



THE B-SIDE

THE DEATH of TIN PAN ALLEY
and the REBIRTH of the
GREAT AMERICAN SONG

BEN YAGODA

How to Not Write Bad: The Most Common Writing Problems and the Best Ways to Avoid Them

Memoir: A History

When You Catch an Adjective, Kill It: The Parts of Speech, for Better and/or Worse

The Sound on the Page: Style and Voice in Writing

About Town: The New Yorker and the World It Made

Will Rogers: A Biography

The Art of Fact: A Historical Anthology of Literary Journalism (coeditor)

THE B SIDE

THE DEATH of TIN PAN ALLEY

and the REBIRTH of the

GREAT AMERICAN SONG



BEN YAGODA

RIVERHEAD BOOKS

a member of Penguin Group (USA)

New York

2015



RIVERHEAD BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) LLC

375 Hudson Street

New York, New York 10014



USA • Canada • UK • Ireland • Australia • New Zealand • India • South Africa • China

penguin.com

A Penguin Random House Company

Copyright © 2015 by Ben Yagoda

Penguin supports copyright. Copyright fuels creativity, encourages diverse voices, promotes free speech, and creates a vibrant culture. Thank you for buying an authorized edition of this book and for complying with copyright laws by not reproducing, scanning, or distributing any part of it in any form without permission. You are supporting writers and allowing Penguin to continue to publish books for every reader.

The author gratefully acknowledges permission to quote lyrics from the following:

“Dancing in the Street,” written by Ivy Hunter, Marvin Gaye, and William Stevenson. © 1964 Jobete Music Co. Inc., MGIII Music, NMG Music, and FCG Music. All rights administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC, on behalf of Jobete Music Co. Inc., MGIII Music, NMG Music, FCG Music, and Stone Gate Music (a division of Jobete Music Co. Inc.). All rights reserved. Used by permission.

“I Get a Kick out of You” (from *Anything Goes*), words and music by Cole Porter. Copyright © 1934 (Renewed) WB Music Corp. All rights reserved. Used by permission of Alfred Music.

“Mr. Cole Won’t Rock and Roll,” written by Joe Sherman and Noel Sherman. © 1959 Sony/ATV Tunes LLC. All rights administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

“To Each His Own” (from the Paramount Pictures film), written by Jay Livingston and Ray Evans. Copyright 1946 Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC. All rights administered by Sony/ATV Music Publishing LLC. All rights reserved. Used by permission.

“What Happened to the Music,” written by Carolyn Leigh, Nacio Brown, and Robert Sadoff. Used by permission of Alley Music Corporation.

Pages 309–310 constitute an extension of this copyright page.

ISBN 978-0-698-17251-7

While the author has made every effort to provide accurate telephone numbers and Internet addresses at the time of publication, neither the publisher nor the author assumes any responsibility for errors, or for changes that occur after publication. Further, the publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

Version_1

To Bob Dorough, Ervin Drake, Dave Frishberg, Norman Gimbel, Sheldon Harnick, Johnny Mandel,
Randy Newman, Curly Putman, Charles Strouse, Allen Toussaint, and Jimmy Webb

CONTENTS

[*Also by Ben Yagoda*](#)

[*Title Page*](#)

[*Copyright*](#)

[*Dedication*](#)

[*Prologue*](#)

[*Premises, Premises*](#)

I

[Mr. Miller and Mr. Schwartz, 1954](#)

II

[I Get a Kick out of You, 1885–1933](#)

III

[Jukebox Saturday Night, 1925–1942](#)

IV

[As Time Goes By, 1941–1948](#)

V

[What Happened to the Music? 1946–1954](#)

VI

[Brill Building Boys, and Girl, 1950–1955](#)

The Big Beat, 1951–1968

Fly Me to the Moon, 1939–1965

Epilogue

Do You Believe in Magic? 1957–1965

Photographs

Acknowledgments

Notes

Books Cited

Index

Prologue

Premises, Premises

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the pianist Keith Jarrett sat down for an interview with Robert Siegel of National Public Radio. Jarrett had just released an album called *Somewhere* which included his trio's rendition of the songs "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" (written in 1932), "Stars Fell on Alabama" (1934), and "I Thought About You" (1939). Jarrett has a reputation as an avant-garde jazz artist, but this was only the latest of a series of albums—others include *Standards, Vol. 1*; *Standards, Vol. 2*; and *Setting Standards*—that featured his trio's rendition of classic American popular songs written roughly in the second quarter of the twentieth century. That is, standards.

Siegel started off by saying, "Standard tunes, first of all, what do they mean to you and why have you recorded so many of them on this disc?"

"First of all, they are anything but standard by today's standards," Jarrett replied. "They're exceptional. There was a period of time in American history where so many things came rushing in, especially in popular music."

Siegel wondered, "Do we not have more songs like this for lack of people trying to write them? Is it unfashionable?"

"Yes, is the short answer to that," Jarrett said. He suggested parts of a longer answer as well. First in that long-ago period of time, there were "people who were actually good at writing melodies." Second, he talked about the importance of singers. He recounted that Miles Davis was once asked who he learned his phrasing from. His answer: Frank Sinatra. Today, Jarrett said, "there are also no important singers, so maybe it's all part of the same pancake mix. If there's no singers and there's no good songs, which came first?"

The pianist said it once occurred to him to try to write a standard, a song that had the quality of having "existed before." He eventually came up with a tune he called "No Lonely Nights."

"But it wasn't that easy to do," Jarrett said.

. . .

The standards, as Jarrett said, "came rushing in"—from the 1920s through the 1950s, but most quickly and intensely in a two-decade span starting in about 1925. The best of them are said to make up the "Great American Songbook" (the term was first used as the title of a 1972 album by the jazz singer Carmen McRae), the size of which varies depending on who's counting. In his definitive book *American Popular Song*, Alec Wilder puts forth about three hundred entries.

What are the attributes of these few hundred songs? The composer Jule Styne once gave a concise

definition to a young friend of his, the jazz pianist Bill Charlap: “What’s the secret to a great popular song? It must be melodically simple and harmonically attractive.” Expanding on that, standard songs are sophisticated (in several senses of the word) and melodic, constructed with, at the minimum, superior craftsmanship, and sometimes with remarkable innovation and artistry. Charlap is speaking of Styne’s “Just in Time,” but he could be referring to any of hundreds of songs: “It has an innate sense of structure. There are rests, points of emphasis, and overall balance and taste. It’s so pliable, and very American.” Although the standards are roughly divided into ballads (slow) and rhythm tunes (fast), the categories are fungible and a given tune can be interpreted in many different ways. Fast or slow, standards are jazz-inflected in rhythm and harmonic possibilities and, especially in later years, show the influence of modern European composers like Ravel and Debussy. The main criterion for songs’ status as standard is the music, but most of them have lyrics that rise to the occasion and are wedded to the melody: sophisticated, once again, and sometimes dazzlingly inventive. The internal rhymes and wordplay from a Cole Porter or Lorenz Hart can suggest W. S. Gilbert with an American accent. But even when dealing with commonplace tropes of love and longing, as in Irving Berlin’s “Always,” “How Deep Is the Ocean,” or “Count Your Blessings (Instead of Sheep),” a standard can have a palpable honesty and conviction and can be emotionally affecting without being schmaltzy. Or at least it can be delivered that way by the right singer.

The melodies were written—to start naming the great names—by Berlin, by George Gershwin, by Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers, Duke Ellington, Arthur Schwartz, Harry Warren, Hoagy Carmichael, Richard Whiting, Vincent Youmans, Walter Donaldson, and Jimmy McHugh. They went with lyrics by Ira Gershwin (George’s brother), Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammerstein II, Howard Dietz, and E. Y. “Yip” Harburg. Those men were all born within a seventeen-year span, from Kern in 1885 to Rodgers in 1902. A slightly younger group, consisting of Harold Arlen, Vernon Duke, Dorothy Fields, Frank Loesser, Johnny Mercer, Jule Styne, and Fats Waller, were born between 1903 and 1910. Burton Lane and Jimmy Van Heusen came on the scene in 1912 and 1913, respectively, and that was pretty much that. To be sure, not all their songs were gems, and even in the very heart of the golden age, a lot of hack tunesmiths turned out reams of lesser material. But not every painter in Renaissance Florence was a Leonardo or a Botticelli. The comparison might raise your eyebrow, or both of them. But the more you ponder the short list of places where intense creativity emerged from a core group of artists in a limited amount of time, the less far-fetched it begins to seem.

The place from which the Great American Songbook emerged was New York City. The highly concentrated music industry originated around the turn of the twentieth century on one Manhattan block, West Twenty-eighth Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue, called “Tin Pan Alley” for the cacophony that blew out of music publishers’ offices. The designation persisted even after the publishers moved uptown, to various outposts centered around the Brill Building on Broadway at Forty-ninth Street. From the 1920s on, a growing number of the best songs originated in the scores of New York musical shows or revues. Henceforth, an ambitious fledgling songwriter’s goal was to have his number in the Broadway spotlight, figuratively and literally—clearly, a big step up from being a mere assembly-line worker in the pop music factory.

The first talking motion picture, in 1927, was a musical called *The Jazz Singer*, and for two decades after that, Hollywood was the western outpost of American songwriting, the home base for such outstanding practitioners as Warren, Mercer, Arlen, and Van Heusen, as well as lesser artisans. Bigfoot New Yorkers periodically went west for short sojourns. Some of the biggest furnished just three 1930s films starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers with an astonishing number of standards of the highest caliber: Irving Berlin’s score for *Top Hat* (“Isn’t This a Lovely Day [to Be Caught in the

Rain]?,” “Cheek to Cheek,” “Top Hat, White Tie and Tails”); Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields’s for *Swing Time* (“The Way You Look Tonight,” “A Fine Romance,” “Pick Yourself Up”); and the Gershwin brothers’ for *Shall We Dance* (“They All Laughed,” “Let’s Call the Whole Thing Off,” “They Can’t Take That Away from Me”). But gems popped up even in films that were less than classics. I’ll cite three examples from hundreds. Kern and Oscar Hammerstein’s timeless “The Folks Who Live on the Hill” was introduced by Irene Dunne in a forgotten 1937 film, *High, Wide and Handsome*. “There Will Never Be Another You,” with music by Harry Warren and lyrics by Mack Gordon, is recognized as one of the greatest songs ever; go to a jazz gig in any city in the world, and you are likely to find it on the setlist. It first appeared in a 1942 Twentieth Century–Fox B movie called *Iceland*, starring skater Sonja Henie and John Payne as a U.S. Marine posted in—that’s right—Iceland. Another from the same year: the timeless “Moonlight Becomes You,” by Johnny Burke and Jimmy Van Heusen, originated as filler in a Bob Hope–Bing Crosby comedy, *Road to Morocco*.

The parity among the three sources of standards—Broadway shows, Hollywood movies, and one-off Tin Pan Alley compositions—is illustrated by a recent book of sheet music, *The Great American Songbook: The Composers*. The Hal Leonard Corporation book includes one hundred songs, from “Accent-tchu-ate the Positive” to “You’d Be So Nice to Come Home To.” The roster is highly selective and (obviously) subjective, but it’s credible, and useful for giving a sense of where standards originated. Eighty-two songs in the book were written in 1950 or earlier. Of them, 33 percent came from Broadway, 33 percent from Tin Pan Alley, and 34 percent from Hollywood.*

The songs were composed with sundry goals in mind, producing great art rarely being one of them. But the songs—the best of them, anyway—took on lives of their own: it turned out they lent themselves to being interpreted in different styles and with different approaches by a range of singers and musicians. They became a repertoire, a canon, repeatedly redefined by distinctive performances, some of which were, in fact, works of art: Coleman Hawkins’s “Body and Soul,” Teddy Wilson and Gerry Mulligan’s “As Time Goes By,” Bunny Berigan’s “I Can’t Get Started,” Fred Astaire’s “Cheek to Cheek,” the Boswell Sisters’ “The Object of My Affection,” Artie Shaw’s “Begin the Beguine,” Billie Holiday’s “They Can’t Take That Away from Me,” and so on. It was more than a matter of individual renditions. The songs provided the foundation of myriad laudable and important American enterprises: not only jazz and the Broadway and Hollywood musical, but popular dancing, the recording industry, radio (or the significant part of it devoted to music), and the crafts of singing, playing instruments, and arranging and conducting music for big bands. Collectively, they constitute one of the great cultural achievements of the United States in the twentieth century.

The most successful songwriters in the Great American Songbook period were recognized for their achievements, repeatedly interviewed in the popular press, and periodically turned into the subjects of biographical movies. Their names went above the titles on billboards for shows and movies. They garnered fortune as well as fame, through a number of different streams of revenue. The best-known but least common was the long run of a Broadway musical in which their songs appeared. Hollywood work was compensated by a weekly salary or a per-picture contract, so the upside was less spectacular but the terms were generous and the work steady. The biggest potential financial boon was via United States copyright law and the efforts of a collective organization called the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP). Composers and lyricists were paid a few pennies each time a recording of a song they’d written was played on the radio or bought at a record store. When a song was played and bought a lot—when it became a hit, as measured by the charts in the weekly *Billboard* magazine—the pennies added up to a huge payday.*

In the Music Division of the Library of Congress in Washington, D.C., you can request to see

Irving Berlin's ledgers. Berlin published his first song, "Marie from Sunny Italy," in 1907, when he was nineteen, and his first big hit, "Alexander's Ragtime Band," four years later. Not long after that, he was acknowledged as the king of American songwriters, a designation he retained until his death at 101 in 1989. The ledgers are mammoth books, bound in red, the entries penciled in precisely by what must have been a small army of accountants. Slowly lifting the cover of the 1950 book, you will see royalties from record and sheet music sales broken down by song—from "White Christmas," which netted Berlin \$13,293.95 for the year, down to "Marie from Sunny Italy," which earned a total of two cents (from foreign sheet music sales). The total royalties for the year amounted to \$78,079.31, which translates to \$771,030.67 in 2014 dollars. That figure does not include Berlin's payments from ASCAP, which were about \$72,000, or his earnings from the Broadway hits *Annie Get Your Gun* (which closed in 1949 after a three-year run) and *Call Me Madam* (which opened in September 1950).

Berlin's "White Christmas" mechanical royalties were almost all due to Bing Crosby's Decca recording of the song, originally released in 1942 and hauled out every yuletide. It hit the top spot on the *Billboard* charts for several years running, but in 1949 (the year reflected in the 1950 royalties) it was pushed aside by another holiday song and peaked at number five. The other song was the creation of a tunesmith named Johnny Marks, who was several rungs on the ladder down from Berlin. He had put to music a humorous poem, "Rudolph, the Red-Nosed Reindeer," written by his brother-in-law; cowboy singer Gene Autry's recording reached number one on December 31, 1949. Despite the fact that, like Berlin and most other songwriters, he was Jewish, Marks would repeatedly return to this particular well, writing "Rockin' Around the Christmas Tree," "A Holly Jolly Christmas," and other holiday songs. But none reached the heights of his first hit. A 1980 *People* magazine interview with Marks contained some illuminating statistics. To that point, Autry's version of "Rudolph" had sold more than 12 million copies, and records by some five hundred other performers 130 million more. The magazine didn't say how much money Marks had made from the song in total but did report that at the time of the interview, it was netting him some \$600,000 a year. That suggests his total "Rudolph" proceeds, by the time of his death five years later, had probably reached eight figures.

• • •

I draw these examples from 1949 and 1950 for a reason. In his scholarly book *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era*, Allen Forte, a professor of the theory of music at Yale University, defined that golden era as lasting from 1924 through 1950. In *American Popular Song*, published in 1972, Al Wilder covered work only by songwriters who were already established by 1950. When an interviewer asked why he instituted the cutoff date, Wilder said, "After that, the amateurs took over." The statement is hyperbolic and a bit unkind, but its core of truth can be seen in the repertoire of singers and jazz musicians who have the luxury of performing the very best songs. From the 1950s through the present day, the concerts and CDs of Tony Bennett—the most justly celebrated singer of standards—have been dominated by songs written in the second quarter of the twentieth century. In 2014, Bennett released a collaboration with the pop singer Lady Gaga. Thirteen of its fifteen songs were written between 1928 ("I Can't Give You Anything but Love") and 1947 ("But Beautiful" and "Natural Boy"). The many singers from other genres who have turned to the American Songbook usually follow similar parameters. In 1978, the country singer Willie Nelson released *Stardust*, which was on the *Billboard* list of top-ten albums for two consecutive years and was ultimately certified as quadruple platinum, meaning that it sold more than four million copies. Of the ten songs on the record, six (including the title song) were composed between 1926 and 1931. Three of the remaining four were

written in 1944 or earlier. The outlier was “Unchained Melody” (1955). The pop singer Linda Ronstadt’s nearly as successful 1983 album, *What’s New*, consisted of standards all written before 1950. Subsequently, virtually every aging rocker, most egregiously Rod Stewart and most recently Annie Lennox, has released one or more albums dominated by pre-1950 selections from the Songbook.

It’s not uncommon to hear statements to the effect that the American Songbook constitutes a towering achievement in the history of this country, equal to or greater than any of our other cultural or artistic endeavors. William Zinsser and Wilfrid Sheed, among others, have made that case and made it well. I am sympathetic to the argument but I don’t intend to make it again, and this book does not depend on a reader’s agreement with it. However, it does proceed from certain premises: that it is possible, legitimate, and useful to make judgments about works of art, including songs; that there was something special—very special—about the Great American Songbook; that musical and lyrical sophistication in popular music is a valuable and maybe even precious thing; and that its demise and reemergence in the United States over the course of a couple of decades in the middle of the twentieth century is worth tracking. If you accept the premises, I welcome you aboard and make a pledge: I will formulate my judgments judiciously and provide evidence for them to the extent I can.

The B Side has some of the elements of a nonfiction mystery. What causes an artistic phenomenon such as the body of standards of the twenties through the forties? How much is due to a fortuitous arrival of geniuses on the scene, how much to external factors, and what might those factors be? More generally, what are the elements of good popular music? What are the elements of bad? How much does, or can, the ratio of one to another change from one era to another? How and why does this happen—and how and why, precisely, did pop music get so bad in the 1950s?

And bad it got. Alec Wilder’s remark about amateurs taking over elides the fact that some writers did emerge composing pop songs in the classic manner in the fifties. However, as the decade progressed, with very few exceptions (Rodgers and Hammerstein, Jule Styne, Lerner and Loewe), the established songwriters had a tough time of it—on Broadway, in Hollywood, and on the pop charts. There weren’t very many young writers wanting to bring the tradition forward, and the majority didn’t do very much exceptional work. Even when first-rate songs *were* recorded, as often as not they flopped. Instead, America seemed to want to listen to banal jingles or turgid laments like “Cry” and “Que Sera, Sera (Whatever Will Be, Will Be)” and the Patti Page jingle whose refrain was “How much is that doggie in the window?”

The malaise was vague and inchoate at first, but starting in 1955 a clear “other” crystallized: Bill Haley, Elvis Presley, and the music that was starting to be called rock and roll. And let me put another card on the table: I love rock and roll. I understand that the standards are not the last word in great songs, or even great popular songs, or even in great American popular songs. Even in the years when Tin Pan Alley held sway, writers and performers who were literally and figuratively miles away—think Jimmie Rodgers, Bill Monroe, Robert Johnson, or Muddy Waters—were scaling artistic heights with very different kinds of music. In the 1950s and into the mid-1960s, these men’s heirs produced “Jambalaya” and “Johnny B. Goode” and “Blue Suede Shoes” and “That’ll Be the Day” and “Twist and Shout” and “Surfin’ U.S.A.” and “I Want to Hold Your Hand” and “(I Can’t Get No) Satisfaction” and “My Generation” and “Like a Rolling Stone,” all of which are great songs. But they are a different kind of song, their amazing energy generated by an emotional release expressed in three chords, a pounding beat, and shout-out-loud vocals.

The seeds of those songs had been planted over the decades by various southern whites and blacks (not Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, or Hollywood denizens), and this new garden ever more luxuriantly

blossomed till the Beatles' invasion in 1964. The work of John Lennon and Paul McCartney was actually evidence that, with the dust having cleared from the rock explosion, a space had emerged where it was possible to create songs with some of the qualities that marked the earlier tradition. In the span of a few years in the early 1960s, Willie Nelson wrote "Crazy," Brian Wilson "Caroline, No," Burt Bacharach "A House Is Not a Home," Smokey Robinson "The Tracks of My Tears," and McCartney "Yesterday." A wide range of remarkably talented songwriters of popular songs has emerged since then. But it isn't possible for them to write a standard—or, as Keith Jarrett found out, is possible, but really hard.

By the time the Beatles played on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, the people who had written the words and music to the standards—those who were still alive—had lost the game, decisively. In retrospect, it's touching to observe the stages of grief, as it were, experienced by those old-line songwriters as the world over which they had held sway receded in the distance: ignorance, dismissal, bemusement, mockery, rage, attempted alliance, resignation, capitulation.

If you had to choose a moment that represented the beginning of the end of the old order, you make a case for a business meeting. The place: Columbia Records' headquarters in Manhattan. The year: 1954.

I

Mr. Miller and Mr. Schwartz 1954

Like, “You know, all those songs on the Hit Parade are just a bunch of shit, anyway.” . . . You know, “If I give my heart to you, would you handle it with care?” Or “I’m getting sentimental over you.” Who gives a shit! It could be said in a grand way, and the performer could put the song across, but come on, that’s because he’s a great performer, not because it’s a great song. . . . So a lot of us got caught up in that. There ain’t anything good on the radio. It doesn’t happen.

• Bob Dylan

Come on-a-my place, my bambino.
All those crazy sound effects they use.
I’d give a million dollars for a good old-fashioned blues.

• “What Happened to the Music” by Carolyn Leigh, Robert Sadoff, and Nacio Herb Brown, 1953

While not quite on the level of a Richard Rodgers, a Cole Porter, or an Irving Berlin, Arthur Schwartz was certainly in the top echelon of American songwriters. Born at the turn of the century, by the mid-1950s he had been producing wonderful melodies for decades, and he was known for the sophistication, range, and quality of his work. Alec Wilder observed in *American Popular Song* that Schwartz “wrote with total self-assurance and high professional skill. . . . His published record contains some of the finest American songs in existence.” (Although Wilder used the past tense, when he was writing those words the composer was still alive. He died in 1984.) Schwartz’s father was a lawyer in Moscow. In this country, the only job he could get at first was as a buttonhole maker. But eventually he became a lawyer, and Arthur grew up in a middle-class New York family, graduated from New York University and Columbia Law School, and practiced law himself before turning to songwriting full-time. His first published song, in 1923, was “Baltimore, Md., You’re the Only Doctor for Me.” Since then, he had moved up in several different worlds, and he had the well-groomed look of a professional man. His son Jonathan wrote that in his (and the) forties, his father “cut a suave path. He was cultivated, as suggested by his unaccountable, ever-so-slight British accent. He was always wonderfully dressed. He moved gracefully with cigarette in hand, a man in honorable thought. His dark hair was turning gray; his light blue eyes held no venom. He was alive and ready for conversation, by all accounts a marvelous listener.”

Schwartz was an important member of a second wave of American songwriters, who came on the scene after Berlin, Kern, and the Gershwins had established the principle that popular songs could be simultaneously successful, sophisticated, and artful. These men—they were all men, except for the lyricist Dorothy Fields—were born around the turn of the century, often to middle-class Jewish families in New York; a striking number attended Columbia University. Schwartz’s first collaborator

back when both of them were counselors at an Adirondacks camp called Brant Lake, was Lorenz Hart, a New Yorker and a Columbia man. Together they composed a number called “I Love to Lie Awake in Bed” (second line: “Right after taps I pull the flaps above my head”) that I sang as a Brant Lake camper in the 1960s and is still in the repertoire there. Hart went on to team with the prodigiously talented Rodgers (Upper West Side, Columbia), and Schwartz started contributing to the Broadway stage in 1926; his main collaborator was Howard Dietz, Columbia School of Journalism, class of 1917. Schwartz and Dietz’s standards included “Dancing in the Dark,” “You and the Night and the Music,” and “I Guess I’ll Have to Change My Plan,” which had the melody of “I Love to Lie Awake in Bed” with new lyrics by Dietz. (The second line—“I should have realized there’d be another man”—didn’t scan as well as the original, but played better in nightclubs.) Schwartz moved to Hollywood in 1938, following a path worn by many New York songwriters. By that time Dietz was fully occupied with his job as publicity director of the Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer movie studio, but most of the best lyricists eventually made their way west from New York, and Schwartz worked with most of them: Frank Loesser, Yip Harburg, Ira Gershwin, Oscar Hammerstein, Leo Robin, and Johnny Mercer. He also was an occasional film producer, his best credits being the Cole Porter biography *Night and Day* and the 1944 musical *Cover Girl*.^{*} After World War II, like his colleagues Harold Arlen, Loesser, Harburg, Jule Styne, and Burton Lane, Schwartz shifted his base of operations from Hollywood back to New York. Over a seven- or eight-year period he had written the music for a series of Broadway shows, most recently *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. His lyricist on that production was Dorothy Fields, and their new musical *By the Beautiful Sea*, starring Shirley Booth, had just now, in the spring of 1954, opened on Broadway. Schwartz was at Columbia to meet with Mitch Miller, head of popular music at the label, who had the power to choose songs Columbia artists would record.

The foregoing gives a somewhat misleading impression of the state of Schwartz’s professional life on the day of his meeting with Miller. To be sure, he enjoyed status and prestige. He had been a close associate of both Kern and George Gershwin (whose death in 1937 shocked the songwriting community), of Ira Gershwin, Rodgers, Arlen, and the other princes of Tin Pan Alley. He had just stepped down as president of the League of New York Theatres, was a council member of the Songwriters Protective Association, and had an AA classification—one step down from the highest, AAA—from ASCAP, the forty-year-old association that collected songwriters’ royalties from the radio stations that played their songs. He was getting musicals produced on Broadway, which was what every songwriter aspired to. And he was still feeling a bit of the glow from a Fred Astaire film MGM had produced the year before, *The Band Wagon*. It featured a raft of old Schwartz and Dietz songs—plus one new one, “That’s Entertainment”—and it was a big hit at the box office.

For some time, however, Schwartz had had an unmistakable sense that things were slipping away from him. For one thing, his Broadway musicals never managed to do very well. *Inside U.S.A.* had a respectable run, but *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn* had played for less than a year, failing to recoup its investment. That was disturbing. “He viewed himself as a theatrical writer,” said his other son, Paul. “He looked down on ‘pop’ songs, said they were for people like Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn. I told him that was bullshit. ‘No no no,’ he’d say. ‘I worked in the theater.’ The music *business*, to him, was *déclassé*.”

That’s not to say he didn’t want his songs recorded or played on the radio. And in recent years, that simply wasn’t happening. What seemed so vexingly different now for Schwartz—and, as a matter of fact, for many of his peers—was that, in marked contrast to previous times, his songs never seemed to live on *after* the show. The gatekeepers of the record industry, who decided which songs singers would record as singles—and thus which songs would even have a chance of being hits on the radio—were

the artist and repertoire (A&R) men; Miller occupied that position at the most powerful label, Columbia. The A&R men were not buying what Schwartz had to offer. The previous year, he had met with a man from RCA Victor, who flatly turned down a batch of songs from *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*. Not a single song from that show had so much as made an appearance on the charts that appeared each week in the trade magazine *Billboard* showing the most popular recordings. Indeed, only one song from his recent shows had charted—a sweet and simple ballad from *Inside U.S.A.* called “Haunted Heart,” Perry Como’s version of which had peaked at number twenty-three in 1948.

Possibly even more annoying was the fact that Schwartz’s old songs—his *standards*—weren’t doing much in terms of any of the three streams of a songwriter’s income: recordings, radio play, and sheet music sales. (In earlier years, sheet music had accounted for the biggest stream. That had diminished with the advent of new technologies and changes in family life—no one had time to sit around the piano anymore—but still could be significant.) And again, he was far from alone in feeling marginalized. A year later, some staffers at ASCAP put together figures showing how many radio “plugs,” or plays, a group of the most glorious American standards got in 1948 and then in 1955. The drop-off was shocking. And the higher 1948 numbers couldn’t be explained by saying the songs were then fresh. As the following examples show, they got airplay in that earlier period *despite* being long in the tooth.

	1948	1955
“A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody” (Irving Berlin, 1919)	31,518	5,478
“Always” (Berlin, 1925)	81,808	7,210
“I Got Rhythm” (George Gershwin, 1930)	18,474	7,115
“More than You Know” (Vincent Youmans, 1929)	9,987	899
“Night and Day” (Cole Porter, 1932)	41,769	11,722
“Over the Rainbow” (Harold Arlen, 1939)	28,704	12,228

What was getting played? When he turned on the radio, Schwartz could only shake his head. What came out of the box—and had been coming ever since the end of the war, it seemed to him—were novelty numbers, lachrymose ballads, simplistic jingles, hillbilly hokum. The smash hit of the previous year, 1953—number one on the charts for eight consecutive weeks and in the top ten for a total of seventeen—was Patti Page’s “The Doggie in the Window.” The writer was not a cowboy or a hick but a thirty-two-year-old Atlantic City native and Tin Pan Alley pro named Bob Merrill. Merrill (born Henry Levan) specialized in novelty numbers, most of them recorded by Columbia artists, and many of them vaguely regional or “ethnic”: “If I Knew You Were Comin’ I’d’ve Baked a Cake,” a hit for Eileen Barton in 1950; “Feet Up (Pat Him on the Po-Po),” recorded by Guy Mitchell in 1952; and “Ooh Bang Jiggilly Jang.” In 1954, Rosemary Clooney’s record of Merrill’s geographically puzzling “Mambo Italiano” made the top ten. But “Doggie,” with its insistent waltz beat, simplistic melody, and nursery school lyrics—which, once heard, positively could not be extracted from a listener’s head—was somehow emblematic, not only of Merrill’s output, but of this particular moment in American popular song.

Interviewed by *Cue* magazine in 1953, Merrill said, “Don’t get me wrong. I’m no Tchaikovsky. I can’t read or write a note. I compose all my songs on this toy xylophone I bought at the five-and-ten

for \$1.98.” He said he put numbers on the xylophone keys so he could easily transcribe the melody. “You can’t fool yourself with fancy arranging,” he said. “All my hits have a very simple, hummable melody.” At that point Merrill claimed he had earned more than \$250,000 from his songs. That emboldened him to purchase a new, better xylophone, which cost \$6.98.

By way of explaining his success, Merrill told *Cue* his songs were “all about America, they are all wholesome, and they are all happy.”

Had the world turned mad, or just imbecilic? That was the basic question the old-line songwriters continually asked one another over corned beef sandwiches at Lindy’s or Nate ’n Al’s, or in brief conversations in the lobby of the Brill Building, the Times Square office building that for decades had been the epicenter of songwriting and music publishing. The whole thing was a mystery. As Schwartz later said, referring to his colleagues, “Their conclusions were the same as mine, that the simultaneous change in our position as writers of songs that could receive exploitation could not be coincidence or the result of the atom bomb or the Russian preparation for the next world war. . . . It must be somebody’s doing.”

Another veteran songwriter, Jack Lawrence, the lyricist of “All or Nothing at All,” “Tenderly,” and “Beyond the Sea,” described his own experiences in a similar way:

I took a Broadway show score and a Hollywood picture score to both Columbia Records and NBC-RCA-Victor records. This represented over a total of twenty-odd songs and perhaps two years’ work or more. In both instances I got not one single recording. Now, perhaps it is true that I’ve lost my touch for writing and creating hit songs in my twenty-odd years of writing professionally. And it could be true that two or three or four of my fellow writer-members have also lost their talent for writing hits. But when you see hundreds of premium quality writers who have written great songs, memorable songs that have lasted for years and years, suddenly confronted with an accusation of having lost their touch and talent, or their feeling for what the public wants today, I think this is too great a coincidence.

You will note that neither the phrase “rock and roll” nor the name Elvis Presley is mentioned by Lawrence or Schwartz as a possible reason for the change in their and their colleagues’ fortunes. In 1954, Elvis was just commencing his recording and performing career in Memphis. And “rock and roll” would, at that moment, have produced a blank look on the face of most Americans.

At this point, the “somebody” who had sabotaged the songwriters, in their increasingly certain estimation, was actually an interwoven collection of entities: the biggest radio networks, CBS and NBC; the record companies they owned, Columbia and RCA Victor, respectively; and a song-licensing organization they had collectively formed more than a dozen years earlier, Broadcast Music, Inc., commonly known as BMI. BMI was a competitor to the venerable association Arthur Schwartz, Jack Lawrence, and everybody like them belonged to. A long-standing financial dispute between ASCAP and the radio networks—which depended on ASCAP songs for the bulk of their programming—had come to a head in 1941, and then, for about a year, the networks banished ASCAP material from the airwaves. In its place, listeners heard classical pieces, works in the public domain, and songs that had been hurriedly signed to the brand-new BMI. BMI writers were not the likes of Arthur Schwartz. Rather, they were people who had been unable to crack ASCAP (the membership policies of which were reminiscent of the most restrictive country club) or who hadn’t even thought to try. A lot of them were from places other than New York City—very other. They were African-Americans like Lead Belly, whose song “Good Night, Irene” was number one for the Weavers in 1950, westerners like cowboy crooner Gene Autry, and outliers like Pee Wee King, a Polish-American accordionist from Milwaukee (birth name: Julius Frank Anthony Kuczynski) who reinvented himself as a country-western singer-songwriter. (His song “The Tennessee Waltz” would be a number-one record for Patti

The ASCAP ban lasted only ten months. And since 1942 the two organizations, ASCAP and BMI, had coexisted on the airwaves and among the music publishers of Tin Pan Alley. But the radio stations still owned BMI. Radio stations determined what would be played on their air. Didn't it stand to reason that they would favor songs licensed to the organization they owned: BMI?

It certainly did to Schwartz and his peers. In April of 1952, *Billboard* reported that ASCAP had filed a complaint against BMI for "antitrust violations." The magazine commented ominously: "ASCAP has tried to live with the BMI competition, but it is no secret that a segment of Tin Pan Alley's upper crust has come to the conclusion that the battle must be to the death." In the middle of 1953, a group of top songwriters met in Oscar Hammerstein II's house to discuss strategy; among those present, *Variety* reported, were Hammerstein's partner, Richard Rodgers, and another titan of popular song, Cole Porter. In November a group of thirty-three composers and lyricists brought a \$150 million antitrust suit against BMI; the four major broadcasting networks (NBC, CBS, Mutual, and ABC, which had grown out of NBC's Blue Network); RCA Victor and Columbia Records; and sundry other parties. The \$150 million figure derived from the plaintiffs' claim that they collectively had been denied \$50 million in revenues from a conspiracy against them and their works; the Clayton Antitrust Act empowers injured parties to sue for treble damages.

The lead plaintiff was Arthur Schwartz, whose law degree had finally come in handy! He was joined by Alan Jay Lerner, Ira Gershwin, Dorothy Fields, Virgil Thomson, Gian Carlo Menotti, and others from both the popular and classical worlds. (*Variety* noted, "While top names like Rodgers & Hammerstein, Cole Porter and Irving Berlin do not appear among co-plaintiffs, they have contributed to the legal war chest, which is now variously estimated at around \$300,000.") The lawsuit claimed that the radio networks and record companies had conspired to give "preference to the performance of BMI controlled music." A widely publicized statement signed by the plaintiffs alleged that the defendants had been guilty of "placing American music in a strait jacket manipulated through BMI."

After generating a flurry of publicity, the lawsuit adopted the petty pace that would characterize it till its resolution, which took a *Jarndyce v. Jarndyce*-like eighteen years. Slowing things at the outset was the discovery process, which in just five years would generate "20,000 pages of testimony, some 11,000 exhibits consisting of approximately 55,000 pages, and almost 3,000 pages of answers to written interrogatories." Schwartz's reading of this material gave him to understand that it wasn't just the conspiracy to favor BMI songs that was holding him back. There was *another* kind of conspiracy. In a deposition for the suit, Mitch Miller testified that in his capacity as head of artist and repertoire for Columbia, none other than Bob Merrill would customarily bring him songs intended for Guy Mitchell, a Columbia recording artist. "I made many suggestions, and he was very grateful for them," Miller testified. "He asked me to be part writer. I said no; I was only doing an editor's work." But then, lo and behold, after "Mambo Italiano" and "Make Yourself Comfortable" became hits (the latter for Sarah Vaughan), Miller starting receiving checks from Merrill's publisher, totaling about \$4,000. Schwartz took that to mean Miller was protesting too much: the payment was a kickback, pure and simple—or, to call it by the term that *Variety* had been using since the late 1930s and that had been a characteristic of the music industry for years before that, payola. A similar thing happened in 1952, Miller testified. During World War II, GIs had turned the old English folk song "A Knave Is a Knave" into a bawdy ditty called "A Gob Is a Slob"; a young American singer and writer named Oscar Brand had recorded it on an obscure folk label in 1949. He brought a cleaned-up version called "A Guy Is a Guy" to Miller, who showed it to the Columbia singer Doris Day. Miller testified that she "didn't like the lyrics as they were"—presumably feeling they needed even more cleaning up—"so we had it

changed.” Day’s record did well, and Miller “received compensation” of \$1,200.

Miller’s willingness to take and maybe even solicit such payments wasn’t the only thing that made him a controversial figure. A graduate of the Eastman School of Music, he started out as a classical oboist and became a highly respected one, playing on recordings under Leopold Stokowski’s baton and for over a decade in the CBS Symphony Orchestra. But his career changed in 1948, when his friend John Hammond recruited him to head the pop A&R department at a new label, Mercury. Miller created two number-one hits—a sort of folk spiritual called “That Lucky Old Sun” and a cowboy number, “Mule Train”—for the singer Frankie Laine (born Francesco LoVecchio), who had previously had middling success at Mercury with a series of jazzy numbers. Miller’s Eastman School classmate Goddard Lieberson lured him to Columbia in 1950 to spearhead a new approach to popular music for the label. “Hereafter,” Lieberson said in an announcement, “more emphasis will be placed on selecting the right artist for the right tune and an imaginative, creative effort to produce the best records possible will be made at the main source of every successful record—the recording studio.”

Lieberson made an intriguing analogy: “A record is in a sense like a play. It requires a beginning, denouement and an end.”

The strategy worked. Within a year and a half, the label’s pop music sales had increased 60 percent, catapulting the company from last to the first among the four major labels. (The others were RCA Victor, Decca, and Capitol.) Miller—commonly referred to as “the Beard” because of his trademark goatee—was responsible for a series of smashes, including Johnnie Ray’s “Cry,” Rosemary Clooney’s “Come On-a My House,” Tony Bennett’s “Because of You” and “Rags to Riches,” and “I Saw Mommy Kissing Santa Claus,” which sold more than three million copies and was sung by a thirteen-year-old freckled Mississippian named Jimmy Boyd. (When the record was first released, the Catholic Archdiocese of Boston banned it because it mixed sex with Christmas.)

Miller, forty-two years old on the day he was to meet with Schwartz, was considered the “golden boy” among the A&R men, in the words of a 1954 *Vogue* magazine article about the music industry. But he was not so well liked by people, such as Arthur Schwartz, who felt, whether they put it this way or not, that a popular song could reach the artistic heights of classical music.

Miller’s attitudes and actions had brought him into conflict with some of the singers Columbia had under contract, notably Frank Sinatra. Sinatra was the greatest singing star of the forties; his intimately and exquisitely controlled tones made girls scream and swoon and earned him the nickname “the Voice.” But by the early fifties he had fallen on hard times. The Voice’s voice was in poor shape, and Sinatra chafed at the fluff and novelty tunes Miller gave him to record, such as “The Hucklebuck,” “Bim Bam Baby,” and “Mama Will Bark,” a duet with a buxom television personality named Dagmar, the gimmick of which was that dogs actually barked in the background. In every possible way, the Beard annoyed the Voice. Drummer Johnny Blowers remembered years later that at one recording session Miller fiddled so incessantly with the dials that Sinatra “looked in the control room, pointed his finger, and said, ‘Mitch—out.’ When Mitch didn’t move, Sinatra turned to Hank Sanicola [a longtime Sinatra associate]. ‘Henry, move him.’ To Mitch, he said, ‘Don’t you ever come in the studio when I’m recording again.’”

Columbia dropped Sinatra in 1952; soon afterward he signed with Capitol Records and his career began to turn around. But the singer’s grudge against Miller remained. During a Copacabana engagement in 1953, according to author Arnold Shaw, the singer “donned a coonskin hat, snapped a bull whip, and honked derisively like a wild goose.” (The whip was a reference to “Mule Train,” which very prominently featured the sound of a whip—created by wood blocks—and the honk to another folksy hit Miller had with Frankie Laine, “The Cry of the Wild Goose,” in which the wild

goose's cry was simulated with French horns. The Davy Crockett craze would not occur for another two years, but coonskin hats had become a trademark of Tennessee senator Estes Kefauver, so Sinatra may have worn one as an act of general rural derision.)

Songwriters, for their part, couldn't afford to affect disdain for Mitch Miller; they needed him. He needed them, too. Every Monday afternoon he opened his doors and let the writers' representatives, publishers, show their wares. Robert Rice of *The New Yorker* sat in on one five-and-a-half-hour session—during which Miller smoked five cigars—and his account is worth quoting for the general sense it gives of the tenor of Tin Pan Alley in 1953, when the Korean War was in full swing and rock and roll was a whisper in the air that was just out of hearing:

There were publishers of almost every possible age, size, shape, and costume, most of them carrying demonstration records but some with piano or guitar players in tow. There was a tall young crew-cut publisher in a regimental tie who crooned; a short, fat, middle-aged publisher in orange slacks and a hound's-tooth sports jacket who bounced; and a tieless, cauliflower-eared, mash-nosed, ex-prizefighter of a publisher who bellowed. There was a businesslike publisher who said, "Mitch, I have two things here, one extremely important"; a highbrow publisher who said, "Mitch, this thing is melodically unoriginal but lyrically powerful"; a timorous publisher who said, "I've got a beautiful little thing here, Mitch, that you're going to turn down"; an aggressive publisher who said, "Let's get lucky together, Mitch"; and an articulate publisher who said, "They all flip for this thing, Mitch." There was a publisher with a number called "Korean Love Song"; when Miller said that it was difficult to associate Korea with love these days, the publisher asked why. There was a publisher with a song called "Off the Coast of Capri on the Way to Sorrento"; when Miller said to him, "Capri yet! Why not Brighton Beach? Why does it all the time have to be so arty?," he replied, "Why, Mitch, nobody's ever used Sorrento before." There was a publisher with a song called "Cigarette, Cigarette," which was about a wild gypsy girl and whose tune was a theme from Mozart's symphony No. 40 in G-Minor; when Miller said, "Mozart's ode to nicotine, eh?," the publisher answered, "Why not? I made money with Tchaikovsky and Rachmaninoff." There was a publisher with a song called "Till I Waltz Again with You," written in fox-trot time; when Miller protested against this anomaly, he said, "But, Mitch, that's the whole kick." . . . There was a young and excited publisher who sprinted in waving a record of a song called "Heartbroken Me and Brokenhearted You." "Mitch," he said breathlessly, "I got a sensational switch on heartbreaks." From this welter, which he bore with astonishing meekness, Miller extracted just two faintly possible songs.*

The fact that Arthur Schwartz was granted a private audience to play the songs from *By the Beautiful Sea*, rather than having to troop in with the rest of the Monday supplicants, was in accordance with his stature and his body of work. But the composer couldn't help approaching the meeting with mixed feelings. Private audience or no, it seemed less than respectful that he, Arthur Schwartz, was still forced to appear before this crass A&R man and depend on his good graces. And it was slightly awkward that he had just very publicly sued Miller's employer, Columbia Records.

His trepidations were confirmed when, after hearing all the songs from *By the Beautiful Sea*, Miller said only one of them was a possibility, a ballad called "More Love Than Your Love." But even that needed "work."

"I like the song but I think you ought to make a change in the melody," Schwartz remembered Miller saying. "I don't think that the second eight measures should do what they do; I think maybe you should repeat the first eight measures where you now have a new eight-measure section."

The composer immediately thought of Miller's testimony about the payments he got from Merrill's and Brand's publishers. It was a shakedown, pure and simple.

"I will think it over," Schwartz replied. "Thank you for the suggestion."

Thank you, indeed. One can imagine the boiling of Schwartz's blood, the iciness of his words. This goateed vulgarian whose claim to fame was insinuating a whip in "Mule Train," who had been responsible for "Come On-a My House" and "Mama Will Bark," having the nerve to tell Arthur

Schwartz, friend and colleague of George Gershwin and Richard Rodgers, to write a song in AABA—the elemental form of American popular song since Irving Berlin and Jerome Kern were starting out—as if this were some kind of brilliant and original insight! And if the “improvement” was accepted, no doubt expecting his palm to be greased!

“I thought it over and decided I did not want to make the change,” Schwartz said.

No Columbia artist would record “More Love Than Your Love.” As a matter of fact, only three recordings of it have ever been made, to the best of my knowledge. It appeared on the cast album of *By the Beautiful Sea*, released by Capitol on a 1950 78-rpm record by Les Baxter and His Chorus and Orchestra; as a filler instrumental track on a 1954 Capitol album by Stan Kenton and His Orchestra; and, improbably, on a 2005 CD by the singer Andy Bey. Lyrically and musically, it is an undistinguished song, sentimental and plodding. It is hard to imagine how it might be improved. Possibly if the first eight bars had been repeated, but probably not.

By the Beautiful Sea got mixed reviews, but Shirley Booth’s star power kept it going till November, when it closed after a seven-month run.

II

I Get a Kick out of You

1885–1933

The word for Dick Rodgers' melodies, I think, is holy. For Jerome Kern, sentimental. For Irving Berlin, simplicity. For my own, I don't know.

• Cole Porter

In order to understand how popular songs got so bad, it makes sense to give some attention to how they got so good. A useful place to start is with the first songwriter to make a significant living at the trade, a Milwaukeean named Charles K. Harris. (The greatest songwriter of the nineteenth century was Stephen Foster. The median total payment Foster received from his songs was \$36, and he died penniless in 1864 at the age of thirty-seven.) Sometime around 1885, Harris hung out a shingle that read: "Charles K. Harris—Banjoist and Songwriter—Songs Written to Order." "After the Ball," his 1891 waltz-time tearjerker about lost love, was this country's first million-selling song. He followed it up with another hit, "Break the News to Mother," in which the words of the title come from the lips of a dying soldier. In his 1926 autobiography—naturally titled *After the Ball*—Harris observed: "I find that sentiment plays a large part in our lives. The most hardened character or the most cynical individual will succumb to sentiment sometime or other."

Harris's phenomenal success introduced the idea that one could make money, even a good deal of money, by writing popular music. It also spawned a whole new style of song, with such self-explanatory titles as "The Picture That Is Turned Toward the Wall," "The Letter That Never Came," and "The Pardon Came Too Late." The last two were the creations of Paul Dresser, who surpassed even Harris as an apostle of sentiment. He was known to burst into tears at the sound of a touching song, especially one of his own compositions. His brother the novelist Theodore Dreiser, on the other hand, described Dresser lyrics as "mere bits and scraps of sentiment and melodrama in story form, most asinine sightings over home and mother and lost sweethearts and dead heroes such as never were in real life."^{*}

The American songs of the period that are still sung, or hummed, today display a kind of forced nostalgia, hammered home by their customary 3/4 waltz time. They put forth a rural or (less often) urban ideal; when they express longing or love, the object is idealized, sentimentalized, and/or distanced. The following were all Tin Pan Alley productions written between 1892 and 1910 but somehow seem much older, as if they had emanated from a prehistoric period of pure Americana: "In the Good Old Summer Time," "Down by the Old Mill Stream," "Daisy Bell (Bicycle Built for Two)," "The Sidewalks of New York," and "Let Me Call You Sweetheart."

Charles K. Harris couldn't read or write music and did not consider that an impediment. He wrote

in *After the Ball*: “The reader will naturally wonder how it was possible for me to write music to a song when even to this day I cannot distinguish one note from another. The answer is simple. As soon as a melody occurred to me, I hummed it. Then I would procure the services of a trained musician . . . hum or whistle the melody to him and have him take it down on paper, with notes. He would then arrange it for the piano. This method is known as arranging.” His compositions’ lack of musical complexity not only wasn’t a problem, it was a virtue. In an era before radio or recordings, songs were disseminated by means of sheet music, bought in music shops and department stores. Middle-class families customarily had pianos in their parlors and one or more members with the ability to play them. “Ability” was a relative term, and therefore most songs were fairly basic melodically and harmonically. The lyrics, too, had to be simple enough for memorization.

The trade grew year after year. “Nowadays,” *The New York Times* remarked in 1910, “the consumption of songs in America is as constant as their consumption of shoes, and the demand is similarly met by factory output.” The high-water mark was 1917, when more than two billion copies of sheet music were sold in the United States; it had become common for a popular individual title to sell five million. In fairly short order, a new group of entrepreneurs took over the major publishers, many of them having come from backgrounds in selling: Isidore Witmark had sold water filters; Joseph W. Stern and Edward B. Marks, neckties and buttons; Leo Feist, corsets; Max and Louis Dreyfus, ribbons and picture frames. These men were resourceful and opportunistic, and in its mature phase the song industry was more vertically integrated than the shoe industry, with the sheet music publisher controlling the structure and taking a cut of every transaction.

Once a song met a publisher’s approval, a complicated chain of events was set in motion. The publisher might suggest or demand changes to the song itself or the title. Upon taking it on, he would commission an illustration (very important, since music was often an impulse buy), then print copies frequently offering a variety of orchestrations. Then it was time for the song plugger to do his stuff. In his 1930 study *Tin Pan Alley: A Chronicle of the American Popular Music Racket*, Isaac Goldberg gave a good description of this vital job: “He it is who, by all the arts of persuasion, intrigue, bribery, mayhem, malfeasance, cajolery, entreaty, threat, insinuation, persistence and whatever else he has, sees to it that his employer’s music shall be heard.” “Bribery” is a harsh word, but without a doubt, in order to get vaudeville and dance-hall entertainers to add the song to their repertoires, pluggers customarily provided them with substantial amounts of what would come to be called payola.

Given the scale of the enterprise, it’s not surprising that songwriters were near or at the bottom of the ladder in terms of power and money (they generally sold a publisher all rights to a song for a modest sum, plus a royalty of a penny or two per copy sold). In the words of a 1908 book, “With a few notable exceptions, America’s popular songwriters are unknown. Such songs are almost impersonal. They do not bear the stamp of the composer’s individuality so much as they reflect the taste of the day.” Some of the “notable exceptions” have been mentioned. Another one is George M. Cohan, who established his own lucrative corner of the industry in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the first two decades of the twentieth with rousing numbers like “Give My Regards to Broadway,” “The Yankee Doodle Boy,” and “You’re a Grand Old Flag.”

The lack of respect accorded to songwriters didn’t stop waves of hopefuls from showing up on Tin Pan Alley to sell their wares like so many Fuller Brush men. Songwriting presented an attractive prospect to ambitious young folk with no other prospects, especially New York City’s hundreds of thousands of immigrants and immigrants’ sons from eastern and southern Europe. The upside potential was so high—you could get a good payday with just one thirty-two-bar hit song—and the barrier to entry so low. *Anyone* could offer his wares—that is, anyone who could handle the indignity

of knocking on door after door and being summarily rejected time and again.

In the first two decades of the new century, the hallmark of Tin Pan Alley was novelty. Writers and publishers searched relentlessly for the angle, the pitch, that would sell, and when one of them hit on it, he was slavishly and copiously imitated. One year it was dream songs: “Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland” was a hit, and so it was succeeded by “Girl of My Dreams,” “My Little Dream Girl,” “Sweetheart of My Dreams,” “When I Met You Last Night in Dreamland,” “You Tell Me Your Dream and I’ll Tell You Mine,” and more. According to the publisher Ed Marks: “The jobbers became so confused that they numbered the dream songs and sold them by number instead of by title.”

The Alley was also keyed to goings-on in the world at large. No significant event, fashion, or trend escaped a musical commentary, including the conflict in Europe, which spawned Al Piantadosi’s mildly pacifistic “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Soldier.” But when the United States entered the war in 1917, songwriters immediately adopted an extreme patriotism. Certainly, the pitch was right in George M. Cohan’s wheelhouse. “I read those war headlines and I got to thinking and humming to myself—and for a moment I thought I was going to dance,” he recalled. That same morning he wrote “Over There.” Within a week of the U.S. entry, “Good-bye Broadway, Hello France” was on the department stores’ sheet music counters, followed in short order by “I’m Glad I Raised My Boy to Be a Soldier,” “I Didn’t Raise My Boy to Be a Slacker,” “We Don’t Want the Bacon (What We Want Is a Piece of the Rhine!),” and scores of others. The war also made its way into love songs, including such kitsch classics as “Your Lips Are No Man’s Land but Mine” and “If He Can Fight Like He Can Love, Good Night Germany!”

A half-dozen years later, Gershwin, Porter, and Rodgers had joined Berlin and Kern in producing songs that do not seem quaint and are still being sung, played, and enjoyed. How did we get from “If He Can Fight Like He Can Love, Good Night Germany!” to this remarkable work? In hindsight, it’s possible to identify an array of interwoven factors.

Individual

The quintet of writers just named represented a rare flowering of genius; as noted, a comparison to Renaissance Florence may seem excessive, but then again it holds up to scrutiny. Unlike Italian painters, they did not all undergo extensive training. But the trailblazer, Jerome Kern, certainly did. Born to a middle-class German Jewish family in New York in 1885, he studied music in the United States and Heidelberg, worked as a Tin Pan Alley song plugger, and contributed numbers to Broadway and London shows as early as 1905. His 1914 song “They Didn’t Believe Me”—with its stately, lingering melody; its 4/4 rhythm that could go fast or slow, syncopated or straight; and its simple, conversational (“and I’m certainly going to tell them . . .”), resonant lyrics by Herbert Reynolds—has been credibly nominated as the first modern American popular song. By his early thirties, Kern was the dean of Broadway composers, unmatched in the way he combined the influences of operetta, English music hall, and ragtime to create a new American sound.

Comparable in genius, close in age, Kern and the second great figure were different in almost every other way. Israel Baline, the son of a cantor, was born in Temun, Russia, in 1888. He came to New York at the age of four and by fourteen was on his own, with a new name—Irving Berlin—working as a saloon pianist and a singing waiter in a Chinatown joint called Nigger Mike’s. He had no musical training, and his piano skills were the most rudimentary of all the great composers, but he had an ear

sample content of The B Side: The Death of Tin Pan Alley and the Rebirth of the Great American Song

- [download online When Magoo Flew: The Rise and Fall of Animation Studio UPA here](#)
- [download **China's Republic \(New Approaches to Asian History\)** here](#)
- [Rich Habits: The Daily Success Habits of Wealthy Individuals pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub, doc, mobi](#)
- [read online Heartfire \(Tales of Alvin Maker, Book 5\)](#)
- [Remote Sensing and Modeling: Advances in Coastal and Marine Resources \(Coastal Research Library, Volume 9\) here](#)

- <http://www.shreesaiexport.com/library/When-Magoo-Flew--The-Rise-and-Fall-of-Animation-Studio-UPA.pdf>
- <http://kamallubana.com/?library/China-s-Republic--New-Approaches-to-Asian-History-.pdf>
- <http://tuscalaural.com/library/Who-Owns-Jung-.pdf>
- <http://www.gateaerospaceforum.com/?library/Red-Mist--Kay-Scarpetta--Book-19-.pdf>
- <http://tuscalaural.com/library/80-Cakes-From-Around-the-World.pdf>