother. As you can see from her expression, she was a complicated person with a very negative personality. There is a self-portrait of George in the middle and Ira's painting of himself on the right.



In Erma Jones' 1937 article "George Gershwin, A Lament" she described the tremendous delight Gershwin had for his art collection, "He was also an ardent and extravagant collector. And as Einstein is more pleased with a compliment on his violin playing than with a salute to his mathematical reputation.... As Leonardo was more proud of his repute as a physicist than his prowess as a painter, so Gershwin was more proud of his picture gallery than of his musicianship."

By 1933 his collection was considered so extraordinary that the Art Club of Chicago arranged for an exhibition of Gershwin's collection. George loaned forty-nine oils, seventeen water colors, lithographs, drawings, and three sculptures.



11. Fascinated by modernism

Gershwin was intrigued by the modernist works of **Berg, Shostakovich, Stravinsky, Milhaud, and Schoenberg** (all big names in the classical world). He asked Schoenberg - whom he also painted - for composition lessons. Schoenberg refused, reportedly saying 'I would only make you a bad Schoenberg, and you're such a good Gershwin already.'

At a party attended by Igor Stravinsky, Gershwin entertained the guests by playing his *Rhapsody* and some of his show tunes. Stravinsky recalled, "None of the music interested me." At that very same party, Gershwin inquired about lessons with Stravinsky, and Stravinsky asked him how much he made. Upon hearing "a hundred thousand dollars a year—maybe two hundred thousand," Stravinsky responded, "Well then, in that case perhaps it is I who ought to study under you!"

12. A string of hit shows and songs

Despite George's success with concert works, the Gershwins continued to write hit musicals – *Oh, Kay!* (1926), *Funny Face* (1927), *Strike Up the Band* (1927 and 1930), *Show Girl* (1929), and *Girl Crazy* (1930). *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) was the first musical comedy to win a Pulitzer Prize (for Drama).

At the age of 27, Gershwin appeared on the cover of *Time* magazine (something reserved for celebrities) showing the popularity of this young man.



Here is Judy Garland in the 1943 movie *Girl Crazy*, based on the Broadway musical, singing *I Got Rhythm*. (Garland might be recognizable to you as Dorothy from *The Wizard of Oz*)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NQ2z-C8HdiA> (3:22)

Here is Nat King Cole singing *Embraceable You*, also from *Girl Crazy*. (Nat King Cole is another artist worth researching... a beautiful singer, who actually started as a pianist.)
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Eo5X54WXvNM> (3:47)

Some of Gershwin's hit songs from his Broadway musicals:

(If you love Gershwin as much as I do, you'll go to You tube and look up recordings of these wonderful songs.)

But Not For Me

Funny Face

He Loves and She Loves

How Long Has This Been Going On?

I've Got a Crush on You

Lady, Be Good

'S Wonderful

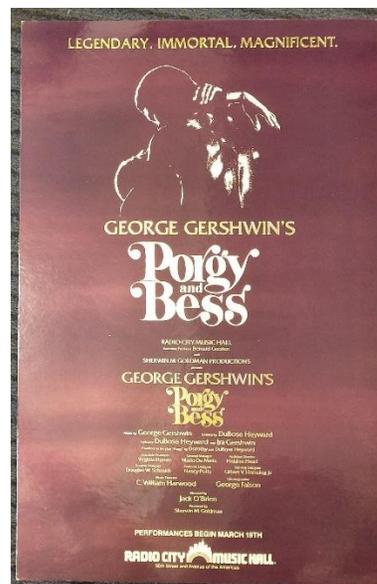
Someone to Watch Over Me

The Man I Love

They Can't Take that Away from Me

13. Porgy and Bess

Gershwin's most ambitious composition was Porgy and Bess, which he called a 'folk opera'. The action takes place in the fictional neighborhood of Catfish Row, South Carolina, and is written for an all-black cast. In order to make the music as authentic as possible, Gershwin traveled to South Carolina, and he spent time on Folly Island, learning more about the customs and language of African Americans in the south. The opera contains some of Gershwin's most sophisticated music and some huge hit arias – 'Summertime', 'I Got Plenty o' Nuttin' and 'It Ain't Necessarily So'. When it was first performed in 1935, it was a box office flop. It is now widely regarded as one of the most important American operas of the 20th century. (It made its Met debut in 1985, some 50 years after it was written...probably due to the history of race relations in this country.) "Porgy and Bess," in the words of Stephen Sondheim, is "a musical gift from heaven".



Here is the gorgeous *Summertime* from *Porgy and Bess*. (2:54)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7-Qa92Rzbk> (2:54)

Lyrics to Summertime (Audio is a bit low on this video)

Summertime

And the livin' is easy

Fish are jumpin'
And the cotton, the cotton is high

Oh, your daddy's rich
And your ma' is good lookin'
So hush, little baby
Don't you cry

One of these mornings
You're gonna rise up singing
You gonna spread your wings
And take to the sky.

Until that morning
Ain't nothing can harm you
With daddy and mammy standing by.

14. Hollywood

After the disappointing reception for *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin moved to Hollywood and worked on many film scores. His music for *Shall We Dance*, starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, married ballet with jazz in a new way, and ran for two hours in length. It took Gershwin several months to write and orchestrate it.



George and Ira with Fred Astaire

Fred Astaire had worked with George on Broadway, so old friends were united in the making of this movie. In an interview, Fred revealed that George was also a good dancer, and when Fred and Ginger would get stuck trying to piece together various dance moves, George was always ready to suggest his own dance ideas.

<https://www.dailymotion.com/video/x26yj5a>

Walking the Dog from *Shall We Dance* (3:14)

15. Final illness

Early in 1937, Gershwin began to complain of blinding headaches, and there were signs he was suffering coordination problems. He was diagnosed with a brain tumor. An operation was unsuccessful,

and Gershwin died on 11 July at the age of 38. The world was shocked and saddened to learn of his early death.

George Gershwin - A Lasting Legacy

From the opening clarinet glissando of *Rhapsody in Blue* to such standards as *Embraceable You* and *Someone to Watch Over Me*, Gershwin's music has been part of our world for almost a century. It evokes an era of glamor and sophistication and gave the United States its first authentic voice in the concert hall. The American singer Michael Feinstein has said, 'The Gershwin legacy is extraordinary because George Gershwin died in 1937, but his music is as fresh and vital today as when he originally created it.' In 2005, *The Guardian* newspaper determined, using "estimates of earnings accrued in a composer's lifetime," that George Gershwin is not only one of the greatest American composers, he was the wealthiest composer of all time.

Awards and Honors

- In 1937, 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.
- In 1985, the **Congressional Gold Medal** was awarded to George and Ira Gershwin. Only three other songwriters, George M. Cohan, Harry Chapin, and Irving Berlin, have received this award.
- In 1998 a special **Pulitzer Prize** was posthumously awarded to Gershwin "commemorating the centennial year of his birth, for his distinguished and enduring contributions to American music." Gershwin had already won a Pulitzer Prize for his musical *Of Thee I Sing* during his lifetime.

GLOSSARY:

Influencer – someone who affects others, and in the case of music, inspires composers

Jazz – a type of music created by African Americans, relying on slave songs, blues and ragtime.

Yiddish – a language of European Jewish people built on the German language with the use of Hebrew words mixed in.

Foray - an initial and often tentative attempt to do something in a new or different field or area of activity.

Pluggger – Someone who promotes new music for sale.

Cacophony – a harsh, discordant mixture of sounds.

Harlem – a neighborhood in Upper Manhattan, which was originally a Dutch settlement, then was inhabited by mostly Jews and Italians in the 1800s, and then in the 1900s African Americans populated the area during the Great Migration.

Pre-cursor – a thing that comes before another of the same kind; a forerunner.

Collaborated – worked together

Rhapsody – a freely-structured work, typically one that is emotional or exuberant in character.

Orchestrate – to set music to orchestra which was originally written for some other instrument(s).

Concerto – a musical work for solo instrument, accompanied by orchestra.

Tone Poem – a work that conveys a story through music.

Maurice Ravel – a Post-Impressionistic French composer, well known for such works as *Bolero*, *Daphnis and Chloe*, and *Pavane for a Dead Princess*.

Alban Berg – a modern Austrian composer of classical music who wrote much dissonant music.

Dmitri Shostakovich – a modern Russian composer of classical music.

Igor Stravinsky – a modern Russian composer of classical music.

Darius Milhaud – a modern French composer of classical music who was greatly influenced by Gershwin. Milhaud's *Creation of the World* caused a sensation with his extensive use of jazz.

Arnold Schoenberg - a modern German composer of classical music who moved to America and became a friend of Gershwin's.

Posthumous – awarded after the death of the originator.