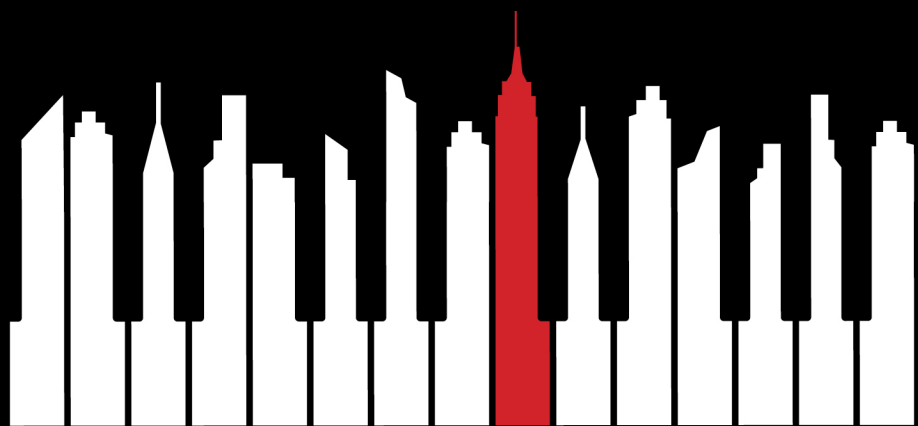


THE ART AND CRAFT OF THE  
**GREAT AMERICAN SONGBOOK**



SAY IT *with a*  
**BEAUTIFUL**  
**SONG**

MICHAEL LASSER AND  
HARMON GREENBLATT

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BEAUTIFUL SONG



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And I wish someday I could find my way  
To the land where the good songs go.

—JEROME KERN AND P. G. WODEHOUSE

For Elaine

*Holding hands in a movie show . . .*

*May not be new,*

*But I like it,*

*How about you?*

—Burton Lane and Ralph Freed

For Fran

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# INTRODUCTION

A song is air and breath. Its music can stir our emotions, yet it dissolves as we listen. Only the words provide enough heft to give it anything like solidity even though they, too, are made of breath. Together, music and lyrics can reach the heart, but it isn't easy. It requires an equilibrium made possible only through craft. In a program of his songs at the 92nd Street Y in New York, the lyricist E. Y. Harburg said, "Words make you think a thought. Music makes you feel a feeling. A song makes you feel a thought."<sup>1</sup> We often underrate what the songwriters of the Great American Songbook (roughly 1920–1950) accomplished within the limits of popular music's conventions and its persistent flirtation with sentimentality. Harmon insistently yet almost apologetically calls the greatest songwriters of the Great American Songbook geniuses. Michael understands what he means. At the same time that we love songs, we also toss them away willy-nilly when something new comes along. But not all of them. Those that persist form the spine of this book.

Deena Rosenberg had songs by George and Ira Gershwin in mind, but she could have been thinking about any of the important songs of the Songbook when she wrote, "Somehow, though we take them for granted, these exquisite miniatures still affect us deeply."<sup>2</sup> After seventy years of rock and roll in all its incarnations and successors, the folk music fling of the 1960s, the widespread popularity of the Nashville sound, and the coming of hip-hop to Broadway, these songs refuse to disappear.

And yet the initial popularity of each of them rarely lasted for more than a couple of months. They fell from the lists of hit songs, but they remained just below the surface, never quite disappearing from the public's collective memory or the performances of some of our best singers. Lyricist P. G. Wodehouse set these words to a melody by young Jerome Kern more than a century ago. Think of it as a reassuring fairy tale:

They had their day,  
 And then we threw them away;  
 And without a sign we would pass them by,  
 For some other, new tune.  
 So off to a happier home they flew  
 Where they're always loved and they're always new.

(Jerome Kern and P. G. Wodehouse, "The Land  
 Where the Good Songs Go," *Oh, Boy!*, 1917)

We all know the music of our own growing up, but the Great American Songbook persists even though its earliest songs are now a century old.

Michael's parents were very social. On any Saturday night, they might invite people to our apartment. They'd roll up the living room rug, turn on the radio, and dance. They found those clear channel stations so they could dance to everyone from Guy Lombardo to Benny Goodman. He used to watch them. One night, as he was just entering his teen years, his mother said, "Come on, Michael. You can dance too." That night, he learned to do the fox trot and the rhumba. We can still hear at least some of these songs in Broadway revivals; showings of movie musicals from before 1960 in museums and on cable television; YouTube, where you can stumble upon the most striking confluences of singers and songs; live performances by jazz and cabaret singers; crossover recordings by both classical and rock singers; and even TV commercials. Did you know that Willie Nelson loves Irving Berlin's "Blue Skies"? The author Jody Rosen wrote recently about his deep affection for Bob Wills and the Texas Playboys, jazz musicians Louis Armstrong and Duke Ellington, and such hit songs as "Stardust" and "All the Things You Are."<sup>3</sup> Wills's writing and playing mixed country with Western Swing with the blues with jazz with Tin Pan Alley and Broadway. His songs fused many of the strains of American song. He made room for Broadway in Texas.

The Songbook may no longer be the center of the nation's musical attention, but take a grandchild to a revival of an old musical like



*Vernon and Irene Castle dance the fox trot. Library of Congress. Public Domain.*

*Oklahoma!*, *Guys and Dolls*, or *Ain't Misbehavin'* and watch the pleasure spread across the generations.

The Great American Songbook, mainstream American popular music written largely between the two world wars, provides the impetus and substance for most of what we have to say. Rock and roll knocked it off its perch during the fifties and early sixties, in part because it had dominated popular taste for nearly half a century and its best songwriters were aging. George Gershwin had died in 1939 at the age of thirty-seven. In 1943, Lorenz Hart succumbed to his inner demons and alcoholism. Two years later, Jerome Kern collapsed on a street in Manhattan and died a few days later. Cole Porter, despite the crippling accident that eventually required the amputation of one of his legs, persisted despite the ceaseless pain. He practiced the urbanity his songs embodied. Rhythm and Blues flourished in Harlem after the

war, waiting to be discovered by white teenagers with money in their pockets for the first time in years.

A new generation of songwriters and singers couldn't match those who preceded them. Too much of the writing would not equal the combination of sentiment and wit we had grown to expect from the likes of Porter, Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg, and Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart. Although Tin Pan Alley would make room for early rock and roll by the mid-fifties, the Songbook still flourished on Broadway and in Hollywood through most of the decade. Broadway marquees flashed the word about Richard Adler and Jerry Ross's *Damn Yankees* (1955), Frederick Loewe and Alan Jay Lerner's *My Fair Lady* (1956), and Jule Styne and Stephen Sondheim's *Gypsy* (1959), while Hollywood produced musicals that featured the hits of such songwriters as Irving Berlin (*Easter Parade*, 1948), George and Ira Gershwin (*American in Paris*, 1951), Nacio Herb Brown and Arthur Freed (*Singin' in the Rain*, 1952), and Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz (*The Band Wagon*, 1953).

There are always great songwriters out there, but the Songbook's span of thirty years or so had more of them working at the height of their powers than at any other time. They also wrote more than those who preceded or followed. They were professionals who turned out the work at a consistent level of excellence, at least most of the time. Of the next few generations of songwriters, the lyricist Johnny Mercer complained that they didn't write enough. Beginning in the 1920s, the songwriters of the Great American Songbook didn't wait for inspiration. They had songs to write.

Mastery of technique combined with the ability to express intense emotion by merging sentiment and wit defined the best of these songs, yet overriding all of them was a sense of how American they were. In his introduction to Alec Wilder's *American Popular Songs: The Great Innovators, 1900–1950*, James T. Maher writes about the changes that first occurred at the very end of the nineteenth century: "The American popular song took on, and consolidated, certain native characteristics . . . that distinguished it from the popular song of other countries. It became a discrete musical entity."<sup>4</sup>

In nearly every song from the Great American Songbook, craft serves the creation of time. Songs may move forward or backward or they may stand stock still as the songwriters build each song's emotions around an inner awareness of time. Collaborators handled the merging of music by one person and words by another with aplomb and with some level

of awareness of just how good at it they were. The lyricist Gene Lees first met Harold Arlen when the composer was quite old. Lees asked him, "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?" Arlen looked at Lees for what Lees remembered as a long time before answering quietly, "Yes."<sup>5</sup> The songwriters' capacity to innovate and invent with such economy in song after song rose to the level of a particular kind of genius. Maher writes, "It is the unconscious role of the innovator to conserve in his creative reflexes both past and contemporary innovation while moving his own work in new directions. He assimilates what is fresh and stimulating, and he then explores his own intuitive sense of the further possibilities."<sup>6</sup>

The songwriters relished the kind of surprise that added to the emotional substance of a song. They had an intuitive grasp of where the nation and its people were. Michael once said that Irving Berlin had a genius for America, and so he did. For half a century, he could intuit what we wanted before we did. He stood beyond his contemporaries in this way, although George and Ira Gershwin came close. It was more a matter of degree than kind. How striking that a group of immigrants or immigrants' children had so keen an awareness of the new land that they or their parents had claimed as their own.

Michael is sometimes uneasy calling Arlen, Harburg, and their contemporaries geniuses. They worked within constraints they infrequently broke free of, yet they were capable of renewal and reinvention, of dazzling rhythms and rhymes, to keep millions of us engaged and emotionally charged. They were practical men and women who often prided themselves on how fast they worked. When they labored more slowly, they kept it to themselves. It took Berlin months to finish "Always" to his satisfaction. These professionals shaped a market that allowed them to flourish at the height of their abilities, not simply because their listeners expected them to but because they expected it of themselves.

Strikingly nuanced in something only thirty-two bars long, a lyric may need no more than a single word to move through time. It creates an emotional setting in which love, its loss, discovery, or survival, lives. Jule Styne, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green's "Just in Time" is a constant weave of time between present and past. The word "time" appears five times in the lyric, mainly at the beginning and end when it counts the most (Jule Styne, Betty Comden, and Adolph Green, "Just in Time," *Bells Are Ringing*, 1956). More than anything, the two characters who sing it

(played originally by Judy Holliday and Sidney Chaplin) recognize their wondrous good fortune. Set to a jaunty tune, the lyrics begin with a happy ending, “I found you just in time,” before admitting in the same chorus, “I was lost . . . / Nowhere to go.” Both characters feel rescued from despair: “No more doubt or fear / I’ve found my way.” Although Comden and Green relied on the past tense throughout the song, it feels immediate, very much in the present moment, shaped by such delight that the man and woman keep repeating the title line to themselves as if in joyful disbelief. Like so many other songs, it seems to embody poet Claudia Keelan’s observation, “I woke up to know that time, as such, doesn’t pass, but goes on and continues in a manner that links all events to other events, some already finished, some happening now, some yet to happen.”<sup>7</sup>

Motion or stasis, not measured by the clock but attuned to the rhythms of the heart. Done so deftly and quickly and even invisibly, it attests to the mastery of craft so highly valued by the songwriters of the Great American Songbook. At the same time, these songs appear to be playing fast and loose with the way most people actually live inwardly. Love songs may rely on great (and sustained) intensity in the present, but we don’t, at least not emotionally. Writing in *The New Yorker*, Paul Bloom observed, “The duration of felt experience is between two and three seconds—about as long as it takes, the psychologist Marc Wittmann points out, for Paul McCartney to sing the words ‘Hey Jude.’ Everything before belongs to memory; everything after is anticipation.”<sup>8</sup> Yet within a single song a lyric may persist in the present or move back and forth nimbly in only a word or two between present, past, and future. In the guise of a single emotion, it plays off different times against one another to create its effect. It creates continuity.

This is, among other things, a book about craft and its mastery. Great songwriters preceded and followed the Songbook, but never before or since were so many so sure about how to make a song. They were so good at it that the making was nearly invisible. What William Butler Yeats wrote about poetry is equally applicable to the making of songs:

I said, “A line will take us hours maybe;  
Yet if it does not seem a moment’s thought,  
Our stitching and unstitching has been naught.”<sup>9</sup>

The craft was essential to the songs’ success. You notice it only if you look for it, but day by day why would you? This book will try to persuade you to listen more closely and thus enjoy more fully.

Similarly, the invisible style of moviemaking that came to be known as the Hollywood Style dominated during the heyday of the Studio System, from the 1930s into the early 1960s. Eventually, it lost its place to the rise of the auteur, the director who came to be seen, rightly or wrongly, as a movie's "author," the possessor of a distinctive style. In those Studio System movies—including *Casablanca*, *Bringing Up Baby*, *A Star Is Born* (with Janet Gaynor and Frederic March), *North by Northwest*, *Stagecoach*, and *Some Like It Hot*—surface polish, clear storytelling, and a star or two to lend momentum and appeal were paramount. The polish was so high that the Hollywood Style appeared to be no style at all.

Like popular songs, many of these movies were formulaic but brought new life to something familiar even though as many as six writers might have worked on a script. It was, said Joe Morton, "Hollywood storytelling at its height, so effortless, so masterful, and it's often invisible to the audience."<sup>10</sup> He might have been describing a song from the Great American Songbook.

At the very least, these songs appear effortless, as if they've always been around, waiting for somebody to sing them on a stage or in the shower. The best of them feel as if they're the most natural thing in the world. And yet they were made by men and women who lacked the ambition or ability to tackle an opera (rest in peace, George Gershwin and Stephen Sondheim) or a novel but who were very good at what they could do. They saw themselves, not as great artists, but as masters of craft who were also shrewd business people. Perhaps the best word, though they would have been suspicious of it, is artisan.

The performing arts are always interwoven with commerce, none more so than popular music. Irving Berlin wrote, "My ambition is to reach the heart of the average American, not the highbrow nor the lowbrow but that vast intermediate crew which is the real soul of the country. . . . My public is the real people."<sup>11</sup> He had a habit of talking straight to his listeners:

Let the dance floor feel your leather,  
Step as lightly as a feather.  
Let yourself go.

(Irving Berlin, "Let Yourself Go," *Follow the Fleet*, 1936)

Those who wrote the songs understood how lucky they were (and how adept). They delighted in the popularity of their work, the broad audiences they reached, the large amounts of money it earned them, and the fine singers who feasted on what they had written.

During World War II, the emotions of parting and separation were especially sharp. The ballad “I’ve Heard That Song Before” by Jule Styne and Sammy Cahn is surprisingly uptempo as it seems to exist only in the present, but the brief lyric shifts often from time to time (Jule Styne and Sammy Cahn, “I’ve Heard That Song Before,” *Youth on Parade*, 1942). It moves quickly and easily from the present to the past and back as the narrator listens to a band playing a familiar song she remembers well. The lyrics say, “forever more,” but the song and its promise are both in the past. All that remains is memory and the desire to hear the song again, “and I’ll remember just when / I’ve heard that lovely song before.”

We began to work on this book in 2021, a century after the Songbook’s opening salvo. That’s when Irving Berlin wrote “Say It with Music” and “All By Myself”; James F. Hanley and Grant Clarke wrote “Second Hand Rose” for Fanny Brice to sing in the Ziegfeld Follies; Ted FioRito and Gus Kahn wrote “Toot, Toot, Toosie” for Al Jolson; and Richard A. Whiting, Kahn, and Raymond Egan wrote “Ain’t We Got Fun” about married lovers.

Things were changing. By the middle of the decade, Milton Ager and Jack Yellen were writing flapper songs (“Ain’t She Sweet”); Fred Ahlert and Roy Turk, among others, were writing blues-like torch ballads (“I’ll Get By”); Berlin had written “What’ll I Do,” “All Alone,” and “Always,” three of his most important songs; Rodgers and Hart and the Gershwins had triumphed on Broadway (*Garrick Gaieties* of 1925 and *Lady, Be Good!*); and the Harlem Renaissance would soon reach far beyond Uptown with songs by James P. Johnson, Thomas “Fats” Waller, Duke Ellington, and Andy Razaf. The Songbook had arrived. By the end of the decade, Al Jolson was singing Berlin’s “Blue Skies” in *The Jazz Singer* on the screen. Sheet music, recordings, radio, and then talking pictures—all putting the same songs in America’s collective ear.

Michael wrote his first two books about individual songs and how they came to be written, and the next about a larger theme that shaped popular music mostly during the first half of the twentieth century. No matter what he wrote, though, the Great American Songbook was at the center of it. They are the songs (and songwriters) he most admires and enjoys. This book is about the Songbook itself and how its composers and lyricists shaped its songs. We are still the beneficiaries of what they accomplished.

We've tried to identify some of the things that mark the Songbook as both distinctive and enduring and devote at least part of a chapter to each. Many of them overlap, even interweave, so they show up more than once. Among them in no particular order: the mastery of craft, especially rhyme; the delight in wordplay and wit; the way in which songs create a sense of theatricality; the manipulation of time; the importance of unpredictability and the rise to authenticity; the essential nature of collaboration; and the relationship such as it is between lyrics and poetry. We could write a paragraph about each of them now, but we prefer to have you discover them in the chapters along with songs to illustrate.

When we have to use technical language to make a point, we make our explanation as brief and clear as possible. We aim at the general intelligent reader, not the expert. We try to be persuasive and we do our very best to avoid the density of so much academic prose. We'd like people to read the book, enjoy it, and learn something from it.

What we write about isn't exclusive to the Songbook. You can hardly escape time, memory, or unpredictability regardless of what you're writing. Stephen Sondheim told an interviewer, "A song exists in time."<sup>12</sup> He was talking, not about the use of tense in a lyric, but rather a song in performance. Alexandra Petri, a *Washington Post* columnist, added, "It is not like a poem you can stop and start and read at any pace you like and return to if you fail to grasp its meaning the first time. A song is delivered in time, and it has only as long as it lasts to tell you what it is trying to say, whether you hear it or not."<sup>13</sup>

But these songs have their own approach. They follow a series of conventions and rely heavily on syncopation, loose jazzy rhythms, and the merging of elevated romantic language with everyday talk enriched by wit. Unlike most of those who came after them, they knew how to write with a sense of humor.

For anybody who cares about the music and lyrics from these years, Alec Wilder's *American Popular Song* and Philip Furia's *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley* are essential reading. We've learned from both of them, but we've consulted them infrequently for this book. They organize by individual songwriters, while we approach the songs guided by the Songbook's various elements.

Michael and Harmon set out to get at some of the essential qualities of the Great American Songbook through a mix of observation and close reading. If what we write is recitative, the songs are the arias. This is not

mainly a work of research but of personal testimony—what we’ve learned from over forty years of blissful immersion in thousands of American songs. To echo what one of our greatest songwriters wrote only four years into his career, “Come on along!”

Michael Lasser  
Rochester, NY  
Harmon Greenblatt  
Northbrook, IL  
May 2023

## RECORDINGS

(Most of these recordings are available on YouTube. Sometimes they’re film clips or videos of live performances. When there are numerous recordings available, we chose one we liked or that was popular when the song was new. Occasionally there were no recordings available. —ML, HG)

## INTRODUCTION

Frank Sinatra, “There Goes That Song Again,” 1943  
Rebecca Luker, Matthew Scott, “The Land Where the Good Songs Go,”  
2010  
Sydney Chaplin, Judy Holliday, “Just in Time,” 1956  
Ginger Rogers, “Let Yourself Go,” 1935  
Harry James and His Orchestra, Helen Forrest, “I’ve Heard That Song  
Before,” 1942

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## CRAFT AND AUTHENTICITY

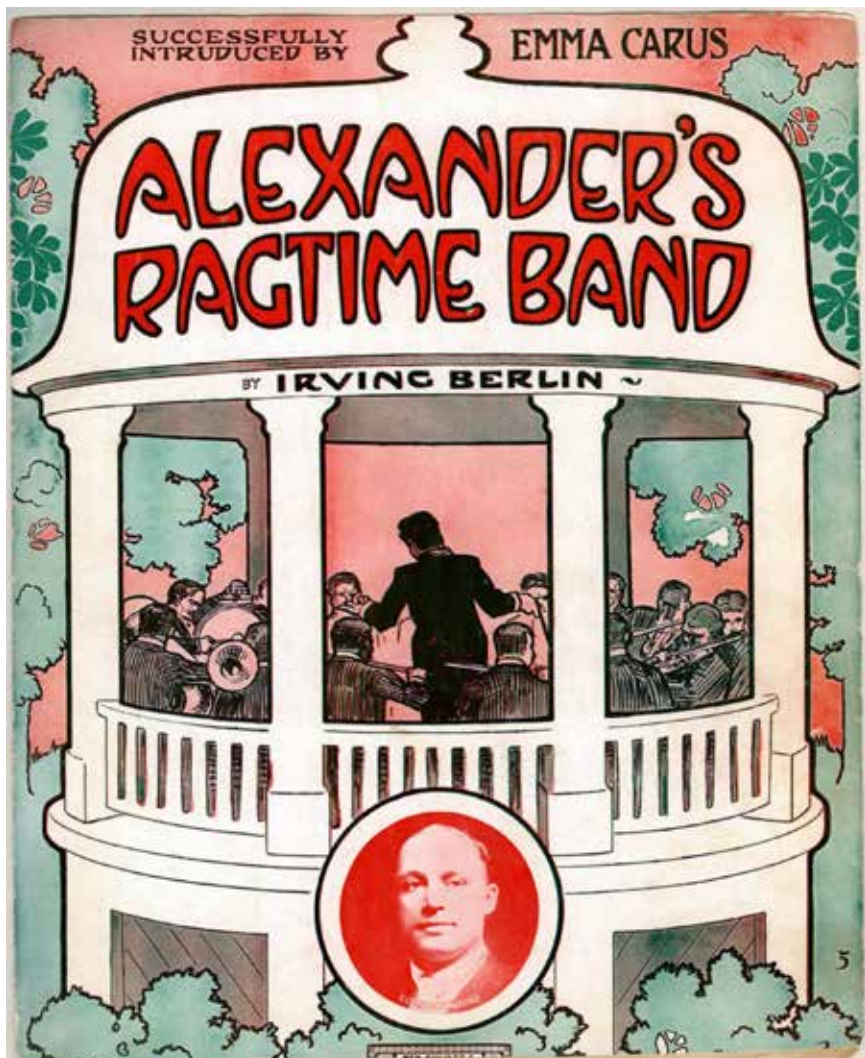
In an interview with the NPR radio host Terry Gross, Ken Emerson, Stephen Foster's most recent biographer, described the American popular song beginning with Foster as "deeply, even proudly, inauthentic."<sup>1</sup> It borrowed from European and African American music, everything from the polka, waltz, and march to ragtime, jazz, and the blues. Eventually, songwriters merged these various elements into a popular music hybrid that was, by its very nature, American. And that takes us to the Great American Songbook.

The nation's varied population—and its equally varied music—means that most of what we call American is a hybrid. If America were a dog, it would be a mutt. We recast what we receive into something new, but we don't throw anything away. The professional songwriters smoothed off the harder edges of each particular strain to make it more respectable and acceptable. They then merged it with other kinds of music. And that's the story of Tin Pan Alley in a nutshell.

In her book about the coming of Modernism to Paris at the turn of the twentieth century, Sue Roe writes that the newly arrived young artists responded "to the mood of artistic self-consciousness which . . . came to characterize the modern age."<sup>2</sup> The years before World War I were a time of artistic and cultural upheaval in this country as well; it didn't start with the Charleston in the mid-twenties. Rather, it reignited itself in the years after World War I. What was going on in Paris was also going on in different ways in the United States. Here we had the urban artists known as The Eight; the Armory Show of Modernist art in 1913; the rise of ragtime,

jazz, and the blues; the Modernist poet Ezra Pound's rallying cry, "Make it new"; and more. Yet popular music was much less self-aware and much more conservative than the other arts. Self-consciousness in Tin Pan Alley and Broadway during these years was not the American bag. It was a commercial undertaking that achieved artfulness and a different kind of modernity almost despite itself. Roe's point about artists' increasing self-consciousness also requires a broader view. Painting was probably the first of the arts to emphasize its own medium, but other forms followed quickly in the 1920s, when the Great American Songbook first flowered. Its songwriters were determined to move past the Tin Pan Alley formulas of the pre-World War I years to write songs with broad appeal yet rooted in a combination of sentiment and wit. They wanted to be inventive. They prided themselves on their craftsmanship. They put everything they had into their songs. Money was part of it, but look at what they accomplished. Working within a conservative framework, Philip Furia explains, song lyricists adapted "the techniques of modern poetry, as well as those of society verse, and wedded them to music. The lyricists of Tin Pan Alley took the American vernacular and made it sing."<sup>3</sup>

Pound, whose book of essays *Make It New* appeared in 1934, was committed to promoting Modernism in contemporary writing, but if one popular song from the early twentieth century stands as an exemplar of Pound's motto, it has to be Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band." Berlin wrote it in 1911, eleven years before Eliot's "The Waste Land." His biographer James Kaplan calls it "a thrilling song with a thrilling lyric, about the thrill of the new: a great new American artform, ragtime. . . . Even more, it was a celebration of America itself, a paean to—and very soon, a symbol of—emerging American cultural superpower."<sup>4</sup> It soon became for Berlin and perhaps for other songwriters as well "a breakout anthem of modernity."<sup>5</sup> Yet at the same time, Berlin was a traditionalist. Long after we understood how offensive the language and attitudes of minstrel shows were, he continued to see minstrelsy as a form of essential American entertainment. He also kept an image of Stephen Foster on his office wall. He combined these two strains in a single song in 1914, "Simple Melody," one of his numerous contrapuntal duets (which he preferred to call "double songs"). Its first melody is sweet and old-fashioned. It conjures up the feel of a nineteenth-century sentimental ballad. Its second melody evokes ragtime, the sensation of the day, American music's first twentieth-century sound. He then combines the two to create an implied capsule history of American song—only seven years after he wrote his first song.



The sheet music cover for "Alexander's Ragtime Band." Duke University. Public Domain.