

Constructing Tin Pan Alley: From Minstrelsy to Mass Culture

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The institution of slavery has been such a defining feature of U.S. history that it is hardly surprising to find the roots of our popular music embedded in this tortured legacy. Indeed, the first indigenous U.S. popular music to capture the imagination of a broad public, at home and abroad, was blackface minstrelsy, a cultural form involving mostly Northern whites in blackened faces, parodying their perceptions of African American culture. Minstrelsy appeared at a time when songwriting and music publishing were dispersed throughout the country and sound recording had not yet been invented. During this period, there was an important geographical pattern in the way music circulated. Concert music by foreign composers intended for elite U.S. audiences generally played in New York City first and then in other major cities. In contrast, domestic popular music, including minstrel music, was first tested in smaller towns, then went to larger urban areas, and entered New York only after success elsewhere. Songwriting and music publishing were similarly dispersed. New York did not become the nerve center for indigenous popular music until later in the nineteenth century, when the previously scattered conglomeration of songwriters and publishers began to converge on the Broadway and 28th Street section of the city, in an area that came to be called Tin Pan Alley after the tinny output of its upright pianos. These talented songwriters and indefatigable publishers, who would go on to dominate mainstream popular music until the post–World War II period, were attuned to every nuance of cultural variation the United States had to offer. And during their reign, they would encounter all of the new technologies—sound recording, talking films, radio, and television—that would come to define mass culture.

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White interpretations and appropriations of African American culture would receive disproportionate credit in defining mainstream popular culture, while the original black sources would recede into the background of their own history.

When blackface minstrelsy first appeared in the early nineteenth century, U.S. popular music existed in the shadow of European opera, which enjoyed considerable popular support. As the class hierarchy in the United States became more clearly delineated, opera came to be increasingly identified with the cultural elite, while those lower down the socioeconomic scale gravitated more toward ethnic Scottish and Irish melodies, Italian bel canto, and the soon to be dominant homegrown songs of minstrelsy. As the complexity of U.S. society increased, it led to greater segregation of audiences—not only by class, but by race and gender as well. Accordingly,

the initial audiences for blackface minstrelsy tended to be white, working class, and male. Minstrelsy established a vexing and recurring pattern of uneven musical exchange in which white interpretations and appropriations of African American culture would receive disproportionate credit in defining mainstream popular culture, while the original black sources would recede into the background of their own history.

At a superficial level, minstrelsy's assertive rhythms and vigorous dancing, coupled with singing and dialogue that combined biting wit and social commentary, were not inconsistent with the cultural patterns of enslaved Africans. Still, with relatively little understanding of or sensitivity toward African American culture, the curiosity and enthusiasm with which these white entertainers approached it were matched only by the distortions and virulence with which they reproduced it. In minstrelsy, we find both the centrality of African American contributions to our popular culture and the uneasy blending of fascination and fear, delight and disdain, respect and rebuke—indeed, love and hate—that typified the posture of most U.S. whites toward African Americans and their culture.

Blackface masking did not begin with minstrelsy, nor was it inevitably race-related. The practice dates back at least to the middle ages in Britain and Europe in certain ritual dramas such as morris dancing and mummer's plays. The performers, often called "guisers," sometimes masked their faces with chimney soot or grease to disguise the true identity of their characters and heighten the sense of mystery and danger in the performance. Callithumpian bands—agitators who had been known to disrupt parliamentary elections in Britain and Ireland—also blackened their faces at times. In the United States, they roamed the streets of New York, Philadelphia, and Boston from the 1820s onward and were described in the *Philadelphia Sunday Dispatch* as "men who render the night hideous by their yelling, drum-beatings, and horn-toutings, and the day disgusting by their outrageous masking and foul disguises."¹ In these so-called "rituals of inversion," masking was used as a way of hiding one's identity and symbolically inverting social roles to disrupt the normal flow and power relations of daily life. The available evidence indicates that, in most instances, these actors were not attempting to represent persons of African descent. There were also rituals of West African origin involving parading, reveling, and grotesque masking that worked their way to the "New World" during the slave trade. In the Jonkonnu festivals that traveled from West Africa to the Caribbean and up the Eastern seaboard of the United States, actors of African descent masked their faces with ash to perform similar role inversions.

In the slaveholding United States, of course, associations between blackface and race were more likely intentional and, in any case, inevitable. The parodic humor of minstrel songs was most often hostile and degrading; minstrel lyrics were invariably written and sung in a caricatured black dialect and routinely referred to African Americans as “niggers,” “darkies,” and “coons.” Still, the immediate acceptance of minstrelsy suggests that it might not have been received as a totally new cultural form, but rather a form that was already familiar, albeit one that was laden with new meaning in its new context. It is also worth noting that in minstrelsy, a performance was no longer a time-bound, seasonal ritual, but now a defining popular art.

Though Thomas Dartmouth Rice was not the first U.S. entertainer to blacken his face with burnt cork to impersonate a black person, he is most often credited with institutionalizing the practice. As cultural lore would have it, Rice, an aspiring young actor, was in Cincinnati when he happened upon a black street performer dressed in tatters singing a song called “Jim Crow” while performing a dance, often described as grotesque, in which he “jumped Jim Crow.” It is tempting to imagine, as Dale Cockrell does, that the performer Rice encountered was a Jonkonnu,² but with no clear evidence to support the claim, it is easier to fall back on the oft-told story that the man was in some way disabled. In any case, Rice saw this combination of elements as his ticket to the future and set about creating a version of “Jim Crow” as a slow-witted, lackadaisical plantation slave that could be performed “behind the footlights.” In addition to Cincinnati, Rice “jumped Jim Crow” in Louisville, Philadelphia, Washington, and Baltimore for enthusiastic crowds before appearing in New York in 1832. He eventually parlayed his fame into a well-received yearlong tour of the British Isles in 1836, thereby introducing foreign audiences to the first form of popular music that was considered distinctly “American.” Jim Crow, the character and the song, remained a mainstay of Rice’s stage act throughout his career and, as a testament to the staying power of this negative stereotype, it was the unofficial name given to the legislation that was used to deprive African Americans of their civil rights in the latter half of the nineteenth century.

As early minstrelsy developed, it was dominated by two characters—both demeaning. If Jim Crow was the rural archetype, at the other end of the spectrum was the urban dandy—a northern city slicker who went variously by names like Zip Coon, Jim Dandy, and others; he was fashionably dressed, streetwise, and at times given to violence. The song “Zip Coon,” was performed in the early 1930s by George Washington Dixon and others, and it lives on as “Turkey in the Straw,” a perennial favorite among country fiddlers. At this time, minstrel performance was a solo art that might take place in a theater, the street, or someone’s kitchen, and minstrel performances in public venues were sandwiched between all other kinds of entertainment, from legitimate theater to circus acts.

It wasn’t until the appearance of Dan Emmett and the Virginia Minstrels in the early 1840s that the genre began to take shape as a self-contained ensemble performance of its own. Like Rice, the Virginia Minstrels followed U.S. success with a tour of the British Isles, where the group disbanded. During this period, Emmett composed one of the most popular and enduring “plantation songs” of minstrelsy, “Dixie Land,” about a freed slave who longs for the simple pleasures of plantation life. During the Civil War, “Dixie” became the unofficial anthem of the Confederacy, and the word became a synonym for the southern United States. By the time Emmett returned to the United States, he was pleased to find a minstrel troupe in just

In “Jim Crow,” Thomas Dartmouth Rice created a character that was a grotesque impression of an enslaved African American.

about every city in the country. In addition to groups named after their founders or places of origin, there were attempts to capture the supposed ethnic origins of the genre with names like the African Melodists, the Congo Minstrels, and the Ethiopian Band. The popular Christy Minstrels billed themselves as the “original and far famed band of Ethiopian Minstrels.”³ In minstrel music, however, the influence of spirited English or Irish folk music was as strong as the African or African American styles it sought to mimic.

In its standard form, the minstrel show included ensemble singing, dances and marches, stump speeches, and comic sketches, “strung together with witticisms, ripostes, shouts, puns, and other attempts at Negro impersonation.”⁴ Instrumentation consisted of strings such as violin and banjo for melody, and a rhythm section comprising the two “endmen”—Mr. Tambo (on tambourine) and Mr. Bones (who played bones or castanets). As minstrelsy matured, the show was divided into three parts: the opening segment was devoted to the Northern dandy, while the closing centered on a skit involving the Southern plantation slave. A later middle section, the olio, included mock lectures and speeches. Over time, the endmen gained in importance, as the addition of a third character, Mr. Interlocutor, provided a target for their witty repartee.

Although racial oppression and nostalgic views of slavery persisted after Emancipation, minstrelsy generally moved toward a more sympathetic treatment of African Americans. No one was more identified with this trajectory than Stephen Foster, perhaps the best-known U.S. songwriter of the nineteenth century. There is some evidence that Foster’s development may have been influenced by exposure to the abolitionist movement. But if Foster humanized minstrelsy, he did so without directly challenging black stereotypes or the institution of slavery. One of his first and most popular minstrel songs, “Oh! Susanna” (1848), portrayed African Americans as good natured but simple-minded, and it is still taught in primary schools as an innocent novelty song. The term *nigger* was liberally sprinkled throughout “Old Uncle Ned,” written the same year, but by song’s end the slave master genuinely mourns Ned’s passing. One year later, “Nelly Was a Lady” depicted a loving relationship among African Americans in a respectful tone. In some of his next compositions—“Old Folks at Home,” “My Old Kentucky Home”—Foster began to downplay the exaggerated black dialect and achieved “a lament for lost home, friends, and youth, cutting across racial and ethnic lines. . . .”⁵ But even as late as 1860, “Old Black Joe,” which borrowed respectfully from the “Negro spiritual” tradition, could be criticized for its racial condescension. Foster’s songs were sufficiently popular—some selling in the range of



100,000 copies—that he became the first U.S. composer to eke out a living from songwriting alone. Still, never having received his due from publishers, he died with thirty-eight cents in his pocket.

By the postbellum period, minstrelsy had become so overpowering that even African Americans composed minstrel songs and joined minstrel troupes, complete with blackface performances. Among the most famous was James Bland, who dropped out of Howard University to pursue a career in minstrelsy and later joined Sprague’s Georgia Minstrels. Bland became the first commercially successful African American songwriter, writing over 700 songs, including plantation songs such as “Carry Me Back to Old Virginny,” which actually became the Virginia state song in 1940, even though many found the well-worn trope of the nostalgic ex-slave and the language of “massa” and “darkey” to be offensive. In the end, Bland’s music was no more indebted to black culture than that of his white minstrel counterparts. At that moment, minstrelsy offered black entertainers the most lucrative opportunity available to them; they may have felt that they had no better alternative than to imitate the white performers imitating them.

Sheet Music, Sound Recording, and the Sounds of Music

Between the Civil War and the turn of the twentieth century, minstrelsy was gradually supplanted by vaudeville, a variety show format that marked the beginning of popular entertainment as big business. From its modest beginnings at Tony Pastor’s Opera House in New York City’s Bowery, vaudeville had evolved by the turn of the century into a national network of hundreds of venues dominated by the Keith-Albee theater chain in the East and the Orpheum circuit in the West. Because popular songs were a staple of vaudeville, Tin Pan Alley publishers were regular visitors to the gala shows produced in New York by the likes of F. F. Proctor, Oscar Hammerstein, and Flo Ziegfeld. “They made fifty or sixty visits a week,” Russell Sanjek has noted, “to boost their newest publications.”⁶ Their “persuasion tactics,” according to Charles Hamm, might include “out-and-out payment by the publisher—a flat fee, or in some cases a promise of a percentage of profits from sales of sheet music.”⁷ The practice of “paying for play”—legal at the time and considered a form of intelligent marketing rather than a shady business practice—eventually came to be known as “payola.” For the publishers, such investments in vaudeville stars were often returned many times in sheet music sales.

Because middle-class home entertainment at this time centered around the piano, sheet music was the main vehicle for the mass dissemination of music, and publishing firms were at the center of the music business. In 1880, some 45,000 pianos were manufactured in the United States.⁸ Over the next thirty years, annual production increased eightfold. Sheet music retailed for thirty to forty cents a copy; for the major publishers, sales were known to reach millions of copies. Charles K. Harris’s “After the Ball,” written and published in 1892, “quickly reached sales of \$25,000 a week” and “sold more than 2,000,000 copies in only several years, eventually achieving a sale of some five million.”⁹ With potential sales such as these, it is not surprising that music publishers were not particularly interested in the cylinder phonograph that Thomas Edison had invented in 1877. They were far too preoccupied with the sale of sheet music—their primary source of revenue—to bother about records.

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When Edison first conceived of sound recording, he felt that its greatest potential lay in reproducing speech and hailed his invention as a “talking machine.” Still, he decided to introduce it to the public by exploiting its musical properties. In countless demonstrations in lecture halls and vaudeville houses, scores of local vocalists, whistlers, and instrumentalists were invited to try their hand at recording. Although brass reproduced reasonably well, the poor sound quality of early cylinders severely hampered their commercial value. Once awed by its potential, Edison momentarily dismissed his phonograph as “a mere toy, which has no commercial value,” and turned his attention to the invention of the electric light before once again returning to recording.¹⁰

The next steps in recording were undertaken by Charles Sumner Tainter and Chichester Bell in the Volta Laboratory of Edison’s fellow inventor, Alexander Graham Bell. Five years of research yielded the graphophone, whose floating stylus and wax-coated cardboard cylinder produced better sound quality than Edison’s machine. In the late 1880s, the Edison patents and the national sales rights to the graphophone were consolidated into the North American Phonograph Company, which originally intended to sell the recording devices as dictating machines. Their District of Columbia franchise—the Columbia Phonograph Company—would go on to become the oldest trademark in the recording business. Because at this time recording was a mechanical process rather than an electromechanical one, it was called *acoustic recording* and it would soon be devoted almost exclusively to music.

In 1889, Louis Glass pointed the way to the future of the phonograph. Glass had equipped some of his dictating machines with a patented, coin-activated mechanism and four sets of stethoscopic listening tubes, and he placed them in the Palais Royal Saloon in San Francisco. For a nickel per listener per play, patrons could avail themselves of the sounds of a prerecorded “entertainment” cylinder. These “nickel-in-the-slot” machines were so successful that, within a year, Glass had placed machines in eighteen other locations, some of which began bringing in as much as \$1,200 annually. The enterprise won for Glass the title of Father of the Juke Box. Pay phonographs proved to be very popular in a wide range of venues, from amusement parks and drug stores to saloons and train stations. However, because phonographs retailed for almost \$150 and cylinders could not be mass-produced economically, a home entertainment market for prerecorded music was not yet feasible.

Among the early cylinders that caught on were those featuring brass bands, instrumental solos, comic Irish tales, and so-called coon songs, novelty songs exploiting negative stereotypes



John Philip Sousa, famous for his military marches, led the U.S. Marine Band to popular success during an era when the limitations of recording technology favored the reproduction of brass bands. In the 1890s, Columbia catalogues listed scores of recordings by the Marine Band.

of African Americans in caricatured black dialect. As the number of locations for coin-operated phonographs increased, so did the demand for prerecorded cylinders. However, three factors stood in the way of a natural alliance between Tin Pan Alley and the new cylinder-recording companies: because of their limited sound quality, cylinders tended to favor spoken-word and instrumental selections; publishers did not receive royalties from the sale or

use of recorded music; and the demand for prerecorded cylinders could not compete with the demand for sheet music. Thus, the companies manufacturing prerecorded cylinders grew independently of Tin Pan Alley.

The Columbia Phonograph Company quickly distinguished itself as the leading producer of quality entertainment cylinders. Among the company's earliest popular cylinders were marches, waltzes, and popular Irish favorites such as "Little Annie Rooney" and "Down Went McGinty," as well as about one hundred recordings of the U.S. Marine Band. Meanwhile, new developments in recording technology had rekindled Edison's interest in the field. During the early 1890s, improvements in sound reproduction came quickly, and within a few years, both Columbia and Edison had introduced affordable phonographs, leading to the creation of a home entertainment market for prerecorded cylinders.

By 1896, Columbia's catalogue of prerecorded cylinders listed thousands of titles. Edison boasted George Washington Johnson—if not the first, then certainly the most successful black recording artist at the time—who achieved fame and fortune with two hits, "The Whistling Coon" and "The Laughing Song." Competition between the two companies was fierce; in fact, they spent so much time fighting each other that they paid little attention to the development of disc recording, an innovation that eventually consigned cylinders to the dustbin of history.

Emile Berliner, a German immigrant, developed the flat recording disc that became the industry standard. In 1888, Berliner unveiled his gramophone and, at its first demonstration, prophesied the ability to make an unlimited number of copies from a single master, the use of discs for home entertainment on a mass scale, and a system of royalty payments to artists derived from the sale of discs. In short, Berliner was the first to envision the contours of the modern music industry.

Berliner delivered on his first prophecy when he made negative discs, called "stampers," which were then pressed into ebonite rubber biscuits to produce an exact duplicate, or "record," of the master. A later improvement replaced the rubber discs with shellac-based, 78 revolutions per minute (rpm) pressings, which became the industry standard until the late 1940s. To realize his second prophecy, the use of discs for home entertainment, Berliner recruited Fred Gaisberg. Gaisberg had been coordinating talent and recording at Columbia, and Berliner made him, in effect, the first artist and repertoire (a&r) man in the infant industry.

Berliner hired Eldridge R. Johnson to manufacture the gramophones. Adding improvements of his own, Johnson soon began turning out machines by the hundreds. In 1901, the two men consolidated their interests into the Victor Talking Machine Company, with Johnson as the senior partner. They adopted as the company logo the famous Little Nipper (the pup listening attentively to his master's voice emanating from a record horn). Shortly afterward, the major recording companies—Edison, Columbia, and Victor—pooled their patents and set about the business of making better records and machines.¹¹ From this point until the advent of commercial radio following World War I, acoustic recording enjoyed its golden era.

Because exclusive recording contracts were not yet the industry standard, artists were not tied to a single company. Gaisberg was soon recording Columbia's top artists for Victor and, through its British partner, the Gramophone Company, those in every music capital in Europe. The British Gramophone catalogue contained songs and arias in every European language and many Oriental languages that were considered culturally superior to most recordings. Victor

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imported these higher-priced Red Seal classical recordings for sale in the United States and then began a domestic Red Label series of its own, featuring stars of New York's Metropolitan Opera.¹² Italian tenor Enrico Caruso became the jewel in the crown of the new series when he signed an exclusive Victor contract offering him the unprecedented provision of a royalty on records sold—thereby fulfilling the last of Berliner's 1888 prophecies. Victor's Red Label series was clearly intended for the wealthy "carriage trade." Columbia also featured a grand opera series of its own. However, by 1910, as Ian Whitcomb points out in his inimitable style, "It was quite clear to the record companies that the classics only brought in prestige and that the steady income was to be made from sales to the 'Cracker-Barrel Trade,' to the 'Good Old Coon Song-Sousa-Monologue-Sentimental Ballad-Bunch.'" ¹³

If the choice of recorded material was an indicator of class differences, the choice of format revealed a rural-urban split. "By the middle of the first decade of the twentieth century," writes C. A. Schicke, "the disc had distinctly succeeded in capturing the buying power of the upper and middle classes and the urban population. The cylinder's stronghold—and mostly Edison cylinders at that—was the poorer, rural market."¹⁴ In both instances, however, the selection of recording artists was made with only the white population in mind. With the exception of George W. Johnson and the great black vaudevillian Bert Williams, even so-called coon songs, a staple of the recording companies from the beginning, were almost invariably sung by whites. Indeed, prior to World War I, only one African American ensemble had landed a recording contract—the Syncopated Society Orchestra led by James Reese Europe (see below).

While the golden age of acoustic recording drew on and preserved a broad range of musical styles, it also established some of the most troubling aspects of the contemporary music industry, the first being the fragmentation of the audience not only along class lines but also along geographic and, of course, racial lines. It was also claimed that the existing technology favored lower (i.e., male) voices. Ada Jones was not simply the "First Lady of Phonograph Records," she was one of the *only* ladies of phonograph records. In addition, the technological advances of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries introduced what later critics of mass culture would see as the historical schism that marked the transition from active music making to passive music consumption. In the popular image of a family gathered around the living-room piano, music is "consumed" through the active participation of all concerned. With the invention of recording, it was no longer necessary to have any musical ability whatsoever to re-create the sound of music. In playing to the earlier image of "family entertainment," the Tin Pan Alley publishing houses were naturally at odds with the record companies.

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In its formative stages, then, the "music industry" could in no way be considered synonymous with the "recording industry," as it has been more recently; it was, if anything, songwriting and music publishing. Of course, the writers of Tin Pan Alley, from Charles K. Harris, Paul Dresser, and Harry Von Tilzer to George Gershwin, Jerome Kern, and Irving Berlin, took notice of records and eventually pushed record companies to record their songs, but for a variety of reasons—practical, technical, legal, aesthetic, and economic—Tin Pan Alley never embraced records. Thus, while Tin Pan Alley and the recording industry intersected at many points and with increasing frequency over the years, in many ways they developed as separate industries. Even as records promised to

become the dominant medium for the mass reproduction of music, Tin Pan Alley continued to identify itself primarily with the “literate” Broadway–Hollywood axis of popular music—a fact that helps account for the disjuncture that marked the emergence of rock ‘n’ roll, a product that was identified with record labels. Just as record companies would come to replace publishing houses as the center of the music industry, rock ‘n’ roll would push aside Tin Pan Alley pop as the dominant style of popular music. But not until midcentury.

Tin Pan Alley Creates Musical Tradition

Tin Pan Alley centralized the U.S. popular music business during the ascendancy of vaudeville, at a time when European opera was still the hallmark of (upper-class) taste. Although songwriters in the United States often took their cues from European high culture, they soon came to realize that the key to profitability lay in catering to popular tastes. Unlike older, more traditional music publishing houses that issued a broad range of material, the song factories of Tin Pan Alley produced only popular songs; in so doing, “Tin Pan Alley songwriters soon reached a stylistic plateau, a much more homogeneous style than had ever before been the case in the history of song in America.”¹⁵ Indeed, Tin Pan Alley availed itself of a much narrower range of material than did the record companies and parlayed the undertaking into an overwhelming—and distinctly “American”—success. “Tin Pan Alley did not draw on traditional music,” musicologist Charles Hamm has said, “it created traditional music.”¹⁶

Typical of early Tin Pan Alley fare were graceful waltzes and spirited marches. Familiar waltzes included Harry Von Tilzer’s “Bird in a Gilded Cage” (1900), “In the Good Old Summer Time” by George Evans (1902), and Egbert Van Alstyne’s “In the Shade of the Old Apple Tree” (1905). All sold millions. The marches of John Philip Sousa and the Marine Band were perhaps best echoed in popular song by the multitalented George M. Cohan. From “Give My Regards to Broadway” in 1904 to his World War I rally tune, “Over There,” in 1917, Cohan’s up-tempo, lightly syncopated numbers won him enduring popularity.

Ironically, for all its definitive American-ness, Tin Pan Alley was dominated by Jewish Americans, at a time when Jewish immigrants were considered racially different by many. If one had to choose a single artist who epitomized the Tin Pan Alley ethos, it would be Irving Berlin, about whom the *Literary Digest*, after praising his work, remarked with surprise: “And Berlin belongs to the Jewish race.”¹⁷ Berlin (Israel Baline) was four years old in 1892 when he and his family came to the United States after escaping Russian pogroms. Like many Jewish immigrants of the period, they settled in New York’s Lower East Side, where they lived in abject poverty. “At fourteen, he was a singing waiter in the honky tonks of Chinatown and the Bowery, absorbing the rich sounds and rhythms of the musical melting pot.”¹⁸ Two years later, Berlin landed his first Tin Pan Alley job. There, he wrote classics such as “A Pretty Girl Is Like a Melody” (1919), “Puttin’ on the Ritz” (1929), “Easter Parade” (1933), and “God Bless America” (1939), which captured the hearts and minds of generations and made Berlin a household name. Until he was unseated by Paul McCartney, Berlin was easily the most successful songwriter in history. “The range of his songs, in content and mood, if not in form,”

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Irving Berlin lived to be 101 years old and became one of the most prolific songwriters of the twentieth century. Because he could play piano in only one key, he compensated by using a piano with a moveable keyboard that could transpose into other keys.



Hamm has said, “is enormous. . . . Some take on a bit of the flavor of ragtime, of the blues, of country-western, Latin-American, or jazz.”¹⁹ His appropriations of multicultural sounds and rhythms—particularly those of ragtime and jazz—speak volumes about his uncanny ability to interpret diverse influences for the mainstream audience and the systematic cultural distortions that accompanied mainstream popularization.

Incorporating Ragtime, Blues, and Jazz

The rise of Tin Pan Alley paralleled the emergence of ragtime, and the connections between the two reveal the inequitable pattern of cultural borrowing and economic reward between black and white artists that has characterized much of the history of popular music in this country. This pattern is central to understanding the advent of rock ‘n’ roll. Ragtime—as opposed to ragtime songs, which were creations of Tin Pan Alley—began as a syncopated, African American music with structural ties to European marches. It employed, in the words of Gunther Schuller, “the polymetric . . . approach of the African native forced into the simple 2/4 pattern of European marches.”²⁰ It evolved from a dance called the cakewalk, which involved blacks imitating the grand entrance of whites to society balls. In the hands of its most famous practitioner, the African American pianist and composer Scott Joplin, ragtime was a self-conscious art form, a composed music. Joplin himself, Whitcomb has noted, “presented the New Negro,”²¹ a polished composer well-versed in musical notation. His “Maple Leaf Rag” (1899) remains one of the best-known ragtime compositions.²²

For Tin Pan Alley, ragtime was a craze to be incorporated into popular song. As such, it is often difficult to separate ragtime songs from other Tin Pan Alley pop. In their affinity for slow march tempos, for example, ragtime songs tended to resemble George M. Cohan’s most successful musical theater numbers. It can also be argued that there is a historical and stylistic continuity from “coon” songs to the ragtime songs of Tin Pan Alley, although the latter were clearly less offensive. Irving Berlin turned out dozens of ragtime songs, including “Play Some Ragtime” in 1909; “Stop That Rag,” “Dat Draggy Rag,” and “Oh, That Beautiful Rag” in 1910; and “Ragtime Violin” and his best-known “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” in 1911. Although this last song did not marry syncopation and the march tradition the way Joplin might have, the catchy, well-crafted tune, which balanced “dash and energy” with a “bow to negro music,” as

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"Alexander's Ragtime Band"

Artist: Bessie Smith

Music/Lyrics by Irving Berlin (published 1911)

Label: Columbia (1927)

As was the case with her stature (over 6 feet), weight (over 200 pounds), appetite for food and sex, and enormous voice, Bessie Smith's talent was so great that anything she sang—from Tin Pan Alley to Mississippi Delta songs—became the blues. She is one of the most influential singers of the early twentieth century, but like many of her musical contemporaries, her career could not recover from the economic downturn of the Great Depression. In 1937, she was severely injured in a car accident on Mississippi's notorious Highway 61 and died within hours.

Musical Style Notes

"Alexander's Ragtime Band" (1911) was a relic of an earlier age, when Tin Pan Alley songwriters explored the rhythmic possibilities and the pop hooks implicit in ragtime. These "ragtime songs" did not employ the multistrain form of true ragtime, but the incorporation of its syncopation (accents on the off-beats) and pentatonic (five-note) melodies made for enormously effective pop music.

Like many Irving Berlin standards, "Alexander's Ragtime Band" was constructed of multiple verses with a repeating chorus. On this recording, however, we hear only the first verse, which is then followed by three repetitions of the chorus: vocal, instrumental, and then vocal again. Smith has also changed some of the words, replacing some of Berlin's 1911 imitation "black dialect" with more natural-sounding lyrics: "Oh, honey" instead of "Oh, ma honey," and "the best-est band in the land" rather than "the best-est band what am in the land."

Bessie Smith sings in a classic blues style, but many of her instrumentalists on this track are jazz players (Joe Smith, trumpet; Coleman Hawkins, clarinet; Jimmy Harrison, trombone; Fletcher Henderson, piano; Charlie Dixon, banjo). They play in ragtime-inspired rhythms, and the trumpet, clarinet, and trombone are all improvising over the melody at the same time, New Orleans style (although the trumpet is featured and is most prominent in the mix).

Musical "Road Map"

TIMINGS	COMMENTS	LYRICS
0:00–0:07	Instrumental introduction	
0:07–0:31	Verse 1	<i>Oh, honey, . . . let's go down there . . .</i>
0:31–0:56	Chorus (1st section)	<i>Come on and hear . . .</i>
0:56–1:19	(second section—same melody, different words)	<i>Alexander's rag-time band . . .</i>
1:19–2:08	Chorus repeated instrumentally, with trumpet, clarinet, and trombone improvising	
2:08–2:22	Repeat of chorus (1st section)	<i>. . . Alexander's rag-time band . . .</i>
2:33–2:59	Chorus pauses for brief trumpet "break"	<i>[Smith says "Listen to the bugle call!" and the music stops except for the trumpet.]</i>
2:59	(second section—same melody, different words) Chorus ends; track fades out abruptly	<i>Come on along, . . .</i>

Gilbert Seldes noted in 1924,²³ proved to be so popular that Berlin was subsequently billed as the Father of Ragtime. Charles Hamm described this process as one that “skimmed off superficial stylistic elements of a type of music originating among black musicians, and used these to give a somewhat different, exotic flavor to white music.”²⁴

A similar, but far more complicated pattern characterized Tin Pan Alley’s use of blues and jazz. The blues appeared at about the same time as ragtime. “But, unlike ragtime,” Gunther Schuller has noted, “the blues were improvised and as such were more successful in preserving the original and melodic patterns of African music.”²⁵ Using, as writer Amiri Baraka (a.k.a. Leroi Jones) has pointed out, a “three-line verse form [that] springs from no readily apparent Western source”²⁶ and other African retentions, such as the call-and-response style and the flatted thirds and sevenths (“blue notes”) that typify the singing of many West African tribes, the blues are clearly part of the African American musical tradition. This, however, is not the impression one would have gotten if one followed the pattern of published and recorded blues songs comprising the “blues craze” that swept the country in the second decade of the twentieth century.

In 1912, three blues compositions were published: Hart Wand’s “Dallas Blues,” Arthur Seals’s “Baby Seals’ Blues,” and “Memphis Blues” by W. C. Handy. There has been considerable debate about whether such compositions fit the strict definition of the blues. In 1959, blues historian Samuel Charters took the narrow view: “Both Handy and Arthur Seals were Negroes, but the music that they titled ‘blues’ is more or less derived from the standard popular musical styles of the ‘coon song’ and ‘cake walk’ type. It is ironic that the first published piece in the Negro ‘blues’ idiom, ‘Dallas Blues,’ was written by a white man, Hart Wand.”²⁷ Others have tended to grant more latitude in defining the blues, acknowledging Handy’s claim to being the Father of the Blues.

Handy was a trained composer who was as conversant with African American folkloric idioms as he was with musical notation. During this period, he published some of his most memorable compositions, including “St. Louis Blues” (1914), “Joe Turner Blues” (1916), and “Beale Street Blues” (1917). Accordingly, Baraka has argued that, “W. C. Handy, with the publication of his various ‘blues compositions,’ invented [the blues] for a great many Americans and also showed that there was money to be made from it.”²⁸ Handy’s success alerted Tin Pan Alley writers, who turned out a rash of so-called blues songs during this period.²⁹ Given record company practices at the time, these songs were invariably recorded by white singers. As Robert Palmer has said, “The idea of making recordings by and for blacks hadn’t occurred to anyone in a position to do



W. C. Handy was one of the first songwriters to bring a feel for the blues into the world of popular composition. Also a successful businessman, Handy established his own publishing house and record label with his partner Harry Pace.

anything about it when the so-called blues craze hit around 1914–15, so [W. C.] Handy’s ‘blues’ and the blues of other popular tunesmiths, black and white, were recorded by whites, many of them specialists in Negro dialect material.”³⁰ Some like Al Bernard and Marion Harris had a better feel for the music than most and were heartily endorsed by Handy himself. Others could be more easily dismissed as holdovers from minstrelsy.³¹ This situation would have defined most people’s understanding of the blues in the 1910s, before the onslaught of blues recordings by scores of African Americans in the 1920s (see Chapter 2).

Early appropriations of jazz created the impression among mainstream listeners that jazz was the product of “polite society” white dance bands, like that of Paul Whiteman, whom the media crowned the King of Jazz. Actually, by the time the term *jazz* had come into popular usage, the style had been fed by a number of musical tributaries (minstrelsy, spirituals, ragtime, and blues, as well as European classical music and Tin Pan Alley pop) that contained African as well as European

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elements. Indeed, many African American jazz musicians were well versed in the European classics as well as the current Tin Pan Alley hits. Still, there is an important—though not absolute—distinction to be made between the oral tradition of improvisational, “hot” jazz and the written tradition of “sweet” dance music that defined white society orchestras like Paul Whiteman’s. Because high-society whites and middle-class blacks tended to shun the rough, hard-driving styles played in honky-tonks and brothels, the jazz showcased in upscale venues aspired to a smoothness and cosmopolitanism that was less important in other places. As a result, most mainstream listeners associated jazz with sweet dance music, even though, by the time of Whiteman’s success, most jazz musicians, including African Americans, were playing scored arrangements that combined sweet and hot styles; some, like Fletcher Henderson and Duke Ellington, had improved on the model, creating the space for hot improvised solos within innovatively structured arrangements.

Patterns of racial exclusion in the recording industry and later in broadcast radio skewed public perceptions of jazz even more. In 1917, for example, when Victor decided to take a chance on the new sound, the band it ended up recording was the all-white Original Dixieland Jazz Band.³² Similarly, with few exceptions, radio broadcasts excluded black performers as a matter of policy. To most mainstream listeners, then, jazz—which was what just about all dance music was called at this time—was the music played by white dance bands.

The Tin Pan Alley songwriter who had the closest association with jazz in reality was George Gershwin. Thoroughly conversant with the European classics as well as with popular styles, Gershwin sought to bridge the gap between art music and popular music. He had a genuine affinity for and personal interest in the music of African Americans. One of the earliest and most familiar fruits of this interest was his *Rhapsody in Blue*, written for “jazz band and piano” and originally performed at Aeolian Hall in New York in 1924 by Paul Whiteman’s orchestra, with Gershwin at the piano. While *Rhapsody* is an extraordinary piece of music for its time, it is much more a symphonic piece than a jazz composition. Still, Gershwin was more sensitive to and respectful of the subtle nuances of African American music than most of his contemporaries. His music found wide acceptance among black as well as white audiences. His “Summertime,” originally written for the opera *Porgy and Bess* in 1935, quickly passed into the realm of a jazz classic. Indeed, it was the rare black jazz band that did not include a Gershwin tune in its repertoire.

Gershwin's identification with jazz is all the more incredible given the isolationist stance of Tin Pan Alley as a whole. Like his colleagues, Gershwin had little contact with musical developments outside New York City. The fact that he was able to assimilate African American influences in a way that resonated across racial lines says more about his musical instincts and talent than it does about the openness of the industry or society as a whole.

Dance crazes, Latin influences, musical theater, and records

As early as 1909, records were a force to be reckoned with. According to Russell Sanjek, "In 1909, more than 27 million phonograph records and cylinders were manufactured, having a wholesale value of nearly \$12 million."³³ While the larger proportion of their revenues would derive from the sale of sheet music for years to come, publishers and a growing number of popular artists felt that additional revenue from record sales couldn't hurt. Thus, Victor Herbert, a successful composer, and John Philip Sousa led the charge to revise the copyright laws. The resulting Copyright Act of 1909 mandated a royalty of two cents for each cylinder, record, or piano roll manufactured, in addition to the royalties already derived from live performances. Shortly after the passage of the act, the recording industry and Tin Pan Alley began to cross paths regularly, beginning with the dance fever that swept the country from 1910 to World War I and continuing with the growth of musical theater.

Tin Pan Alley hits such as Irving Berlin's "Everybody's Doin' It" and "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and Gilbert and Muir's "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee" were well suited to new social dances like the one-step, two-step, and turkey trot, and records made it easier for couples to practice at home. The dancing public was most eager to follow in the footsteps of the cosmopolitan husband-and-wife dance team of Vernon and Irene Castle, who popularized these new dances with the able assistance of the African American bandleader and composer, James Reese Europe, whom they hired as their music director. The Castles pushed the envelope further after returning from Paris with the Argentine tango, which marked the beginnings of what John Storm Roberts has called the "Latin tinge" in mainstream popular music.³⁴ This being the ragtime era, Tin Pan Alley was quick to issue a number of "ragtime tangos" with titles like "Tango Rag" and "Everybody Tango." The tango also had an effect on the African American music that became popular in the mainstream; it can be heard most prominently on the tango introduction to W. C. Handy's "St. Louis Blues." The Castles made the tango an enduring classic and helped demonstrate the value of dance music on record. In addition to their string of successful Castle House dance studios and lucrative public appearances, the Castles had a deal with Victor to produce a series of dance records. Europe supervised the project, providing opportunities for dozens of African American musicians to participate in (and shape) mainstream culture, and also contributing to the Latin tinge by adding Puerto Rican musicians to the mix.

Europe had organized the Clef Club in New York as a black musicians' union of sorts that could furnish dance orchestras of almost any size, like the 145-piece orchestra—fifty-eight banjos, mandolins, and bandores; ten pianos; five drum kits, and more—he assembled for a 1912 Carnegie Hall concert, which was a first for a black orchestra and the first concert to showcase popular tunes in the hallowed hall.³⁵ Because of his association with the Castles, Europe's Syncopated Society Orchestra was signed to Victor in 1914—another first for an African



The Clef Club, organized by James Reese Europe, was an African American musicians' union that could supply orchestras of varying sizes on request. In 1914, Europe's own Syncopated Society Orchestra was signed to Victor, becoming the first African American ensemble to secure a recording contract.

American ensemble. They produced eight dance records for Victor that remained profitable for years. After the outbreak of World War I, Europe joined an all-black regiment where he was asked to organize "the best damn brass band in the United States Army."³⁶ Simultaneously, the Jones Act of 1917 made all Puerto Ricans citizens of the United States. Thus, while his partner Noble Sissle auditioned musicians in Harlem, Europe recruited an additional eighteen darker-skinned Puerto Ricans from the island and formed the 369th Infantry Regiment Hell Fighters Band. After months of trench warfare and reportedly spectacular concerts throughout France, the Hell Fighters returned home to a hero's welcome (including a parade up Fifth Avenue to Harlem), and toured the United States, recording 24 sides of ragtime and jazz for the French Pathé label.

In addition to dance music, musical theater became another force linking Tin Pan Alley and the record companies; its value became apparent during World War I, when British Gramophone made successful recordings of the songs from *Business As Usual* and two of Irving

Berlin's shows, *Watch Your Step* and *Cheep*. Afterward, Victor—followed by Columbia and Edison—emulated the success of its British partner by recording the best-known stage entertainers in the United States. The singer who created the strongest bridge between Tin Pan Alley and the world of records was Al Jolson. His 1919 Columbia recording of Gershwin's "Swanee," which he usually performed live in blackface and white gloves, sold over 2 million records. This figure was equaled by the 1920 Victor recordings of "Whispering" and "The Japanese Sandman," two Tin Pan Alley favorites performed by the Paul Whiteman Orchestra. Following these hits, popular stage entertainers like George M. Cohan, Al Jolson, Nora Bays, and Sophie Tucker soon found themselves pushing Tin Pan Alley songs on records.

The Tin Pan Alley songsters organized the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP) in 1914 to recover royalties on performances of their copyrighted music. This is done by issuing a blanket license for the use of any selection in the catalogue to live-performance venues such as hotels and nightclubs (and later radio and television) and then

Membership in ASCAP was skewed toward writers of show tunes and semiserious works; The vast majority of black artists were routinely excluded from the society and thereby systematically denied the full benefit of copyright protection.

distributing these royalties to writers and publishers. Membership in ASCAP was skewed toward writers of show tunes and semiserious works, and included Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and George M. Cohan. Of the society's 170 charter members, only six were black: Harry Burleigh, Will Marion Cook, J. Rosamond, James Weldon Johnson, Cecil Mack, and Will Tyers.³⁷ While other black writers and composers who were schooled in musical notation (W. C. Handy, Duke

Ellington) were able to gain entrance to ASCAP, the vast majority of black artists were routinely excluded from the society and thereby systematically denied the full benefit of copyright protection. Until 1939, when a rival organization was formed, ASCAP was a closed society with a near monopoly on all copyrighted music. As proprietor of its members' compositions, ASCAP controlled the use of any selection in its catalogue, thereby exercising considerable power in shaping public taste.

Commercial Broadcasting: A Very Private Enterprise

At the beginning of the 1920s, the outlook for records was rosy. While gross revenues hit an all-time high of \$106 million in 1921, however, shrewd observers might have noticed a cloud on the horizon—radio. Two years after the advent of commercial radio broadcasting in 1920, annual record revenues showed a decline. By 1933, the height of the Great Depression, they had plummeted to an unprecedented low of \$6 million.

The scientific properties of radio waves had been known since the latter half of the nineteenth century. In 1886, Guglielmo Marconi developed the first practical application of wireless communication. He secured a British patent in 1896 and, a year later, established the Wireless Telegraph and Signal Company. In 1899, he founded American Marconi in the United States and set his sights on nothing short of a worldwide monopoly on wireless communication. In its formative stages, wireless communication was used primarily for telegraphy. The man usually credited with transforming the wireless into a technology for *telephony*—the basis of radio broadcasting—is

Lee de Forest, inventor of the audion, an early version of the vacuum tube that could generate, modulate, amplify, and detect radio energy. Reginald Fessenden, who worked with Edison, made the first long-distance telephonic transmission in 1906. While this can be considered the birth of broadcasting, his transmissions were far less dramatic than de Forest's 1908 broadcasts of phonograph music from the Eiffel Tower or his 1910 broadcast of Caruso from the Metropolitan Opera in New York. As a result, it is de Forest who is known as the Father of Radio.

The Growth of Network Radio

During World War I, there were tremendous advances in radio because competing companies suspended their patent disputes for the war effort. Seeing international communication as a key element in the balance of world power after the war ended, President Woodrow Wilson noted that British-domination of radio—represented by Marconi's company—would not be satisfactory. In 1919, the president of American Marconi was forced to tell his stockholders: "We have found that there exists on the part of the officials of the [U.S.] Government a very strong and irremovable objection to [American Marconi] because of the stock interest held therein by the British Company."³⁸ Harnessing patriotism to the profit motive, General Electric (GE) engineered a "solution," with the active support of the U.S. government. When all was said and done, the operations and assets of American Marconi were transferred to a new entity—the Radio Corporation of America

Harnessing patriotism to the profit motive, the operations and assets of American Marconi were transferred to a new entity—the Radio Corporation of America (RCA).

(RCA). RCA was set up as a holding company for the major radio patent holders in the United States. Its stock was divided among GE and Westinghouse, which would manufacture radio equipment; American Telephone and Telegraph (AT&T), which would manufacture transmitters and control telephonic communication; and the former stockholders of American Marconi.

With the future of North American radio firmly in U.S. hands, a regular schedule of broadcasting began in the United States. In November 1920, Westinghouse's KDKA went on the air from the roof of the company's Pittsburgh factory to broadcast the results of the Harding/Cox presidential election. Within two to three years, and with few precedents to guide their development, nearly 600 stations across the country were licensed to operate. Existing legislation, designed primarily to govern maritime telegraphy, did not anticipate the impact of commercialized telephonic broadcasting. Issues such as programming, financing, organization, ownership, networking, interference, and advertising were worked out in practice and over time.

By the mid-1920s, the structures and practices that would dominate radio for the next two decades were already in place. RCA formed the National Broadcasting Company (NBC), a twenty-five-station network, extending from New York to Kansas City, that went on the air with a most ambitious program, featuring the New York Symphony Orchestra at the Grand Ballroom of the Waldorf-Astoria, and a number of remote feeds, including the dance bands of Vincent Lopez, Ben Bernie, George Olsen, and B. A. Rolfe; the Metropolitan Opera star Titta Ruffo; the comedy team of Webber and Fields; and a Will Rogers monologue. By 1926, NBC was operating two semiautonomous networks out of New York—the more powerful Red Network offering news, semiserious works, and light opera, and the Blue Network, broadcasting more popular

fare. These networks were headed by David Sarnoff; Sarnoff had distinguished himself in 1912 as an American Marconi telegraph operator who had been in constant contact with the sinking Titanic. Called “wonder boy of the radio,” Sarnoff had envisioned consumer broadcasting as early as 1916. “I have in mind a plan of development which would make radio a ‘household utility,’ in the same sense as the piano or phonograph,” he wrote in a memo to his superiors. “The idea is to bring music into the home by wireless.”³⁹ Sarnoff became president of RCA in 1930, the year the company was severed from GE in a government-led antitrust suit, and was the chair of its board from 1947 until he retired in 1969.

In 1927, Arthur Judson, a violinist turned artist manager, began the Columbia Phonograph Broadcasting System, with financial backing from the Columbia Phonograph Company, which eventually withdrew from the project. The fledgling network received an influx of cash from one of its main advertisers, the owner of La Palina cigars—whose son, William S. Paley, was installed as the network’s new president in 1928. At this time, the name of the network was shortened to the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS). Within months, CBS was NBC’s major competitor, and coast-to-coast broadcasting was a reality. Paley and Sarnoff would be the dominant figures in broadcasting for years, each controlling vast media empires.

Although radio developed with little government interference, it was closely monitored by the National Alliance of Broadcasters (NAB), which recommended an extension of government regulatory powers. These recommendations were codified in the Radio Act of 1927 and expanded in the Communications Act of 1934, which created the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Still, the law lagged behind technological advances and ownership patterns embodied in the predominance of network broadcasting. By 1938, the networks were using 98 percent of the available nighttime wattage, and NBC and CBS had already locked up fifty of the fifty-two clear channels—special frequencies allocated to stations with large transmitters positioned to broadcast over great distances with minimal interference—as well as 75 percent of the most powerful regional stations. In terms of ownership patterns, radio had developed as a very private enterprise indeed. Programming, however, was another matter entirely.

The Advertisers Versus the Programmers

Until World War II, radio was dominated by four national networks that viewed the market as one monolithic listening audience. Their strategy was to pull in as broad a slice of this total listenership as possible—hence the term *broadcasting*. Early radio pioneers felt that the new medium should nourish the spirit and raise the nation’s cultural level through programs of news, literature, drama, and concert music. While this belief did little for either the fortunes of Tin Pan Alley or the cultural preferences of huge segments of the U.S. public, it did affect the programming decisions of commercial station owners, who demanded propriety and “good taste” in everything from program content to advertising. Direct advertising of a product was permitted only during business hours; at night, only a discreet mention of a program sponsor’s name was allowed. When it appeared that such principles might somehow be compromised, “cultured” industry stalwarts like Lee de Forest

lost no opportunity to cry out in earnest protest against the crass commercialism, the etheric vandalism of the vulgar hucksters, agencies, advertisers, station owners—who lacking awareness of their

*grand opportunities and moral responsibilities to make of radio an uplifting experience, continue to enslave and sell for quick cash the grandest medium which has yet been given to man to help upward his struggling spirit.*⁴⁰

As the twenties roared past most nineteenth-century conventions, the old guard of broadcasting often found itself locking horns with a new breed of unabashedly commercial advertisers. In many ways, Sarnoff and Paley personified the two camps. As a visionary corporate executive, Sarnoff was immersed in the public service aspects of the medium. He viewed radio as an “electronic library” that brought useful information, uplifting literature, and tasteful music into the home. (Of course, as an equally good businessman, he was not oblivious to the fact that such services would sell millions of the radio receivers his company manufactured.) Paley, on the other hand, came to radio as the advertising manager of his father’s cigar factory. His product needed a harder sell, the kind that was considered crass by the old guard. Fortunately for popular music, advertisers like Paley, who catered to “vulgar” popular tastes as a matter of necessity, ended up playing the major role in determining the course of radio programming.

Fortunately for popular music, advertisers like Paley, who catered to “vulgar” popular tastes as a matter of necessity, ended up playing the major role in determining the course of radio programming.

Consistent with radio’s educational mission, news had always been a staple of radio programming. Drama also added to radio’s aura of respectability. The bulk of radio programming, however, was music. Ever vigilant concerning the economic self-interest of its members, ASCAP notified radio early of its intention to include musical broadcasts among its sources of copyright royalties. Commercial advertising had placed musical broadcasts within the “public performance for profit” provision of the 1909 Copyright Act. By the end of 1924, Sanjek notes, “ASCAP income from 199 radio licenses was \$130,000, up from the previous year’s \$35,000 but far from the million predicted when the drive to collect from broadcasters began in the summer of 1922.”⁴¹ Dissatisfied with its share, ASCAP complained that radio had not simply killed records and vaudeville, it had killed popular music itself. Publishers and broadcasters thus began an adversarial relationship that continued well into the 1960s.

In 1934, ASCAP’s radio royalties were \$850,000—still not the sought-after \$1 million. By 1937, however, its radio royalties had jumped to \$5.9 million, thanks to advertisers. To draw listeners—and thus increase sales—the advertisers supported “dialect” comedy and popular song programs rather than dramatic series or concerts of classical or semiclassical music. Pepsodent toothpaste, in this sense, turned Freeman Gosden and Charles Correll, the white creators of the “blackface” comedy series *Amos ‘n’ Andy*, into the highest paid entertainers in broadcasting. (As usual, racial parody could be counted on to turn a profit.) Advertisers also provided the listening audience with “live” musical entertainment—and, at the same time, skirted the stringent advertising code by promoting artists with the sponsoring corporation in their group name: the A&P supermarket chain sponsored the A&P Gypsies; Ipana toothpaste, the Ipana Troubadours; and Cliquot Club soft drinks, the Cliquot Club Eskimos.

One of the most interesting national prime-time experiments in popular music was sponsored on NBC by the American Tobacco Company, maker of Lucky Strike cigarettes. Company president George Washington Hill directed B. A. Rolfe and his thirty-five-piece orchestra to play only popular dance music with “no extravagant, bizarre, involved arrangements,” and invited listeners to send in their song preferences. With Hill’s advertising budget of \$20 million, even

staid NBC executives “suffered his brash, boorish behavior and joined him at Sunday-morning rehearsals to test the ‘foxtrotability’ of every selection programmed.”⁴² The show evolved into the famous *Your Hit Parade*, one of the most popular shows to hit network radio. In focusing solely on musical selections that were popular among the listening audience, *Your Hit Parade* conferred a measure of power in determining public taste on the consumer. The show’s admittedly flawed and probably rigged rankings foreshadowed the more “scientific” methods of rating that determine programming formats today.

The tension between “culture” and straight commercial entertainment in radio programming continued until the economic imperatives of the Great Depression put the advertisers in a position to determine the tone of radio more than the programmers. During the depression, as Erik Barnouw has written, “Destitute families that had to give up an icebox or furniture or bedding still clung to the radio as to a last link with humanity.”⁴³ Such loyalty tipped the balance of power in programming to the side of the advertisers. As a result, radio has tended to follow the popular tastes of consumers. This tendency had quite surprising consequences when rock ‘n’ roll arrived in the early 1950s.

Tin Pan Alley Goes Hollywood . . . and Latin

If radio never quite measured up to ASCAP’s musical or financial expectations, the creation of another new medium—talking films—held out the promise of even greener pastures for Tin Pan Alley composers. A number of processes were developed for adding sound to film. In 1924, AT&T’s Western Electric developed the vitaphone process of synchronizing disc recordings with film, and it was purchased by Warner Brothers. Warner’s classic 1927 film, *The Jazz Singer* starring Al Jolson, often remembered as the first talkie, was in fact a silent film with songs. GE had developed a process for photographing sound onto film in 1922; and in 1928, David Sarnoff organized RCA Photophone to exploit the process. Sarnoff then developed a theater chain, Radio-Keith-Orpheum (RKO), which controlled about 12 percent of all first-run outlets in the United States. By 1930, sound had been installed in 83 percent of the country’s theaters.

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musicals. To secure entertainers with guaranteed appeal, they raided the most popular entertainment medium available to them—network radio. Accordingly, *The Big Broadcast* (1932), a film about radio, numbered among its artists Kate Smith, the Boswell Sisters, and the Mills Brothers, making it one of the few early Hollywood musicals to use African American talent. Also starring in the film was Bing Crosby, who would set the standard for pop vocals until World War II.

Originally steeped in minstrelsy (he actually appeared on film in blackface), Crosby began his singing career in 1926 as one of the Rhythm Boys in the Paul Whiteman band. In 1931, he



One of the most popular entertainers of the early twentieth century, Al Jolson is shown in a scene from *The Jazz Singer*, performing in blackface. Later in his career he discontinued the practice.

launched his solo recording career and landed his first radio show. He recorded with everyone from Al Jolson and Louis Armstrong, to Paul Whiteman, and Duke Ellington. Crosby pioneered a style of singing called “crooning,” a laid back, more personal approach that allowed for greater vocal nuance and feelings of intimacy between artist and audience. Crooning was made possible when the microphone replaced the acoustic megaphone and singers no longer had to project their voices to the far reaches of a nightclub or concert hall to be heard. In addition, hits like “Sweet Leilani” (1937), a pseudo-Hawaiian number from the Oscar-winning film *Waikiki Wedding*, and “San Antonio Rose” (1940), a western swing song penned by Bob Wills, fed the mainstream attraction for exotic cultural influences. Crosby went on to star in over sixty musical films. His recording of Irving Berlin’s “White Christmas” from the 1942 film *Holiday Inn* sold more than 30 million copies and entered the pop charts eighteen years in a row.⁴⁴

Fox was the first major Hollywood studio to ally itself with a Tin Pan Alley publishing house: De Sylva, Brown, and Henderson, which turned out a string of hit musical comedies, including *Good News*, *Three Cheers*, *Hold Everything*, and *Sunny Side Up*. In turn, Warner Brothers acquired a dozen New York publishing houses. The studio used the songwriting team of Harry Warren and Al Dubin to score most of Busby Berkeley’s choreographic extravaganzas such as *42nd Street*, *Gold Diggers*, and *Footlight Parade* in 1933. Family-oriented Broadway musicals, such as Jerome Kern’s *Babes in Toyland* and *The Merry Widow* by Rodgers and Hart, were reproduced for the silver screen in 1934. The indefatigable Irving Berlin, whose fee for a musical film score was \$75,000 plus a percentage of gross receipts, contributed hit songs to films like *Puttin’ on the Ritz* (1930), *Top Hat* (1935), *Follow the Fleet* (1936), and *On the Avenue* (1937). By 1937, the music publishing houses associated with Hollywood shared 65 percent of ASCAP’s publisher dividends and continued to do so for the next decade.⁴⁵

Another aspect of the connection between Hollywood musicals and mainstream culture bears mentioning. In the buildup to World War II, the United States, concerned about hemispheric solidarity, instituted the Good Neighbor policy toward Latin America. This policy went

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“Bing Crosby”
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into high gear in the late 1930s and was embraced by Hollywood, which flooded the United States and international markets with films featuring Latin American themes, stories, images, music, and locations.⁴⁶ Many of these films were big-budget musical comedies, with U.S. stars appearing alongside well-known Latin American entertainers. They were intended to avoid the despicable stereotypes of earlier Latin-themed films in their attempts to distinguish among the national characteristics, geographical boundaries, and cultural differences of various Latin American countries. Even with good intentions, however, Hollywood could conflate Buenos Aires, Rio de Janeiro, and Havana as easily as Tin Pan Alley could confuse a tango, a samba, and a rumba.

All the major Hollywood studios participated in this exercise. Indeed, some Latin-themed films that fit the above description predated the Good Neighbor policy, such as *Cuban Love Song* (1931), which starred Jimmy Durante, Lawrence Tibbett, and Lupe Velez and featured Ernesto Lecuona's Orchestra performing "The Peanut Vendor," and *Flying Down To Rio* (1933), which first paired Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers and featured Vincent Youman's "Carioca." By the late 1930s, Fox led the pack with Brazilian singer and dancer Carmen Miranda, whose riveting performance of "South American Way" in the Broadway revue *The Streets of Paris* (1939) captivated the U.S. audience and led to a string of musical films, including *Down Argentine Way* (1940), *Weekend in Havana* and *That Night in Rio* (1941), and Busby Berkeley's *The Gangs All Here* (1943) in which she performed the "Uncle Sam-ba." Typically performing in carnivalesque outfits and a headdress piled high with tropical fruit, the excess that defined Miranda's image could easily be taken as a demeaning caricature of all things Latin. Still, her signature performances and nonthreatening sexuality turned her into one of the highest paid actors in Hollywood.

The Good Neighbor period coincided with the appearance of a new song type in the U.S. cultural landscape that Gustavo Pérez Firmat has referred to as the "latune"—"a tune with a Latin beat and an English language lyric."⁴⁷ Coupled with the influx of new Latin American immigrants, this new type of song created the conditions under which "genuine and imitation Latin songs both competed and reinforced each other."⁴⁸ In *Cuban Love Song* "The Peanut Vendor" was performed alongside the title song, which was considered by Firmat to be the first Anglophone *bolero*. "Cuban Love Song" was straight Tin Pan Alley pop in a Latin-themed film. But "The Peanut Vendor" was originally "*El Manisero*," a Cuban composition that was marketed as a *rumba* (spelled rhumba in



Carmen Miranda was a major star in Brazil before coming to the attention of Hollywood. Narrowly stereotyped as the feisty Latina, she was nevertheless instrumental in popularizing Latin music and culture throughout the Americas.


the United States). For the U.S. market, the song was fitted with English lyrics; it sold over 1 million copies of sheet music for E. B. Marks (which listed 600 Latin music tunes in its catalogue) and may well have been the first million-selling Latin music record, too. It has since been recorded over 160 times.

The Tin Pan Alley writers who contributed to the “latune songbook” included luminaries such as George Gershwin and Irving Berlin. Veteran songwriters Harry Warren and Mack Gordon penned all the “Latin” material for Carmen Miranda’s musicals, including “I Yi Yi Yi Yi,” “Chica Chica Boom Chic,” and “They Met in Rio.” Though a broad range of Latin American sources were appropriated, Cuban rhythms proved to be the most popular. Cole Porter classics such as “In the Still of the Night,” “Night and Day,” “I’ve Got You under My Skin,” and “Begin the Beguine” reflect his fascination with Cuban sounds, and, like latunes in general, they have been criticized for trivializing vibrant Latin music. In this climate, Ernesto Lecuona’s “Andalucia” could easily be morphed into the decidedly un-Latin “The Breeze and I” with enough momentum to reach number one on *Your Hit Parade*. At the same time, original Latin selections like “Siboney” and “Perfidia” passed into the realm of “American standards.”

The Good Neighbor years brought to the fore performers like Xavier Cugat and Desi Arnaz, who could negotiate the demands of the pop market with just enough Latin-ness to thrive. But they also created the space for groups like Machito’s Afro-Cubans, who played a “high-octane rumba style” generally for darker-skinned audiences that could “rattle the fenders off a jeep.”⁴⁹ If African American and European influences continued to vie for what would become the dominant force in the U.S. popular culture dialectic, it was clear that Latin music had become the primary source for further rhythmic innovation and exotic seasoning.

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In the early twentieth century, established Tin Pan Alley publishing houses consolidated their interests across popular music genres and in every medium used to disseminate popular music—sheet music, radio, Broadway plays, Hollywood films, and (to a lesser extent) records. At times, Tin Pan Alley’s relationship with the recording industry conflicted with its other interests. Radio and movies, for example, netted Tin Pan Alley a hefty sum but hurt the recording industry. After all, the consumer did not have to buy a record to hear the latest hit; he or she needed only to turn on the radio. Movie music remained in demand for only as long as the film was in circulation. “When Hollywood created a glut of as many as six or eight songs in a single production, it led to a superabundance of recorded movie music, which sold pictures but not recordings. A Hollywood-connected publisher could no longer assure record makers that a specific song in a forthcoming film would be the plugged hit.”⁵⁰ Therefore, what were profitable ventures for Tin Pan Alley songwriters and publishers may not have been equally lucrative for recording companies. During the 1920s and 1930s, record companies had to look elsewhere to realize the financial potential of their product. It may not be purely coincidental that they exploited the markets for blues and country music at precisely the moment that record sales began to decline.

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