

# America's Songs II

Michael Lasser



Songs from the 1890's  
to the Post-War Years

ROUTLEDGE

# America's Songs 99

This book continues to tell the stories behind popular songs in our country's history, serving as a sequel to the bestselling *America's Songs: Stories Behind the Songs of Broadway, Hollywood, and Tin Pan Alley*. Organized in short easy-to-read essays, this collection provides historical context to specific songs but also demonstrates how certain songs facilitated the popularity of particular genres, subsequently reshaping the landscape of American popular music. *America's Songs II: Songs from the 1890s to the Post-War Years* will appeal to American popular music enthusiasts but will also serve as an ideal reference guide for students or as a supplement in American music courses.

**Michael Lasser** is a lecturer, writer, broadcaster, critic, and teacher. Since 1980, he has been the host of the nationally syndicated public radio show, *Fascinatin' Rhythm*, winner of a 1994 Peabody Award.

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Songs from the 1890s to the  
Post-War Years

Michael Lasser

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*For the generations:*

*Celia & Evelyn  
Carol & Bobby  
& Alison*

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## Foreword

A few years ago, when Michael Lasser and I collaborated on *America's Songs: The Stories Behind the Songs of Broadway, Hollywood, and Tin Pan Alley*, we started with what we thought was a modest list of about 700 songs. As we researched and wrote about the stories behind those songs, however, it became clear that we had to cut the number of songs drastically if the book was to be smaller than an unabridged dictionary. Each cut was painful. We were cutting a great song—and a great story. We haggled, we argued, and finally we horse-traded: “I’ll cut ‘How About You?’ if you’ll cut ‘At Last.’” At the end of the regimen, more than half the songs were on the cutting-room floor.

After the book came out, we heard from readers who liked the book but wondered, sometimes with some vehemence, “How could you not include . . . [naming one of their favorite songs]?”

Therefore I’m delighted that Michael has taken on the task of writing about these songs in a second book. The songs are just as good; the stories of how they were written are just as fascinating; the reading will be just as much fun.

These songs have done what popular songs are not supposed to do: stayed popular. The very idea of “popular song,” after all, is based on transience. One song is popular for a few weeks or months, then is displaced by newer songs, remembered, if at all, by its original listeners as a “golden oldie.”

But in the first half of the twentieth century, about 700 songs have endured and still sound as fresh today as when they were first heard seventy, eighty, even a hundred years ago. We call them “standards” (the British, who love them as much as we do, call them “evergreens”).

One reason these songs have lasted is that many of them were written for Broadway musicals, and as musicals such as *Show Boat* and *Kiss Me, Kate* are regularly revived in Broadway, regional, and amateur productions, their songs reach a younger audience. Many were also written for Hollywood films, and as we continue to watch Fred and Ginger, Gene and Judy, we continue to hear the songs of Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, Cole Porter, and other great songwriters. Musician friends tell me that the chord progressions of these songs are so much more intriguing than blues songs such as “I Got Rhythm,” “Body and Soul,” and other classics that have become the bedrock of jazz improvisation.

But these songs have lasted simply because they are just so good. They were composed by *songwriters*, which may sound tautological, but increasingly in the latter half of the twentieth century, songs have been composed by the same people who perform them. But the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart, and Kern and Hammerstein were not performers but songwriters. Their trade was usually further divided into two other specializations: composers and lyricists. Most of those composers (with the major exception of Irving Berlin) were classically trained; George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers, and Cole Porter brought the intricacies of classical music to the simple formulas of Tin Pan Alley songs. Plus, they composed melodies on the piano rather than the more musically limited guitar.

Lyricists such as Lorenz Hart and Ira Gershwin were trained in the rigors of light verse. In school, they composed villanelles and rondeaux, sonnets and triolets. When they set words to music, they knew where accents fell, what syllables could be fitted to musical notes. They listened to the way Americans talked and found that an ordinary catchphrase—“You Do Something to Me,” “How Long Has This Been Going On?,” “You Took Advantage of Me”—sounded great when wedded to a musical phrase. They would never rhyme “sunshine” with “sometime.”

Finally, they all knew each other—mostly New Yorkers, immigrants or the children of Jewish immigrants. On Broadway or in Hollywood, they hung out together, demonstrating their latest songs. You would never play a dull chord with Jerome Kern in the room, never use a clichéd lyric with Johnny Mercer at your shoulder.

The songs they have left us have become known, collectively, as “The Great American Songbook,” the closest thing America has to a body of classical song that is reinterpreted, year after year, generation after generation, by singers and musicians. In recent years, these standards have been sung by singers as diverse as Rod Stewart, Meat Loaf, Carly Simon, Sheena Easton, Paul McCartney, Willie Nelson, Brian Wilson, and *Glee*’s Matthew

Morrison. Appropriately, such singers “vote” with their voices for the songs that make it into the canon.

And, in this book, Michael Lasser with wit, wisdom, and extensive research, gives you the stories behind those songs and how they reflect the America of their time—and of ours. It’s his way of keeping these great songs alive and kicking.

Philip Furia  
June 2013

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## Preface

*America's Songs II: Songs from the 1890s to the Post-War Years* is a companion to *America's Songs: The Stories Behind the Songs of Broadway, Hollywood, and Tin Pan Alley*, published by Routledge in 2006. I set out to finish the job that Philip Furia and I began together in 2005. We knew from the start that we were collaborating on a book about the sometimes-elusive game of collaboration that songwriters played so well during the first half of the twentieth century. Whether Ira Gershwin was asking George to add a few more notes to a musical phrase or George was suggesting a necessary word to Ira, the division of labor was often more ambiguous than that. The creative key was the partnership between the composer and the lyricist; everything else derived from that.

At the heart of this book is a rich trove of anecdotes that reveals how and why the songwriters did their work; it also relies on some selective close reading, mainly of lyrics, to illuminate just how good the songs are. I hope that the anecdotes and the commentary will be useful to those engaged in the study of songs and the men and women who wrote them, but also satisfying for those who know, enjoy, and love this unequalled body of song, and might be tempted to hum along as they read. Some will want to read the entries selectively, to search out songs they remember fondly, but those who read it from beginning to end will have a chance to see how the nature of the anecdotes changed over the years, even though many songwriters had developed similar ways of collaborating. As Robert Frost wrote in "A Tuft of Flowers": "Men work together,' I told him from the heart, / 'Whether they work together or apart.'"

The first volume begins in 1910 and ends in 1977, while this new one covers the years between 1891 and 1951. The choice of years may sound

arbitrary, but isn't. The first song in *America's Songs II: Songs from the 1890s to the Post-War Years* is "After the Ball," because its success was instrumental in transforming music publishing into an enormously profitable national business known as Tin Pan Alley. Eventually located on West 28th Street in Manhattan, the Alley was popular music's home from the 1880s until the 1930s, when phonograph records and radio left sheet music sales in their dust, and when movie studios, eagerly gobbling up everything they could turn into Talkies, purchased many of the publishing houses and moved their centers of power to the West Coast. By that time, though, Tin Pan Alley had become a generic name that meant the entirety of commercial popular music in America.

The book ends with "Too Young," just before the eruption of rock 'n' roll changed the game in the early 1950s. It established a powerful new cultural force that we later began to call "youth culture." "Too Young" was one of the first ballads to capitalize on the emergence of young people as a market. Although it precedes rock 'n' roll, the song was one of the first signs that the culture was changing.

The trick, in a book that moves chronologically from song to song, is to find a way to convey a sense of history and authorship. Even standards are artifacts of their own time. Like this book, they came about because there was a task to perform—a score to complete, a star to write for, an image or scrap of melody that stuck in the mind. If nothing else, the men and women who wrote for Broadway, Hollywood, and Tin Pan Alley did not wait around for inspiration. They had work to do. Sammy Cahn's answer, when someone asked him which came first, the music or the words, has become a cliché. "The phone call," he'd say. It was practical work, usually performed with one eye on the clock and another on the bank account, but the songwriters succeeded and achieved beyond anyone's imagination. In retrospect, and not incorrectly, we call the thousands of songs from the first half of the twentieth century the Great American Songbook.

The best way to understand these collaborations is through anecdotes, because they make the experience of songwriting recognizable and understandable. This is how these people did their work—a familiar mix of intent and intuition, hard work and good luck, and, beneath it all, an implicit sense of mastery. I have limited the songs largely to standards, those relatively few extraordinary songs that outlast their initial popularity. They are songs whose mere mention from a stage can make an audience murmur with anticipatory delight. Some important songs are not included, because there is no anecdote to tell; the songwriters sat down, wrote a song, and then stood up. End of story. In the few cases where a song is not quite a standard, I've

included it because its story is unusually entertaining and revealing, and because it fits especially well with a standard from the same time.

Where do all the stories come from, especially since nearly all the songwriters have died? As you might expect, from histories and critical studies, biographies and memoirs, and newspaper and magazine interviews. Surprisingly, a large number of anecdotes came from obituaries, and, less surprisingly, more and more material came from the Internet. Online sources are more reliable than they used to be. I was especially fortunate to have a number of fine libraries to work in and found most of what I needed at the Central Branch of the Rochester (NY) Public Library, a fine collection for a public library in a slightly out of the way city; the Sibley Music Library of the University of Rochester's Eastman School of Music; and the Special Collections Department of the New York Library of the Performing Arts at Lincoln Center, the source of most of the clippings I found. I'm grateful to the librarians in all three places for their patience, knowledge, and guidance. They do their often-undervalued profession proud. I also want to thank Constance Ditzel and Elysse Preposi for their patience and clarity, and my wife, who understands the kind of solitary concentration the task requires.

Even though Tin Pan Alley is long gone, I was very glad to learn that the same kinds of stories about songwriting persist even though the music business continues to change dramatically. Here's one I learned about the wrong kind of music and from the wrong time: in 1964, Willie Nelson was broke, living with his wife and three children in a Texas trailer park stuck between a cemetery and a used car lot. In a recent interview, country singer Kinky Friedman said that, "in the car lot, there's a sign that says, 'Trailers for sale or rent,' and Roger Miller pulls up to Willie's place and sees that sign."<sup>1</sup> There are so many good stories that shed light on how and why important songs came to be written that it was impossible to fit them all in one book. Even a second volume doesn't entirely finish the task.

Michael Lasser  
2013

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## Introduction

*“There is, of course, some kind of tale behind every song, but mostly songs are written because one is a songwriter and there is a reason to write particular songs.”<sup>1</sup>*

—Irving Berlin, in a letter to Abel Green, Editor of *Variety*

When Gene Lees met Harold Arlen near the end of the composer’s life, he asked him a question that apparently no one had asked before: “Mr. Arlen, when you and George Gershwin and Rodgers and Hart and the others were writing for the theater in the thirties, were you consciously aware that what you were writing was art music?” Lees remembered that Arlen “looked at me for what seems in memory a long moment and then said, softly, ‘Yes.’”<sup>2</sup>

Lees and Arlen were talking about the Great American Songbook, the unequalled popular songs written between 1920 and 1950, but anticipated by the arrival of ragtime, jazz, and especially Tin Pan Alley in the preceding two decades. Writing almost exclusively about love—some mix of romance, sex, and marriage—the songwriters of the Great American Songbook combined rich melodies, sophisticated harmonies, and smart rhythms with lyrics derived from the slangy vitality of American speech. The results were striking, especially in the ways they wove sentiment and wit together within the limits of a single song. Although this sounds complicated, most songwriters were devoted to simplicity. Despite their clever wordplay, accessibility was a virtue and Irving Berlin was its greatest master. Novelist Anita Loos once had a chance to watch him work: “He would go over and over a lyric until it seemed perfect to my ears. Then he’d scrap the whole thing and begin over again. When I asked Irving what was wrong, he invariably



**FIGURE 0.1** Two kids from the Lower East Side, George Gershwin and Irving Berlin. Courtesy of Photofest.

said, ‘It isn’t simple enough.’”<sup>3</sup> What John F. Baker said of Sammy Cahn is equally true of all the good lyricists: they possess “an uncanny ability to fit shapely, singable words to almost any tune written . . . and make them sound inevitable.”<sup>4</sup>

That inevitability often lay in the songwriters’ ability to maneuver within the unyielding conventions and conservative public taste that made innovation difficult. Despite the slavish commitment to a single subject, the repetition of the same old imagery, and the frequency of clichés both musical and verbal, the best songwriters’ gift for innovation is at the heart of *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators*, Alec Wilder’s book about composers, and *Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America’s Great Lyricists*, Philip Furia’s about lyricists. Despite the temptation to settle for banality, each songwriter had to make a song work on his—and its—own terms. Berlin said, “I’ve always despised that constant effort in the theater and pictures to be unique and original. A picture or a play is good or bad. So is a song. If they’re also different, okay . . . but it’s a great mistake to set out with no objective but being unusual.”<sup>5</sup>

Using no more words than it took to match thirty-two bars of music, a good lyric could spark what was tired and lift what was flat. Just as good songwriting combined sentiment and wit in a single song, so it had to be

both familiar and fresh at the same time. But the men and women who wrote these songs didn't sit around waiting for inspiration to strike. They went out looking for it or fought their way through its absence. Johnny Mercer compared songwriters to baseball players: "A ballplayer gets up there and he has to produce. Bam! He whacked it! Then he's done for the day; and they have to get ready for the next game. It might be two or three days, but remember, even though he's not in the lineup, he's constantly practicing. However, they still have to concentrate on one game at a time, and they don't think about how far the ball's going to fly. We do the same thing with songs . . . How do you write a song, how do you hit a ball? Don't think about it, just write it, just hit it. It's the same thing."<sup>6</sup>

As they learned that ragtime and jazz provided enough edge to keep things interesting, composers capitalized on the looseness and drive of syncopation, while lyricists created a lively up-to-date language given shape by their playfulness with sound and rhyme in songs that gave voice to everyone, especially the young. We identified as standards those songs that were so good they refused to disappear after their initial popularity. They continued to buzz along just under the surface until new singers emerged to perform them, thereby confirming that what we'd been singing in the shower all along was worth remembering, even if it was as simple, sweet, and sad as this:

I long to rest my weary head on somebody's shoulder,  
I hate to grow older  
All by myself.<sup>7</sup>

The reasons elude me, but the history of songwriting is dense with anecdotes about the songwriters and the songs: the serendipitous moment—or was it dumb luck, the way somebody worked, why and how a song came to be written, and then the recognition that it worked—what Herman Melville called "the shock of recognition." Songwriting—the completed song—stands at the confluence where collaboration and history meet, along with art and commerce. With the exception of Berlin, Cole Porter, and a few others who wrote both words and music, nearly all these songs were the result of collaboration. It was something like a marriage, shaped by affection and conflict, common understanding but seething tension—not only as a result of personality but often in terms of the work as well. Even George and Ira Gershwin, who loved each other beyond measure, occasionally argued sharply. Because the music usually came first, the task of setting words to it was no mean feat, especially if the collaborators heard a melody from different emotional perspectives. As Johnny Mercer put it, "Writing music takes

more talent, but writing lyrics takes more courage.”<sup>8</sup> Mercer’s mentor E.Y. Harburg said of being a lyricist, “You’ve got to be a euphoric masochist.”<sup>9</sup>

Attitudes toward love, sex, and marriage changed rapidly and dramatically through the twentieth century, and songwriters had to keep up. They weren’t poets and they certainly weren’t sociologists, but the moment when the lyric and the music became one—a new third thing—could be thrilling. Yip Harburg said that “the greatest romance in the life of a lyricist is when the right words meet the right notes.”<sup>10</sup> To stay in the game, songwriters needed to live in their own time with their antennae aquiver for the newest catchphrase, the sharpest rhythms of the day, the hottest gossip, and the latest changes in what people wanted and what they were doing. While some of the songs were autobiographical, more often than not the songwriters’ subject was not themselves, but us. We remember a song, we attune ourselves to its emotional vibe, and we’re able to say, “Yes, that’s it. That’s how it was; that’s how it feels.” The songwriters would never have said so, but they were democratic populists who told us our own stories in our own time, and then the best of those songs continued to speak to other times. To see how they did it, song by song, is the purpose of this book.

# Chapter 1

## 1891–1895

**“After the Ball”** [*A Trip to Chinatown*] (1892)  
Lyrics and music by Charles K. Harris (1867–1930)

The business of American popular music began in a storefront in Milwaukee. Charles K. Harris, a small-time vaudeville performer, wrote songs for any performers he could finagle into singing them. Eventually, he opened his own publishing house and hung a sign over the door: “Songs Written to Order.”

No song is more important to the history of Tin Pan Alley than “After the Ball,” a lugubrious strophic (verse–chorus–new verse–repeat chorus, etc.) waltz of unrequited love that records its main character’s lifetime of bitter disappointment. They wept; we yawn. They embraced grand emotions; we prefer irony.

In 1891, Harris attended a dance during a visit to Chicago. He watched a young couple argue and then separate. A line came to him: “Many a heart is aching after the ball.” When he got back to Milwaukee, he finished the ballad in which an old man explains to his niece why he never married and why his former sweetheart soon died of a broken heart. He had seen the woman he loved kiss another man but learned only years later that the man was the young woman’s brother. Of such unsubtle melodramatic plot lines were Sentimental Ballads often made.

The first time a performer sang “After the Ball” in a Milwaukee vaudeville house, he forgot the words and the song flopped. Harris then paid a well-known theater performer named J. Aldrich Libbey \$500 and a percentage of the sheet music sales to sing it in full evening dress during a San Francisco performance of the hit musical, *A Trip to Chinatown*. At the end of the first verse and chorus, and then the second, the audience was silent.