

ABSTRACT

Title of Dissertation: A BLUE TIN PAN: MUSICAL, CULTURAL,
AND PERSONAL CONTEXTS OF JAZZ IN
THE COMPOSITIONS OF HAROLD ARLEN

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This dissertation explores the compositions of songwriter Harold Arlen, viewing them as musical portraits of the immigrant experience and the racial politics of the United States in the early part of the twentieth century. This approach reveals how Arlen's upbringing in a racially diverse neighborhood in Buffalo, New York, where Jewish American immigrants and African Americans formed the core of the community, as well as his early years playing in jazz bands and his tenure at the Cotton Club, left a permanent and indelible mark on his compositional style. I trace the influence of African American popular music on his compositional approach, structure, and style. In doing so, this dissertation adds a more nuanced view to narratives about Jewish American songwriters' use of jazz and blues in Tin Pan Alley song by demonstrating their specific application in the works of one composer. In addition to musical function, the personal and cultural implication of jazz elements in Arlen's music are also explored.

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COMPOSITIONS OF HAROLD ARLEN

by

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Preface

Throughout the writing of this dissertation the world around me has changed dramatically—from turbulent elections to a global pandemic, and most recently an international outcry for racial justice—the broader context of the global society into which this work will now be released is forever changed from when I first set pen to paper. I am acutely aware that this dissertation, which seeks to examine the relationship between white, Jewish American songwriters and African American musical styles, is in a way a microcosm of the complex history of race relations in the United States that are currently at the forefront of national discussions. It is my strong hope that this work, which encourages a re-examination of discourses surrounding Tin Pan Alley and argues for a more inclusive understanding of the role of race both in the sound and history of this music, answers the recent charge of American Musicological Society President, Suzanne G. Cusick, to join together in “thinking, with all the seriousness you can muster, about just what we, as musicians and scholars of music and sound, can do to identify and eliminate the structures of racism in the wider world.”¹ I acknowledge that I can still continue to grow as a scholar and will commit my future efforts to creating socially-conscious and culturally informed scholarship.

¹ Suzanne G. Cusick, “On the Death of George Floyd: A Letter from the AMS President,” June 3, 2020.

Dedication

This dissertation is dedicated to my dad, Eugene England, who I know would have loved to see it.

Acknowledgements

I would like to express my thanks to the many faculty mentors, colleagues, friends, and family who have walked with me along the long road of pursuing a graduate degree in music, and particularly those who accompanied me on the final leg of the journey which is represented here in the form of this dissertation. The road has not always been easy and there have been many unexpected twists and turns along the way, none of which could have been navigated without the unwavering support I was so fortunate to receive. I am grateful to my committee members, and especially my advisor, Dr. Patrick Warfield, who has spent many years teaching me to research and write, hopefully well. I also extend thanks to all of my professors at the University of Maryland for striving to bring out the best in me as a scholar through their time and efforts. I am grateful to my parents for encouraging me and to my mother for countless hours of babysitting. But the people who deserve the highest thanks are my boys. To my husband, Dan, I will never find the words (a surprise to us both I imagine) to say thank you for never allowing me to quit. To my sons, Liam and Jacob, who gave me such perspective and joy throughout this process, I hope someday you see this and know that you can accomplish anything if you stay the course. And of course, thank you to Harold Arlen, whose music means so much more to me with each passing day.

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INTRODUCTION

The opening scene of the 1943 film musical *Stormy Weather* portrays the aging dancer, Bill Williamson (played by Bill “Bojangles” Robinson), receiving a magazine produced in honor of his outstanding career.² The camera focuses in on the cover, across which a headline proudly proclaims: “Celebrating the magnificent contribution of the colored race to the entertainment world in the past 25 years.” Included with the magazine is a handwritten note: “Dear Bill, Jim Europe would have been proud of you—ex drum major Noble Sissle.” As a gaggle of neighborhood children surround him, Williamson begins to reminisce about his career in the spotlight. The remainder of the film is little more than a thinly-veiled vehicle for a series of no less than twenty musical numbers, jam packed into a running time of just over an hour and a half. Critically acclaimed alongside *Cabin in the Sky* as one of the best Hollywood musicals to feature an entirely African American cast, *Stormy Weather* stars many of the age’s top African American performers, including Dooley Wilson, Cab Calloway, Fats Waller, the Nicholas Brothers dancing duo, comedian F. E. Miller, Ada Brown, Katherine Dunham and her dance troupe, and Lena Horne. The *New York Times* lauded the star-studded cast:

² *Stormy Weather*, directed by Andrew Stone, produced by William LeBaron, with a screen play by Frederick Jackson and Ted Koehler (Twentieth Century Fox, 1943), re-released by Cinema Classics Collection (Twentieth Century Fox, 2005).

“Stormy Weather” is a first-rate show, just the kind of spirited divertissement that will make you forget all about your own momentary weather troubles. There is so much to choose from, Fox having wisely decided to bury a very thin and trite story line with an abundance of the show world’s leading colored talent that “Stormy Weather” has more the appearance of a super-vaudeville bill than a motion picture.³

Taken as a whole, the musical numbers in the film present a sweeping overview, however problematic and reductive, of African American musical styles at the turn of the twentieth century. It is complete with minstrel songs and a blackface performance, along with a cakewalk, blues, and jungle numbers. It is interesting therefore that the film takes its title from a 1933 song written by a white, Jewish-American songwriter: Harold Arlen (1905–1986).

This film—itself a catalog of African American popular music—situates Arlen within the history of African American popular musical traditions, and according to many, appropriately so. As Ethel Waters, who premiered “Stormy Weather” in the thirty-second edition of the *Cotton Club Parade*, supposedly remarked: “Harold Arlen is the negro-ist white man I ever knew!”⁴ Waters’ tongue-and-cheek assessment of the composer, while said in jest, pinpoints the essence of Arlen’s compositional style: his incorporation of African American popular music idioms.

³ “‘Stormy Weather’: Negro Musical With Bill Robinson, at the Roxy—‘Her to Hold’ Opens at Criterion,” *The New York Times* (July 22, 1943).

⁴ Ethel Waters as quoted in John S. Wilson, “An Evening of Harold Arlen’s Music,” *New York Times* (June 27, 1984).

The musical sounds of jazz and blues are essential to Arlen, both the man and his music. So integral was their influence that *New York Times* critic John S. Wilson refers to their use as the “distinctive Arlen touch”:

The distinctive Arlen touch was the jazz-based, blues rooted quality of his music. Such songs as “Stormy Weather,” “I Gotta Right to Sing the Blues” and “Blues in the Night,” the swinging beat of “Happy as the Day is Long,” the gospel cry of “Ain’t It the Truth” place him as a composer alongside Mr. Waller and Duke Ellington rather than Richard Rodgers or Jerome Kern or Irving Berlin. He was the blackest of the white songwriters of the ‘30s and ‘40s.⁵

Arlen seems to have agreed, distancing himself from his peers saying: “I’m essentially not a smart writer, I’m a blues writer.”⁶ But Arlen’s fascination with blues and jazz, arguably the most popular American musics of the early twentieth century, was hardly surprising or uncommon, raising the question of what about Arlen’s approach seemed truly distinctive to his audiences. Indeed, the syncopated rhythms, blue notes, and chromatic harmonies of jazz can be found in the works of many of his contemporaries during the period known as America’s Golden Age of Song (1920s–1940s).⁷

⁵ John S. Wilson, “Harold Arlen’s Songs Basis of Cabaret Show,” *New York Times* (May 15, 1978).

⁶ Arlen quoted in Max Wilk, *They’re Playing Our Song: Conversations with America’s Classic Songwriters*, revised edition (Westport, CT: Easton Studio Press, 2008), 167.

⁷ Charles Hamm defines the golden years of Tin Pan Alley as “the era marked off roughly by America’s involvement in the two great world wars of the twentieth century.” See Charles Hamm, *Yesterdays* (New York: Norton, 1983), 326. Gerald Bordman defines this era more precisely as the years 1924–1937 in American musical theater history. See Gerald Bordman, *American Musical Theater: A Chronicle*, 4th edition with updates by Richard Norton (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 441.

Through careful study of Arlen's compositions, it becomes clear that what is interesting about Arlen's relationship to the musical language of the blues and jazz is the depth of their impact on his compositions.⁸ This dissertation presents a series of case studies in which I offer a stylistic and socio-cultural analysis of selected compositions of Harold Arlen. I examine the influence of African American musical idioms on Arlen's style and contextualize that style within common narratives about American popular music. In doing so, it becomes apparent that Arlen's career and his musical output complicate many existing paradigms about the intersections between race, ethnicity, and American popular song. In particular, his compositions demonstrate that African American musical styles form a more integral part of the Tin Pan Alley sound than is typically acknowledged, extending far beyond rhythmic syncopation or the occasional blue note. Moreover, his music shows that the presence of these elements serve a much different socio-cultural function than suggested by current narratives that highlight themes of assimilation and appropriation without fully engaging with how and why those acts occur.

⁸ Here I am following Mark Tucker who describes jazz in this period as a fluid construct. Mark Tucker, "Jazz," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Vol 14. 2nd edition (London: Macmillian; and New York: Grove's Dictionaries, 2001).

Race and Ethnicity in The American Popular Music Industry

At the turn of the twentieth century, the American popular music industry was embodied by New York's Tin Pan Alley.⁹ The name, coined by journalist Monroe Rosenfeld, made reference to the tinny sound of song pluggers banging away on pianos in the offices of New York's music publishing houses originally clustered near 14th St. (before moving further uptown to 28th St). This overcrowded space of songsters was a result of a growing trend toward the centralization of American culture and industry in major cities, which Alan Trachtenberg has famously referred to as "the incorporation of America."¹⁰

More than the physical centralization of the music industry, Tin Pan Alley represented the sonic centralization of America's published popular music. Over the years, the term Tin Pan Alley itself came to refer to a style (or rather a body of loosely related styles) of music that emerged as the dominant form of popular music in the United States. This new musical voice was defined not by those who had

⁹ For more on Tin Pan Alley see David Ewen, *The Life and Death of Tin Pan Alley: The Golden Age of American Popular Music* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1964); David A. Jasen, *Tin Pan Alley: The Composers, the Songs, the Performers, and Their Times, the Golden Age of Popular Music from 1886 to 1956* (New York: D. I. Fine, 1988); Craig H. Roell, "The Development of Tin Pan Alley," in *America's Musical Pulse: Popular Music in Twentieth Century Society*, ed. Kenneth J. Bindas (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1992), 113–21; Philip Furia, *Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists* (New York, NY: Oxford University Press, 1990), and Rose Subotnik, "Shoddy Equipment for Living: Deconstructing the Tin Pan Alley Song," in *Musicological Identities: Essays in Honor of Susan McClary*, edited by Jacqueline C. Warwick, Raymond Knapp, and Steven Bauer (New York, NY: Routledge, 2008): 205—219.

¹⁰ Alan Trachtenberg, *The Incorporation of America: Culture and Society in the Gilded Age* (New York: Hill and Wang, 1982).

always considered themselves cultural insiders, but rather by marginalized voices from the periphery: immigrants.

Beginning in the late 1800s, a rising tide of anti-Semitism in Europe led thousands of Jews to flee to the United States in search of freedom and equality. Many of these refugees settled in New York. Between 1880 and 1910, the population of Jewish immigrants in the city swelled from approximately 80,000 to one million, representing fully one quarter of New York's total population.¹¹ There, significant numbers of Jewish American immigrants found personal and professional fulfillment in entertainment.

Scholars have frequently noted the number of Jewish American songwriters working in Tin Pan Alley though fewer have successfully proposed explanations for this phenomenon.¹² Irving Howe suggests that theater was a natural calling for many Jewish American immigrants, as theatricality plays a part in many aspects of Jewish religious practice, from the “high church impressiveness of the reading of the Torah, the virtuoso performances of cantors and preachers, the protocol of the Passover feasts, with the theatricality of suspense in the opening of the door for the invisible prophet Elijah.”¹³ Moreover, there had been a long tradition of Yiddish theater in the

¹¹ Hamm, *Yesterdays*, 327–28.

¹² See David Suisman, *Selling Sounds: The Commercial Revolution in American Sound: The Commercial Revolution in American Popular Music* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009): 32–41.

¹³ Irving Howe, *World of our Fathers: The Journey of East European Jews to America and the Life They Found and Made There*, with the assistance of Kenneth Libo and a new introduction by Morris Dickstein, 30th Anniversary Edition, (New York: New York University Press, 2005), 461.

Old World, and figures like the *badchen* (a jester figure common at Jewish weddings), the fiddler, and the stage comedian were well established parts of Yiddish culture. Yet, he also notes that these figures were significantly less consequential in the Yiddish past than they were to become in the Jewish American future.¹⁴

Howe proposes, however, that a more significant reason for Jewish Americans' rise in theater was the incredible popularity of vaudeville in the early 1900s coupled with the ensuing demand for talent, which led the entertainment industry to look beyond ethnicity or skin color in pursuit of another color: green.

These were the years in which vaudeville was enormously popular, a major form of American entertainment always needing replenished talent or whatever rough approximations could be passed off on the smaller towns. . . . The easygoing cynicism prevailing in this milieu had certain moral advantages: it brushed aside claims of rank and looked only for the immediate promise of talent. Just as blacks would later turn to baseball and basketball knowing that here at least their skin color counted for less than their skills, so in the early 1900's young Jews broke into vaudeville because here too people asked not, who are you? But, what can you do? It was a roughneck sort of egalitarianism, with little concern for those who might go under, but at best it gave people a chance to show their gifts.¹⁵

For many in the New World, vaudeville was not only a welcoming place, but a place where one could prove oneself. It provided an outlet to show what you could do, where the performer "drives toward perfection of work and acknowledgement in the world."¹⁶ Charles Hamm points out that this welcoming climate was less benevolent

¹⁴ Ibid., 461.

¹⁵ Howe, 557.

¹⁶ Ibid., 558.

and more opportunely created, as earlier generations of Jewish-Americans had already come to occupy many important posts in the entertainment industry.¹⁷

At the same time, the theater was a place to enjoy newfound freedoms in a land free from the social strictures and politics of Eastern Europe. In Howe's view, theater was also the expression of "a long-contained vulgarity, which had already come to form a vital portion of Yiddish culture in eastern Europe as a challenge to rabbinical denial and *shtetl* smugness, now broke through the skin of immigrant life. It was vulgarity in both senses: as the urgent, juicy thrust of desire, intent upon seizing life by the throat, and as the cheap, corner of the mouth retelling of Yiddish obscenities."¹⁸

Many of the most popular vaudeville stars in America at the turn of the century were Jewish Americans: Al Jolson, George Jessel, Eddie Cantor, Bennie Fields, Jack Benny, Ted Lewis, Sophie Tucker, George Burns, Fanny Brice, and Milton Berle. The star power of these performers, their names plastered on billboards across the city and lit up on glittering marquees, in turn meant that Jewish Americans had increasing power in this sector. But Jewish Americans also became powerful forces behind the curtain. Jews owned and operated many of the most successful vaudeville theaters, among them Klaw and Erlanger, the Shubert Brothers, the Orpheum Circuit, and People's Vaudeville. The last was founded by Marcus Loew and Adolph Zukor together with Joseph and Nicholas Schenk, who would later go on

¹⁷ Hamm, 329.

¹⁸ Howe, *World of Our Fathers*, 558.

to become successful in the Hollywood film industry paving the way for future Jewish American movie moguls including Louis B. Mayer, Samuel Goldwyn, William Fox, the Warner Brothers, and the Selznicks.

Arguably the most musically significant power position to be occupied by Jewish Americans in the entertainment industry was in publishing. The first significant music publishing house established in New York, M. Witmark and Sons (along with their Chicago affiliate, Sol Bloom), was owned and operated by Jewish-American immigrants. The early generations of Tin Pan Alley songwriters represented in the catalogues of these publishing firms were likewise often Jewish American immigrants, including Charles K. Harris, Monroe Rosenfield, Edward B. Marks, Lew Bernstein, and Maurice Shapiro.

The music written and published by these songwriters was not significantly Jewish in nature. Witmark and Sons provides a clear case sample. Between the late 1800s and early 1900s, this house published primarily sentimental, European-style ballads and a new musical style, alternatively marketed as “coon songs” or “syncopated” songs, that drew upon African American musical idioms and lyrical stereotypes. These songs were vestiges of America’s first and most successful form of musical entertainment: the minstrel show.

A form of variety entertainment popular throughout the United States, the minstrel show consisted of white performers impersonating African Americans and taking on the roles of stereotypical characters that have now entered into American culture in significant and problematic ways: Zip Coon (the Northern, urban Dandy who is less learned than he thinks), Jim Crow (the enslaved man), and Lucy Long (a

female character used to portray a broad variety of female characters such as the mammy or the jezebel).¹⁹ White actors and musicians donned “blackface,” painting their faces black with the ends burnt cork, as a crude costumery to embody. To return to the example of Whitmark and Sons, that organization had a dedicated “minstrel department,” which in addition to music, sold gags, makeup, and costumes. Many of the Witmarks themselves also performed in minstrel troupes.²⁰

Tin Pan Alley songs drew not only upon the sounds of African American musical idioms, but also upon negative stereotypes of African Americans in lyrical and musical form. This is not to say that African Americans were the only group to receive such treatment in Tin Pan Alley. As Raymond Knapp notes: “a quick survey of any large list of songs performed in musical plays and on the New York stage at the turn of the century reveals a bemusing concentration of numbers that project clusters of racial and ethnic stereotypes.”²¹ Song served as a safe space for the exploration of difference among performers and audiences in social majority groups.

¹⁹ For more on the history of the minstrel show see Robert C. Toll, *Blackening Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974); Eric Lott, *Love and Theft: Blackface Minstrelsy and the American Working Class* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993); Dale Cockrell, *Demons of Disorder: Early Blackface Minstrels and Their World* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1997); and William J. Mahar, *Behind the Burnt Cork Mask: Early Blackface Minstrelsy and Antebellum American Popular Culture* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1999).

²⁰ Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), 33.

²¹ Raymond Knapp, “Tin Pan Alley Songs on Stage and Screen,” in *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, ed. by Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 82.

Musical caricatures of many diverse cultures, especially those of recent immigrants, can be seen clearly in a short survey of Irving Berlin songs written around the year 1910, which include “I Wish That You Was My Gal, Molly” in a mock-Irish stance, “Dorando” in Italian dialect, and “Oh, How that German Could Love,” “Colored Romeo,” a mock black song and an avalanche of rag-inspired songs: “Yiddle on Your Fiddle (Play Some Ragtime),” “That Mesmerizing Mendelssohn Tune,” “Stop that Rag,” “Dat Draggy Rag,” “Oh, That Beautiful Rag,” “Ragtime Violin,” and “Alexander’s Ragtime Band.”²²

Ultimately it was the ragtime-inspired pieces that launched Berlin’s successful career and the sounds of African American popular song more generally that would help future generations of Jewish American find their own musical voice. Recently, Matthew Morrison has described this phenomenon as “blacksound:” the sonic counterpart of blackface, blacksound recognizes “the ways in which popular entertainment, culture, and identity have been shaped by the sonic and embodied legacy of blackface in and beyond the United States . . . [and] put blackness as the aesthetic basis of American popular music.”²³ Morrison’s construction builds on the work of Jayna Brown who describes “racial mimicry” in popular music, as well as other scholarship on the appropriation of the sounds of Blackness. These include Mendi Obadike’s “acousmatic blackness” (the taking on of a sonic skin that allows

²² Howe, *World of our Fathers*, 561–62.

²³ Matthew Morrison, “Race, Blacksound, and the (Re) Making of Musicological Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72 (2019): 782.

for the perception of Blackness even when Blackness is not visually represented), Barbara Savage’s “aural blackface” (evoking Blackness through speech and dialect), Nina Eidsheim’s “sonic blackface” (the perception of vocal timbre as racially representative), Kristin Moriah’s “sounding blackness” (the consideration of “sounding” Black as political), and Daphne A. Brook’s “Sonic Blues Face” (Black performance modes developed by White and Black female blues singers).²⁴

That Jewish American songwriters would become interested in the sounds of African American popular music is in many ways unsurprising. During the Great Migration of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, thousands of African Americans moved from the rural south to urban centers in the liberal north in search of greater economic and social opportunities. Jewish Americans who had arrived in northern cities during waves of immigrations and African Americans were thus

²⁴ See Jayna Brown, *Babylon Girls: Black Women Performers and the Shaping of the Modern* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006); Mendi Obadike, “Low Fidelity: Stereotyped Blackness in the Field of Sound,” (Ph.D. diss., Duke University, 2005); Nina Sun Eidsheim, “Marian Anderson and ‘Sonic Blackness’ in American Opera,” *American Quarterly* 63, no. 3 (September 2011): 641–71; Barbara Diane Savage. *Broadcasting Freedom: Radio, War, and the Politics of Race, 1938–1948* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1999); Moriah, “‘I Dreamed and Loved and Wandered and Sang’: Sounding Blackness in W. E. B. Du Bois’ *Dark Princess*,” *Sounding Out!* (blog), August 20, 2018, <https://soundstudiesblog.com/2018/08/20/i-dreamed-and-loved-and-wandered-and-sang-sounding-blackness-in-w-e-b-du-boiss-dark-princess/>; Daphne Brooks, *Bodies in Dissent: Spectacular Performances of Race and Freedom 1850–1910* (Durham: NC, Duke University Press, 2006).

brought into close contact with one another, a fact that would have a profound effect on music.²⁵

Ulf Lindberg has argued that the trend toward African American popular music in Tin Pan Alley mirrors the rise of urban culture as more Americans generally moved from rural areas to the city.²⁶ Tin Pan Alley was not only physically located in the city, but the urban aesthetic stance of its songs was heard in both sound and lyrics. At the turn of the twentieth century, through the proliferation of sheet music, recordings, and radio from the city center, urban culture came to stand in for national culture, replacing the rural heartland as the symbol of America for the first time. Indeed, the urban sounds of Tin Pan Alley quickly came to represent not only the city, but the nation, as the songs were mass produced and disseminated by its powerful publishing companies, many of which were coincidentally owned by Jews. The nationalization of the Tin Pan Alley aesthetic was furthered by the development of radio and records. So widespread was the influence of Tin Pan Alley, that American popular music became in a sense, standardized. It seems no surprise that many of the songs from this time period are called standards.

²⁵ “Got on My Traveling Shoes: Black Sacred Music and the Great Migration,” in Robert M. Marovich, *A City Called Heaven: Chicago and the Birth of Gospel Music* (Urbana, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2015); Charles Hiroshi Garrett, “Louis Armstrong and the Great Migration” in *Struggling to Define a Nation: American Music in the Twentieth Century* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008); Charles Lester, “You Just Can’t Keep the Music Unless You Move with It,” *The Great Migration and the Black Cultural Politics of Jazz in New Orleans and Chicago in Escape from New York: The New Negro Renaissance beyond Harlem* (University of Minnesota Press, 2013).

²⁶ Ulf Lindberg, “Popular Modernism? The ‘Urban’ Style of Interwar Tin Pan Alley,” *Popular Music* 22 (2003): 283–98.

Jewish American Songwriters and “The Sounds of Blackness”

The complex interplay of interweaving threads of race, ethnicity, and modernism exhibited by Tin Pan Alley song is best summarized by Jeffrey Melnick, who boldly claims:

Tin Pan Alley is where American Music came into its own as a business through urbanization, nationalization, and standardization, and a certain definitive brand of racialization. . . . Tin Pan Alley was organized by Jews in New York who figured out how to make the city the cultural heart of the nation, how to use the sounds of blackness as the basis of their own creations, and how to standardize all of this in an incredibly efficient popular culture enterprise.²⁷

Implicit in Melnick’s assertion are three interrelated questions: (1) how exactly did Jewish-American composers “use the sounds of blackness,” (2) why did they use these sounds? and (3) to what end? I suggest that there is no unilateral answer to any of these questions, nor should there be. Rather, undertaking an examination of these questions in the contexts of specific case studies, such as Harold Arlen, can add nuance to our understanding of the roles blues and jazz have played in shaping the sound of Tin Pan Alley.

The question of *how* Jewish-American composers used African American musical styles in their works has been the subject of curiously little research given the widely accepted narrative that Jewish-American songwriters had a complex relationship with Black music. While most scholars acknowledge the presence and influence of ragtime, blues, and jazz on Tin Pan Alley, few fully explore what the

²⁷ Jeffrey Melnick, “Tin Pan Alley and the Black-Jewish Nation,” in *American Popular Music: New Approaches to the Twentieth Century*, eds. Rachel Rubin and Jeffrey Melnick (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2001), 31.

influence of these musics looks like, or rather sounds like, in the hands of specific Tin Pan Alley composers. A handful of scholars writing about Irving Berlin (1888–1989) and George Gershwin (1898–1937), the two Tin Pan Alley composers best known for their association with African American musical styles, have sought to answer this question through specific examination of how jazz elements function in the work of these composers. These provide useful case-studies for Arlen scholarship. Jeffrey Magee addresses Berlin’s well-remarked association with African-American styles in “Everybody Step: Irving Berlin, Jazz, and Broadway in the 1920s.”²⁸ Therein he applies topic theory, a semiotic study of musical signs, to Irving Berlin’s “Everybody Step.”²⁹ In doing so he is able to pinpoint some of Berlin’s specific applications of jazz and “bring musical precision to a phenomenon that has been noted but not well defined.”³⁰ He goes on to note that this approach also “draws a neutral distinction between seemingly contradictory types of jazz in the 1920s,” including those delineated by race such as music arranged by white band leaders and that played by

²⁸ Jeffrey Magee, “Everybody Step’: Irving Berlin, Jazz and Broadway in the 1920s.” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 59 (2006): 697–732.

²⁹ Magee follows topic theory as described by Robert S. Hatten, *Interpreting Musical Gestures, Topics, and Tropes: Mozart, Beethoven, and Haydn* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2004). Important precursors to this work include Leonard Ratner: *Classical Music: Expression, Form, and Style* (New York: Schirmer, 1980) and Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991) among others. It is important to note that Magee is also not the first to apply topic theory outside of the realm of Classical music. See also Raymond Monelle, *The Sense of Music: Semiotic Essays* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Pres, 2000) and Michael Pisani, *Imagining Native America in Music* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2005).

³⁰ Magee, “Everybody Step,” 703.

African American groups.³¹ Magee's *Irving Berlin's American Musical Theater* (2012) likewise successfully explores Berlin's associations with ragtime and jazz.³²

C. André Barbera similarly explores George Gershwin's longstanding association with jazz. He argues that Gershwin's music "can be viewed not as isolated compositions resisting categorization but rather as early examples of a vaguely defined yet characteristic musical tradition of the United States."³³ In doing so, he suggests that jazz and African American musical idioms indeed form a core component of the musical style of at least a subset of Tin Pan Alley songs. He further claims that the best evidence for understanding Gershwin's musical style as more deeply situated within the context of jazz is the use of many of his songs by jazz musicians. He then goes on to analyze the elements of Gershwin's musical style that have made his melodies attractive to jazz musicians, specifically: rhythm, melody, harmony, and phrasing or structure.³⁴

While these scholars represent the exception to the generality with which the subject is often discussed, still others have dismissed Tin Pan Alley composers' use of jazz as superficial. The appearance of syncopated rhythms or blue notes, or other markers of a jazz style in their works, is often likened to adding pepper for flavor in the larger recipe for a musical work. The difficulty in describing the influence of

³¹ Ibid.

³² Jeffrey Magee, *Irving Berlin's American Musical Theater* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

³³ C. André Barbera, "George Gershwin and Jazz," in *The Gershwin Style* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 186.

³⁴ Ibid., 187–88.

African American musics on the sound of Tin Pan Alley seems in part to come from the conflicting sentiments of early authors writing on popular song.

Charles Hamm, one of the first scholars to make a name for himself writing about American popular music and who is still widely read today, passionately argues that American popular song is descendant from European traditions. In his seminal book *Yesterdays* (1979), he questions the nature and depth of the influence that African American musical idioms had on American popular song, which he says were at most used as “exotic seasoning.” He further claims that focusing on the African American elements of popular song directs attention away from the European roots of this music.

I question the role of “negro” music in the formation of the song styles of Stephen Foster and of the first generation of Tin Pan Alley writers. Similarly, I believe that only several quite superficial aspects of “negro” music were skimmed off by songwriters of the 1910s, ‘20s, ‘30s, to add a touch of exotic seasoning to their products—and that the emphasis on these details serves to detract attention from the more important fact that the chief stylistic features of the songs of the composers discussed in this chapter came from an earlier generation of American songwriters and from the music of Central and Eastern Europe. It does the history of music by black musicians no lasting good to insist on interpretations that are historically unsound, and it may also obscure the profound effect that black music had on American song in the mid-1950s and afterward.³⁵

Curiously, within the same text Hamm goes on to contradict himself, writing that the uniquely American quality of popular song derives from African American musical idioms:

Stephen Foster created the first truly native songs. . . . With his death something mysterious happened. The peculiarly native quality that he had brought to American popular song, a quality borrowed from Negro music, disappeared quite as suddenly as it had arrived. . . . Finally, when these

³⁵ Hamm, 358.

changes—rhythmic, harmonic, melodic—were consolidated, a unique kind of song emerged: American song. The songs of Berlin, Gershwin, Kern, and their contemporaries struck the ears of both Americans and Europeans as being distinctly and peculiarly American. One reason for this was the frequent use of the rhythmic patterns originating in ragtime, in the syncopated dance music played by black bands, and in the music played by early black jazz bands, particularly those popular in Harlem in the 1920s. Syncopated rhythms, displacement of beats, anticipations of rhythmic resolutions at the ends of phrases, and the use of triplet figures in duple time all gave American songs of the 1910s and '20s a piquant flavor unlike that of songs written in Europe.³⁶

Hamm's own internal struggles with the role of race in American popular music are emblematic of wider contentions about the role of race in American music, contentions that continue to play out today.

In his entry on Tin Pan Alley in the *New Grove Dictionary of Music*, Thomas Hishack problematically describes how Tin Pan Alley survived the *invasion* of various minority musics until the 1950s. "Rock and roll is often blamed for the death of the Tin Pan Alley kind of songs, yet the old-time music business had already survived the invasion of ragtime, blues, jazz, swing, country-western, and other new musical movements."³⁷ Each of these "invaders" is notably marked by race and socio-economic status as being outside of the mainstream. Banfield similarly describes the presence of "a number of minority genres, which at the turn of the century cohabitated before being forced by changing circumstances to seek separate lodgings,

³⁶ Hamm, 372–74.

³⁷ Hishack, s.v. "Tin Pan Alley," in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Oxford Music Online.

marry or perish.”³⁸ Banfield goes on to dismiss the influence of “a certain amount of jazz coding” on Tin Pan Alley song as a non-essential “titillation” and further group jazz within discussion of additional “exotic others” occasionally heard on the theatrical stage such as “pavane rhythms, non-tonal melodic arabesques, pentatonic collections, or whatever.”³⁹

Still others have sought to explain the appearance of African American musical styles through another mechanism of whitewashing: focusing on the perceived kinship between African American music and the Jewish traditions of cantillation and Yiddish song. In the words of Jeffrey Melnick, “because Jews had such enormous success with African American music, it became a popular sport to devise and elaborate upon a variety of explanations for this artistic kinship.”⁴⁰

Through comparison with Jewish traditions, the presence of pentatonic collections, blue notes, and rhythmic ambiguities, are yet again re-interpreted as white, albeit through the guise of Jewish identity. Particularly guilty of this trapping is Jack Gottlieb’s *Funny it Doesn’t Sound Jewish*, which draws oftentimes thin parallels between popular tunes and Jewish melodies.⁴¹ This is not to say, of course, that there are no crosscurrents between these two bodies of music as Magee explores in his

³⁸ Stephen Banfield, “American Popular Song and Popular Music on Stage and in Film,” in *The Cambridge History of American Music*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 324.

³⁹ Banfield, 314–15.

⁴⁰ Melnick, *Right to Sing the Blues*, 52.

⁴¹ Jack Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004).

article “Irving Berlin’s ‘Blue Skies’: Ethnic Affiliations and Musical Transformations” (2000).⁴²

This sometimes conscious and other times unconscious dismissal of jazz as not fundamental to the sound of Tin Pan Alley is often grounded in narratives of cultural appropriation. This has created an incomplete picture of Tin Pan Alley because it inherently positions jazz as an outside and othered source of musical inspiration rather than an intrinsic and vital resource fundamental to the creation of Tin Pan Alley’s sound and substance.⁴³

As Jeffrey Magee describes, heated tensions around the idea of cultural appropriation have often made it difficult to discuss the use of jazz in Tin Pan Alley. “The cultural problem that has plagued writings about this music [is] the notion of white appropriation, in particular Jewish-American appropriation, of Black music.”⁴⁴ Indeed, while discussions of cultural appropriation are always difficult, they are in this case doubly so when considered in the context of capitalism. Amiri Baraka has decried Jewish composers use of Black music, pointing out the unfortunate economic reality that white musicians “could be named Great Composers and live sumptuously,

⁴² Magee also explores the Jewish nature of Berlin’s work in “Irving Berlin’s ‘Blue Skies’: Ethnic Affiliations and Musical Transformations,” *The Musical Quarterly* 84, no. 4 (2000): 537–80.

⁴³ See Kwame Appiah’s discussion of outsider/insider relationships and the problems of understanding cultural appropriation in *The Lies That Bind: Rethinking Creed, Country, Color, Class, Culture* (New York, NY: Liverlight, 2018). On the difficulty of discussing cultural appropriation and music see also James O. Young, *Cultural Appropriation and the Arts* (West Sussex, U.K.: Blackwell 2010).

⁴⁴ Jeffrey Magee, “Everybody Step,” 703.

while their [Black] teachers always struggled for recognition, even survival!”⁴⁵

Jeffrey Melnick, by contrast, acknowledges that: “any chronicle of Jews making money out of African Americans . . . flirts uncomfortably with conventional anti-Semitic stereotypes.”⁴⁶

I suggest that it is important to acknowledge themes of cultural appropriation that flow through the history of Tin Pan Alley, while also acknowledging that individual, white composers had differently nuanced connections to Black musicians and musical styles. It is only through acknowledging and investigating specific stories that focus on individuals that we can gain both a better understanding of the music written for Tin Pan Alley during the Golden Age of Song and also fully engage with how appropriation was actively performed during this era.⁴⁷ In so doing, we are better able to understand the significant roles of race and ethnicity in shaping the musical sound and consciousness of the United States. An understanding of the nuanced relationships between white and Black musicians and musical styles can help to broaden the historical narrative of the Golden Age of Song, and further make it more inclusive of figures who have been ignored in previous studies of the period.

In addition to answering the question of how Jewish American songwriters used the sound of African American popular music we must also ask another

⁴⁵ Amiri Baraka, *Digging: The Afro-American Soul of American Classical Music* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009), 148.

⁴⁶ Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 41.

⁴⁷ Kwame Appiah, *The Ethics of Identity* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2005).

question: *why*? Three intertwined themes dominate the discourse on black-Jewish relations in Tin Pan Alley: appropriation, assimilation, and Americanization. These themes demonstrate that our understanding of the story of Tin Pan Alley is equally important to our understanding of *how* that story has been told, especially with regards to the role of race.

Several scholars have written about how, as immigrants in a new nation, first- and second-generation Jewish Americans had a desire to demonstrate a sense of belonging to the nation. Jazz provided a vehicle through which to sonically perform this sense of belonging. In *A Right To Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Song* (1999), Melnick argues that by adopting the sounds of jazz, a recognizably American music, Jewish-Americans naturalized their foreign backgrounds while also sacralizing themselves through comparison with the shared history of pain and suffering of African Americans. He further argues that the use of jazz effectively responded to fears of Jewish American foreignness, commonly expressed through the criticism of Jewish-American men as too effeminate. Musically, this insult was made sonic by locating the Jewish voice within a racist stereotype associated with sex and violence.⁴⁸

Other scholars have focused on how as makers and markers of culture in New York, Jewish Americans were in a powerful position to use music not only as a means to demonstrate a sense of belonging to the nation, but also to define that nation. Here, I am following Benedict Anderson's definition of the nation as an "imagined

⁴⁸ Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 11.

community.” As Anderson explains, a nation is more than physical boundaries or political governments, but a sense of belonging shared by people who will likely never meet and who nevertheless choose to be part of a community.⁴⁹

Perhaps unsurprisingly, such discussions of Black-Jewish relations in music as a mode of assimilation are often tied to staged works, where there is a physical as well as sonic outlet for the performance of one’s “Americanness.” Many Tin Pan Alley songs, and certainly the most successful, were further attached to either stage or screen. Andrea Most’s *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (2004) brings together several of the author’s individually published articles to examine how first and second generation Jewish Americans used the musical as a means to create a space for themselves in American culture by literally writing themselves into the story of America.⁵⁰ Most analyzes how Jewish songwriters, lyricists, and librettists explore the narrative of assimilation through the juxtaposition of cultural insiders and outsiders in staged productions.

In a similar exploration of staged works, *Black Face, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (1998), Michael Rogin positions blackface performance as a way to challenge the fixed nature of identity by showing how easily it can be undermined with the addition or subtraction of a mask. He also raises interesting observations about the social importance of popular entertainment in the

⁴⁹ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism*, Revised Edition (New York: Verso, 2006).

⁵⁰ Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004).

creation of American melting pot culture.⁵¹ While these broad, sweeping, narratives can be useful as a means for understanding Black-Jewish relationships in Tin Pan Alley song as a broad cultural phenomenon, they are reductive and problematic for many reasons, not the least of which is that not all works by Jewish-American composers conform to these ideologies.

Re-Thinking Tin Pan Alley: Harold Arlen as Case Study

Harold Arlen's music sounds a call for a critical re-examination of the relationship between Tin Pan Alley and African American musical styles. While earlier scholars have well-demonstrated how circumstance (immigration, the Great Migration, etc.) and style (Yiddish musical theater, operetta, etc.) came together in the creation of Tin Pan Alley song, many have underplayed the importance of the relationship between Jewish songwriters and Black musicians, and the critical role that jazz and blues played in the creation of this American music.

Methodology and Organization

In this dissertation, I will examine the impact of African American musics on American popular song through an analysis of Harold Arlen's musical output. Since there is no archive of Arlen's materials and much of his manuscript and other personal sources are currently inaccessible to scholars, I will primarily use published editions of his works. These editions, many of which were published during the composer's lifetime and bear strong similarities to recordings, including those where

⁵¹ Michael Rogin, *Black Face, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting Pot* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1996).

the composer plays, suggests that they closely represent the songs as Arlen composed them. While this is limiting in one sense, it also facilitates the work of this dissertation, which is primarily concerned with understanding the ways in which Arlen and his music have been understood. I will likewise analyze his music within the framework of current narratives about Tin Pan Alley composers and the Golden Age of Song in order to demonstrate the nuanced ways in which Arlen's music participates in such narratives.

Arlen's musical career will be examined from the three-fold perspectives of the 1) musical, 2) cultural, and 3) personal, and what each reveal about his music. Each of these sections will be mapped onto the three worlds of popular music within which Arlen circulated: 1) the Jazz club, 2) Broadway, and 3) Hollywood.

The first section of this dissertation lays the foundation for an exploration of Arlen's musical style through an in-depth consideration of his early years as the son of a Jewish cantor in Buffalo and the beginning of his career as a jazz musician, from the establishment of his own jazz band, the Buffalodians, to his tenure at the Cotton Club. I will examine both his relationship with traditional Jewish music and African American popular idioms as the two principle building blocks of his style. This exploration is framed through an analysis of Arlen's two most famous weather songs, "Stormy Weather" and "Ill Wind." In these analyses, I will apply the lenses of both traditional western music theory and jazz to a discussion of Arlen's musical style. In so doing, I demonstrate how multiple possible modes of musical analysis can work together to bring to light different elements of Arlen's musical style in a way that reflects how Arlen synthesizes different musical traditions in his own work.

The second section considers Arlen's career as a composer of musicals and revues for the Broadway stage and the ways in which his music participates in larger discourses about the connection between race, ethnicity, and the mid-century stage. In particular, I will situate his musicals *Bloomer Girl* (1944) and *St. Louis Woman* (1946) within narratives about a Jewish composer's performances of assimilation in staged musicals.

The third and final section explores Arlen's works for the silver screen. Here I consider his contributions to the film industry and demonstrate how he used the intimacy of film as a vehicle for personal expression. It is in film that we see both Arlen's most direct acceptance and rejection of his musical identity as a blues writer. It was for *Blues in the Night* that he collaborated with Johnny Mercer to write his only true blues. Curiously, it is also his "Over the Rainbow," written for the *Wizard of Oz*, which is one of his only songs to completely reject references to blues and jazz in an effort to create a dreamlike fantasy world distanced from reality. There we see the composer subverting his musical style to create what he believed audiences would hear as a "universal" musical language, one that seemingly conformed to the conventions of musical theater, especially those drawn from operetta and the world of classical music in order to deliberately distance itself from the modern time period and urban location of jazz.

The six chapters are connected by musical interludes that treat songs fundamental to an understanding of Arlen by touching upon his works in the realm of classical music and creating a dialogue between the classical and popular spheres. In doing so, we can better understand how Arlen viewed his place in American music

and the role of jazz and other African American musical styles therein. In these interludes, I will further show his engagement with African American composers, as well as classical music and the legacy of George Gershwin. The first interlude investigates Arlen's cycle of solo spirituals, *Americanegro Suite*, tracing the spiritual's complex evolution from a sacred choral genre born out of the melding of European and African American traditions to solo art songs predominantly written by Black composers. The second interlude takes as its subject Arlen's *Blues Opera*, based on the score for his failed musical *St. Louis Woman*, situating it within both Arlen's admiration for his hero, George Gershwin, and the search for an American operatic voice.

This broad approach is useful for a number of reasons. One key benefit is that this survey covers all three of Arlen's major collaborators in the medium for which they were most known: Ted Koehler (jazz club), E.Y. Harburg (musical), and Johnny Mercer (film). A second benefit is that it highlights the facility with which composers moved through various spheres of popular music during the Golden Age of Song. Finally, it continues to problematize our understanding of Tin Pan Alley as a singular narrative or a single musical style. More importantly, it calls into question our understanding of Black-Jewish relations in American popular music and race and music more generally.

Before beginning any study of Arlen as a composer, it is important to first understand Arlen as a performer, as his performance sensibilities informed his musical style. Arlen considered himself first and foremost a performer and an "accidental composer":

It was a very strange pattern, when I look back. You have to believe me. I never had *any* notion of being a composer. As a kid, I loved to sing. I wanted to be a singer. Never dreamed of songwriting. I have to be a fatalist and say somebody, something, moved me on the chessboard. I was taken by the neck and put here, and put there, and put there—and then things happened to me. Because look how it all worked out for me.⁵²

The overture to this dissertation returns us to the chess match, to examine “how it all worked out” and how a composer got his start.

⁵² Arlen quoted in Max Wilk, *They're Playing Our Song: Conversations with America's Classic Songwriters*, revised edition (Westport, CT: Easton Studio Press, 2008), 163.

ACT ONE

Harold Arlen's music is often recognized for its relationship to the musical languages of African American popular styles, namely blues and jazz. This section tells the story of a young, Jewish-American composer's fascination with the rhythms and harmonies of these styles, a story that is not unfamiliar to those who study American music and will recognize its common plot and shared tropes with the tales of countless other composers: Gershwin, Berlin, and Kern, just to name a few. In the telling of this story, however, I turn a greater eye toward adding nuance to the pages of that story. I unpack the history Arlen's relationship with blues and jazz, framing it within the spatial politics of Buffalo, New York, and his youth playing first in territory bands and later the jazz clubs of New York City. Through exploration of Arlen's published works and recordings from these eras, I then seek to understand the specific impact that these styles made on his compositional voice as a developing songwriter. In so doing, I do not seek to revisit the well-established fact that jazz made an impact on Arlen or indeed any of the Tin Pan Alley songwriters, but rather to probe *how* it happened, *why* it happened, and *what* this means for how we understand the music from this era and Arlen's compositions in particular.

OVERTURE

Boyhood and Buffalo Bands

The camera focuses in on a cab driver sitting behind his steering wheel and humming the song “Stormy Weather.” His passenger, unseen, begins to query the driver, asking if he knows who wrote the tune:

Cabbie: “Irving Berlin, is the answer.”

Arlen: “You’re wrong. I’ll give you two more guesses.”

Richard Rodgers and Cole Porter came next.

Arlen: “Wrong again . . . I wrote that song”

Cabbie: “Who are you?”

Arlen: “Harold Arlen”

Cabbie: Who?

This comedic scene, drawn from an opening sketch for NBC’s weekly show *Happy with Blues*, captures an important part of Harold Arlen’s reception.¹ Although he is one of the most prolific songwriters of the first half of the twentieth century, Arlen’s name is lesser known among the general public today than many of his contemporaries. In the course of nearly a decade of researching and writing about Arlen it has become second nature for me to attach an epitaph to his last name whenever discussing my work, in order to avoid the blank expressions of my counterparts: “I’m currently writing about Harold Arlen . . . the composer of the score for the *Wizard of Oz*.”

Arlen’s life has been the subject of only two biographies: Edward Jablonski’s

¹ Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Boston: North Eastern University Press, 1996), 315. The special on NBC aired September 24, 1961.

Harold Arlen: Happy With the Blues (1961), later updated with additional sources and published as *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (1986), and Walter Rimler's *The Man that Got Away: The Life and Songs of Harold Arlen* (2015).² The Jablonski biographies, written during the composer's lifetime and with his input, are rich and comprehensive, complete with many personal anecdotes from the perspective of the author as both friend and fan. These biographies, however, notably lack the scholarly apparatus of documentation. Rimler's biography by comparison, written more than twenty years after the composer's death, unearths many difficult-to-find sources, including newspaper articles and early recordings. These biographies are complemented by Max Wilk's, *They're Playing Our Song* (1973), a collection of personal interviews with selected lyricists and composers from the Golden Age.³ Arlen and his music also receive careful attention in the two volumes on American popular song that deal most critically with musical analysis of Tin Pan Alley song and style: Allen Forte's *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era 1924–1950* and Alec Wilder's seminal *American Popular Song*.⁴

² Jablonski, *Happy with the Blues* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1961; New York: DaCapo, 1986); Walter Rimler, *The Man That Got Away: The Life and Songs of Harold Arlen*, Music in American Life (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015).

³ Max Wilk, *They're Playing Our Song: From Jerome Kern to Stephen Sondheim—The Stories Behind the Words and Music of Two Generations* (Kingsport, Tennessee: Kingsport Press, 1973).

⁴ Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song*, edited with an introduction by James T. Maher (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972); Alan Forte, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era 1924–1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).

The last five years have seen a renewed interest in the composer. Walter Frisch leads musicologists in the analysis of Arlen's musical style. His article "Arlen's Tapeworms, the Tunes that Got Away" (2015) is a groundbreaking study in which Frisch dissects many of Arlen's compositions that break away from the standard 32-bar AABA form, as evidence of the influence of his background in jazz. Frisch's recently published monograph, *Arlen & Harburg's Over the Rainbow* (2017) as well as a chapter he contributed to *Representation in Western Music*, "Representing Arlen" (2013), likewise use recordings of Arlen's music as a springboard for analysis focusing on the "thorough" qualities of his music.⁵ This dissertation adds to the current flurry of scholarly work on Arlen by considering what his career reveals about Black-Jewish relations and the intersections of jazz and Tin Pan Alley in the early twentieth century, and focusing beyond the impact of jazz on his musical expression to cultural and personal expression as well.

In the section that follows, I describe the circumstances that shaped Arlen's compositional voice, beginning with his upbringing in Buffalo, New York. It will become clear that Arlen is both a product of his Jewish-American heritage as well as the soundscape of the racially diverse city. I will also trace how his experiences playing in jazz bands during his youth reflected both his time and place in society, as well as directed his future.

The Makings of a Songwriter

⁵ Walter Frisch, "Arlen's Tapeworms: The Tunes That Got Away," *The Musical Quarterly* 98/1-2 (March 2015); *Arlen & Harburg's Over the Rainbow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017); "Representing Arlen" in *Representation in Western Music*, edited by Joshua S. Walden (Cambridge University Press, 2013).

Harold Arlen's life is at once typical of songwriters working during the Golden Age of Tin Pan Alley and reflective of his particular experience in four significant ways: (1) he was exposed, early in life, to the music of the synagogue, (2) he was raised in the racially diverse city of Buffalo, New York, (3) his formative musical experiences came from playing in jazz ensembles, and (4) he had an active career as a performer. While none of these early experiences was entirely unique among Tin Pan Alley songwriters, the details of Arlen's life did differentiate him from his contemporaries, and they point to significant aspects of Arlen's musical language. Not only did he incorporate the sounds of his father's synagogue, he was also deeply indebted to the sounds of jazz he first heard and played as a young man in Buffalo.

Like so many others from the Tin Pan Alley roster, Arlen was the son of Eastern European Jewish immigrants. Born Joseph Arluck on February 14, 1905 in Buffalo, New York, Arlen was the eldest surviving son of Samuel and Celia (née Orlin) Arluck, Jewish immigrants from Vilna, then in Russian Poland.⁶ His birth was shrouded in grief as a twin brother, Harry, died. His parents named their surviving son Hyman, the "H" to honor his brother's memory, and they often called him Chaim, which is Hebrew for "life." Seven years later, on November 11, 1912, the Arluks completed their family as they welcomed a second son named Nathan but whom they called Julius, and nicknamed Udie. Such name changes were not uncommon among Eastern European Jews, especially those who had lost young children, as name changes were thought to fool evil and thwart its attempts to bring harm to the family.

⁶ The following biographical summary is based primarily on information drawn from Jablonski, *Rhythym, Rainbows, and Blues* (1996).

Years later, when young Hyman Arluck would set forth to make his mark as a composer, he would change his name once more to Harold Arlen, taking the first syllable of Arluck and joining it together with the last syllable of his mother's maiden name, Orlin, to fashion a new identity.

His father, Samuel Arluck, was a cantor. Other composers from Arlen's generation had connections to music in the synagogue, but none so deep as Arlen.⁷ It was at the synagogue on Pine Street where his father worked that a young Harold began his musical education singing in the choir at the age of seven. Arlen, more so than other composers of his generation, later acknowledged the strong influence his Jewish upbringing had on his musical style: "No, I never dreamed of aping my father, but I know damned well now that his glorious improvisations must have had some effect on me and my style."⁸

Many of Arlen's closest friends and colleagues believed that the pathos of the composer's music was the result of his Jewish heritage. In one description of the dual joyous-melancholy quality of Arlen's music, lyricist Yip Harburg explicitly described the sound: "it is almost complete contradiction, the whole suffering of the Hebrew children as they were being chased from one country to another, as well as the great humor of Shalom Aleichem."⁹ Harburg went on to explain "Harold is a very, very

⁷ While Irving Berlin's father, Moses, had also been a cantor in Russia he was unable to find employment as a cantor in the United States, instead taking work as a butcher and offering Yiddish lessons before passing away in the composer's youth.

⁸ Arlen quoted in Max Wilk, *They're Playing Our Song*, 166.

⁹ *Ibid.*

melancholy person. Inside, deeply religious. But he's very superstitious. When he gets to the piano, it's a feeling of witchcraft. He'll spit three times and almost talk to the chords, talk to God. He does it humorously, but behind the humor are all sorts of superstitions and beliefs."¹⁰ While it is difficult to imagine the immaculately put together and well-dressed Arlen spewing spit on his piano, the idea that his religious background had a significant impact on his music holds water given his early experiences with his cantor father.

Race and Place: An Immigrant Family Arrives

Arlen was raised in Buffalo, New York. As a northwestern city more than six hours from bustling New York City, Buffalo is not often thought of as a center of musical vitality, but this could not be further from the truth. Indeed, in 1901 Buffalo was selected to host the Pan American Exhibition, one of several important world fairs in which the cultures and technologies of the world were put on display. The Temple of Music at the exhibition was the site of exciting performances of music from around the globe, as well as some of the best contemporary performers of the age, including John Philip Sousa.¹¹

The diversity of the Pan American Exhibition was reflected in the city of Buffalo itself. As a major port city and center of industry, Buffalo attracted many new

¹⁰ Harburg quoted in Wilk, 167.

¹¹ University of Buffalo Digital Collections, Pan-American Exhibition of 1901 Collection, Revisiting the Pan-American Collection of 1901 website, <https://digital.lib.buffalo.edu/collection/LIB-005/>.

settlers in the country. By 1855 fully sixty percent of the city's population was comprised of immigrants, mostly from Germany. This initial wave of immigration was soon followed by groups from other European areas beginning in the 1870s. The fastest growing community was the Polish community to which Arlen's parents belonged. The tight-knit nature of this community, which by the 1880s had established their own centers of worship, community organizations, and even a Polish American newspaper, *Polak w Americe*, was surely a strong draw for the cantor's family.¹²

The city was also home to a small but well-established community of African Americans. According to Mark Goldman, "Blacks had been living on the East side for years, longer than any ethnic group in the city except Native Americans."¹³ Documentary evidence suggests African Americans had lived in the city as early as the end of the eighteenth century. As a center of free-thinking and a final stop on the Underground Railroad before arriving in Canada, Buffalo's African American population continued to grow throughout the nineteenth century. The city was home to many of the first African Americans to live in freedom.¹⁴

Arlen grew up in a racially diverse neighborhood where Jewish American immigrants and African Americans together formed the core of the community. As

¹² Lillian Serece Williams, *Strangers in the Land of Paradise: The Creation of an African American Community in Buffalo, New York: 1900–1940* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 10.

¹³ Mark Goldman, *City on the Lake: The Challenge of Change in Buffalo, New York* (New York: Prometheus Books, 1990), 15.

¹⁴ Williams, 11.

Lillian Serece Williams notes in her history of the city, Buffalo was not beholden to systemic segregation as was seen in other parts of the nation.¹⁵ While most of the other famous names from Tin Pan Alley grew up in cosmopolitan New York City, they lived in predominantly Jewish neighborhoods. Arlen, however, was raised in a more diverse local climate.

The Arlen family resided at 389 Clinton Street before settling in a modest duplex at 65 Pratt Street. The working middle-class neighborhood in east Buffalo was populated mostly by Jewish and African Americans. The relationship between Jewish Americans and their African American neighbors was largely convivial. According to Goldman:

For those who lived in the neighborhood . . . blacks were neither strange nor exotic. East Side Jews . . . mingled freely with their African American neighbors. On small, tree-lined streets packed with wooden one-two—, and three-family homes, they lived together, blacks in one flat Jews in another. Jewish-owned stores on Jefferson Avenue and William Street catered to a mixed clientele of blacks and Jews, and the Jewish Community Center and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters stood catty-corner from each other. Though now separated by miles of concrete highway and immense gaps of material comfort, many local blacks and Jews in their sixties and seventies talk fondly of a time when they lived together on the old East Side.¹⁶

The Arlens themselves rented the upper half of their duplex to an African American family, Anderson and Minnie Arthur and their three children. Harold and his brother Julius were frequent visitors to the Arthur home and played regularly with their children.¹⁷ Thus some of Arlen's closest childhood relationships and formative

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Goldman, 15–16.

¹⁷ Rimler, 6.

experiences took place within a racially diverse community, a fact that would have an undeniable influence on his future career. George K. Arthur, the Arthurs' grandson, later claimed that it was Arlen's friendship with his family that first stirred the composer's fascination with jazz and "made Arlen feel at home with African Americans and their music."¹⁸

Indeed, the mix of Jewish and African American culture in the immigrant communities of Buffalo had a profound impact on the city's musical landscape. In an article titled "Local Color, A Visit to Buffalo's Black Belt," author B. J. Ruby described the seemingly exotic sounds of the growing African American community:

If you have eyes in your head, you cannot but find it interesting. You may find much that is bestial there. You will perhaps get a glimpse of rough, savage beauty, you may hear jangling, drunken, ragtime, you may hear the soft chant of Negro hymns. I do not know what you will see or hear if you visit the negro colony, but you will always find life there—primitive, uncivilized, passionate life that is always interesting. Begin your exploration on the corner of Clinton and Washington Street: If the sky is not moonlight, the darkness of the street pierced only by an occasional lance of light from a corner arc-light, will seem like the yawning mouth of a cavern. I suggest this procedure, because it will give you the feeling of reckless intrepidity as you stride boldly into it.¹⁹

There, on the East side of Buffalo, where Arlen was born and raised, the rhythms of ragtime intermingled with the sounds of the synagogue and Yiddish theater and transformed the city into the perfect climate for an emerging young Jewish-American songwriter.

Recognizing their son's musical talent, the rising middle-class family purchased a piano and enrolled Harold in private lessons with a local music teacher,

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ B. J. Ruby, as quoted in Goldman, 16.

Miss Faller, and later Arnold Cornelissen, one of the city's best-known musicians. Although his family hoped that a classical musical education would prepare their son for a stable career as a teacher, a career that would allow him the flexibility to lead an Orthodox life and observe the Jewish holy days, Arlen demonstrated a passion for popular music. In an interview with Max Wilk, Arlen reflected on his musical upbringing: "My father gave me piano lessons so I would be a teacher and not have to work on *shabbas*. Mine was a marvelous family—all kinds of love. But that was the first reason I went to the piano. I found other reasons soon enough, needless to say!"²⁰ Like most young piano students, Arlen did not care to practice the tedious exercises and classical compositions assigned by his teachers. He was much more interested in the music other children of his age were listening to, which in the early teens in the Jewish neighborhoods of Buffalo, was jazz:

It seems to me that the 'bug' is there early in most authors, composers, or lyricists. But I didn't have that bug at all. I didn't study other composers, I didn't worry about lyrics, not me. I was interested in the Memphis Five, a jazz band, or Benny Goodman. . . . I started pretty late in life developing tastes, for paintings, whether they're good or bad, or a taste for Kern and Gershwin. I didn't really study other composers and their work until I got to the point where I had to write eight or fifteen songs for a show. Then I asked myself 'What do they do? *Then* I began to study them, to realize their ideas and their styles, to appreciate what they were doing . . . mostly after I'd gotten to know them personally. But my beginnings were never centered on those guys, only jazz.²¹

²⁰ Wilk, 150.

²¹ Arlen quoted in *Ibid.*, 165.

Jazz in the Jukebox: The Teenage Performer-Composer

Whatever the flint that sparked the fire, Arlen developed a healthy obsession with jazz. Jablonski describes how, in 1917, a young Arlen came across a Tin Pan Alley rag titled “Indianola,” published under the pseudonyms S. R. Henry and D. Onivas (Domenico Savino, an Italian born composer who was conservatory trained and known for concert pieces). He quickly began to seek out other such piano novelties, and soon the young Arlen was collecting blues and jazz recordings, including recordings by his favorite group, the Original Memphis Five. As a teenager, Arlen made his first trip to New York to see the Original Memphis Five play at a Brooklyn Dance Hall, “and when they came off the stand,” he later recalled, “I stood there with as much awe as if the President of the United States had just finished speaking.”²² He eagerly sought out recordings of great pianists, and his fascination extended to recordings of Bessie Smith accompanied by musical giants Clarence Williams, Fletcher Henderson, and James P. Johnson, as well as recordings of Arthur Schutt and Frank Signorelli, classically trained pianists known for their particular brand of showmanship. It is worth noting that many of Arlen’s early jazz heroes were white practitioners of the genre, a fact reflective of racial bias and prejudice of the time, as white jazz groups were among the first to achieve successful recording contracts.

Against his family’s wishes, Arlen began to harbor a desire for a life in popular music. His first break came in high school, when along with his friend Hymie Sandler, Arlen began performing for amateur nights as a comedian and the pair would

²² Wilk, 165.

compete for prize money. Arlen also began gigging around Buffalo, working frequently as a pianist at the Gayety Theater burlesque house on Pearl Street and local movie theaters where he played for silent films. Arlen's conservative parents quickly grew concerned over their son's musical foray into the seedy underworld of the popular music circuit, and with good reason. He began cutting class and his schoolwork suffered. At the age of sixteen, despite the protestations of his family, he announced that he was dropping out of Hutchinson High School in order to pursue a musical career.

Arlen's defection from a humdrum life of pencils and paper, and his entrance into the world of professional music coincided with the birth of the Jazz Age. While the genre may have had its origins in New Orleans, by the 1920s northern cities like Chicago and New York had thriving jazz scenes. Buffalo was no exception. The Arlen's Buffalo home was located in a part of the city known as the "Tenderloin District," a red-light area which became the center of the African American jazz scene and later the "jazz triangle" formed by the geometrical location of the city's many fine clubs.²³ smack dab in the middle of it all, as early as 1919 Arlen had founded his own jazz band, The Snappy Trio, along with Hymie Sandler (drummer) and Teddy Meyer (violin).²⁴ A true neighborhood band, the young musicians

²³ Rick Falkowski, *History of Buffalo Music and Entertainment: A Nostalgic Journey into Buffalo New York's Musical Heritage* (Williamsville, NY: Rick Falkowski, 2017), 85.

²⁴ Information about Arlen's early bands drawn from Jablonski, *Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*.

rehearsed in the Arlucks' home, taking the living room as a rehearsal space. As the group became established, Arlen, not only pianist, singer, and arranger, but the band's booking agent, joined the Buffalo Musician's Union Local 43.²⁵ One of their first regular gigs was a six-week stint at a tavern called the Maple Leaf Café, where they earned \$35 a week plus tips. The creation of the Volstead Act, prohibiting the manufacturing and sale of alcoholic beverages, and the beginning of Prohibition, however, soon led to a restructuring of the popular music scene.

Located near the U.S.-Canada border, Buffalo was in an opportune position for the importation of illegal liquor during Prohibition. The opening of the Peace Bridge between Buffalo and Canada in 1927 helped breathe new vitality into the popular music in Buffalo, centered in vaudeville houses. Fortunately for the Snappy Trio, Prohibition increased their wages and the group earned \$60 a week playing as many as four shows a day, seven days a week at vaudeville houses, honing their chops as young musicians. Certainly, they learned creativity and how to improvise, both figuratively and literally. When Grange Hall in nearby Gowanda hired the group for an afternoon dance, provided they could bring a saxophonist, Arlen divined to attach a kazoo to the mouthpiece of a clarinet (which he also could not play, but figured out well enough to fake) to create the buzzing timbre of the instrument, pleasing his patrons.

²⁵ Despite racial integration in other aspects of life in Buffalo, the musicians' union was an all-white union; a separate union, Buffalo Local 533, was created for African American musicians. This segregation was commonplace in musicians' unions. On the history of the union and the city's Colored Musicians Club, which also had its home on the Clinton Street of Arlen's youth, see Rachel Bernstein, "Colored Musicians Club 1918–Present," <http://www.math.buffalo.edu/~sww/0history/hwny-cmchistory.html>.

The Snappy Trio quickly expanded into a quartet known as the Se-Mor Jazz Band, with Harold Bernstein on saxophone. When Sandler left the group, Hyman Cheiffetz, a budding lyricist, joined. Cheiffetz would co-author what would become Arlen's first composition, "My Gal, My Pal (Won't You Come Back to Me)," followed by "I Never Knew What Love Could Do." The self-published "My Gal, My Pal," was released in spring 1924 under the name Harold Arluck. Arlen promoted the song at the Lafayette Theater, where he appeared with the Se-Mor Jazz Band, by handing out miniature piano rolls printed with the lyrics. When this proved unsuccessful, the manager of the Lafayette Theater, a sympathetic man, tried a new method of advertisement: Arlen's friend Stanley Meyers played the melody on saxophone while the words were projected on a screen and the audience was invited to sing along. The sheet music was then sold in the lobby. Still, the song did not sell any copies and was discouraging to Arlen as a budding songwriter.

Arlen may have found his first songwriting attempts disappointing, but he quickly founded a six-piece group, The Southbound Shufflers. This new ensemble, included Warner Bullock, Ray Weiler, Stanley Meyers (saxophone), Harold Arlen (piano and vocalist, leader/arranger), Joe Rosen, and Ralph LaGuardia.²⁶ In the spring of 1923, the Southbound Shufflers worked on the *Canadia*, a lake boat that cleverly evaded Prohibition era restrictions on drinking by carrying passengers from Buffalo to nearby Crystal Beach in Ontario. The band played in the New Orleans style of the

²⁶ "The Old Photo Album," *The Sun Courier Express* (April 18, 1923). "Southbound Shufflers On Crystal Beach Steamer 'Americana,'" Jablonski Papers, Box 4, Folder 3, Music Division, Library of Congress.

Original Memphis Five Jass Band: accessible arrangements of popular songs for dancing, and blues and jazz-like novelty songs that facilitated solos and improvisations. Discouraged by his failed songwriting attempts and the many headaches brought on by the demands of leading the ensemble, Arlen decided to disband the Southbound Shufflers in 1925. But the composer's spirit was not truly broken.

Arlen soon went on to join the Yankee Six, a more prestigious group that played for elegant events—proms, college dances, country club dinners, weddings—and upscale venues, such as the Greyer's Restaurant and Ballroom, located in the center of Buffalo's theater district. It was there that Arlen would meet a young dancer, Ray Bolger, who would become his close friend and later play the part of the scarecrow in the film *The Wizard of Oz*.

Comprised of four owner-founders and two employees, the band was a tight professional outfit, and it continued to grow, first to the Yankee Ten and later an eleven-member ensemble known as the Buffalodians. The Buffalodians were one of few bands in the area to feature two pianists (Arlen and Dick George). Their full roster included: Henry Krompart (trumpet), Norman Booth (trombone), Jules Pillor, Bill Wullen, Ivan Beaty (saxes), Jack McLaughlin (violin), Charles Panico (guitar), Dick George (piano), Harold Raub (bass), Harold Tapson (drum), and Harold Arlen (piano and voice).²⁷

²⁷ See Woody Backensto, "Who Were the Buffalodians," *The Record Changer* 13/1 (Jan. 1954) and Backensto, "Recalling Music of the Past," *The Tri-State Skylark Strutter* 19/9 (May 2009).

The Buffalodians proved to be a lucrative outfit for Arlen; Jablonski notes that he often earned as much as \$100 a week. But the benefits would prove to be more than financial; it was with the Buffalodians that Arlen began to develop his voice as a composer, and we can learn a great deal about his early style from the few surviving recordings of the group.

The “Distinctive Arlen Touch”

Each of the surviving recordings from the Buffalodians exemplifies the New Orleans and Chicago jazz style popular during Arlen’s youth. Immediately recognizable is how the instrumentation hearkens back to musical predecessors, such as the five-piece bands exemplified by the Original Memphis Five or the Original Dixieland Jass Band. The Buffalodians instrumentation includes a typical frontline featuring trumpet, trombone, and clarinet, and a robust rhythm section including drums and piano, and an assortment of strings including violin, banjo, mandolin, guitar, and bass.

The musical texture of these early Buffalodians recordings likewise points to New Orleans. In typical fashion, the band plays in a tight ensemble style; no one shines above the rest. Instead, the frontline features a collective improvisation, resulting in a dense, polyphonic texture, in which each instrument occupies its own rhythmic, melodic, and timbral space. Only during breaks or stop time when soloists are featured is there a momentary reprieve from this density of sound

In his article, “Arlen’s Tapeworms: The Tunes That Got Away,” Walter Frisch suggests that the commonplace use of the “break” or “stop time” in New Orleans jazz, a one- or two-bar passage in which a soloist improvises before the

beginning of the next phrase, can be heard in Arlen's music and can explain his well-known formal extensions and deviations, though as we will see in later chapters, I believe other elements of jazz learned in New York City come equally if not more to bear on the development of this stylistic element.²⁸ Further, I trace the impact of jazz on Arlen's style beyond its influence on form to other aspects of his musical style and approach to composition.

Such breaks could either extend the form from within or without.

Improvisations were just as frequently incorporated as part of the traditional four- or eight-bar phrase structure as they were tacked on as appendages. Frisch observes that both kinds of breaks can be heard in early Arlen recordings, for example, his arrangement of Irving Berlin's "How Many Times" for the Buffalodians (1926) on which Arlen serves as both pianist and vocal soloist.²⁹

As a Tin Pan Alley song, the formal pattern of "How Many Times" follows a modified 16-bar AABA song format (AABC/AA'CA) in which the inclusion of a C section functions as a kind of brief pre-chorus, building tension and leading to the return of the expected A. Arlen adapts the tune for a dance band by omitting the verse and first presenting the tune instrumentally, before giving it to the vocalist, and concluding with an instrumental section featuring soloistic variation in which the melody trades between the full ensemble, trombone, trumpet, and violin soloists. The

²⁸ Walter Frisch, "Arlen's Tapeworms," 11.

²⁹ The Buffalodians, "How Many Times," on *Harold Arlen Swings Sweet and Hot*, Living Era (UK: Sanctuary Records Group, 2005), CD AJA 5603. Recording can also be accessed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=p1N66itSyMY>.

recording begins with a four-measure introduction followed by two repetitions of the instrumental chorus, and a sixteen-bar interlude before the vocalist's entrance.

As Frisch notes, there are three significant breaks in the final instrumental chorus following the vocalist's entrance (see table 1).³⁰ The most interesting and noteworthy of these breaks, featuring the violin occurs immediately in the concluding A section of the vocal section. This has the effect of extending the vocalist's final A section from the standard four bars we expect to the six bars. Two other breaks during the instrumental reprise of the chorus, featuring solo clarinet and solo trumpet respectively, stay within the confines of the form and do not create extensions. There is an interpolation of new material (closely based on what came before), before the final instrumental repetition of the chorus and concluding coda.

³⁰ Frisch, "Arlen's Tapeworms," 11.

Formal Section	Text
A	“How many times have you said I love you . . .”
A	“How many times have you said, I’ll be true . . .”
B	“How many wonderful sweeties have you told that to?”
C	“How many times has a certain feeling troubled you so that you hit the ceiling”
A	“How many hands have you held all alone”
A’	“How many lips have you pressed to your own”
C	“I’d hate to think that you’d kissed to many, but I’d feel worse if you hadn’t kissed any”
A	“Please tell me how many times”

Table 1: Formal Pattern “How Many Times”³¹

Surely, Arlen’s deviations from formal structure may also have been tied to the desire to recreate this timbral freshness or from the influence of the march/ragtime form (AABBCCDD) typical of Dixieland jazz. This repetitive structure naturally gives rise to minute variations through repetition. Returning to his recording of “How Many Times,” each strain of the chorus pattern has small variations, which likewise pull the ear toward possibilities for extensions. While in part this phrase structure owes much to Irving Berlin, the tune’s original creator, Berlin himself was a fan of ragtime and

³¹ Formal analysis of Irving Berlin’s “How Many Times” as discussed in Frisch, “Arlen’s Tapeworms.”

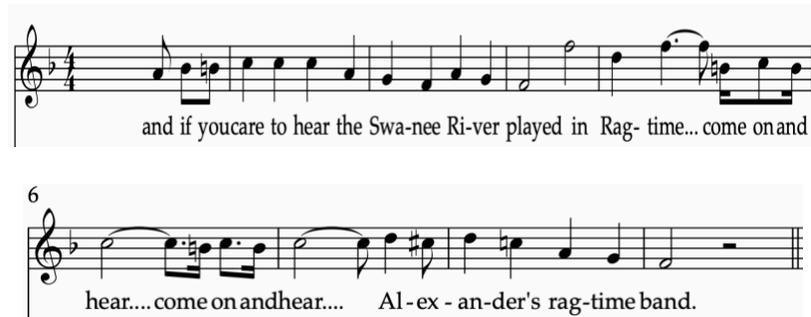
well-noted for its influence on his work. During this same period, Arlen was also cultivating an interest in rag as expressed in his unpublished solo piano work “Rhythmic Moments” (1928).

None of Arlen’s compositions before his “Stormy Weather” of 1933, written nearly a decade after the publication of his first work, fall within the category of “tapeworms,” those songs that fall outside of the standard thirty-two bars. This suggests that while Arlen’s early days playing in territory bands may have contributed to his general aesthetic, it may not alone be the direct link responsible for his extensions of form.

To my ear, there is more interest to be found in Arlen’s use of the voice in these recordings. In most tunes, Arlen’s vocals are used midway through the song to add variety. As many scholars have remarked, Arlen often treats the voice as an instrument, and is well-known for his trademark octave leaps, such as those found in “Stormy Weather.” These leaps explore the different ranges of a singer’s voice in a way that makes timbre very important to the overall soundscape of an Arlen composition, much in the way that timbral variation, highlighting the voices of different instruments through solos, was intrinsic to the distinctive New Orleans sound.

It is worth mentioning that these vocal leaps are also commonplace in vocal rags from the early part of the twentieth century, which had become popular by the time of Arlen’s youth and would have been known to him. That Arlen was fascinated by ragtime generally is reflected in his early experiment in the genre, “Rhythmic Moments” (1928) for solo piano. His penchant for wide leaps is not unlike those of

piano ragtime melodies. Such octave leaps in vocal ragtime songs were not necessarily commonplace though they do appear in some selections as in the well-known octave leap in Berlin’s “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” though this tune is based on Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks at Home” which might likewise explain the vocal leap (see example 1).



Example 1: Irving Berlin, “Alexander’s Ragtime Band,” 1911.

Indeed, Arlen’s style of singing as featured in the Buffalodians’ recordings exemplifies popular vocal techniques of the age, in particular that of the crooners.³² Consider how Arlen’s voice shifts into a deeper chest voice for the end of each melodic line in the A sections, or the warmth and schmaltz he evokes sliding through notes on the line “How many lips have you meshed to your own.” Music critic Will Friedwald remarked that his voice could go both very high like “one of the stratospheric tenors of the era” and also be “warm and deep,” “sizzling and lusty.” He went on to state that Arlen was “ahead of the curve as an early example of a white

³² Howard Goldstein, s.v. “Crooning,” *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Oxford Music Online.

vocalist influenced by black jazz styles.”³³ Bing Crosby himself wrote in a 1947 letter, “I’ve always considered him one of the best stylists I ever heard.”³⁴

The impact of popular vocal styles on Arlen is often overlooked as an influence on his overall compositional style and approach to writing for the voice. Perhaps this is because popular vocal styles are not often the subject of scholarly research.³⁵ Yet many of the melodic gestures in Arlen’s songs seem intimately tied to popular vocal practices.

In Arlen’s performance style, one hears not only the influence of the crooner however, but also the hint of something else. As Jablonski points out:

The mid-Twenties saw the advent of the crooners, and Arlen’s singing style fitted into that category, but with a difference: some of the musical ideas he had learned in his father’s choir, and some he had picked up from his father’s singing; there was even some hint of the singing of the blues artists; the rest was personal invention.³⁶

Arlen frequently cited the influence of his Jewish heritage and his father’s singing on his musical style.³⁷ Ethnomusicologist Mark Slobin notices that the two styles

³³ Rimler, 11.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ For more on the topic of popular vocal performance techniques, see H. Pleasants, *The Great American Popular Singers* (New York, 1974); W. Friedwald, *Jazz Singing: America’s Great Voices from Bessie Smith to Bebop and Beyond* (New York, 1990); and Allison McCracken, *Real Men Don’t Sing: Crooning in American Culture* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

³⁶ Jablonski, *Happy with the Blues*, 40–41.

³⁷ Jack Gottlieb draws specific comparisons between Arlen tunes and specific Yiddish melodies. The connections between such tunes, however, seem speculative at best. See Jack Gottlieb, *Funny, It Doesn’t Sound Jewish: How Yiddish Songs and Synagogue Melodies Influenced Tin Pan Alley, Broadway, and Hollywood* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2004), 214–216.

Jablonski observes in Arlen's singing indeed have many connections, in particular what he calls the emotional, "tear in the eye" quality that contributed to the popularity of Jewish-American performers like Al Jolson and songwriters like Irving Berlin."³⁸

Describing his father's vocal style as a cantor, Arlen called Samuel Arluck the "greatest theme-and variations man I've ever known," an interesting turn of phrase given Arlen's own compositional tendencies.³⁹ In this quote, Arlen makes reference to the Jewish tradition in which a cantor improvises chanting of texts within Jewish worship, the purpose of which is to not only share the texts with the community, but to bring life to the words. As Slobin observes, this performative process creates a dialogue between the past and present of Jewish faith, juxtaposing two components: one that is "fixed, timeless, and spaceless," and one that is "improvisatory, current, and locatable."⁴⁰ Such dialogue between past and present, sacred and secular, and between Arlen's Jewish upbringing and his youthful immersion in American jazz can be heard expressed in his own vocal improvisations in these early recordings.

In Arlen's recordings the influence of cantorial vocal techniques can most clearly be heard in the ornamentations. For example, returning to his recording of "How Many Times" (1926), consider his frequently added vocal turns such as can be heard on "feeling" (1:06), "ceiling" (1:08), "pressed" (1:15), and "any" (1:20) or the

³⁸ Mark Slobin, *Fiddler on the Move: Exploring the Klezmer World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 99.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 37

⁴⁰ Mark Slobin, *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998; reprinted 2002), 9.

wailing scoop he applies to “how” (1:13).⁴¹ These figures often include turns or appoggiaturas that make use of chromatic motion. Mark Klingman details some such ornaments in his *Maqām and Liturgy: Ritual Music, Aesthetics of Syrian Jews in Brooklyn* (2009), likewise comparing them to the ornaments of Arabic music traditions.⁴²

The ornaments in cantorial traditions are as motivic in nature, often featuring two or three note gestures that one trained in the tradition would recognize and use appropriately based on musical and worship contexts. Minute motivic fragments often form a key feature of Arlen’s writing as we shall observe in Chapter 2. In addition to their influence on his melodic style, motivic ornaments are sometimes written out in both piano and vocal parts in Arlen’s published sheet music.

The influence of Arlen’s background as a cantor’s son can likewise be heard in other works from the 1920s, including his instrumental “Minor Gaff: A Blues Fantasy” (1927).⁴³ Therein the wailing minor melody and the ornamentation sound as though they belong to a different world altogether, that of Klezmer.⁴⁴ Further sonic

⁴¹ The Buffalodians, “How Many Times,” on *Harold Arlen Swings Sweet and Hot*.

⁴² Mark Klingman, *Maqām and Liturgy: Ritual Music, Aesthetics of Syrian Jews in Brooklyn* (Detroit, MI: Wayne University Press, 2009).

⁴³ Harold Arluck, “Minor Gaff: A Blues fantasy,” *Sweet Georgia Brown*, Charley Straight and His Rendezvous Orchestra, Birmingham Black Bottom Original Recordings 1926–1927) (Crates Digger Music Group), 2012. This recording can be accessed: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ffJoXHAWw_M.

⁴⁴ Slobin describes ornamentation as a key component to identifying Klezmer music. He further dismisses such traits as modality as useful signifiers of Jewish music as they are found across musical folk and religious cultures. See Slobin, *Fiddler on the Move*, 99.

comparison is elicited through the instrumentation, featuring prominent use of the clarinet, a frequent soloist in the Klezmer band. Indeed, a “fantasy” is a genre or label attached to some Klezmer works

Still, many African American jazz composers wrote similar minor blues works during this era. Ellington’s minor blues and in particular his “Black and Tan Fantasy,” “The Mooche,” and “East St. Louis Toodle-oo,” all dating from the late 1920s could likewise have been important influences on Arlen’s composition. Similarly, Fletcher Henderson’s “Variety Stomp” could have served as inspiration, and is particularly noteworthy given the relationship between Arlen and Henderson.

Arlen’s arrangements and his performances demonstrate the cultural mixing of the composer’s many musical heritages. Thus, through looking at some of Arlen’s earliest recorded works, we can get a sense of how his style may have been influenced by his early years spent both singing in his father’s synagogue, and playing in territory bands who learned the new and exciting sounds of African American popular musics—ragtime, blues, and jazz.

Arlen’s band’s popularity quickly extended beyond that of a “territory band,” and through their booking agent they often secured gigs in major cities on the East Coast. In 1924 they set out for Cleveland and then traveled east to Pittsburgh, finally landing in New York City in the spring of 1925. Arlen had arrived and the first chapter of his story as a composer began to unfold. While this overture laid the foundations of Arlen’s first experiences with jazz, the first chapter will explore the development of Arlen’s jazz sensibilities through his residency in New York City’s jazz clubs, including the notorious Cotton Club.

CHAPTER 1

Searching for a Sound That Swings: The Early Years at the Cotton Club

In the spring of 1925, Arlen and the Buffalodians arrived in New York City. In this chapter, I trace Arlen's path from his arrival in New York through his tenure at the Cotton Club, which ended in 1934. In doing so, I demonstrate how during this decade Arlen developed an intimate relationship to jazz that would impact his future musical style as he began to blur the lines between performer and composer. In his earliest works for the club, explored here, we can see a composer searching for a meaningful way to incorporate the new sounds of the jazz club into his own musical vocabulary.

From Bands to Ballrooms

The flame with which the Buffalodians burst onto the New York scene in 1925 fizzled almost as quickly as it had begun. After playing a two-week stint at the Palace in Times Square (one of the few remaining vaudeville theaters, which were quickly being replaced by motion pictures), followed by another at Gallagher's Monte Carlo Restaurant on 51st and Broadway, Arlen's tenure with the Buffalodians came to an abrupt and dramatic end in the summer of 1926 after a falling out between band members.¹

Happily, during his brief few months in New York with the Buffalodians, Arlen had met and befriended important band leaders of the age. He was introduced to Fletcher Henderson at the Roseland Ballroom. Henderson was impressed with the

¹ Biographical information drawn primarily from Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1996).

young Arlen's arrangements and asked him to arrange some tunes for his band, including "Dynamite," which Henderson's Dixie Stompers recorded in 1926. Arlen would also later write "Deep Henderson" for the Buffalodians as a tribute to his hero later that year.

Around the same time, another dance band leader, Arnold Johnson, heard Arlen and the Buffalodians play at the Monte Carlo. Following the band's breakup, Arlen went to work for Johnson who was leading his group on a radio show called "The Majestic Hour," which was broadcast weekly from Park Central Hotel on Seventh Avenue and 51st Street. The radio hour was sponsored by manufacturers of Majestic Radio.

Harold Arlen was working with the Arnold Johnson Orchestra when the group was hired to appear on Broadway for a six-month run of a revue titled *The Great White Scandals* for which Arlen arranged several tunes. During intermission one night, he sang the reprise for one of the hit songs from the show, "I'm on the Crest of a Wave." The composer Vincent Youmans, who was in attendance, heard him and hired him to sing in a new musical he was writing, *The Great Day*. Fletcher Henderson, who was doing arrangements for Youman's show, also asked Arlen to help with the arrangements for the pit orchestra. One day during summer rehearsals, Henderson fell ill, and Arlen agreed to play for the performers. During the brief pauses between numbers, he began to toy with a piano vamp that would soon turn into Arlen's first successful hit: "Get Happy."

On July 31, 1929 Arlen and lyricist Ted Koehler signed a yearlong contract with the George and Arthur Piantadosi firm. With the simple stroke of a pen, Arlen

became a composer, leaving his dreams of a career in performance behind: “It got me away from that which I had loved, a goal I had loved, a goal I had set. And yet suddenly I realized that goal had become something my temperament couldn’t take.”²

“Get Happy” was interpolated into *Ruth Selwyn’s 9:15 Revue*. Though the production was a commercial flop, fortunately for Arlen and Koehler, the run of the show had lasted long enough that “Get Happy” was starting to gain attention. Producer Earl Carroll, who saw the show in Boston, was impressed by the Arlen-Koehler hit, and hired the pair for *the Vanities of 1930*.

The songwriting duo received another invitation from their newfound popularity, this time to work at the Silver Slipper, a prominent club on Broadway and 48st in Times Square. The club was noted for the mix of its clientele, “Broadway stars and less than stars, the Park Avenue Rich and well born, and criminals.”³ Despite its outward appearance, like many New York clubs during the 1920s and 30s, the Silver Slipper was in reality owned by the mob. As much as it provided a stage for lavish and expensive entertainment productions, it also provided a backstage bar for alcohol, made illegal by Prohibition-era laws.

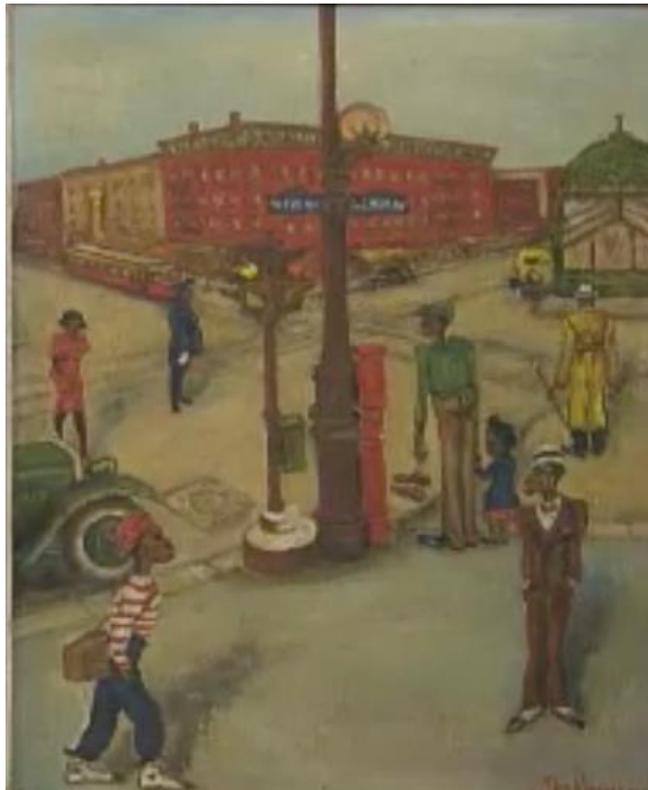
At the Silver Slipper, Arlen and Koehler contributed numbers to the show *Biff-Boom-Bang*. None of these songs were published but they impressed the club’s management, especially “Shakin the African,” which had a flavor that could please

² Arlen quoted in “A Dream to Perform,” The Official Harold Arlen Website, <http://www.haroldarlen.com/bio-3.html> (2013).

³ Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Boston, MA: North Eastern University Press, 1996), 35.

the audiences at another of their locations. The management quickly hired Arlen and Koehler to write for another show, *Brown Sugar (Blackberries of 1931)* featuring the Duke Ellington Orchestra, which was slated to open in the fall of 1930. The location: the now infamous Cotton Club.⁴

On the Cotton Club Stage



⁴ On the history of the Cotton Club, see James Haskins, *The Cotton Club* (New York, NY: Random House, 1977).

Figure 1: Ted Koehler, Painting of Harlem Scene⁵

Located at 142st and Lenox Avenue in the heart of Harlem's theater district, the club was originally purchased in 1920 by Jack Johnson, the first African American heavy-weight boxing champion, and began its life as a supper club known as the Club Deluxe. Shortly thereafter, the club was taken over by notorious gang owner Owney "The Killer" Madden, a prominent figure in Prohibition-era New York known for supplying illicit alcohol from his Phoenix Cereal Beverage Company to the city's entertainment establishments, of which the Cotton Club was the most popular and successful.

Entertainment at the Cotton Club was provided by some of the best African American performers of the age: Cab Calloway, Duke Ellington, Ethel Waters, Fats Waller, Louis Armstrong, the Nicholas Brothers, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, and Lena Horne, just to name a few. Despite its roster of talent, however, the long history of racial prejudice in the United States could also be seen alive and well at the club. Decorated with "white columns and a backdrop painted with weeping willows and slave quarters," these performers danced, sang, and played for exclusively white

⁵ This painting, presumed to be the work of lyricist Ted Koehler, was featured on the popular PBS television program, *Antique Roadshow* on June 12, 2010 (Episode 1504, "San Diego"). The painting, as well as an original set of lyrics for "Stormy Weather," were brought to the program by Koehler's grandson. The only existing copy, the painting was valued at \$2,000–\$4,000 by appraiser Leila Dunbar. At this time, the location of the painting is unclear through it seems likely it is still in the private possession of the Koehler family.

<https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/roadshow/season/15/san-diego-ca/appraisals/stormy-weather-lyrics-koehler-painting--201001A41/>

patrons.⁶ Harlem Renaissance poet Langston Hughes likened the club to a kind of human zoo, a “Jim Crow club for gangster and monied whites.”⁷

Shows were presented to the white clientele as “authentic” experiences of Black culture within a particular paradigm of acceptance. Performances of “jungle music” were a popular phenomenon. Performers danced barefoot and scantily clad in faux-African tribal clothing to upbeat jazz-tunes with names evoking the African continent, featuring heavy percussion and playing techniques such as the use of the plunger mute to provide an exotic flare. While such performances satiated white patrons’ curiosity about what they perceived to be the culture of their African American countrymen, female dancers were carefully selected to be light skinned and slender, or in the words of the famous Cab Calloway tune “tall, tan, and terrific,” in order to placate any possible audience fears of *real* African Americans.⁸

In his book *Slumming: Sexual and Racial Encounters in an American City: 1885–1940*, Chad Heap describes how in late nineteenth-century America, as cities, especially New York, began to grow in size, they also became “more spatially socially divided, especially along race and class lines.”⁹ The so-called practice of

⁶ Cab Calloway quoted in A. H. Lawrence, *Duke Ellington and His World* (New York, NY: Routledge, 2001), 106.

⁷ Langston Hughes, “When the Negro Was in Vogue,” in *The Collected Works of Langston Hughes*, vol. 13, *Autobiography: The Big Sea*, edited with an introduction by Joseph McLaren (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2002), 176.

⁸ Cab Calloway and His Orchestra, “I’m Always in the Mood for You”/ “She’s Tall, She’s Tan, She’s Terrific,” (Variety, 1937), VA 643, 78 rpm.

⁹ Chad Heap as quoted in Jennifer Lee, “When Slumming Was the Thing to Do,” *New York Times* (July 6, 2009).

“slumming” brought these diverse communities closer together again. Heap argues that “as problematic as slumming can be as voyeuristic sport, it’s positive in the context of its period, “in that it encouraged cross-cultural exchange.¹⁰ He also points out that it was a way for whites, restrained by the social attitudes and practices of their own communities, to take on and experiment with other identities.

This was no less true for the white songwriters who provided some of the now legendary music played by African American bands at the Cotton Club, including Harold Arlen and his predecessors Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields. Arlen’s own tenure at the Cotton Club lasted five years, including five shows from *Brown Sugar* in 1930 to the Cotton Club *Parade* of 1934, and his time there profoundly shaped his musical style.

For Arlen and Koehler, the Cotton Club was the place where they furthered their development as songwriters. The routine at the club was rigorous. The club presented two major productions a year (Fall and Spring)—two floor shows a night—midnight and 2:00am, forcing the pair to quickly hone their craft. Between 1930 and 1934 the pair wrote songs for no less than five annual revues at the Cotton Club (forty-three songs in total), many of which have gone on to become standards in the core repertory of the Great American Songbook.

More importantly, at the Cotton Club Arlen and Koehler rubbed elbows with some of the best African American talent of the age, the effect of which on Arlen’s musical development cannot be minimized. Many have remarked on the significance

¹⁰ Ibid.

of Arlen's early associations with African American musicians. Producer Roger Edens described his surprise at Arlen's innate ability to absorb the musical styles of his counterparts, as well as what he perceived as their acceptance of Arlen's musical stylings despite a growing resentment toward the "southern professionalism" of white jazz that was becoming popular in New York at the time. While this passage reads problematically from a twenty-first century point of view, reflecting white supremacist attitudes, it nevertheless points out that others observed Arlen's immersion in the sounds of the Cotton Club and the influence it would have on his future style:

I shall never forget the sight and sound of Harold with the cast. He was really one of the them, dancing with them, laughing and kidding with them. He was really one of them. He absorbed so much from them—their idiom, their tonalities, their phrasings, their rhythms he was able to establish a rapport with them. . . . I was always amazed that they completely accepted Harold and his super-minstrel show antics. They loved it—and adored him.¹¹

Finding His Voice

During his time at the Cotton Club, Arlen was able to refine his skills as a jazz musician, skills first developed during his youth with territory bands in Buffalo.

There he fostered the intimate knowledge of African American popular music idioms that would come to form the heart of his music.

Blues and jazz are essential to Arlen, both the man and his music. In his formative study of American popular song, Alec Wilder hypothesizes that "Arlen, my hunch tells me, might never have become a song writer had he grown up in the roiling, but to him, tepid, times [before the 1920s]. For he needed the enriched and

¹¹ Roger Edens as quoted in Jablonski, *Happy with the Blues* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 68.

color drenched sounds which had developed by the late twenties in order for him to want to be a writer.”¹² He went on to explain that Arlen both shaped and was shaped by his time and place in the world:

He entered into the field of popular music at a propitious time, one in which he could spread himself and experiment rhythmically, harmonically, and melodically as he never could have even ten years before. To me it is like an invention, let's say the camera, appearing and before you know it there is a man who seems, by his aptitude, to have been born to be a photographer. Had Arlen been born sooner or later than he was, there would have been little in the musical air to inspire him to be a writer of songs. It would seem that stylistic traits developed during his intensive contact with the music of black musicians during the Harlem years in New York pervaded his songs throughout his life.”¹³

The composer's first biographer, Jablonski, was “wary of assigning too much significance to Arlen's contacts with black musicians in the early 1930s at the expense of recognizing his ‘personal touch,’” instead arguing that it was “Arlen's personal bent, which tended toward the harmonies and rhythms of the blues and jazz that enabled him to compose melodies . . . that sounded completely at home in the Cotton Club.”¹⁴ This assessment fails to account for how Arlen's many years performing at the elite institution and his exposure to some of the best jazz musicians of the age, not only from the Cotton Club but from the city as a whole, would surely impact his musical style.

¹² Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 254.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Jablonski quoted in Allen Forte, *The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 1924–1950* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995), 210–11.

Arlen himself describes directly absorbing influences from the Cotton Club. In Arlen's early compositions for the Cotton Club, the most obvious marker of jazz influence is rhythm. In particular, Arlen was influenced by rhythms of swing and other dance styles featured at the club. Remembering the composition of his first major success for that institution, "Between the Devil and the Deep Blues Sea," (*Rhythmmania*, 1931), Arlen creates a direct connection between his use of rhythm and dance. He described being inspired by the great dancer, Bill Robinson: "One day I kept thinking of the steady beat of Bill Robinson's tap-dancing at the Cotton Club, for whom I was composing songs at the time, and before I knew it I was myself tapping out the melody of "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea."¹⁵

The heightened focus on rhythm places "The Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" squarely within the tradition of the rhythm song, in which rhythm drives the music forward.¹⁶ This type of song with its focus on rhythm, represents arguably the most conventional, straight-forward approach to incorporating jazz into mainstream popular song. For Arlen it represents a period of transition from Buffalo to New York, from young aspiring musician to songwriter. Many of his recordings with the Buffalodians had been arrangements of popular dances, such as the foxtrot featured in his 1927 "Buffalo Rhythm."¹⁷ Featuring new swing rhythms, his early works for the

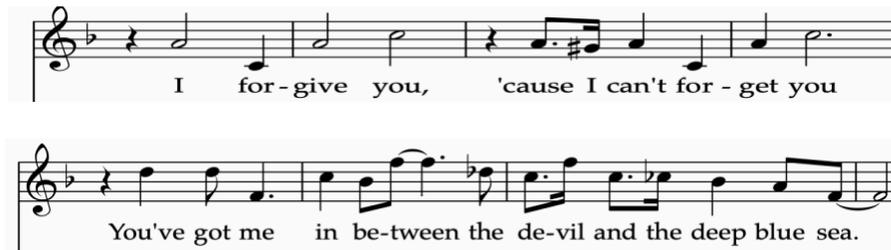
¹⁵ As quoted in Rimler, 24.

¹⁶ For a discussion of the rhythm song see Lehman Engel, *American Musical Theater* (New York: Macmillian, 1975), 106.

¹⁷ Harold Arluck, "Buffalo Rhythm," Jack Hylton and His Orchestra, (Hayes, Middlesex, England: Gramophone, 1927) Co. B 5379, 78 rpm. Recording can be accessed: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hiTJUSLU05o>.

Cotton Club represent his fledgling efforts to begin incorporating the sounds of New York City's jazz scene into his own musical voice.

The chorus of "Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" begins with an off-beat syncopated emphasis as in Gershwin's "I Got Rhythm" (1930). The final measures of the A section which feature the title lyric, also features a chain of dotted-eighth-sixteenth figures.



Example 3: "Devil and the Deep Blue Sea," Rhythmia (1931)

This rhythmic gesture (e. x e. x e etc.) feels intimately related both to the tap dance referenced in the above anecdote and the jaunty rhythms of swing. This gesture would become favored by Arlen as a symbol of jazz, particularly in his works of the early 1930s (see table).

The dotted-eighth-sixteenth rhythm also frequently (though not always) appears in conjunction with a melodic gesture. Therein, an initial pitch is left by leap (usually a third or fourth) and immediately returned to again. For example, in "Devil and the Deep Blue Sea" the rhythm begins with C before leaping to F and immediately back to C. This rocking melodic motion conjures visions of a dance move such as a step-ball-change dance effect of rocking back from one foot to another, then back to the first. However, the rocking melodic gesture itself seems

more tied to left hand piano patterns that typically appear in blues and later boogie-woogie. Indeed, Arlen frequently uses this combined rhythmic, melodic gesture in the piano accompaniment, particularly in introductory sections. This gesture in the piano accompaniment is often placed preceded by or followed by a triplet figure.

Year	Title	Featured in Piano Introduction	Notes
1931	“Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” (<i>Rhythmmania</i> , Cotton Club)	✓	Piano introduction preceded by rising triplet figure.
1932	“I Got a Right to Sing the Blues” (“Earl Carroll’s Vanities”)	✓	Piano introduction preceded by rising triplet figure. Notable appearances of accompaniment in between phrases of the vocal melody, especially in the left hand
1932	“I’ve Got the World on a String” (Cotton Club Parade- 21 st Edition)	✓	Piano introduction preceded by opening rising triad in same rhythm
1932	“The Wail of the Reefer Man” (Cotton Club Parade- 21 st Edition)	✓	
1933	“Happy as the Day is Long”		Used throughout in piano accompaniment, particularly between vocal phrases; not featured prominently in voice
1933	“Stormy Weather” (Cotton Club Parade-22 nd Edition)		Appears minimally in the release
1934	“As Long as I Live”		Notable appearances of accompaniment in between phrases of the vocal melody, especially in the left hand Rhythm obscured in vocal melody by ties
1934	“Let’s Take a Walk Around the Block” (<i>Life Begins at 8:40</i>)	✓	
1936	“You’re the Cure for What Ails Me” (<i>The Singing Kid</i>)		Begins in piano accompaniment immediately before entrance of vocal refrain, marked “rhythmically”
1937	“Moanin’ in the Mornin’” (<i>Hoorary for What!</i>)		Featured prominently on title line

1937	“Buds Won’t Bud”	✓	Marked in R.H. piano introduction by appoggiaturas. Not featured thereafter.
1938	“If I Only Had a Brain” (<i>The Wizard of Oz</i>)	✓	Followed in the initial measures of the introduction by the triplet figure that usually proceeds it
1941	“When the Sun Comes Out”		Featured in piano accompaniment only
1941	“Blues in the Night” (<i>Blues in the Night</i>)		Featured prominently in the two vocal releases
1941	“This Time the Dreams On Me” (<i>Blues in the Night</i>)	✓	Featured prominently in L.H. introduction before adopted by R.H. and voice
1942	“Life’s Full of Consequence” (<i>Cabin in the Sky</i>)	✓	Triplet figurations in R.H. of piano following rhythm rather than preceding
1943	“One for My Baby” (<i>The Sky’s the Limit</i>)	✓	Pervasive

Table 2: Arlen’s Use of Swing Rhythm 1930–1943s¹⁸

A survey of Arlen’s use of this rhythmic pattern yields a few interesting observations. First, it shows that for the span of more than a decade in his early career, Arlen used this rhythm to evoke the sound of jazz in his works. By the mid-1940s, these rhythms appear less frequently in Arlen’s works, except in the cases of his works for the theater—*Bloomer Girl* (1944) and *St. Louis Woman* (1946)—where it used to dramatic ends to signal a very basic jazz style as we will see in future chapters. Arlen also employed other dance rhythms, notably the Calypso, in other staged works such as *Jamaica* (1957). In later Arlen works, the influence of jazz appears in more diverse elements such as form and harmony.

Arlen’s use of this swing pattern also shows that from an early age, he composed instrumentally for the voice, as there are clear ties to this figuration and his

¹⁸ In order to be considered for inclusion in this table, the rhythm must appear in a minimum of two consecutive iterations. Inversions of this rhythm (sixteenth-dotted eighth) likewise appear in many Arlen works but have not been included for the purposes of this chart.

piano accompaniments. Finally, this rhythm also often serves as a clue for where Arlen will begin melodic experimentation with blue notes as in the lowered C^b in the “Devil and the Deep Blue Sea.”

Outside of the rhythmic gestures and a few blues-inflected melody notes, there is not much in “Devil and the Deep Blue Sea,” nor indeed any of Arlen’s early work in New York that demonstrates his distinct style. Arlen’s early compositions from the decade of the 1930s–1940s show a composer absorbing the sounds of jazz and experimenting.

Other Arlen compositions from this era show a similar attitude of exploration and discovery. Another hallmark of Arlen’s style, the octave leap, first appears during this era as well. There it can be heard in his “Linda” from the Cotton Club show *Brown Sugar* (1930).



Example 2: “Linda,” *Brown Sugar* (1930)

A similar octave drop occurs in his “Sweet and Hot,” from the subsequent year (see example 4). In an interview with Alec Wilder, Arlen claimed that he derived “Sweet and Hot” from his song “You Said It” (1931) from a musical by the same name he created with Jack Yellen. He said he was inspired by a lick he picked up from a trumpet player playing the tune, showing Arlen again searching for influence and beginning to think instrumentally.¹⁹

¹⁹ Wilder, 259.



Example 3: "Sweet and Hot," (1931)

Taken together, Arlen's early efforts for the Cotton Club demonstrate a composer searching for his sound. While surely Arlen's experiences during his childhood in Buffalo and his youth spent performing with territory bands left a mark on his style, it was his years in the New York jazz scene that truly shaped the composer as can be heard in his works from his later years at the Cotton Club: "Stormy Weather" and "Ill Wind."

CHAPTER 2

Forecasting the Future: “Stormy Weather,” “Ill Wind,” and the Later Cotton Club Years

On April 16, 1933, amid curling plumes of cigarette smoke and the pungent smell of contraband liquor, Ethel Waters took center stage at the Cotton Club, the foremost nighttime hotspot in Harlem. Now in its twenty-second edition, the finale of *The Cotton Club Parade* began inauspiciously enough: an orchestral overture followed by a series of loosely connected scenes in the style of the revue. There were comedy routines, dance numbers, songs and skits about the south, and risqué romance tunes.

As Waters began to sing, a hushed silence filled the room:

Not until the eleventh scene did the star, Miss Ethel Waters, appear. The scene was titled “Cabin in the Cotton Club.” [Dan] Healy had staged it simply against a cabin backdrop; Miss Waters stood under a lamppost, a midnight-blue spotlight on her. . . . After her chorus, the scene imperceptively faded into the next as she was joined by George Dewey Washington, singing responses to Miss Waters’ choruses; the Talbert choir joined them. By using special lights Healy was able to fade the girls practically unseen onto the dance floor. The transition from song to dance was done smoothly and effectively. The number stopped the show.¹

The song Waters performed that evening was “Stormy Weather,” a heart-wrenching blues about lost love with music and lyrics by a team of young songwriters: Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler.

¹ Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Happy with the Blues* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 63–64. Arlen describes “Stormy Weather” as the tenth scene in the revue in his revised Arlen biography, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University, 1996), 50.

Upon first listen, it is clear that there is something interesting about the song, even if it is difficult to put your finger on it. The “happy wedding” of text and music in “Stormy Weather” result in an alluring song that is unconventional in both form and content, illustrating Arlen’s skill as a collaborator and his ear for jazz.² In this chapter, through analysis of two of Arlen’s iconic songs—“Stormy Weather” (1933) and “Ill Wind” (1934)—I will show how the blues and jazz came to form a fundamental part of Arlen’s musical voice as he developed his style. Therein we will discover that in contrast to many other songwriters of his age, for whom jazz often acted as a musical reference to the exotic, for Arlen it was at the core of his musical style.

“Stormy Weather”

It is during the latter years of his tenure at the Cotton Club that we first begin to see the elements that would become essential hallmarks of Arlen’s style come to light: (1) unconventional and extended forms, (2) melodic development through motivic repetition and variation, (3) harmonization that frequently juxtaposes major/minor polarity via blue notes and non-diatonic scale collections or modes, (4) an instrumental approach to vocal writing featuring wide-ranging melodies and frequent octave-drops, especially at the ends of phrases, and (5) a keen sense of harmonization and orchestration.

² Arlen describes the union of text and music this way in Max Wilk, *They’re Playing Our Song: Conversations with America’s Classic Songwriters*, Revised and Updated (New York: Easton Studio Press, 2008), 176.

While the influence of the Cotton Club can be heard in many of his compositions, nowhere is the perfect storm of talent and circumstance that helped to develop Arlen's style more clear than in "Stormy Weather" (1933), Arlen's most famous composition from his years at the Cotton Club, as well as his most well-known collaboration with Koehler. The work epitomizes Arlen's absorption of jazz influences through the attributes outlined above.³

Unconventional and Extended Form

While "Stormy Weather" follows the AABA formal plan popular among songwriters of the period, it deceptively deviates from the standard 32-bar structure. The song is, instead, a lengthy 58 bars, complete with an introduction and lengthy and challenging vocal interlude (see table 2). Given its unconventional and extended form, it is perhaps paradoxical that this work would go on to become known as a "standard."

Arlen humorously referred to these unconventional songs not as 'earworms'—a term often applied in popular song to describe a catchy tune that worms its way into one's ear and is difficult to dislodge—but rather as 'tapeworms.' The effect of Arlen's tapeworms is far from sickening, however, as is evidenced by the enduring popularity of his works in the Great American Songbook. As lyricist and collaborator Leo Robin observes: "It was refreshing and challenging to work with a writer like Harold who is not bound by the conventional formulas of the music business. However, it is remarkable that while he avoids the commercial clichés, so many of his

³ "Stormy Weather," *The Harold Arlen Songbook* (Milwaukee, WI: Hal Leonard, 1985).

songs have been commercial in the sense that they have found favor with the people.”⁴

Formal Section	Bars	Text
Introduction	4 bars	
A	8 bars	Don't know why, there's no sun up in the sky, Stormy weather. . .
A	10 bars	Life is bare, gloom and mis'ry ev'ry where, stormy weather. . .
B	8 bars	When he went away the blues walked in and met me. . .
A	10 bars	Can't go on, ev'rything I had is gone, stormy weather. . .
Interlude	12 bars	I walk around, heavy hearted and sad. . .
Reprise A	10 bars	Can't go on. . .

Table 3: Formal Pattern, “Stormy Weather”

The opening A section follows an asymmetrical phrase structure that while it conforms to the proscribed 8-bars, does so in an unusual way: 3+2+2+1 (see example 2).⁵ A sense of disjointedness is created by the division of the opening melody into a short 3-bar phrase that feels as a complete and contained unit owing to the presence of the octave drop, which is then answered by two short melodic fragments (“Since my man and I ain’t together”/ “Keep’s rainin’ all the time). Each fragment is two measures long, creating a yet further uneven balance with the three-measure motives

⁴ Ibid., 165.

⁵ Phrase structure analysis based on Walter Frisch, “Arlen’s Tapeworms: The Tunes That Got Away,” *The Musical Quarterly* 98/1–2 (March 2015). NB: This song does not contain a verse.

further exploration of the melody. This creates yet another asymmetrical pattern
 3+2+3+2.

Life is bare, gloom and mis'ry ev 'ry where, Stor-my Wea-ther

just can't get my poor self to ge-ther I'm wear-y all the ti-me.

ti-me. so wear-y all the ti-me.

Example 5: Phrase Structure A' "Stormy Weather"

This longer A-section is likewise reprised following the contrasting B-section, and in performances featuring the interlude, a third time following the *dal segno* designation. This is not to say that there are not elements that bring the seeming chaos of the storm into order. The B section of "Stormy Weather" is perhaps the most conventional structural component of the song, conforming to the expected structure (8 bars) and featuring an even melodic line.

Such deviation from form all the while referencing its scaffolding is a hallmark of Arlen's musical style. When questioned by his biographer, Edward Jablonski, about his penchant for straying away from musical conventions, Arlen's reaction bordered on surprise: "I don't think I'm trying to be different. Sometimes I

get into trouble in order to get out of trouble I break the form: I start twisting and turning, get into another key or go sixteen bars extra to resolve the song. And often as not I'm happier with the extension than I would have been trying to keep the song in regular form."⁷

In the words of Walter Frisch, "One of Arlen's distinctive qualities as a song composer is his ability to break the form but keep the frame. That is, the standard structures that define 'the territory of popular music' (what I will call the frame) act as a foil to Arlen's compositional explorations (the form)."⁸ What inspired Arlen to "break the form but keep the frame" of "Stormy Weather"? In an interview, Arlen described the song's composition process as unintentional, a frequent and well-worn trope for the composer:

I didn't count the measures till it was all over. That was all I had to say and the way I had to say it. George Gershwin brought it up and I didn't know it He said, 'You know you didn't repeat a phrase in the first eight bars?' And I never gave it a thought.

In his recent work on the composer, Frisch asserts that Arlen's formal breakaway was inspired by the 'break' often heard in New Orleans style jazz, or a moment in which the players improvise. Frisch draws attention to Arlen's description of the composition of "Stormy Weather" as reported to Alec Wilder wherein Arlen uses the term 'break' and makes connections to Arlen's early fascination with groups like the Original Dixieland Jazz Band and the style of his recordings with his youthful outfit, the Buffalodians. I believe, however, that the true explanation for the song's

⁷ Arlen, quoted in Edward Jablonski, *Happy with the Blues*, 234–35.

⁸ Frisch, "Arlen's Tapeworms," 13.

unusual form can be found in what I hear as Arlen's most defining feature, his "motivicity."

Melodic Development: "Motivicity"

The essential character of "Stormy Weather" derives from the presence of a small motivic unit that permeates the score.⁹ This focus on the motivic level gives Arlen's work the character of what I will call "motivicity," I borrow this term from Renaissance and Baroque scholar Joshua Rifkin, who defines motivicity as "the maximum permeation of a polyphonic complex by a single linear denominator or set of denominators."¹⁰ In other words, the work is motivically saturated. As Rifkin explains, such motives can contain elements of pitch, duration, or both.

While neither the term "motivicity" nor the music which it typically describes were familiar to Arlen, the term may be useful here for the visual context it can provide to Arlen's music. Therein, it suggests the depth to which motives Arlen's work, appearing not only in the melody but also frequently informing harmony and form. As such motivicity provides a parallel to the horizontal and vertical appearance of motives in multi-voice polyphonic compositions.

⁹ It seems significant that the language Frisch uses of "keeping the form but breaking the frame" parallels Max Weinreich's description of the "variety within stability" created through ornamentation of Jewish cantors. This again suggests the significant role of the motive as a source of Arlen's formal deviations. See Weinrich quoted in Mark Slobin, *Chosen Voices: The Story of the American Cantorate* (Urbana and Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1998; reprinted 2002), 9.

¹⁰ See Joshua Rifkin, "Miracles, Motivicity, and Mannerism: Adrian Willaert's *Videns Dominus flentes sorors Lazari* and Some Aspects of Motet Composition in the 1520s," in Dolores Pesce (ed.) *Hearing the Motet: Essays on the Motet of the Middle Ages and Renaissance* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1997), 244.

Unlike many other songs from the Golden Age, “Stormy Weather” is not conventionally melodic in the sense that Arlen does not necessarily write long or arch shaped melodies. In Arlen the emphasis on motivic detail is more significant than the longer melodic phrase, a trait uncommon for songwriters of his time period and of vocal music generally. Written in the key of A^b major, but more often performed in G, the opening A section of the piece begins with a restless rising motive, a scintillating chromatic slide from the lowered third to the dominant of G major (A#-B-D).

The opening chromatic slide creates a quick major-minor shift that questions the listener’s sense of key, a common gesture in the blues. Rather than answering the question, however, Arlen repeats the motive three times, varying the rhythm. The effect is like that of a child’s wind-up toy, which despite seeming to run out of energy, moves just a bit more, erratically and unevenly, as the gears attempt to keep turning. Through this process of repetition, the motive gradually unfurls into a fully-fledged melody that ends its first three bars with an unexpected octave drop (see example 6).

Motive x1 Motive x2 Motive x3

Don't know why there's no sun up in the sky, Stor-my Weath er

Example 6: Opening Motive/ Melody, “Stormy Weather”

This small, three-note unit emerges as significant through repetition, variation, and development.¹¹ Therein, my use of “motivicity” departs from Rifkin. While in the Renaissance motet, motivicity does not imply that motives transform or play otherwise significant structural roles, in Arlen motives fulfill such functions.¹² Indeed, the recognizable motive at the beginning of “Stormy Weather” does far more than provide the groundwork for the initial melody. It helps to establish the structural foundation of the rest of the piece.

The melodic contour created by this three-note motive does not conform to the arch-shape melodic phrase Arlen’s potential audiences had been conditioned to expect through conventions of western music traditions set forth by *bel canto* vocal traditions. Rather, the melody is disjointed and uneven, establishing a new norm that creates the opportunity for further deviations as heard in the uneven phrase structures of the A sections as previously noted.

That such a small motive gives rise to an entire work, both its form and its substance, is supported by an anecdote from Arlen’s biographer, Edward Jablonski, in which Arlen performed this short riff at a party, and encouraged by a positive response, wrote the entirety of the song in a half-hour at his Croydon penthouse with Ted Koehler lying on the couch and dreaming up lyrics while he repeatedly played small segments of the melody at the piano. Such a compositional process suggests the

¹¹ Steve Swayne likewise observes Arlen’s predilection for three-note motives and traces the influence of this specific feature as well as Arlen’s harmonic usage of thirteenth chords on Steven Sondheim. Steve Swayne, *How Sondheim Got His Sound* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 2008), 86.

¹² See Rifkin, 244–45.

idea of “developing variation,” though on a much smaller scale than in the works to which this term is typically applied. Found in the works of composers such as Arnold Schoenberg (1874–1951), Johannes Brahms (1833–1897), and his predecessor Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) this is a process in which a motive is continually repeated, varied, and transformed to give rise to other elements of the work.¹³

While Arlen’s work can be understood in light of “developing variation,” given his limited formal training and connections to classical music, it is also important to understand the motivic element of his work in the context of the musical world in which he lived and worked: jazz. Many jazz players notably including Louis Armstrong were known for improvising solos around recurring motifs on a scale in a manner comparable to Arlen’s development of the motivic gesture in “Stormy Weather.” It is moreover important that we seek to understand this motivic process and its connections to jazz without solely imposing the colonial structures of Western music theory at the expense of considering other frameworks of analysis while applying those terms and concepts from western music theory that can prove useful.

The importance of motive in Arlen’s work also suggests a strong connection to improvisation and the form of the piece. Walter Frisch has previously suggested that Arlen was inspired by the “breaks” in jazz performance, I hear the influence of jazz and improvisation in his works in a small but also importantly different way.¹⁴

¹³ See Charles Rosen, *The Classical Style: Mozart, Haydn, and Beethoven* (New York: Norton, 1972, reprinted with new chapter on Beethoven 1998). Walter Frisch, *Brahms and the Principle of Developing Variation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1990)

¹⁴ Frisch, “Arlen’s Tapeworms,” 13.

Whereas improvisation in a break usually features a soloist breaking down or embellishing pre-existing material already played and heard, here it is the improvisation itself that gives rise to the material content and ultimately the unusual form.

This way of composing, in which the composition arises as the result of improvisation, has a direct connection to Arlen's experiences playing in New York. In fact, it was just this method of composition that led to the creation of Arlen's first successful hit, "Get Happy" (1929). This song, written while subbing in for Fletcher Henderson as the rehearsal pianist for Vincent Youman's *Great Day!* was born from the boredom of a pianist who had to play a repetitive vamp to cue dancers. As in the "Stormy Weather" example, repetition of a small motivic idea (notably three times) gives rise to the melodic unit.

The image displays three staves of musical notation for the song "Get Happy". Each staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of two flats (B-flat and E-flat), and a common time signature (C). The first staff contains the lyrics "For-get your trou-bles come on get hap-py— You bet-terchase all your cares a- way". The second staff contains "— Sing Hal-le - lu-jah come on get hap-py, — Get rea- dy for the judge-ment". The third staff contains "day.". The notation shows a repeating melodic motif of a quarter note followed by an eighth note, which is repeated three times in each staff, illustrating the improvisational technique described in the text.

Example 7: "Get Happy"

It is further noteworthy that this style of creation from a small motivic phrase was a trademark of Youmans with whom Arlen was working when he wrote this first successful hit. "He'd help pioneer a composing style that became a model for the

emerging American songbook: taking a brief melodic phrase and building a succession of variations on it, each supported by its own distinct harmonization.”¹⁵

Arlen was also well known for writing down what he called “jots,” or brief musical snippets of an idea, on scraps of paper to return to for development at a later point. Comically, Arlen’s tendency to develop a tune by “noodling” about led lyricist Martin Charnin to call Arlen “one of the greatest Spaghetti writers of all time.”¹⁶

Edward Jablonski noted a more explicitly European and less culinary thread in Arlen’s compositional style, explaining his compositional style as “his own variations on a theme.”¹⁷ In fact, this opening motive, consciously or not, may have been a variation on one of his own earlier works: “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” from the Cotton Club Parade of 1933 featuring Duke Ellington’s band. The B section of this work features the same three-note motive (see example 8) first suggested through chromatic motion and then exact.

¹⁵ Rimler, 13.

¹⁶ Charnin interview with Walter Frisch 2013, as cited in Frisch, “Arlen’s Tapeworms,” 2.

¹⁷ Edward Jablonski, *Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 27.

With-out your love, it's a hon-ky tonk pa rade, with-out your
[Motive] [Motive]
love, it's a mel-o-dy played in a pen-ny ar-cade.

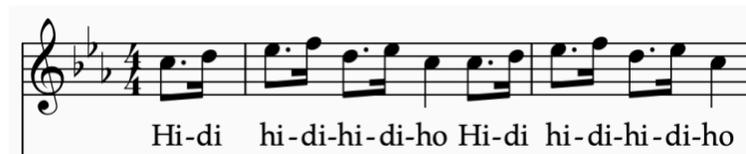
Example 8: “It’s Only a Paper Moon,” 1933

In addition to their connections to improvisation, the opening motive of “Stormy Weather” bears another marker of influence from the New York City jazz scene: its triadic structure. While the triadic structure is more obvious in “Get Happy,” “Stormy Weather” likewise implies an opening triad, one that cleverly omits the root in favor of using the augmented second (or the blue third) to pull more strongly to the third scale degree. Triadic openings were favored by many New York jazz composers of the period and the ascending, minor triadic opening has been tied specifically to the Cotton Club sound as in Ellington’s “East St. Louis Toodle-oo” (1926), the recording of which features Bubber Miley on a growling plunger-muted trumpet bending notes and evoking a similar feel to Arlen’s “Stormy Weather” motive, as well as Cab Calloway’s “St. James Infirmary” and “Minnie the Moocher.”¹⁸ Arlen certainly would have been aware of these pieces not only through working at the Cotton Club, but through being tasked with writing “Minnie the Moocher’s Wedding Day,” a novelty follow-up to the original Cab Calloway number. Sloan also observes strong parallel between the three-note motive of “Stormy

¹⁸ Nathaniel Sloan, “Constructing Cab Calloway: Publicity, Race, and Performance in 1930s Harlem Jazz,” *The Journal of Musicology* 36/3 (summer 2019): 382.

Weather” and Armstrong’s “West End Blues,” going so far as to state that this “suggests that, consciously or not, Arlen co-opted this motive from Armstrong’s recording.¹⁹

An even clearer connection to the musical stylings of the Cotton Club becomes evident when considering that the opening motive for “Stormy Weather” was apparently conceived as “front Shout” or “hi-di-ho,” a typical performance feature of Cab Calloway (see example 9), who Arlen had thought would be premiering his work, though that honor would later go to Ethel Waters.



Example 9: “Minnie the Moocher,” Cab Calloway

Comparing Calloway’s well-known, call-and response “hi-di-ho” figure with the opening of “Stormy Weather” one notices how both emphasize a similar melodic contour and emphasize relationships between major and minor seconds in the melody. Arlen was surely aware of this work as he was tasked with writing the sequel, “Minnie the Moocher’s Wedding Day” for another Cotton Club performance. He also included a “hi-de-ho” briefly in his “Satan’s Lil’ Lamb,” written for the musical production, *Americana*, his first collaboration with lyricist E. Y. Harburg.

Harmony

Arlen’s ear for harmony and orchestration matched his gift for melody. This is only truer considering the general approach of the Tin Pan Alley songwriter, which places

¹⁹ Ibid., 126.

an emphasis on the outer voices often leaving the inner voices to be realized by another figure: the orchestrator or the arranger. Arlen's background as an arranger led him to create songs that are noted for their "thoroughness." As Wilder explains, "One sensed the seeds of orchestration, one knew somehow that once he had thought the song through to its final phase, the performance of it, whether it be by a singer, a piano, a band, a jazz group, or a band with a singer. There wasn't the usual feeling of the song's isolation. It was as if the writer of a book were to have seen his words through the presses all the way to the bookstore."²⁰ As Walter Frisch observes, there are not many manuscript scores that exist in Arlen's hand, at least not that have been accessible to researchers to date. However, Arlen often played and sang his own songs, and more often than not these performances correspond to the recordings, suggesting the general accuracy of the published versions.²¹

Within "Stormy Weather," the germinal seed or three-note motive (A[#]-B-D) is most audibly recognizable because of the presence of the blue note on which it begins its ascent. Beginning a Tin Pan Alley song on a blue note was very uncommon and codes the piece as belonging more to the jazz world while it lived and breathed in both. While the motive itself gives rise to the melody it is this one single blue note that, for lack of a better turn of phrase, colors the whole work and gives it its ethos as well as its structural cohesion in the midst of formal deviations. As Sloan observes, "I

²⁰ Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 289–90.

²¹ Walter Frisch, *Arlen & Harburg's Over the Rainbow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 55.

hear Arlen's use of blue notes as a subtle sonic signature that promoted this lasting perception [being especially adept at assimilating black topics], transforming the sound from a superficial black topic to an intrinsic compositional element. The blue third plays a key structural role in the song's AABA form as a central tone that builds coherence and linearity across each A-section melody."²²

Indeed, the melodic arch of the opening motive (A[#]-B-D) beginning with the lowered blue note is even mirrored in the overall harmonic plan of the piece, an ostinato-like progression, perhaps best heard as a harmonic loop, which likewise begins with rising half-step motion followed by an upward leap (G-G[#] dim- Am7-D9), featured in the first two measures, followed by another ostinato (G-E-A-D) in the subsequent six measures.²³ It is noteworthy that this progression appears in other Arlen works including "Happy as the Day is Long" (1933). Variants of the progression were further popular in jazz from this era.²⁴

This is not the only place where Arlen uses the harmony to provide cohesion. Underneath the jagged exterior of the A sections, is an underlying melodic structure that offers a sense of order and brings the elements into balance. The melody of the A section outlines the descent of a fifth from D-G accented by the rhythmic placement of significant pitches on strong beats and/or long rhythmic values: "Why" (D), "Sky"

²² Nathaniel Sloan, "Stormy Relations," 125.

²³ Wilder, 262.

²⁴ For more on variations of this form, specifically as they appear in Fletcher Henderson's recordings in this era see Jeffrey Magee, *The Uncrowned King of Swing: Fletcher Henderson and Big Band Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 174.

(C), “Since my man and I” (A), and “Together”/ “Time” (G). This descent cleverly avoids the third scale degree (B) anticipated in bar 3 at “Weather,” replacing it with an unexpected step upward to D and a dramatic octave plunge, further thwarting our ears. The composer thus leaves the third scale degree, harmonically ambiguous from the first presentation of the opening motive, as an open question and implying a gapped-scale common to jazz and African American musics. The harmonic question of the third is highlighted at the end of the A section in which the chromatic motion from A#-B is emphasized through its prominent placement at the cadence and drawn out rhythm. This approach to the cadence cleverly imitates and manipulates the opening motive (A# -B-D). The half-step motion from A#-B is now preceded by a rising C major triad, causing us to hear the A# as a lowered seventh scale degree. The half-step ascent is then answered by a descending major third (A# -B-G), in echo of the ascending minor third from the opening.

The more harmonically ambiguous A sections are contrasted by a shift to a bright C major in the B section, signal a contrast in mood as the text reminisces about past loves and expresses hope for the future in the face of despair. Sloan notes that this section is replete with subdominant cadences, creating a topical gospel reference further clarified in the text through such as “All I do is pray the Lord will let me.”²⁵ The shift in the harmony is highlighted through parallel rhythmic change. The rhythm shifts in the bass to a strong four on the floor beat, and the dotted rhythms in the vocal

²⁵ Sloan, “Stormy Relations,” 128.

line give more declarative feeling than the more languid and free rhythms of the opening.

Finally, the harmonization in the vocal interlude is the most adventurous. The interlude is written in what appears to be C minor, the implied relative minor of E, which should be the minor key of this minor-sounding piece . . . but is not as the piece is harmonized as being in G major with interpolated flat notes. The scale collection of this area appears to imply either a blue scale or references to modal areas in the Phrygian (lowered second) and Lydian modes (raised fourth).

Approach to Vocal Writing

Throughout “Stormy Weather” the vocal line demonstrates Arlen’s approach to vocal writing, which many have noted tends to be instrumental in character, but not in the sense that melodies are not beautiful. As Wilder notes, “He thinks in terms of instruments, in the aggregate and singly. Which is not to say that he wishes the potential singer of his songs to sing instrumentally. He couldn’t do that, being a singer himself.”²⁶ Arlen’s melodies are challenging and often involve difficult leaps such as frequent octave drops, heard early in the first measures of the work. The octave drop is particularly effective in performances of songs like “Stormy Weather” where it tends to coincide with strong voiced consonants. In classical performance techniques, the strong placement of a final “R” at the end of the opening refrain of “Stormy Weather” would create a problem for singers who are taught to avoid closing the mouth to create the consonant at the expense of losing projection, whereas for

²⁶ Wilder, 253–54.

crooners, the popular vocal technicians of the age, the closing of the mouth facilitated a resonance picked up by the microphone to create an intimate vocal sound appropriate for the ethos of the piece. This knowledge shows the fusion of Arlen's sensibilities as singer and instrumentalist.

The sheer difficulty of singing an Arlen tune prompted the work's premiere performer, Ethel Waters, to first fall in love with the song . . . and then demand that she never be asked to sing it more than once a night.

Pearl [Bailey] and I went up there, and they had a new number that Harold Arlen had written. They were using a lot of mechanical devices to get storm effects. It was a wonderful number. But after listening to it I told them that the piece should have more to do with human emotions and should be expressed that way instead of with noise-making machines to interpret the rumblings and rattlings of Old Mother Nature. But let me take the lead sheet home, I suggested. I'll work on it with Pearl. This song should be given a dramatic ending. I'm gonna see if I can give it that. But if I do, I will only want to sing it at one show a night. I want to give it everything I got. That will take too much out of me if I have to sing it in more than one show.²⁷

In addition to the octave drop featured in the opening, the B section features a series of mesmerizing repeated notes followed by a leap, again more typical of instrumental writing. Indeed, the vocal melody sounds like an instrumental vamp. Perhaps the clearest example of instrumental writing in "Stormy Weather," however, can be heard in the unexpected 12-bar interlude that follows the B section.

Perhaps owing to the difficulty of the vocal line, or in an effort to further balance and control the storm, the interlude is frequently cut from performance. Not typical of the AABA popular song, the interlude further disrupts the already distorted

²⁷ Ethel Waters with Charles Samuels, *His Eye Is on the Sparrow*, new preface by Donald Bogle (New York: Doubleday, 1951; reprinted Da Capo, 1992), 218–19.

32-bar form. The vocal writing in the interlude is highly instrumental, as the voice takes on a formal role typically reserved for instrumental ensembles or soloists. The pentatonic-inflected melody outlines a series of falling fourths the first of which is approached through a descending seventh followed by a leap up of an augmented fourth, a difficult line for singers to manage, both in terms of pitch and vocal mechanics as it jumps wildly between vocal registers. The interlude then culminates in a series of dramatic octave leaps. These features combine with the characteristic octave drop found in the chorus and suggest that Arlen may have conceived the melody instrumentally.

The image shows a musical score for the vocal interlude of "Stormy Weather" in G major. It consists of four staves of music. The first staff begins with a treble clef, a key signature of one sharp (F#), and a 3/4 time signature. The melody starts with a quarter rest, followed by a descending eighth-note scale: G4, F#4, E4, D4, C4. This is followed by a descending eighth-note scale: B3, A3, G3, F#3, E3. The lyrics under this staff are "I walk a-round, hea vy hear-ted and sad_ Night comes a-round and I'm". The second staff continues the melody with a descending eighth-note scale: D3, C3, B2, A2, G2. This is followed by a descending eighth-note scale: F#2, E2, D2, C2, B1. The lyrics are "still feel-in' bad.. Rain pour-in down, blind-in' ev-ry' hope I had. This". The third staff features a series of triplets of eighth notes: G2, F#2, E2; D2, C2, B1; A1, G1, F#1; E1, D1, C1. The lyrics are "pit-ter-in' pat-ter-in' beat-in an' splat-ter-in' drives me mad. Love, love. Love, love.". The fourth staff continues with a descending eighth-note scale: B1, A1, G1, F#1, E1. The lyrics are "This mis er-y is just too much for me.".

Example 10: Vocal Interlude, Stormy Weather

Legacy

Despite or perhaps because of its unusual qualities, “Stormy Weather” continues to be one of Arlen’s most well-known and frequently performed works. Like many Arlen compositions, The success of “Stormy Weather” was intimately tied to talented performers. While the work was originally intended for Cab Calloway, who was in

residency at the Cotton Club at the time, timing of events led to a need for Arlen to develop his song for a singer newly arrived at the Cotton Club: Ethel Waters. Recently returned from a dangerous performance run on the Al Capone nightclub circuit in Chicago and Cicero, and the wreckage of her disastrous marriage to Clyde “Eddie” Matthews, Waters’s world-weary voice was a perfect match for the song that would soon catapult both her and the song’s creators to stardom. Waters later reminisced:

When I got out there in the middle of the Cotton Club floor, I was telling things I couldn’t frame in words. I was singing the story of my misery and confusion, of the misunderstandings in my life I couldn’t straighten out, the story of wrongs and outrages done to me by people I had loved and trusted. Your imagination can carry you just so far. Only those who have been hurt deeply can understand what pain is, or humiliation. Only those who are being burned know what fire is like. I sang “Stormy Weather” from the depths of the private hell in which I was being crushed and suffocated.’²⁸

Audiences agreed, requesting no less than twelve encores of her performance on that opening night.

Since its premiere, “Stormy Weather” has likewise received several notable recordings throughout the years. This includes two significant early records: Leo Reisman and his Orchestra (featuring Arlen as vocalist) and Waters’ subsequent recording with the Dorsey Brothers Orchestra. Both instant best-sellers, topping the

²⁸ Waters, 220. This quotation as cited in Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* includes the text “If there’s anything I owe Eddie Matthews, it’s that he enabled me to do one hell of a job on the song ‘Stormy Weather.’” (51–52).

charts. Waters's recording was also later enshrined in the Grammy Hall of Fame.²⁹ As Ira Gershwin once commented, anyone who "finds himself wondering if a resultant song isn't too long or too difficult or too mannered for popular consumption. But there's no cause for worry. Many Arlen songs do take time to catch on, but when they do, they join his impressive and lasting catalogue."³⁰

Following the close of the 22nd edition of the Cotton Club Parade (and after careful permissions were arranged with the club's management), Wachsman arranged a "Stormy Weather" Tour, featuring the composer at the piano backed by an all African-American choir, including Katherine Handy, daughter of legendary blues author W. C. Handy. The tour opened with a performance at Radio City Music Hall on May 19, 1933 and then traveled onto cities that were strongholds of African American culture—Baltimore and Washington, D.C—and later to Jamaica and the Bronx where they were presumably performed for mixed audiences. Since then, the song has been performed by such names as Frank Sinatra, Bing Crosby, Judy Garland, Etta James, Billie Holiday, Ella Fitzgerald, Charles Mingus, and Duke Ellington. It was also immortalized in film by Lena Horne in 1943 in a Twentieth Century Fox film of the same name.

²⁹ Waters' recording notably includes the 12-bar interlude, which is absent in Arlen's recording and frequently omitted in performance. This interlude was also excluded from the original sheet music publication but was restored in *Harold Arlen Songbook* several years later. See Jablonski, *Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 53. For further discussion of some of the other noteworthy performances of this song see Will Friedwald, *Stardust Melodies: The Biography of Twelve of America's Most Popular Songs* (New York: Random House, 2002), 276–308.

³⁰ Ira Gershwin, quoted in Jablonski, *Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, xiv.

Despite its resounding success as a standard, Arlen apparently never liked “Stormy Weather.” Several decades after “Stormy Weather” became a hit, at a birthday party for the composer hosted by Burton Lane and his wife Lynn, Lane played the song to celebrate Arlen. As Lane played, Arlen whispered to his wife “You know, I never liked that song. I never thought it deserved to be the hit that it was.”³¹ In an interview with Wilfrid Sheed, he similarly called the piece a “throwaway,” or “a song I could have mailed Monday or Tuesday. It wasn’t anything special.” The most he ever said of the song was that it was “strong,” though I think it bears mentioning he did later adopt a dog he named Stormy.³²

Arlen’s humility aside, his songs, in particular “Stormy Weather” are seen as more than standards, but as a sort of American folk music. “Each of their Cotton Club shows, beginning with *Rhythmmania*, produced at least one outstanding song that has become part of the fabric of musical Americana: ‘Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea,’ ‘I’ve Got the World on a String,’ ‘Stormy Weather,’ ‘As Long as I Live,’ and ‘Ill Wind.’”³³

As Rimler describes, “Stormy Weather is loved throughout the world. Many think of it as a folk song—one that’s always been around.”³⁴ Jablonski similarly writes:

³¹ Burton Lane, Euology for Harold Arlen, April 25, 1986 as cited in Rimler, 34.

³² Wilfrid Sheed as quoted in *Ibid.*

³³ Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 49.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 33.

Though his name is mentioned regularly with all the other great contributors to American music, Arlen has also been mentioned in the company of Stephen Foster. Defining Harold Arlen's historical niche in American music becomes simpler with the introduction of Foster's name. Arlen's art—and it is art—is rooted, as is Foster's in American folk music; yet it is not a purist's folk music in the sense that it has sprung from the traditional music of the people . . . The only true American folk music readily identified as purely American is jazz, the blues, ragtime, and the other contributions by the American Negro, but so is the music of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley. The two musics have exchanged influences and have enriched American art music.³⁵

Giving credence to his claim, Jablonski recounts a story in which producer Robert Breen, on tour with *Porgy and Bess* in 1955, attended a concert in Cairo that featured in addition to classical fare, a section titled "American Folk Music." This section included only five selections: "Stormy Weather," "Blues in the Night," "I Gotta Right to Sing the Blues," "Ac-cent-tchu-ate the Positive," and "Ill Wind." When he approached the conductor after the concert, he was told that "they are just old American folk melodies that we made into a folk medley." The conductor was amazed to learn that these songs were not only not folk music in the strictest sense, but that their composer, one Harold Arlen, was alive and well.³⁶

This view of blues and jazz, and Arlen's music specifically as folk, is made particularly clear by a performance of "Stormy Weather" by singer Joni Mitchell. Her performance is featured on the live album, *Stormy Weather*, produced by Don Henley and released by the Isis Fund in 1998. Funded by AT&T and the Thoreau Institute, the album was made exclusively available to longtime customers of AT&T to help expand the mission of the Walden Woods Project, a non-profit organization founded

³⁵ Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* 18–19.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, xv.

for the preservation of Walden Woods in Lincoln, Massachusetts, one of the most enduring symbols of American history and culture. Mitchell's performance is featured alongside performances by a diverse list of artists including, Gwen Stefani, Trisha Yearwood, Sheryl Crow, Stevie Nicks, Björk, and Natalie Cole. Each artist offers a cover of an American standard by fellow Jewish-American songwriters, including Gershwin's "You Can't Take That Away from Me" and Mac Gordon and Harry Warren's "At Last."

It is possible that Arlen's "Stormy Weather" also influenced Helen Carter's "Dark and Stormy Weather" or was influenced by the earlier recording by her predecessors, the Carter Family. The song, "Dark and Stormy Weather," allegedly written by A. P. "Doc" Carter, follows a similar lyrical pattern and melodic contour, is a folk tune based on the familiar melody "Down in the Sally Gardens." In the Carter Family recording from the 1930s, the melody drops a fifth on "Weather" as in the melody of "Sally Gardens." The song was later recorded with an interesting variation by Maybelle Carter's eldest daughter, Helen Carter, sister of June Carter, in her recording from 1998. Her recording from this later date, after the success of Arlen's song, features an octave drop on "Weather," perhaps consciously or unconsciously paying reference to Arlen.³⁷

"Stormy Weather" continues to dominate the popular culture of the United States today, appearing inconspicuously in the background of countless film and

³⁷ Carter Family "Dark and Stormy Weather," Bluebird B8868, November 1941, 78 rpm. Helen Carter, "Dark and Stormy Weather," *This is For You Mama* (Brighton, MI: Old Homestead Records, 1980) OHS 90124, 12" LP.

television programs. It can even be heard through the open windows of many cars today, streaming from NPR Public Radio. The tune is played slowly by solo piano, no words necessary now for a melody that has lived on so far beyond its original performance at the Cotton Club. Comically, it reports a drop in the Dow Jones Industrial or the overall financial vitality and well-being of the nation, while “We’re in the Money” signifies that markets are up and “It Don’t Mean a Thing if It Ain’t Got that Swing” reports a mixed market.

Ill Wind

By the time Arlen was ready to leave the Cotton Club, his musical style had come into its own. The influence of jazz on his compositional style can also be heard in one of his final compositions for the Cotton Club, and another great weather tune, “Ill Wind.” In this composition, we again hear Arlen immersed in the New York club jazz style.

Unconventional and Extended Form

Written for the 1934 *Cotton Club Parade*, Arlen and Koehler’s last contribution to the jazz promenade, “Ill Wind” is another of Arlen’s tapeworms. Spanning forty bars, it represents Arlen’s complex approach to phrase structure and organization to an even higher degree. In total, the work sprawls, 40 measures (not including the piano introduction).

Section	Bars	Text
A	10	Blow, ill wind, blow away.
A’	10	Go, ill wind, go away
B	8	You’re only mis-leadin’
A”	12	So, ill wind, blow away.

Table 4: Formal Pattern "Ill Wind"

On first appearance, it is clear that the phrase structure of the opening A section does not conform to a symmetrical eight-bar structure. An unusual ten measures in length, this section is uneven on a multitude of levels. On the surface level, the A section is divided into segments of an odd grouping of measures. Theorist Allen Forte has described the division of the phrase structure as 3+4+3.³⁸

The image shows a musical score for the song "Ill Wind". The first line of music is divided into three segments: a 3-measure segment, a 4-measure segment, and a 3-measure segment. The lyrics under the first line are: "Blow ill wind blow a - way, Let me rest to - day, You're". The second line of music is a 3-measure segment with the lyrics: "blow-in' me no good, no good." The key signature is one flat (B-flat) and the time signature is 4/4.

Example 11: Superficial Phrase Structure, “Ill Wind”

This hearing is reasonable, especially when one considers the punctuation for the text. However, it does not well account for the rhythmic ingenuity of this section.

The strange magic of the rhythm’s effect on phrase structure is perhaps best observed in performance. Originally written for Adelaide Hall and accompanied by the Jimmie Lunceford Orchestra, “Ill Wind” has also become a standard for performers including Lena Horne, Frank Sinatra, Dinah Washington, and Ella Fitzgerald. In each performance, the phrase structure is broken down in significantly different ways. These performative differences are the result of the *mutability* of the phrase structure, which in turn owes to the tune’s motivic nature. The mutability of

³⁸ Ibid.

phrase structure in Arlen's music, as evidenced by "Ill Wind," is particularly clear in the recording of Frank Sinatra.³⁹

The first bar of "Ill Wind" begins with a whole note, almost stopping the phrase before it has begun. Unusual for vocal writing, particularly in popular song, this rhythm displaces our sense of the phrase continuing, and can be heard functioning as its own self-contained unit. This hearing is clarified when one considers vocal technique. The initial lyric, "blow," ends in a strong diphthong resulting in the closing of the lips and stopping of the sound. Further, while the grammar of the lyrics indicate that the singer should continue the phrase beginning with "blow" over the next bar, the text of the next bar begins with a glottal stop at "ill" that naturally creates a break in the sound unless the singer takes great care to elide the "w" of "blow." Frank Sinatra takes a slower tempo and allows the first note of the phrase ("blow") to decay, following the natural effects of pronunciation and capturing the pathos of the work.

In addition to treating the first measure as its own phrase, Sinatra breaks the second measure into two distinct phrase units "Ill Wind"/ "Blow Away." This effect, suggested by the placement of the commas in the lyrics, allows the singer to highlight the repeated text at "blow," and also points out the collapse of the second interval, heard first in the diatonic form ("ill wind") and later in the chromatic ("a-way"). The

³⁹ Harold Arlen, "Ill Wind," accompanied by Arthur Schutt piano (February 6, 1934), Victor 24579, LP. Recording can be accessed: <https://songbook1.wordpress.com/tx/si/sw/composers-and-lyricists/harold-arlen/harold-arlen-sings/>. Frank Sinatra, "Ill Wind," *In The Wee Small Hours*, re-issued and re-mastered by Capitol Records, May 26, 1998, B000006OHD.

result is that the first three measures are now broken into separate units: (1+2) in which the two-bar unit is further broken down into two sections that are unequal in duration ($\frac{1}{2} + 1\frac{1}{2}$ bars respectively). The subsequent phrase beginning “skies are oh so gray” likewise breaks down from a four-bar phrase into smaller, unequal phrases when one observes the punctuation and takes into consideration the rhythmic values tying over the barline.

The image shows two staves of musical notation in G minor. The first staff contains the lyrics: "Blow ill wind blow a - way, Let me rest to - day, You're". Above the staff, there are three horizontal lines with brackets indicating phrase structures: a line labeled '1' above the first measure; a line labeled '2' above the next two measures, with a sub-division below it showing $[\frac{1}{2}] + [1\frac{1}{2}]$; and a line labeled '2' above the final two measures. The second staff contains the lyrics: "blow-in' me no good, no good.". Above this staff, there are two horizontal lines with brackets, each labeled $2\frac{1}{2}$, spanning the first two and last two measures respectively.

Example 12: Performative Phrase Structure, A Section of “Ill Wind”

The phrase structure established in the first A section is further manipulated in the subsequent A section by changing the rhythm of the final measures causing the phrase beginning at “sky” to be retroactively heard differently.

$\frac{1}{2}$ $1\frac{1}{2}$ 2

2 3

Example 13: Phrase Structure A', "Ill Wind"

This phrase structure is still further manipulated again in the final reprise of A (12 measures including piano) at the end of the work.

1 2 2

$2\frac{1}{2}$ 2 $1\frac{1}{2}$

Example 14: Phrase Structure A'', "Ill Wind"

The phrase structure of the B section is likewise complex, and often rendered more so in live performance. While this section is the only to conform to the expected eight bars, again Arlen does not do so according to the conventional approach. On the surface, it looks as though this section is primarily built from two short rhymed phrases "You're only misleadin' the sunshine I'm needin'"/ "It's so hard to keep up with troubles that creep up." This creates a phrase structure of 4 + 4. However, the

units that comprise each of the four bar phrases are further broken down by the three-note melodic gestures (C#-D-D). The octave drop at the end of each of these units makes it sound as though this small unit in and of itself has achieved finality and can stand alone. In his recording Sinatra naturally calls attention to this by slightly prolonging the rhythm in between each re-iteration of this three note motive.

The image shows three staves of musical notation in G minor. The first staff contains the lyrics "You're on-ly mis-lead-in' the sun-shine I'm need-in'— Ain't that a shame?—" with fingerings [1] [1] [1] [1] [2] and a slur over the final three notes. The second staff contains "It's so hard to keep up with trou-bles that creep up from" with fingerings [1] [1] [1] [1] and a slur over the first two notes. The third staff contains "out of no— where, when love to blame." with a fingering [2].

Example 15: Phrase Structure, Release, “Ill Wind”

Melodic Development: Motivicity

Sinatra’s approach to phrasing points again to a significant feature of Arlen’s style: a focus at the motivic level. As I demonstrate, at its core, the motivic structure in “Ill Wind” is heavily dependent on two elements: sustained rhythms and the interval of the second. As noted in the analysis of the phrase structure, there is an emphasis on the whole note itself as a motivic unit. The whole note that occurs on the opening beat of draws the listener’s immediate attention and focus. Forte points out that this initial rhythm (“blow”/ B^b), as well as the subsequent sustained rhythmic values highlighted on “way” (G) and “day” (F), help to highlight the pentatonic nature of the melody.

These pentatonic moments signaled by the rhythm are further emphasized through the deliberate placement of lowered blue notes that emphasize their arrival, usually through the interval of a chromatic second.⁴⁰

Indeed, melodically, “Ill Wind” is a veritable ode to the second in its various guises. It is through playing with this simplest of intervals, the second, that Arlen derives the bulk of the melody. The interval of the second is first introduced as fundamental to the sound of “Ill Wind” surreptitiously in piano accompaniment. The interval of the second is emphasized on the first beat of the opening measure as the lower voice of the right hand (A, A^b, G, F) clashes against the B^b triad emphasized in the outer voices, inching down stepward toward resolution. It likewise appears emphasized in the left hand as E^b D on beats three–four of the first measure, where it is approached via a large leap and paralleled in motion by the right hand (G-F). The second also appears prominently in bar two, first inverted as a minor seventh (C l.h./ B^b r.h.) and then as stacked seconds in the final sustained chord before the vocalist’s entrance (F-G-A). The left hand figure of the accompaniment from bar one, emphasizing the second, likewise reappears under the vocalists initial entrance.

The musical score is in 4/4 time and B-flat major. It consists of three measures. The first measure has a vocal line with a whole rest and a piano accompaniment starting with a chord of A, A-flat, G, and F in the right hand, and E-flat and D in the left hand. The second measure continues the piano accompaniment with a chord of C in the left hand and B-flat in the right hand. The third measure features a vocal line with a whole note 'Blow' and a piano accompaniment with a sustained chord of F, G, and A in the right hand, and the same left hand figure as in the first measure.

Example 16: Piano Introduction, “Ill Wind.”

⁴⁰ Forte, 211.

The opening melody of “I’ll Wind” emphasizes a diatonic second, which is immediately transformed into a chromatic second at “blow away.” This newly introduced chromatic second is emphasized in measures 6–7 as the melodic motion moves from D^b to C (“let me”) and G^b to F (“to-day”) separated by the tonic axis B^b. The interval of the second is highlighted again at “blowin’” in measure 8, where it is emphasized by a decorated octave leap (the Arlen signatue). There it is also framed by a rising minor third and falling minor sixth on either side, playing now intervallically with inversion and opposition in a smiliar way to the earlier juxtaposition of the diatonic and chromatic second.

If Arlen’s focus on the second motive is veiled in the A sections, it is brought to into glaring focus by the release (B). Therin Arlen obsessively develops a chromatic second motion C[#]-D, late reversed as E^b-D at measure 25, which is further emphasized by the quickened rhythmic pace and the octave/seventh leaps in the melody. This thinking at the smallest level, demonstrates again Arlen’s absorption of jazz influences, as melody emerges from a small riff or pattern, often with rhythmic emphasis.

Vocal Writing

The vocal writing of “Ill Wind” is unusual in many respects and simultaneously typical for Arlen. While most composers, especially those with a background in voice, would tend to write arch shaped phrases, Arlen presents a series of disjointed units, constantly varied even in their repetition. The extreme leaps of the vocal release are also more instrumental than vocal in character, the repeated sevenths being

difficult even for the most talented of musicians to keep in tune. This too is typical, however, of Arlen's style.

Arlen's own recording of the work also includes an unpublished vocal interlude, a feature he often included in his songs.⁴¹ As in many of his interludes, this section is completely in contrast with the character of what comes before in the AABA chorus.

How can I feel at ease, when you wind through the trees,
Where blackbirds are singing the blues.
You rattle my door, can't stand it no more.
I'm weary of hearing bad news.

My blue bird would cheer me if you'd let him near me,
But when you are around, away he goes.
The Lord only knows my trouble and more.

The interlude interrupts with rollicking major piano riffs and figurations that coupled with the melodic writing that seems influenced by ragtime, before a tricky bit of modulation brings back a reprise of the final A.

The appearance of a vocal interlude both in "Ill Wind" and "Stormy Weather" reminds one of the New Orleans style jazz recordings of Arlen's youth, in which the vocalist often entered midway through the recording as an interlude. This was a common performance practice in jazz arrangements in the 1920s and 1930s. Indeed, another Arlen recording of "Ill Wind," with Eddy Duchin and His Orchestra presents

⁴¹ Harold Arlen (vocals) and Arthur Schutt (piano), "Ill Wind (Recorded February 6, 1934), Victor 24569.

“Ill Wind” in this earlier format, largely an instrumental piece, in which the AABA of the song is performed by Arlen midway through the work.⁴²

Harmony

While the piece is written in the key signature of B^b and the initial chord is a B^b tonic, it sounds as in a minor key from the beginning. In part this results from the non-direct harmonic progression of the opening phrase which moves through a chain of minor thirds (Dm7+4/ Fm7) before arriving on a major G7 by way of accenting the relationship of a second, a fundamental relationship to the piece. The emphasis on these minor areas leading to the sixth scale degree questions the harmonic area. The question remains, why this progression?

According to Forte, Arlen is largely led to this progression because of the use of blue notes he incorporates in the melody.⁴³ Beginning with the lowered seventh (A^b / “blow”) in measure four, Arlen’s harmony is led astray by his desire to use the blue note to emphasize the interval of the second. Perhaps this is what Arlen meant when he joked that he sometimes got into “trouble” and needed a few extra measures to work things out. The story of the third, always a pitch of interest in an Arlen work, is particularly noteworthy within the piece. The expected D is transformed quickly to D^b and prominently positioned on the first beat of measure 6. The inclusion of the lowered third D^b early on in the vocal melody (measure 6), plays upon the major-

⁴² Harold Arlen with Eddy Duchin and His Orchestra, (February 28, 1934), Victor 24579. Recording can be accessed: <https://songbook1.wordpress.com/tx/si/sw/composers-and-lyricists/harold-arlen/harold-arlen-sings/>.

⁴³ Forte, 211.

minor juxtaposition of which Arlen was so fond while recoloring the subdominant chord of that bar.

Forte further notes jazz influence in the harmony in “Ill Wind” as he describes Arlen’s “idiomatic harmony—one that can be heard not infrequently in jazz-infiltrated popular ballads beginning in the early 1930s—again, probably attributable to the influence of the big bands with their experimental arrangements, which were then coming into such prominence, in the music of the Ellington band in particular.”⁴⁴

Conclusions

Arlen’s “Stormy Weather” and “Ill Wind” represent some of the first manifestations of his distinct compositional voice. When the Cotton Club closed in the late 1930s after the 21st amendment legalized the sale of alcohol and effectively ended the need for an underground system of illicit libation accompanied by entertainment, the influence of his early years spent playing jazz never left Arlen. Many of the songs he wrote in these early years have come to occupy such a prominent position in the Great American Songbook that they are now called standards. So influential was his music that following one of the last songs written for the club, “I Love a Parade” all subsequent shows of the Cotton Club were called the *Cotton Club Parade*. As he continued on to his next enterprises, Broadway and Hollywood, the sounds of the smoke-filled supper club never left his ears and would continue to appear in his future compositions, not as a hallmark of bygone years but as the exciting start of something new as he carried the sounds of jazz forth into other new ventures.

⁴⁴ Forte, 212.

INTERLUDE 1

The Americanegro Suite

Following his departure from the Cotton Club, Arlen found himself at the juncture of two roads diverged. There were few paths to success in the music world of the early twentieth-century United States. The first and most well-traveled of these paths was through achieving success on stage and screen in the arenas of Broadway and Hollywood. The second, and rockier path to be certain, was to make a name for oneself as a *composer*, forging into the hallowed halls of classical music. Arlen pursued both of these paths in his career. In the interludes from this dissertation, I explore Harold Arlen's relationship with classical music. In so doing, we are able to observe how his absorption of jazz elements into his compositional voice was informed not only through his experiences with popular music, but also through new developments in the classical world.

During his years at the Cotton Club, Arlen had also been busy writing for Broadway musicals and revues. In 1932 he worked on the score for a revue titled *New Americana*, where he met future friend, frequent collaborator, and librettist E. Y. Harburg. Following their meeting, Arlen would work with Harburg on many projects throughout the decade, the pair jet-setting back and forth between Broadway and Hollywood. They collaborated on two musical revues, *Life Begins at 8:40* (1934, co-written with Ira Gershwin), and *Hooray for What* (1937), and several films for Studios including: *Strike Me Pink* (1936), *Stage Struck* (1936), *The Singing Kid* (1936), and *The Gold Diggers of 1937*, *The Circus* (1939), and of course, *The Wizard of Oz* (1939) which has forever made their names known to history.

Despite his enthusiasm for staged works, however, Arlen was also intrigued by the possibilities of breaking into the world of classical music. That Arlen would be intrigued by the world of classical music should come as no surprise considering his admiration for George Gershwin. Throughout his life, Arlen frequently and without hesitation named Gershwin as his favorite composer. According to Edward Jablonski:

On hearing Leonard Bernstein refer to Aaron Copland as one of “America’s great composers” on television, Arlen disagreed. He felt that Copland lacked true individuality, that he was a great musician, a musical architect, but no great composer. Arlen was an admirer of Stravinsky’s *Firebird* and found the Russian composer to be a great melodist. Beethoven was “too grand.” He enjoyed the Romantic modern composer Ralph Vaughn Williams, but it was Gershwin he admired most.¹

The feeling was apparently mutual. The strong musical relationship between the two composers has been observed by many, including Gershwin’s biographer Howard Pollack: “Gershwin found his own heir in Harold Arlen, who became not only a good friend but, along with Vernon Duke, probably as much of a protégé as he ever had.”²

Gershwin’s early death in 1937 had a profound impact on Arlen, an effect that even manifested itself in his physical health.³ While Arlen never directly discussed his hero’s influence on his decision to pursue classical composition, following

¹ Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University, 1996), 114.

² Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006), 161.

³ Following Gershwin’s death Arlen began to experience terrible headaches, a phenomenon even his physician believed was a reaction to Gershwin’s death; Arlen taking on the physical symptoms of the brain tumor that had ailed his mentor. Though, this was later found to be a cyst in the composer’s upper jaw, which pressed on a nerve, and was easily removed. See Jablonski, *Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 114.

Gershwin's death, Arlen created more works for the classical world. While he had written at least one work in this vein as early as 1935—"Mood in Six Minutes" commissioned for the General Motors Symphony Hour—his most serious efforts began in the early 1940s with the *Americanegro Suite*, for which he rejoined Ted Koehler.⁴

Americanegro Suite, subtitled "four spirituals, a dream, and a lullaby," is a "suite of songs in the Negro idiom." Organized and presented as a cycle of six art songs for solo voice and choir, and published by Chappell Press in 1940 in an elaborate hardcover collection, complete with illustrations by American Artist Henry Botkin and an accompanying essay by music critic and Arlen's longtime friend Rob Wachsman, as well as reviews from Deems Taylor, Irving Berlin, Ira Gershwin, Hall Johnson, and Jerome Kern, the cycle is a testament to the depth of Arlen's admiration for and fascination with African American music.

While many white composers of the 1920s and 1930s had written "Broadway spirituals," songs with fleeting musical references to black topics and filled with opaque lyrical references that "depend for their racial flavor upon sundry allusions to

⁴ General Motors Symphony Hour, Broadcast April 14, 1935. According to Walter Rimler this work has been heard only once during this live broadcast and has not appeared since in either broadcast, concert, or recording, nor does it exist in published sheet music. He alleges that parts of it were recycled twice for Arlen's work for Broadway: first into the *Hero Ballet* from *Hooray for What!* (1937) and again in the *Civil War Ballet* from *Bloomer Girl* (1944). He likewise contends parts appear in "the 1964 song "Night After Night," written with Dory Langdon Previn. See Walter Rimler, *The Man That Got Away: The Life and Songs of Harold Arlen* (Chicago: University of Illinois, 2015), 46. This is difficult to verify, however, as the only description of the work comes in the form of written word by Jablonski. See Jablonski, *Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 95–96.

the ‘Amen Corner,’ ‘Judgement Day,’ ‘Gabriel’s Horn,’ and a frustrated devil—with a few random ‘hallelujahs’ thrown in for measure,” few white songwriters had attempted sincere efforts at creating a spiritual as seen in the *Americanegro Suite*. Therein, Arlen draws inspiration from African American composers who were among the first to arrange the spiritual for solo concerted performance, including Harry Burleigh.

In his “Stormy Relations: The Cotton Club, Broadway Spirituals, and Harlem Encounters in the Music of Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler,” Nathaniel Sloan has argued that “Arlen’s ‘use of ‘classic’ spiritual tropes to support Koehler’s dialect lyrics appears backwards-looking rather than enlightened.”⁵ In this interlude, I argue that careful analysis of Arlen’s music in the context of composition by African American authors including Harry Burleigh, reveals greater nuance to his approach, while also giving voice to the African American authors on whose work Arlen based the suite. The *Americanegro Suite* serves as a rich site for the exploration of black-Jewish musical relations in the early part of the twentieth century, one that provides insight into the relationship between race and the popular music industry while also acknowledging the interconnectedness of various spheres of American music, including the sacred and the classical.

⁵ Nathaniel Sloan, “Stormy Relations: The Cotton Club, Broadway Spirituals, and Harlem Encounters in the Music of Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler,” *Musical Quarterly* 101 (2019): 138.

Making the Americanegro Suite

Unlike most Arlen compositions, the *Americanegro Suite* was an uncommissioned passion project that took shape slowly over the course of two years. The germinal seed was first planted in 1938 in the form of an eight-bar jot. As with many of his hit songs, Arlen worked at the piano, repetitively playing the short melody of what would become “Big Time Coming,” the final song in the cycle, coaxing out the tune like a jazz musician exploring the possibilities of a riff. Meanwhile Koehler sat relaxing nearby dreaming up lyrics. On hearing the melody, he suggested “there’ll be no more work/there’ll be no more worry,” and from there the pair developed the song’s chorus. But as Arlen biographer Edward Jablonski notes, Arlen and Koehler “were in no hurry, there being no great demand for spirituals at that moment.”⁶ Only once the jot had found full life in the song “Big Time Comin,” a “rousing jubilee, a come-to-glory shouting song,” did the pair begin to wonder about the sale and marketing possibilities for their newly-birthered creation. The demand for spirituals had not increased greatly by the time of the song’s completion in 1941 and Arlen and Koehler were left wondering: where did their work fit in?

According to Jablonski, it was an unnamed source that first recommended they consider crafting the song into a suite of art songs.⁷ Ultimately, “Big Time Coming” would come to serve as the final piece in a newly-crafted suite of songs that together comment on the state of the world in the war-torn 1940s. The resulting cycle

⁶ Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 144.

⁷ *Ibid.*

swings like a pendulum between pessimism and optimism, ultimately ending with the latter. The suite begins with “The Reverend Johnson’s Dream” followed by two pairs of spirituals separated by a lullaby: “I Got Dat’ Feelin,” “I’m Here Lawd,” “Little Ace O’ Spades,” “Where is Dis Road A-Leadin’ Me To,” and “Big Time Comin.””

As published, each of the songs in the *Americanegro Suite* is accompanied by an arresting black and white illustration by American artist Henry Botkin. Botkin (1896–1983), was the cousin of songwriters George and Ira Gershwin. The son of Rose Gershwin’s presumed first cousin Anna Dechinek Botkin, he was born in Boston and attended the Massachusetts College of Art before moving to New York where he took classes in drawing and illustration at the Arts Students League. He began his career as a magazine illustrator, working for *Harper’s*, the *Saturday Evening Post*, and the *Century Magazine*. In the late 1920s Botkin moved to Paris where his style underwent dramatic changes under the influence of the modernist school. He was known primarily for landscapes and still-lives, although he later moved toward abstraction and collage.⁸

⁸ See Pollack, 196–97. There is an archive dedicated to Henry Botkin at the Smithsonian Archives of American History. See Henry Botkin Papers 1917–1979 <https://www.aaa.si.edu/collections/henry-botkin-papers-7456#overview>.



Figure 2: Henry Botkin and George Gershwin, ca. 1934, unidentified photographer. Henry Botkin papers, 1917–1970. Archives of American Art, Smithsonian Institution

It is unclear at what point in the creative process Botkin joined Arlen in collaborating on the *Americanegro Suite* or the circumstances under which their partnership formed, but Botkin the two men were likely introduced through the Gershwins. After returning from Paris in the 1930s, Botkin acted as informal painting instructor and art curator for George, who had a strong interest in the visual arts.⁹ Over a period of approximately seven years, Gershwin spent a reported \$50,000 acquiring more than 150 works of art including paintings by European and American

⁹ In fact, many composers active during the Golden Age of popular song had a deep interest and appreciation for the visual arts not only as collectors, but also as creators. Arlen, Gershwin, and Berlin each put paintbrush to canvas, painting everyday scenes and objects as well as friends and family.

artists, as well as African sculpture.¹⁰ According to Martha Severens, Botkin and Gershwin shared an affinity for African and African American culture that stimulated Gershwin's creative work: "The interaction between the two cousins was a dynamic one, and Botkin created paintings that reflect Gershwin's music. Correspondences are found in subject and in style."¹¹ Indeed, Botkin accompanied Gershwin on his now legendary trips to study Gullah culture on Folley Island in South Carolina prior to the creation of *Porgy and Bess*.

Each of Botkin's illustrations for the *Americanegro Suite* depicts a common trope based on racist caricatures of African Americans: singers joined in praise with hands raised high, the lonesome bluesman with his guitar, a mammy figure crooning a lullaby to the child curled at her breast. These images provide significant insight into white Americans' image of African American life. What is significant about these visuals is that they all contain musicalized elements, demonstrating how closely the imaginary and romanticized image of African Americans and their history was tied to music, and the stereotypical belief propagated by the minstrel show that to be black was to be innately musical.¹² The connection between blackness and musicality

¹⁰ Pollack, 197–201.

¹¹ Martha Severens, *The Charleston Renaissance* (Spartanburg, SC: Saraland Press, 1998), 112.

¹² Michael Brenson, "Black Musicians in Art" Stereotypes and Beyond," *Art View*, *The New York Times* (August 14, 1988), 31; Kurtz Allen, *Stereotypes in Black Music: The African-American Crossover Compromise* (Createspace Indie Pub Platform, 2010).

is further evident in (white) critics' assessment of Botkin's illustrations, which draws on musical jargon:

The very intensity of his absorption in negro life and many exhibitions of paintings of the south brought considerable praise. . . . There is no shallow sentimentality in his painting and they never descend to the popular burlesque caricatures or easy illustrative approach so common in these themes. *Their rich, deep-throated fullness of utterance and their harmonies of vibrant tones in the lower registers make these pictures authentic aesthetically.*¹³

The appearance of the word 'authentic' in the description of Botkin's paintings is further noteworthy; it brings to light a common phenomenon in both popular and classical music in the twentieth century, namely the use of African American musical styles to communicate authenticity.

The theme of authenticity, and the complex ability of white musicians to use black voices to express it can also be found in Wachsman's introduction:

But whether Ted and Harold have worked together or apart, they never lost sight of the promise they unconsciously made to each other—that somewhere, somehow, some time they were going to produce music and songs for Negroes that would truly express race. If they had learned in their early Cotton Club days that the Negro had his own way to express sorrow, or joy, that there was a belief in the natural, the spiritual and the supernatural that was both naïve and profound, then they likewise felt that they could write music that would help portray all this.¹⁴

While all this was going on, they had a more intimate association with Negroes and Negro life. Instinctively they sensed that there was something special, something great that the race had to say.¹⁵

¹³ As cited in *Americanegro Suite: Four Spirituals, A Dream, and a Lullaby* (New York, NY: Chappell, 1941), 16, emphasis added.

¹⁴ Wachsman quoted in the foreword of *ibid.*, 11.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 10.

This sentiment is further echoed in the book jacket endorsements from fellow composers and lyricists. Irving Berlin praised the collection while simultaneously acknowledging its place within the larger body of popular songs inspired by African American musical subjects (cleverly leaving the question of racial ownership and authorship ambiguous): “Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler have made an important contribution to the catalogue of modern American Negro songs.”¹⁶ Ira Gershwin, Deems Taylor, and Jerome Kern meanwhile each lauded the songs for their ‘authenticity.’¹⁷

These incantations by Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler have not only the character and atmosphere but also the flavor of authenticity. They make an eminently worthwhile contribution to American folk music and I hope they attain the success they deserve.
—Ira Gershwin

Here are songs that, while not imitative, evoke the charm of the Negro spiritual, preserving the directness, humor and underlying sincerity of the folk-song, enhanced by individual touches that give them a special quality all their own.
—Deems Taylor

In the ‘Americaneegro Suite’ I think Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler are to be congratulated particularly for successfully avoiding the sham of pseudo-Negro spirituals. Here are a half-dozen genre pictures: conceived, it is true, in the Negro narrative idiom, but they are almost without exception genuine musical creations, not experiments in imitation.
—Jerome Kern

These comments from prominent white figures in American music are interesting for several reasons, not the least of which is that they demonstrate white privilege and power in the music industry, and in American society generally during the time of the

¹⁶ Irving Berlin quoted in *Americanegro Suite*, 18.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 18–19.

work's creation. The depiction of these caricatures as authentic, sincere, and genuine was an important component of the discourse that helped to maintain white supremacy. The profound strangeness of a score written by two white men and being praised by fellow white artists, all the while drawing upon Black musical language is difficult to comprehend from a twenty-first century perspective, creating a parallel with the minstrel show of earlier decades. It should further be noted that it is clear this work was not written specifically for African American performers, who frequently experienced barriers in the music industry and particularly in the realm of classical music. One only need think of the tales of Marian Anderson as example. In fact, the most oft cited recording of this work was performed by the white American singer, Judy Kaye.¹⁸

The *Americanegro Suite* was favorably reviewed by African American composers and critics of the time as well. Hall Johnson, renowned composer and arranger of spirituals applauded Arlen and Koehler's work for its uniqueness among similar Tin Pan Alley compositions:

Of all the many songs written by white composers and employing what claims to be a Negroid idiom in both words and music, these six songs . . . easily stand far out above the rest. Thoroughly modern in treatment, they are at the same time, full of the simple sincerity which invariably characterizes genuine Negro folk-music and are by no means to be confused with the average "Broadway Spirituals."¹⁹

¹⁸ Harold Arlen, *The Americanegro Suite Plus Songs from Stage and Screen featuring Judy Kaye, soprano with Peter Howard, piano*, directed by Robert W. Stern, produced by Stuart Triff (New York, NY: Premier Recordings PRCD 1004, 1986; re-released 1990).

¹⁹ Hall Johnson quoted in *Americanegro Suite*, 19.

Johnson's comments point toward the unique treatment of African American musical styles in *Americanegro Suite*, which occupy an unexpectedly central place in the otherwise classical, Euro-American genre of the song cycle.

Arlen was hardly the first composer to use African American musical idioms as the subject of an art song, yet he was one of the first white composers to do so, with the important exception of Stephen Foster's parlor songs, which are likewise standalone compositions for voice and piano.²⁰ While George Gershwin is often celebrated for his fusion of classical and popular styles vis-à-vis his incorporation of jazz idioms into classical genres for opera and orchestra, and composers like Irving Berlin are remembered for infusing Broadway songs with the vital energy of ragtime rhythms, few other Tin Pan Alley composers successfully composed in the venerated form of the art song.²¹

From where then did Arlen draw his inspiration? While there were few white composers writing in a comparable style, there was an established tradition of African American composers in the United States writing solo spirituals for voice with piano accompaniment. In the following section, I will briefly explore the history of the

²⁰ Rimler also describes Arlen's earlier "Things," written with E. Y. Harburg for comedic performer Bert Lahr as a "pseudo-art song." In this work, Arlen and Harburg mock the pretense of the art song as Lahr sang in wide, obnoxious vibrato of many "things" without actually saying anything. See Rimler, 42.

²¹ Here I am considering the art song as a work intended for stand-alone performance outside of the context of a staged work, following the tradition of Romantic art song composer's such as Schumann and Schubert. Usually such works are for solo voice as are the majority of the pieces in Arlen's *Americanegro Suite*. He includes fleeting sections marked choral in the conclusion of a few pieces, though only one melodic line continues to be notated and there are no harmonies.

spiritual that traces its journey from choral religious work to solo concerted work before analyzing Arlen's approach to the new genre of the solo spiritual. In doing so, I demonstrate that the *Americanegro Suite* embodies the complex history of race relationships in the American popular music industry.

A Brief History the African American Spiritual

Sandra Graham has defined spirituals as “religious folk songs created by African Americans in the early nineteenth century.”²² They are characterized as much by their musical sound as by their lyrical substance. Spirituals are richly saturated by textual references to the Old Testament, where unknown poets drew inspiration from parallel stories of struggle and triumph, such as those of the Israelites in captivity, as well as those featuring heroes who overcame great odds: David, Daniel, and Jonah. As Sandra Graham notes, they demonstrate a “selective approach to Christianity” shaped by the circumstances of African Americans in the New World and focus on themes of “righteousness on Judgement day,” “the jubilation of crossing into heaven,” “the pathos of earthly suffering,” and “patience.” These themes are presented through a mixture of strong first-person narrative and metaphor that draws heavily on imagery. The rugged spirit of determination and defiance, joy and sorrow, is captured by sometimes erratic rhyme schemes that speak to the spiritual's origins as an oral tradition.²³

²² Sandra Graham, *Spirituals and the Birth of the Black Entertainment Industry* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

²³ Ibid.

As a primarily oral tradition, the origins of the spiritual are highly contested and debated.²⁴ The fusion of African American aesthetics and traditions with the practice of white hymnody and later camp meeting songs appears to be what first gave rise to the body of music known as the spiritual. Musically, spirituals demonstrate a kinship with each of these sources of origins. They bear living witness to many West African musical styles through the inclusion of call and response phrase structure, flattened or blue notes, and gapped scale melodies, while also incorporating Western features such as verse-chorus form, triadic harmonies, or conventional meters.

According to Eileen Southern, contrary to popular belief that spirituals were born on Southern plantations, the earliest references to spirituals appear to be found in sources dating from the early nineteenth century in the Philadelphia area, a stronghold of the newly independent African American churches, such as the African Methodist Episcopal Church, where African Americans were free to worship as they wished.

How did this music come to be known to a young Jewish-American songwriter living and working in New York in the 1940s? The answer lies in the spiritual's journey from the church altar to the concert stage. Throughout the mid to late 1800s, choral arrangements of spirituals became popular among Jubilee groups, African American choral groups modeled on the famed Fisk Jubilee Singers. In the 1870s, these groups became a popular subject of the minstrel show and were parodied alongside camp meetings and other religious practices. The enduring popularity of the

²⁴ Eileen Southern, "An Origin for the Negro Spiritual," *The Black Scholar* 3/10 (Summer 1972), 8–13.

minstrel show helped to launch the concert spiritual into musical fame as religiously-influenced popular music dominated the minstrel show for at least the better part of a decade.²⁵

While such concert spirituals often identified an arranger, they were not attributed to specific composers. By 1875, both white and Black composers had begun to write new works based on the lyrical and musical properties found in the concert spiritual. Graham refers to these spirituals as “commercial spirituals.” Such spirituals, designed for mass market appeal, varied in musical style but drew upon associations with earlier forms of the spiritual through common themes (e.g. Judgement Day) or lyrical references (e.g. “Gabriel’s trumpet, “hallelujah”) to create associations with the folk spiritual. Many also included sonic indexes of the spiritual such as gapped-scales or blue notes, though often these musical elements were treated as secondary to the overall musical style of the work.²⁶

“Commercial spirituals” have often been dismissed as “knock-offs” or “imitations” unworthy of study. For example, Sam Dennison, the first to describe this kind of spiritual decried them saying “the unquestioned sincerity of the spiritual’s cry from the depths of the black soul became a tawdry, derisory desecration of the original; all the sublime expression of the black’s innermost being was transformed into a ridiculous triviality that was in every sense as degrading to the imitator as to be

²⁵ Graham, 144.

²⁶ Ibid.

imitated.”²⁷ Nevertheless, written and performed not only by whites but also by African American performers and arrangers, these “spirituals became the first mass market music to have originated in Black experience.”²⁸

The commercial spiritual peaked in popularity by the 1880s but could be found through the 1930s and 1940s, when they also incorporated elements of new musical styles, especially ragtime and Tin Pan Alley, with traces of its impact lingering well into the 1930s and 1940s. Arlen’s *Americanegro Suite* thus falls within the tail end of the commercial spiritual’s heyday.²⁹

Influences in Arlen’s *Americanegro Suite*

In order to better understand Arlen’s *Americanegro Suite*, it is helpful to situate his work within the context of the commercial spiritual. Four composers—Harry T. Burleigh (1866–1949), Will Marion Cook (1869–1944), John Rosamund Johnson (1873–1954), and William Grant Still (1895–1978)—stand out as composers of commercial spirituals with whose work Arlen would likely have been familiar. The connection between Arlen and these composers seems particularly significant considering Arlen’s personal relationships with the last two. Indeed, Cook was one of the figures who played an important role in encouraging Arlen to develop his first song, “Get Happy,” over a decade prior when the two worked together on Jack Yellen’s *You Said It* (1931). William Grant Still also collaborated on the music for

²⁷ Sam Dennison, *Scandalize My Name: Black Imagery in American Popular Music* (New York, Garland, 1982), 297–8.

²⁸ Graham, 119.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 147.

the film version of *Stormy Weather* in 1943. Yet it is Burleigh's contribution that stands, or rather sounds, the strongest in Arlen's *Americanegro Suite*.

Harry Burleigh (1866–1949)

Harry Burleigh began his career as a singer, well known for his resonant baritone voice, which he developed singing in his family's quartet. In 1892 he was awarded a scholarship to the National Conservatory in New York where he studied with Victor Herbert and Antonin Dvorák who also served as musical director from 1892 to 1895. Burleigh would go on to become a prolific arranger and composer, particularly remembered for his body of songs. He also held important positions in the musical community, atypical for African Americans at the time. From 1913 to 1941 he worked as a staff editor in the New York offices of the important Italian music publisher G. Ricordi. He was also a founding member of ASCAP (American Society of Composers and Performers) beginning in 1914, and he was elected to the board of directors in 1941.

Burleigh first began publishing his own songs in the 1890s. According to Jean Snyder, his early works reflect the traditions of the plantation and minstrel song, more however, are better described as ballads in a late-romantic style.³⁰ By 1915, his works had been featured on many recitals and he had established a reputation as a composer of art songs. At this same time, his relationship with the spiritual began to develop. From 1900 to 1915, Burleigh had accompanied Booker T. Washington on fundraising events in New England, singing Negro spirituals. Following this time, he wrote a

³⁰ Snyder s.v. "Harry Burleigh" in *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, Oxford Music Online.

number of solo spiritual arrangements, including “Deep River” (1917), which has brought him significant recognition both then and now.

According to Eileen Southern, Harry Burleigh was the first composer to set the genre of the “spiritual” or “gospel song” as a solo work for voice with accompaniment, changing the work from a participatory tradition into a performative one, and transforming a once primarily vernacular oral tradition into the world of art music.³¹ Southern notes that following the success of Burleigh’s early arrangements, many classically trained African American vocalists, including Marian Anderson, Roland Hayes, and Paul Robeson made a practice of concluding their recitals with a selection of such stylized solo spirituals or other folksongs. This tradition has continued with more contemporary African American vocalists including Jessye Norman and Kathleen Battle who frequently included solo spirituals in their concert programs. Thus, it is was Burleigh who first laid the foundation for future generations of composers to write in this new medium, creating a blueprint for the spiritual as art song, which would later give rise to the *Americanegro Suite*.

The Americanegro Suite as Commercial Spiritual

The influence of the commercial spiritual, most notably those by Harry Burleigh, can be seen in Arlen’s *Americanegro Suite*. Specifically, one can hear the “bi-musicality” of Burleigh echoed in Arlen’s work. In her dissertation, “Harry T. Burleigh and the Creative Expression of Bi-musicality: A Study of An African-American Composer and the American Art Song” (1992), Jean Snyder describes how Burleigh’s

³¹ Eileen Southern, *The Music of Black Americans: A History*, third Edition (New York: Norton, 1997), 271.

arrangements of spirituals in the tradition of art song demonstrate a mastery of both white European and African-American musical traditions, expressing a “bi-musicality.”³² Bi-musicality as defined by Bruno Nettl refers to “recognizing and keeping separate two or more musics in the same way in which bilingual people handle two languages.”³³ Burleigh’s compositions can perhaps be understood through the framework of “double-consciousness,” a concept derived from W. E. B. DuBois’s *The Souls of Black Folk* (1903). Therein the author describes how African-Americans live in “a world which . . . only lets himself see himself . . . through the eyes of others. One ever feels his twoness—an American, a Negro; two souls, two thoughts, two unreconciled strivings; two warring ideals in one dark body, whose dogged strength alone keeps it from being torn asunder.”³⁴ This concept is frequently applied not only to African Americans, but also immigrants and other marginalized groups.³⁵

The duality of Burleigh’s work can be heard in his classical approach to translating the spiritual as art song. Many of Burleigh’s solo spirituals adapt folk melodies simply by adding straight-forward, tonal accompaniment. Chromaticism is

³² Jean E. Snyder, “Harry T. Burleigh and the Creative Expression of Bi-Musicality: A Study of an African-American Composer and the American Art Song” (Ph.D. diss., University of Pittsburgh, 1992).

³³ Bruno Nettl, *The Study of Ethnomusicology: Thirty-One Issues and Concepts* (Urbana and Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois, 1983), 50.

³⁴ W. E. B. DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk: Essays and Sketches*, 3d. edition (Chicago: A.C. McClurg, 1903), 3.

³⁵ Lydia Goehr, “Music and Musicians in Exile: The Romantic Legacy of a Double Life,” in *Driven into Paradise: The Musical Migration from Nazi Germany to the United States*, ed. Reinhold Brinkmann and Christoph Wolff (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1999), 66–92 and 85.

used for occasional coloring or as passing dissonance only.³⁶ In the composer's own words: "My desire was to preserve them [the spirituals] in harmonies that belong to modern methods of tonal progression without robbing the melodies of their racial flavor."³⁷

This is not to say that Burleigh's music was uninteresting. Burleigh infused his compositions by creating variations in the accompaniment patterns to both create interest and clarify structure."³⁸ Indeed, many of Burleigh's songs are noted for growing "more active harmonic in rhythm, with a tendency to increasingly complex harmonization throughout the song even though the melody may be strophic."³⁹ Occasionally these harmonies include extended chord tones that suggest simultaneously a knowledge of late romantic styles and, in the case of the solo spiritual, also an intimate knowledge of African-American musical traditions. Many of these features can be attributed to Burleigh's double-consciousness and heard in the score for Arlen's *Americanegro Suite*, which continues to combine black and white musical sensibilities, while also highlighting Black-Jewish relations.

³⁶ Southern, *Music of Black Americans*, 271.

³⁷ *New York World*, October 25, 1924 as cited in *ibid.*, 271.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 253.

³⁹ *Ibid.*

Analyzing the Americanegro Suite

Big Time Comin'

Arlen and Koehler's first composition for the *Americanegro Suite*, which would come to serve as the last piece in the suite, exemplifies many of the qualities in Burleigh's works as identified by Snyder. Musically, it is probably the most conventional of the songs in the cycle, reflecting many of the features of a stylized spiritual for solo voice and piano as demonstrated by early Burleigh spirituals. The up-tempo chorus features a repetitive melodic sequence and the oom-pah style piano accompaniment outlines simple tonic-dominant progressions. The emphasis on the backbeat could suggest a congregation of worshipers clapping along in praise (see Example 17).

The musical score for the chorus of "Big Time Comin'" is presented in a standard staff format. It consists of a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats), and the time signature is 2/4. The lyrics are: "Dere'll be no more work dere'll be no more wor-ry dere'll be no more trouble when dat big — time comes." The piano accompaniment features a repetitive melodic sequence in the right hand and a simple tonic-dominant progression in the left hand, characteristic of an oom-pah style.

Example 17: Chorus from "Big Time Comin'"

The text depicts someone preparing to celebrate the arrival of the Judgment Day. The lyrics depend heavily on the image of the train, drawing on well-established literary

imagery from blues, where the symbol of the train implies a multitude of meanings from the crossroads to the Great Migration. The illustration provided by Botkin of the lone bluesman and his guitar further enforces this connection.



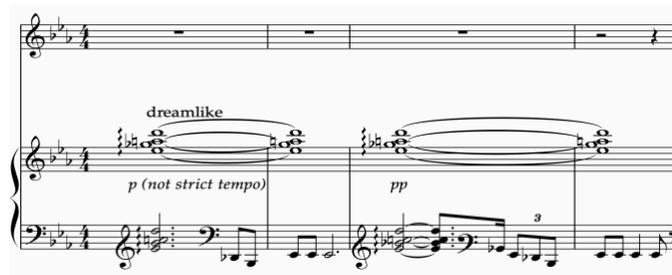
Figure 3: Harry Botkin, illustration for “Big Time Comin”

Reverend Johnson’s Dream

The final song composed for the collection, and the opening piece of the cycle, “Reverend Johnson’s Dream,” stands in contrast to “Big Time Coming” as the most musically adventurous. Completed sometime in September 1940, it presents a “sermon in 140 bars” in which a minister recounts the events of a dream in which he

climbs atop a high mountain, from where he can look down on the world.⁴⁰ He laments the turbulent state of the world in the war-torn 1940s and invokes the Lord's help.

“Reverend Johnson’s Dream” begins with dissonant chords featuring extended harmonies that summon the listeners’ attention in the same manner as a preacher banging on the pulpit before a fiery sermon. Rather than being strongly accented, however, these opening chords are presented in free tempo and piano dynamic make it seem as though the sermon is at a distance as in a past memory, or in this case a dream. The use of these sonorities is more reflective of Burleigh’s movement toward more tonally complex and through-composed works in his later period.⁴¹



Example 18: mm 1–6, “Reverend Johnson’s Dream”

As the preacher describes the physical journey to the mountaintop site of his revelation, the piano creates the scene of a long and wandering walk, through repetitive ostinato figures. In the bass, the left hand outlines a descending fifth,

⁴⁰ Arlen also marks the beginning of his “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive” from the film *Here Come the Waves* (1944) as as sermon.

⁴¹ Jean E. Snyder, *Harry T. Burleigh: From the Spiritual to the Harlem Renaissance* (Urbana and Chicago, Illinois: University of Illinois Press, 2016), 167.

beginning with a slithering chromatic slide, B^b, A, A^b, E^b. Above, the right hand provides sweet rocking sixths that oscillate back and forth between a whole step (see example 19).

The image displays two systems of musical notation. The first system consists of a vocal line in a treble clef and a piano accompaniment in a grand staff (treble and bass clefs). The vocal line has lyrics: "walked an' I walked an' I walked." The piano accompaniment features a chromatic slide in the bass line and rocking sixths in the right hand. The second system also has a vocal line and piano accompaniment. The vocal line has lyrics: "Down thru de val leys an' o-ver de hills" and is marked "molto cresc." The piano accompaniment continues with similar textures.

Example 19: mm 7–13, ostinato, “Reverend Johnson’s Dream”

Powerfully accented, sustained chromatic chords again appear to punctuate the narrator’s climb up a mountaintop from where he can look down and reflect upon the world. The left and right-hand patterns are then somewhat altered and reversed, the material for each now appearing in the opposite hand, as the narrator continues his sermon (see example 20). The rhythm of the descending fifth ostinato has gone through a noticeable process of rhythmic diminution, beginning first as eighth notes and now as sixteenths, showing the narrator’s growing sense of urgency and also musically energizing the piece and driving toward the end.

The remainder of the piece alternates back and forth between the extended chord sections and ostinatos. There are moments however, where Arlen also allows the voice to shine through by using a sparse texture of only tremolo octaves in the left hand, and then answering the vocalist’s melody in the right during moments of vocal

rest. These moments again call to mind the sights and sounds of the Baptist church, the growling crescendo of the pastor and the affirmations of the congregation and the choir.

The image shows two systems of musical notation. The first system starts at measure 24. The vocal line (treble clef) begins with a rest, followed by a triplet of eighth notes. The lyrics are "Den I stood dere gaz-in' on de world be-low. Like a". The piano accompaniment (grand staff) features a piano (*p*) dynamic and a rhythmic pattern of eighth notes in the right hand and chords in the left hand. The second system continues the vocal line with the lyrics "migh - ty cra-dle rock-in' to an' fro." and shows the continuation of the piano accompaniment.

Example 20: Ostinato Variation, mm 18–23, “Reverend Johnson’s Dream”

The vocal writing of “Reverend Johnson’s Dream” reveals the influence of a multitude of musical styles, alternating seamlessly between spoken and sung dialogues, a style of writing that simultaneously evokes *Sprechstimme* of the art song tradition or the interspersed dialogue of musical comedy traditions such as the minstrel show, while also referencing the melodic vocal patterns of preachers in the African American Baptist Church. Many of the passages are marked using with performance directions such as “very reverently” or “with motion (in a sermon-like fashion),” while sections are labeled using terms like “hymnal.” As Snyder notes, Burleigh developed a similar style referred to as “declamatory” in his late art song

repertoire.⁴² In both vocal style and substance, this work also bears a strong resemblance to Will Marion Cook's *Three Negro Songs*, published by Schirmer in 1912, in particular its closing work "Exhortation: A Negro Sermon" which is also a sermon in song form.

Little Ace O' Spades

The inner songs of Arlen's *Americanegro Suite* reflect on important musical tropes in African American song. In "Little Ace O' Spades" we find the stereotypical image of a mammy figure singing her child to sleep (see figure 2). The lyrics draw on conventions of African-American lullabies, notably using linguistic dialect "hushabye" and "rockabye." Some problematic lyrics from this song such as "Lay yo' kinky head on my breast," were later altered in the 1980s for the Judy Kaye recording to reflect political correctness, with the composer's permission, and the song was retitled "Little Angel Child." The singer also explains a parent's absence (typically this was related to being away in the fields) while comforting and reassuring the child of their return.

⁴² Snyder, *Harry T. Burleigh: From the Spiritual to the Harlem Renaissance*, 167.



Figure 4: Harry Botkin, illustration for “Little Ace of Spades”

Both musically and lyrically, this composition draws on similar features to compositions by Burleigh and his contemporaries. Lullabies also called cradle songs, were a particularly popular trope explored by Burleigh. Arlen’s work begins with a chromatic jazz-dream, introduction that shows a pentatonic influence from the spiritual tradition. The rocking-back-and-forth walking figure of the piano accompaniment was a common feature in songs of this type and was likewise employed by Burleigh in his compositions (see examples 21 and 22).

Example 21: Arlen, “Little Ace O’ Spades”

Slowly H. T. BURLEIGH.

Voice. 

Piano. 

1. Mam - my's ba - by, go ter sleep, — Hush - er - by, Hush - er - by, dear, —
 2. Mam - my's su - gah, go ter sleep, — Hush - er - by, Hush - er - by, dear, —

p a tempo

'Cross de hyarf de crie - ket creep, — Hush - er - by, Hush - er - by, dear: —
 Ba - by stars done cease ter peep, — Hush - er - by, Hush - er - by, dear: — De

Hoot - owl call - in' fum de ol' sy - ca - mo' Way down yonner in de hol - ler; — De
 moon raiseslim froo de ol' moun - ting - gap, In hts cradle been a - rock - in' — De

p

Example 22: Burleigh, “Negro Lullaby”

I Got Dat Feelin’

Another song, “I Got Dat Feelin’” in *Americanegro Suite* textually evokes popular folk spirituals, “Little Wheel A’ Turnin’ in my Heart,” “This Little Light of Mine,” and “Every Time I Feel the Spirit.” These songs all bear poignant similarities in the textual references (describing the feeling of being inspired by the Lord) in addition to the melodic and phrase shapes, the syncopated rhythms at the beginning of measures, and the call and response structure. All were written during the Civil War era and the

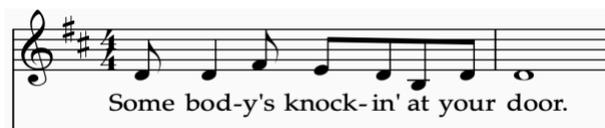
first was a supposed favorite of Abraham Lincoln, strengthening the ties to the nineteenth-century Arlen (and others working in the genre of the commercial spiritual, such as Burleigh) were seeking to capture.

I'm Here Lawd

Another of the inner songs in the collection, "I'm Here Lawd," likewise creates clear connections, both textually and musically with known spirituals. In particular, this work bears striking resemblance to the folk spiritual, "Somebody's Knocking at your Door." Lyrically, both reference the action of knocking at the door. In "I'm Here Lawd" it is the sinner who knocks at the pearly gates to beg for admittance while in the "Somebody's Knocking at Your Door" it is Jesus who knocks on the door of the sinner who is positioned to make a choice of whether or not to answer. Musically, the melodic structure bears enough similarity in the rhythmic and intervallic structures, as well as the general melodic contour to be of notice.



Example 23: Arlen, "I'm Here Lawd"



Example 24: "Somebody's Knockin' at your Door"

Where Is Dis' Road A-Leadin' Me To?

The most vocally challenging of the songs in the cycle, "Where Is Dis Road A-Leadin' Me To?" is an impressive aria, with a melody that spans an octave and a tritone (from C to G^b), and challenging shifting tempos. In this piece, Koehler plays with duality of meanings, something common in African American literary traditions. The question posed by the title seems to refer not only to where the narrator finds him

or herself in the present, on earth or in the spiritual sense, but also to the journey of so many Africans across the Atlantic Ocean in slave boats. This is reinforced by Botkin's powerful imagery, which seems at once to suggest arms uplifted in a prayerful gesture of supplication, but also arms shackled and an expression of fear (see figure 5).

The image displays a musical score for the song "I Got Dat Feelin'". It consists of four systems of music, each with a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The first system begins with the vocal line "I got dat" and includes dynamic markings such as *dim.*, *mf*, *p*, and *mp*. The second system contains the lyrics "feel - in' a-down in my heart a way down a way-". The third system continues with "down. I got dat feel - in' a-down in my heart an' I aint". The fourth system features an "(Echo)" section with the lyrics "nev - er gon-na let it out! Nev - er gon-na let it out!" and includes the dynamic marking *pp sub*. The piano accompaniment is written in a style characteristic of early 20th-century blues or jazz, with a steady bass line and chords in the right hand.

Example 25: "I Got Dat Feelin'"



Figure 5: Harry Botkin, Illustration for “Where Is Dis Road, A-Leadin’ Me Too?”

The illustration provided for this song, with its emphasis on the cruelties of slavery, the confusion and fear of arriving in a new land, and the desire for freedom and acceptance highlight the syncretism between the Black experience and that of Jewish American immigrants. This parallel gives new dimension to our understanding of Arlen’s interest in composing this work. As Jeffrey Melnick observes, African Americans frequently used imagery from the Old Testament, like what appears in the spiritual tradition, which described the suffering of the Jewish people to evoke sympathy from (predominantly Christian) white Americans. Jewish Americans have conversely related to African Americans through the framework of spirituality.⁴³

In this history of Black-Jewish relations in the United States, Jewish Americans have also at other times sought to separate and distance themselves from

⁴³ Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 165–97.

African Americans in order to claim their own “whiteness” and gain acceptance in white society. This is particularly true in the case of minstrel and blackface performance, defamatory performances many practitioners of which were Jewish. While Arlen’s composition does not engage in the same overtly prejudicial stereotyping of the minstrel show, it nevertheless represents in a sense, a Jewish American’s caricature of an African American style. In doing so, Arlen takes on the construct of “blackvoice,” the sonic counterpart of blackface, as described by Matthew Morrison and others.⁴⁴

The *Americanegro Suite* thus seems to fulfil both paradigms of Black-Jewish relations, and provides depth to our understanding of Arlen’s work in this composition and more broadly in his compositional *oeuvre*. His work simultaneously shows his engagement with African Americans and his distance from them, as Jewish identity continued to take on racialized elements in the mid-twentieth century. It likewise shows how race and ethnicity formed crucial pillars in the formation and expression of the American national identity.

Conclusions

Arlen’s *Americanegro Suite* is one of his most infrequently performed works, and one that presents a different side of the popular song composer. Understanding the relationship between the works of African American classical composers and Arlen’s compositional efforts not only serves to place the *Americanegro Suite* within a

⁴⁴ Matthew Morrison, “Race, Blacksound, and the (Re) Making of Musicological Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72 (2019): 782.

musical tradition, but also further illuminates the complex relationship between Jewish Americans and African Americans in music. Significantly, it demonstrates that the back and forth between white and Black musical styles, and between Jewish and African American composers, was not contained to the world of popular music.⁴⁵ While this is often acknowledged in the realm of orchestral music and opera, it is rarely noted in the more intimate genre of the art song.

⁴⁵ Joseph Horowitz, “New World Prophecy,” *The American Scholar* (September 13, 2019). In future, see also his book currently in progress, *Dvorak’s Prophecy*.

ACT TWO

As first- and second-generation immigrants, the Jewish American songwriters of Tin Pan Alley are frequently written about within the contexts of assimilation and adaptation. Specifically, their use of the musical languages of jazz and blues have often been understood within this framework as a way of sonically performing American identity. This section problematizes this understanding through a critical examination of how Arlen used these styles. As discussions of assimilation and adaptation are frequently tied to Jewish American songwriters' works for the stage, I will explore how in Arlen's works for the theater he uses jazz and blues as part of his songwriter's toolbox to create musical-dramatic narratives that solicit more complex cultural readings. While the first section of this dissertation has explored how the sounds of jazz functioned musically in Arlen's songs, the following section explores the cultural work these sounds performed and how this complicates existing narratives of Tin Pan Alley.

CHAPTER 3:

Jazz Takes the Stage Part One: *Bloomer Girl* (1944)

After leaving the Cotton Club, Arlen moved back and forth between New York and Hollywood frequently, searching for a project where he could make his mark as an up-and-coming songwriter. The stage musical in the wake of the Rogers and Hammerstein revolution had quickly become the yardstick against which all popular songwriters of the Golden Era were measured, and it served as the surest path to success as a composer. His opportunity came in the form of *Bloomer Girl*, an unusual musical play about suffragettes fighting against fashion: the hoopskirt. This project served not only as Arlen's entry point into the new world of the book musical, but it also demonstrated his ability to carry the sounds of jazz from the Cotton Club to the stage in a musically and dramatically unique way.

Bloomer Girl (1944)

On Thursday October 5, 1944 at the Sam S. Shubert Theater, located on 225 West 44th Street in New York City, women in hoopskirts huddled together backstage in preparation for the first act finale of the newest show on Broadway. A trumpet fanfare sounded the final call for places, and, cramped and crowded in their crinoline cages, they toppled over one another, making their way to the wings. Moments later the red-velvet curtain lifted revealing the sidewalks and storefronts of a wholesome American town. The lights rested on a grand pavilion where people gossiped excitedly about the upcoming fashion show featuring the latest designs from hoopskirt manufacturer

Horace Applegate. The show commenced as the women paraded on stage, flaunting the newest fashions. Each modeled a hoopskirt more comical and humongous than the next. Finally, there came the announcement for the debut of the “Superhoop of 1861,” worn by none other than Horace Applegate’s daughter, Evalina. The young lady walked center stage, turned to pose for the audience, and . . . dropped her hoopskirt.



Figure 6: Celeste Holm as Evalina Applegate in *Bloomer Girl* at the Shubert Theater in New York, 1944.

The above scene is from Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg’s *Bloomer Girl* (1944), a musical that represents a pivotal moment in the history of musical theater. In it, Arlen and Harburg, create a political commentary that subverts accepted narratives about the relationship between Jewish American songwriters and the Broadway musical, in particular the narrative of assimilation.

Many scholars have described how Jewish Americans used the realm of entertainment as a way of achieving integration into American society. Not only did they find acceptance within these areas of employment, but staged works offered the opportunity to tell particular stories that positively portrayed themes of acceptance. Outsiders brushing up against and then ultimately being accepted by the majority is a

popular conceit of the musical comedy.¹ Often times, as Andrea Most and Bruce Kirle have observed, the outsider(s) within the story are portrayed in such a way that they represent an ethnicized other who is naturalized or otherwise accepted through the unfolding of the plot, creating a melting pot narrative.² The theme of assimilation also carries into more generalized studies of Jewish music as well. As Abraham Schwadron writes a “key term that appears necessary in understanding the Jew and his music is a very sensitive one—*compromise*. The term implies both the need for adaptation and the desire to maintain individuality under assimilated and often adverse conditions.”³

In Arlen and Harburg’s *Bloomer Girl*, the protagonists stand apart from society, and rather than seeking acceptance, demand that the broader society change in order to meet their higher moral standards. In doing so, they challenge not only the assimilation narrative of the musical but create a poignant political commentary, one that takes a critical and self-reflexive look at the United States during the World War

¹ Northrop Frye, “The Mythos of Spring: Comedy,” in *Comedy: Meaning and Form* (New York: Harper and Row, 1981). On the juxtaposition of insiders and outsiders as an expression of American nationalism see also Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, 119–153.

² Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Bruce Kirle, “Reconciliation, Resolution, and the Political Role of *Oklahoma!* in the American Consciousness,” *Theatre Journal* 55/2 (May 2003): 251–74.

³ Abraham Schwadron, “On Jewish Music,” in *Music of Many Cultures*, ed. by Elizabeth May with a foreword by Mantle Hood (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980), 285. This idea of compromise or assimilation has often been the root of anti-semitic criticisms of Jewish composers who are depicted as borrowing from the music of others for profit. See Magee, *Irving Berlin’s American Musical Theater*, 12–13 and Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 41.

II era when much of the nation's focus was directed to problems abroad despite continued and pressing issues of racism and sexism on the Homefront. This too was unusual for the wartime era of the 1940s, in which a number of musicals were dedicated to the pursuit of supporting pro-American rhetoric and drumming up support for the war effort.⁴ Other works from the era continued traditions such as the musical comedy or star-centered show with little to no reference to current events, and served as a form of escapism from the pressing reality of the time.

Bloomer Girl was written against the backdrop of two revolutions, political and musical. Written in the wartime 1940s, it was the first integrated musical to follow in the footsteps of Rodgers and Hammerstein's landmark production, *Oklahoma!* (1943).⁵ Like *Oklahoma!*, the show brought together the diverse elements of music, drama, and dance in the service of an integrated whole. Unlike *Oklahoma!*,

⁴ On this subject see Alan Anderson, *The Songwriter Goes to War: The Story of Irving Berlin's All-Army Production of This Is the Army* (Pompton Plains, NJ: Limelight, 2004); Clayton Koppes and Gregory Black, *Hollywood Goes to War: How Politics, Profits, and Propaganda Shaped World War II Movies* (New York: Free Press, 1987); John Bush Jones, *The Songs that Fought the War: Popular Music and the Homefront 1939–1945* (Waltham, MA: Brandeis University Press, 2006); Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of National Identity*, 119–153; Ethan Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin': The Broadway Musical in the 1940s*, 94–120; Kathleen E. R. Smith, *God Bless America: Tin Pan Alley Goes to War* (Lexington, KY: University of Kentucky Press, 2003);

⁵ The terms book musical and integrated musical frequently appear in use together though they have distinct meanings. Book musicals refer to those works based on a developed storyline with constant characters and dialogue. An integrated musical is the theatrical parallel of the operatic *Gesamtkunstwerk* in which all elements of the production work together to convey dramatic meaning. The latter term was frequently used to give validation to musical theater through connection to opera.

however, it did not focus on romantic themes of Americana. Indeed, its political bent was remarkably self-reflexive and critical during a time of great patriotic fervor.

Based on an unpublished play by the husband-and-wife Dan and Lilith James, the action takes place in the Yankee town of Cicero Falls, a fictionalized representation of the real New York town, Seneca Falls, during the spring of 1861. The plot concerns Evelina Applegate, the youngest and only unmarried daughter of the successful hoopskirt manufacturer Horace Applegate, and also by an ironic twist of fate, the niece of suffragette Dolly Bloomer, the originator of the competing Bloomer pant.

Much to her father's chagrin, Evelina shares her Aunt Dolly's social and political beliefs and becomes a "bloomer girl," campaigning for women's rights and emancipation. Her father decides that the only cure for Evelina's rebellious nature is marriage to an appropriate suitor, the natural cure for all things feminine. He introduces Evelina to Jeff Lightfoot Calhoun, a young hoopskirt salesman in Kentucky, in the hopes of arranging a marriage complete with the added advantage of expanding his business to the south. To his disbelief, rather than ameliorate his problems, Evelina eventually convinces Jeff to share her political and social ideologies, and the pair falls in love before Jeff leaves to fight for the North in the Civil War.

The success of *Bloomer Girl* lies in large part in the significance of its political commentary, which takes a critical look at the United States as a nation that does not always act upon its own values in a time when most other works for stage and screen were engaged in celebratory political propaganda. In the musical, this

commentary is primarily achieved through a subversion of gender paradigms.⁶

Musically, the breakdown of gender paradigms is created in turn via the juxtaposition of two broad musical styles: the parlor style and the jazz style.⁷

Music as Politics in *Bloomer Girl*

Bloomer Girls' fifteen songs draw upon styles from classical music to modern jazz the result of which Harburg's biographers, Meyerson and Harburg, described as an "odd fusion of old and new sounds."⁸ This fusion makes the subversive, alien nature of the score readily apparent, leading theater scholar Ethan Mordden to question: "*Bloomer Girl*'s score—as a whole it sounds carefully dated, yet other than the inclusion of an unusual number of waltzes, Arlen uses little pastiche. . . . In other

⁶ A thorough discussion of traditional female character types is beyond the scope of this chapter. For more on female character types see Richard M. Goldstein, "I Enjoy Being a Girl': Women in the Plays of Rodgers and Hammerstein." *Popular Music and Society* 13, no.1 (1989), 1–8 and Julie Noonan "The Sound of Musicals' Women: *Tessitura* and the Construction of Gender in the American Musical" (Ph.D. diss. University of Kansas, 2006). On the subversion of character types see Stacy Wolf, *A Problem Like Maria: Gender and Sexuality in the American Musical* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005) and *Changed for Good: A Feminist History of the Broadway Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011).

⁷ The following musical analysis was developed in part from my master's thesis, Sarah Jean England, "It Was Good Enough for Grandma, But It Ain't Good Enough For Us: Women and the Nation in Harold Arlen and E.Y. Harburg's Wartime *Bloomer Girl* (1944)," (MA thesis, University of Maryland, 2013).

⁸ Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 191.

words, if Arlen is writing of and for 1944, and within the conventions of musical comedy, why is his sound so . . . well, alien?”⁹

The answer to Mordden’s question is clear. Arlen’s score—coupled with Harburg’s libretto—functions as an audible metaphor for the breakdown of traditional gender roles as explored in the musical. Over the course of the music, what I will call the parlor style—characterized by a reserved approach to harmony, diatonic melodies, and simple rhythm—come to represent the traditional construction of femininity as endorsed and encouraged by the community depicted in the musical. The jazz style, on the other hand—characterized by expanded harmony, chromatically-inflected melodic lines, and syncopation—represents a subversive construction of femininity central to *Bloomer Girl’s* plot.

The Parlor Style

Arlen makes use of the parlor style, the traditionally sentimental, romantic style associated with the early years of Tin Pan Alley, which can be heard in three waltzes dispersed throughout the score: “When the Boys Come Home,” “Sunday in Cicero Falls,” and “The Rakish Young Man with the Whiskers.” This style, established by Stephen Foster and popularized by such hits as Charles K. Harris’s “After the Ball,” is characterized by an emphasis on lyrical melodies over rhythm, and generally simple harmonies with occasional hints of chromaticism or adventures to secondary

⁹ Ethan Mordden, *Broadway Babies: The People Who Made the American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 124.

areas. The texts of such songs tend to address domestic topics or more generally romantic love, or otherwise express nostalgia for the past. The waltz was not uncommon in songs written in the parlor style, having been reinvigorated by operettas such as those by Franz Lehár, Sigmund Romberg, Rudolf Friml, and Richard Rodgers.¹⁰

The following analysis focuses on “When the Boys Come Home” and “Sunday in Cicero Falls,” which begin the first and second acts respectively. Through his use of the parlor style in these ensemble numbers Arlen creates an implicit association between the parlor style and the musical’s fictitious community. Arlen’s message is rendered explicit by Harburg’s lyrics, which seek to define community according to a particular set of social values, social values well accepted, but clearly under threat during both the play’s setting in the 1860s and in the musical’s own 1940s.

“When the Boys Come Home”

The first act curtain rises on a domestic portrait. The Applegate daughters are anxiously awaiting the return of their traveling salesman husbands. The youngest plays a monotonous finger exercise at the pianoforte while her sisters sew quietly in the background; gradually, the repetitive rhythms of their motions give way to the

¹⁰ Raymond Knapp, Mitchell Morris, and Stacy Wolf, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 40–41.

opening ensemble number.¹¹ The lyrics of “When the Boys Come Home” present well-accepted, nineteenth-century views of gender in which the activities of women who “stitch,” “pray,” “sleep,” “weep,” and “wait” are contrasted with the singular action of men who simply “work.” The private and public spheres are thus created and separated along gender lines. They are also depicted as perfectly natural and given the stamp of authority through archaic language (“t’was”) and history:

Stitch, stitch, pray and sleep
Men must work and women must weep
T’was ever thus since time began
Woman, oh woman must wait for man
Stitch, stitch, tie the strings
This is the sorry state of things
And only one song keeps hearts a-beat
And only one thought makes waiting sweet
When the boys come home.

But lyrics are hardly the only thing at work in this number. Just as Rodgers and Hammerstein had sought to integrate lyrics and music, Arlen’s score underscores the proper social hierarchy of Harburg’s texts. The song follows a modified AABA form, along with a brief introduction, which develops thematic material from the earlier “Piano Practice.” The left-hand accompaniment pattern draws upon the ascending arpeggiated figure from the exercise, while the right-hand melody similarly

¹¹ “When the Boys Come Home,” is the title of a song with words by John Hay (1838–1905) and music by Oley Speaks (1874–1948), published by in New York by G. Schirmer in 1915. There is no evidence to suggest that either Harold Arlen or E. Y. Harburg were aware of its existence, but the unintended reference reveals an interesting political undercurrent. John Hay was the private secretary to President Abraham Lincoln during the American Civil War. His lyrics for “When the Boys Come Home” depicted American’s weariness as the war dragged on four years. Published during World War I the song also commented directly on the United States’ involvement in the first global conflict. Here, the song takes on further significance as it addresses World War II.

Voice
 Stitch stitch pray and sleep men must work and wo-men must weep.

Piano
 8va

Example 28: “When the Boys Come Home,” Measures 9-16

The second verse repeats the melodic material one step higher, showing both mounting frustration, perhaps the result of the men’s absence.

Following a bright chromatic modulation from the key of D^b major to the key of D, the orchestra clarifies the waltz rhythm that had only been hinted at by the introduction. This association with the waltz, still currently popular as a musical trope for Tin Pan Alley but recognizably an older musical form, creates a further association with the notion of Victorian Era domesticity. Magee has noted that for the elder composer Irving Berlin, the waltz “maintained a strong connection to the values of Victorian America.” Berlin frequently used the waltz to set texts featuring themes of “nostalgia, loss, regret, domesticity, old-fashioned courtship, and enduring love.”¹² Arlen similarly explored the waltz in his earliest published composition, “My Gal, My Pal” (1924), co-written with friend Hyman Cheiffetz.¹³ The waltz style was one

¹² Magee, *Irving Berlin’s American Musical Theater*, 24.

¹³ Published as “My Gal, Won’t You Come Back to Me,” 1924.

to which Arlen rarely returned, cementing that for Arlen this style signified something past, even outdated, within the context of his own musical language.

The change of key and simplification of the metrical pattern also underscore a shift in the text, as the women seemingly abandon their serious concerns for more trivial fare. It is here made clear that this community of women can find happiness only when the family unit is returned to its natural state:

When the boys come home
The clouds will trip lightly away, away
The clouds will trip lightly away
When the boys come home
We'll all be as merry as May, as May
We'll all be as merry as May

There'll be drums and trumpets, tea and crumpets
Out on the Village Green
A silver moon for that reunion scene
Oh what Joy! When the boys come home

When the boys come home
The glorious sound of the tramping feet
Will echo down the winding street
That leads to a lane where lovers meet
And may it prove so sweet, so sweet
That they will never more roam
When the boys come home!

While this text may appear to reinforce normative gender roles, Arlen actually undermines them by hinting at the feminist themes to be explored in the musical. During the nineteenth century of the musical's world, the waltz was far more scandalous than we might envision it today. In his excellent study of the waltz, Steven Baur has detailed how authority figures of the time warned that this provocative

dance, “endangers the moral and physical well-being of its young victims, causing delinquency, depravity, illness, and—in some cases—instant death.”¹⁴

Arguably the most scandalous aspect of the waltz was the visual. Bauer has painted a vivid picture of blasphemy in the ballroom describing waltzing as a “dizzying mélange of sound and motion,” filled with “powerful unrelenting rhythms” and “sweating, undulating bodies.”¹⁵ Unlike earlier dances, including cotillions, quadrilles, and other square dances, the waltz featured an intimate coupling of partners. It was not only the close proximity between partners that made the waltz scandalous, but the loose morals the unrestrained physical movements of the dance suggested. Any young woman who danced the waltz was in danger of becoming ruined “property,” no longer able to be bartered and traded in a marriage contract.

The waltz thus challenged the emergent separate-sphere ideology of the Industrial Revolution (1760–1840), which mandated the separation of labor along gender lines. In order for men to dedicate themselves entirely to the heightened demands of work in the public sphere, women were required to assume a new role in the private sphere, that of housewife. Women became responsible for maintaining the home, rearing the children, and keeping their husbands’ content. They were expected

¹⁴ Steven Baur, “‘Waltz Me Around Again Willie’: Gender, Ideology, and Dance in the Gilded Age,” in *Musicological Identities: Essays in Honors of Susan McClary*, edited by Steven Baur, Raymond Knapp, and Jacqueline Warwick (Aldershot and Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2008), 47.

¹⁵ Ibid.

to uphold moral standards as the “angel in the house” and serve as role models for both their families and the broader community.¹⁶

Harold Arlen exploits both the traditional associations and the subversive nature of the waltz in the opening number for Act II of *Bloomer Girl*, “Sunday in Cicero Falls.” In this number, the community praises themselves for their Puritanical values. Evalina then lyrically turns the tables upside down with her own rendition, exploiting the hypocrisy of the community’s moral standards.

“*Sunday in Cicero Falls*”

As the sunlight of Sunday morning casts a warm glow across the sidewalks of Cicero Falls, the local townspeople make their way to church to celebrate the Sabbath. Along the way, they describe the strict moral standards to which they are bound by society. The lyrics make several direct references to fashion— “collars are white,” and “shoes are brushed, and shirts are starched”—reinforcing the notion of restrictive clothing as a metaphor for behavioral constraint.¹⁷

Despite their grumblings, the townspeople, including the women, believe that such moral standards are necessary for the creation and preservation of social order.

¹⁶ The construct of the Victorian Era woman as the “angel in the house” come from a popular poem of the same name by Coventry Patmore, first published in 1854. Therein, he describes many of the expectations of women outlined above. For more on gender ideology in this time period see Barbara Welter, “The Cult of True Womanhood 1820–1860.” *American Quarterly* 18, no. 2, par 1 (Summer, 1966), 151–74.

¹⁷ For more on the nature of dress as an expression of social liberty see Kathleen M. Torrens, “All Dressed Up With No Place to Go: Rhetorical Dimensions of the Nineteenth Century Dress Reform Movement,” *Women’s Studies in Communication* 20, no. 2 (Fall, 1997), 189–210.

The role of clothing in this process is addressed in the lines “hearts never blunder where girls wear such underwear” and “boys don’t spread rumors ‘bout girls wearing bloomers.”

Women Sunday in Cicero Falls
In this lovely merry land
Main street look like fairyland
Where the angelus falls
Shingles are bright
Collars are white
Sunday in Cicero Falls

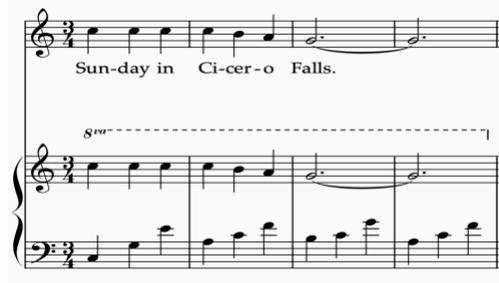
Hearts never blunder where
Girls wear such underwear
Sunday in Cicero Falls

Men Sunday in Cicero Falls
Shoes are brushed and shirts are starched
Hearts are pure and throats are parched
Sabbath has fallen on cobbles and walls,
Thank merciful heaven
Just one day in seven is
Sunday in Cicero Falls

Boys may be quizzical
But not too physical
Sunday in Cicero Falls

Boys don’t spread rumors
‘Bout girls wearing bloomers
On Sunday in Cicero Falls

The conservative views of the community are further reflected in the musical structure of the song. “Sunday in Cicero Falls” is written as a waltz in AABA form in C Major. The first A section presents the women’s perspective on life in Cicero Falls. It features a descending melodic line that moves in stepwise motion, which might again reflect the women’s limited social mobility (see example 29), particularly when contrasted with the men’s later melodic motion.



Example 29: Women's Melodic Arch, "Sunday in Cicero Falls"

The second A section presents the men's perspective on life in Cicero Falls. There the melodic material outlines a broken chord, first ascending and then descending by thirds, perhaps reflecting men's greater social freedom (see example 30).



Example 30: Men's Melodic Arch, "Sunday in Cicero Falls"

In an analogue to the popular "counterpoint song" often found in the Broadway musical of writers such as Irving Berlin, the two gendered lines combine in the final reprise of the A section.¹⁸ There they are bound together by a third line sung by a

¹⁸ The *Oxford Handbook of the American Musical* defines the counterpoint song as "a song that includes two different melodies that can be combined, meaning they are based on the same harmonic scheme and do not clash when sounding together. Usually the tunes are sung separately and then combined in a third verse." See the *Oxford Handbook of the American Musical*, 41. Irving Berlin's use of the counterpoint song is further detailed in Magee, *Irving Berlin's American Musical Theater*, 22–23.

group of women, featuring oscillating thirds that sound like the ringing of church bells, celebrating tradition gender roles and the institution of marriage.

The image shows a musical score for the piece "Sunday in Cicero Falls" in 3/4 time. It consists of five staves. The first staff is a vocal line with the lyrics "Sun-day in Ci-cer-o Falls." The second staff is a vocal line with the lyrics "Sun - day, Sun - day." The third staff is a vocal line with the lyrics "Sun-day in Ci-cer-o Falls." The fourth staff is a piano accompaniment for the right hand, marked *forte*, with a *sm* (sforzando) marking above it. The fifth staff is a piano accompaniment for the left hand. The score features a counterpoint between the vocal lines and the piano accompaniment.

Example 31: Gender Counterpoint, “Sunday in Cicero Falls”

Following the conclusion of “Sunday in Cicero Falls,” Evalina reprises the number as a solo in the key of B Major, chromatically undercutting the harmonic structure. She indulges in the destructive power of the waltz as she attacks the social pillars of order. She first reaffirms the beliefs of the community and then challenges them, exposing the townspeople as hypocrites through the satirical examples of bartender Murphy and old banker Hodge. These examples make passing reference to a less favorable suffragette cause, temperance, which is for the most part tactfully avoided in the musical. They contrast the images of alcohol and camphor (a chemical compound) with the religious nature of the text. Other comical lines contrast sexual images with those of the church. Consider for example the lines “each Puritan buttock is laced to an inch” and “even the rabbits inhibit their habits.”

Sunday in Cicero Falls
With all this underpinnin'
There who would think of sinnin' there
When the angelus calls
Morals are right
Corsets are tight
Sunday in Cicero Falls

The sinners join up with a virtuous fringe
They pass the saloon with that righteous cringe
And bartender Murphy remarks with a twinge
“Virtue is its own revinge”
Sunday in Cicero Falls

Old banker Hodge with a nose for investment
Is making his weekly appeal to the Testament
He's giving his conscious its weekly repairing
His morals are getting sabbatical airing
He's taking his soul out of camphor calls
Sunday in Cicero Falls

No maiden dare falter
No widow dare flinch
Each Puritan buttock is laced to an inch
The boys may be itchin'
But no one dost pinch
Sunday in Cicero Falls

Even the rabbits inhibit their habits
On Sunday in Cicero Falls.

The threat to social order posed in Evalina's reprise of “Sunday in Cicero Falls” is perceived not only by the audience, but by the fictional community depicted in the musical as well. Following Evalina's exit, the community sings a repetition of the counterpoint featured in the ensemble number in an attempt to reinforce traditional gender roles in which Evalina would not have a public voice. They are unable to silence her, however, as moments later the bloomer girls march through the town square carrying signs advertising their forthcoming performance of Harriet Beecher Stowe's play, *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, and campaigning for the joint causes of

women's rights and abolition. Soon thereafter, the police storm in to arrest Dolly, Evalina, and the bloomer girls on charges of public nuisance and disruption of social order. The destabilizing power of the waltz thus gives way to physical chaos on the stage. While it is impossible to know whether or not Arlen was consciously aware of the nineteenth-century view of the waltz as destabilizing, it is nevertheless clear that he masterfully exploits it in this scene.

The Jazz Style

Thus far the score for *Bloomer Girl* has shown Arlen to be fluent in the parlor style, but the composer was equally if not more proficient in the jazz idioms popular during his age. These idioms find their home in the jazz style that is proudly showcased in some of the score's most memorable numbers including "Evalina" and "T'Morra." The jazz style in this score is characterized by the presence of exaggerated dotted rhythms and strongly placed blue notes, as well as extended harmonies. Such features, while not uncommon on the Broadway stage, were not wildly popular in the heyday of the integrated book musical of the 1940s–1960s popularized by Rodgers and Hammerstein, which frequently drew from conventions of the romantic tradition.¹⁹

The nature of the text in these numbers helps to create an association between jazz and a subversive construction of femininity or a set of social values that are more forward thinking than those espoused by the community. The contrast of lyrics further helps the listener to hear the jazz style then as the more modern style, while

¹⁹ Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 73–99.

the parlor style comes to signify an older, more outdated approach. Such juxtaposition of modern, African American popular music styles and European musical styles has precedent in earlier Tin Pan Alley songs, such as the genre of the “operatic novelty song.” In his *Tin Pan Opera* (2011), Larry Hamberlin describes how the contrast of ragtime and opera within these songs could be used to create a multitude of meanings based on lyrical content; often “ragtime, not opera is ‘really smart,’ and the open rejection of cultivated music is seen as fashionable and up to date.”²⁰ The clear contrast of musical styles thus mirrors the contrast of social values in songs such as “Evalina” and “T’morra.”

“Evalina”

The first time Evalina sings in *Bloomer Girl* she sings not as herself, but as the “other.” The incident occurs in the first act of the musical when Jeff mistakes Evalina for the Applegate family maid, Daisy. He regales her with “Evalina,” an old plantation song. She takes advantage of wearing the mask of otherness and turns the tables on him, singing his lines in her own voice in a display of female empowerment.²¹

²⁰ Larry Hamberlin, *Tin Pan Opera: Operatic Novelty Songs in the Ragtime Era* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011), 232.

²¹ According to undated drafts of the script, Harburg intended Daisy to be an African American woman who had come to the North in search of work after escaping the bonds of slavery via the Underground Railroad. This adds an extra dimension to the “othering” in this scene. See the E. Y. Harburg papers at the New York Public Library.

The text of the song evokes some of the tone and imagery of a genteel courtship ballad but also features erotic imagery of ripened fruit and youthful longing, suggesting Jeff's sexual intentions.

Evalina, won't ya ever take a shine to that moon?
Evalina ain't you bothered by the bobolink's tune?
Tell me, tell me how long
You're gonna keep delayin' the day
Don't ya' reckon' it's wrong
Triffin' with April this way?
Evalina, won't ya' pay a little mind to me soon?
Wake up! Wake up!
The Earth is fair, the fruit is fine
But what's the use of smellin' watermelon
Clingin' to another fellow's vine?
Evalina, won't ya roll off that vine and be mine?

The highly sexualized nature of the text is reinforced by the musical language, which draws upon the sensual idioms and sexual associations of jazz. The back-and-forth seconds on "Evalina" and dotted-eighth sixteenth rhythms, sonically portray Jeff's flirtations. Meanwhile the lowered sixth scale degree (C^b) on "Shine" and "bobolink," and the latter's subsequent juxtaposition with the sustained C[#] on "tune" preview his desire to persuade Evalina to give in to temptation, and sooner rather than later as he asks in the next verse: "Tell me, tell me how long, ya gonna' keep delayin' the day?" Therein, the quarter note triplet and the descending tritone are put to particularly effective use on "delayin'" (see example 32).

Our hearing of this style as jazz is reinforced not only through the sexuality of the lyrics but the plantation backdrop. Many of the lyrical references that feel as though they could be equally well at home in the minstrel show, which incorporated the vocabulary of African American popular music styles such as we hear in this excerpt. Indeed, this song bears a striking resemblance to minstrel composer Paul

Dresser's, "Evalyne," (1913).²² Both duets prominently feature the bouncing dotted-eighth sixteenth rhythms and contain similar lyrical references. In the latter, the text makes allusions to "honey," "bees," and "willoughbys tress," and both are framed as romantic courtship songs that ask how long until the romantic pair is wed.

Understanding the connections to the minstrel show as suggested by this number become critical to our further reading of Arlen's use of jazz, complicating the notion that jazz is the only style evoked through Arlen's use of African American musical idioms in the score. The most popular form of entertainment in the United States through the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the minstrel show was a kind of variety stage entertainment (including comedic skits, dances, and musical numbers) that portrayed negative stereotypes of African Americans. These stereotypes were often embodied by white actors—first Irish and later Jewish Americans—who frequently performed in "blackface," painting their faces with burnt cork to portray African American characters. These characters as exemplified by the stock types "Zip Coon," "Jim Crow," "Uncle Tom," "Mammie," and "Lucy Long" among others, put on stage deeply prejudiced and problematic images of African Americans as dim-witted, lazy, violent, or over-sexualized; images that have gone on to become entrenched in American society and that continue to

²² Paul Dresser, "Evalyne," featuring Will Oakland and Bill Murray (1913), Victor 17518, 10." Recording can be accessed: <http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/recordings/detail/id/3581/>

influence bias against African Americans and support white supremacist ideas even through the present day.

Given the clear racist history of the minstrel show, the question arises: why would Arlen make references to this tradition in *Bloomer Girl*? A show with an otherwise progressive plot, *Bloomer Girl* seems on the surface to be arguing for the rights of another marginalized group: women. The answer lies in the “cultural work” of jazz and by extension Arlen’s multivalent references to the minstrel show in the musical.²³

As “Evalina” demonstrates, one important function of Arlen’s references to the minstrel show is to create a connection between the jazz style and sexuality. In this sense, Arlen seems to participate in the minstrel show as a twentieth century agent of blackface. Hidden behind the safety of the composer’s pen instead of performing directly onstage, he continues to propagate minstrel tropes and stereotypes through the connection of blackness with sexuality through jazz.

Arlen’s connection between the sounds of blackness and sexuality become more complicated, however, when considered within the context of the musical’s plot. Therein, Evalina and her fellow Bloomer Girls strive to become sexually empowered by rejecting the hoopskirt and the oppressive system of gender division it represents. They are not routinely sexualized in the musical, but express their agency through voicing their own sexuality. In this sense, Arlen’s engagement with

²³ Here I use the term “cultural work” following Jane P. Tompkins, *Sensational Designs: The Cultural Work of American Fiction, 1790–1860* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1985).

blackface can also be understood as functioning as a masking device, in which the musical's characters take on *blackvoice*, the sonic representation of the physical burnt cork blackface.²⁴ This masking as “other” allows the musical characters to act in ways that are not accepted by the majority society that exists within the show by serving as a form of appropriation that aims to carve out a space for agency while also taking advantage of and thereby reproducing racist discourses. The notion of masking as freeing for the musical's white characters and more specifically as a vehicle for the exploration of social norms has a long history. This history extends beyond the minstrel show—where blackface performance could also be understood as white Americans, under the guise of comedic performance, exploring behavior not typically allowed within strict Victorian-era social codes—to the early days of comedic opera where othered characters often created comedy by thwarting social expectations.

Still, there is more at work in Arlen's references to jazz within the score that begins to move beyond the minstrel connection. As earlier stated, Arlen creates a clear juxtaposition within the musical not only between jazz and parlor styles, but also between “old” and “new.” In this sense, jazz stands in for the sound of modernity. Sounds like jazz and ragtime were also interpolated into the minstrel

²⁴ Matthew Morrison, “Race, Blacksound, and the (Re) Making of Musicological Discourse,” *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72 (2019): 781–823.

show as a means of updating the sound of the score, they did not typically function as markers of modernity within the plots of such shows as they do here.

Musical score for the first system of 'Evalina'. It features a voice line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is one sharp (F#) and the time signature is common time (C). The lyrics are: "E - ve-li-na won't ya ev-er take a shine to that moon?". The piano part provides a rhythmic accompaniment with chords and moving lines in both hands.

Musical score for the second system of 'Evalina', starting at measure 5. It features a voice line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "E - ve-li - na ain't ya bo-thered by the bo -bo-link's tune?_____". The piano part continues with a similar accompaniment style. The system ends at measure 8.

Musical score for the third system of 'Evalina', starting at measure 12. It features a voice line and a piano accompaniment. The lyrics are: "day.". The piano part continues with a similar accompaniment style.

Example 32: The jazz style in “Evalina”

Returning to the example of “Evalina,” one can see how the jazz style takes on new purpose as Evalina picks up her half of the tune in the duet. By restating Jeff’s already sung sexual intentions in her own voice, Evalina shows that she is a modern,

empowered woman capable of expressing her own sexuality. Throughout the course of the song, Evalina also shows that she is a world-wise woman who holds no naïve views about romance. She links the themes of love and money, showing her disdain for the institution of marriage in which the union of man and woman is treated as a business contract.

Evalina Evalina, won't ya ever take a shine to that moon?
Our lives could be a perfect hitch
'Cause you're so handsome, I'm so rich
Evalina, ain't ya bothered by the bobalink's tune?
Jeff I'd be content with only you
Evalina And just a chambermaid or two
Tell me, tell me how long
You're gonna keep delayin' the day
Don't ya reckon its wrong
Triffin' with finance this way?

The purpose of "Evalina" within the dramatic action thus seems to be to show Evalina as a sexually empowered, modern woman, equal to her male counterpart. She not only physically takes over Jeff's lines, but when the pair comes together to sing the final words, a comparison of their vocal lines reveals a power struggle, which reaches a climax on the dissonant juxtaposition of the pitches E^b and D on the word "vine," and resolves into a major third on the word "mine," notably featuring Jeff's voice on the upper pitch for it is only in the last moment that he is able to reassert his power (see example 33).

Roll off that v-ine and be mine!

Roll off that v-ine and be mine!

Example 33: Power struggle in “Evalina”

Thus, through connections to the sounds of blackness as introduced by the minstrel show, the jazz style in “Evalina” creates a subversive construction of femininity that contrasts with the traditional femininity associated with the parlor style.

“T’Morra”

The association between the jazz style and a subversive construct of femininity is further clarified in “T’Morra.” Here, Daisy makes a strong argument for the cause of Women’s Rights, challenging the audience to “never put off till tomorrow what you can do today.”

T’Morra is that better day,
 With rainbows in the sky
 That’s the picture people like to paint
 But while I seek that better day
 The years keep flying by
 And lots of things that should be happening . . . Ain’t!
 Till fin-ally there comes this revelation
 T’Morra is the curse of civilization

She cleverly links her frustration with the state of women’s rights with her own sexual frustrations. She simultaneously questions the virtue of preserving her own

virginity and denying herself the carnal pleasures she craves, and the virtue of preserving the status quo and denying women equal rights. In so doing, she exploits the multiplicity of meanings inherent in the word “utopia.”

T’Morra, T’morra
Livin’ for t’morra
Why is t’morra better than today?
T’Morra, T’morra
Waitin’ for t’morra
My aunt became a spinster that way.

T’Morra, T’morra
It dawns on me with horra
Loves getting’ far away
T’Morra, T’morra
Why can’t a lady borra’
A little tomorra’ tonight

The present, The present
The present is so pleasant
What am I savin’ it for?
Progressive, Progressive, I’d rather be concessive
My heart is raisin’ a row!
Utopia, Utopia
Don’t be a dope ya’ dope ya’
Get your Utopia now!

The sexual undertone of the lyrics is brought out in the score through rising melodic lines, sensual chromaticism, and swaggering swing rhythms, borrowing from the jazz style (see example 34).

T' - mor - ra' t' - mor-ra

4
liv-in' for t' mor- ra', why is t' mor-ra be-tter than to-day?

Example 34: The jazz style in “T’Morra”

As if the sexuality of “T’morra” was not overt, Daisy also performs a provocative (but not explicit) strip tease while singing the song, adding a visual component to the expression of her desire and engaging in a kind of behaviour that seems more at home in earlier musical traditions of the minstrel era (see figure 7). References to the minstrel show tradition take on further significance in Arlen’s musical portrayal of race within the musical.



Figure 7: Joan McCracken performs a provocative strip tease as Daisy in Bloomer Girl.

Letting the Music Set You Free: The Sound of Racial Politics

Secondary to the focus on women's rights in *Bloomer Girl* is a subplot concerning racial equality. In the musical, the Bloomer Girls not only use their headquarters for the printing of feminist propaganda and the organization and planning of events, but also as a stop on the underground railroad. A significant part of the musical involves

the girls smuggling an escaped slave, Pompey, to freedom in the North. When the girls meet Pompey, he sings a song expressing his profound desire for freedom in “The Eagle and Me,” another of Arlen’s tapeworms.

“The Eagle and Me”

As the only African American character featured in the musical, Pompey and his song, might be expected to sonically represent African American culture by using audibly identifiable markers of Blackness, such as musical traits associated with jazz. Moreover, Pompey’s song provided Arlen with a clear opportunity to infuse the score with his distinct style. Surprisingly however, the music assigned to Pompey sounds more as though it falls somewhere between the parlor style and the jazz style established in the score.

The image displays two systems of musical notation for the song "The Eagle and Me". The first system includes a voice line and a piano accompaniment. The voice line is in 4/4 time, with lyrics: "Ri-ver it like to flow; Ea-gle it like to fly. Ea-gle it like to". The piano accompaniment features a melody in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand. The second system starts at measure 6 and includes a voice line with the lyric "feel its wings a-gainst the sky." and a piano accompaniment. The piano part consists of chords in the right hand and a bass line in the left hand.

Example 35: “The Eagle and Me”

Given the clear breakdown between musical styles elsewhere in the score the listener is left to wonder why Arlen musically characterizes Pompey in this opaque manner. The answer lies in the sentiment expressed by the text: Pompey's desire for freedom. Musically, the score subtly presents Pompey's plea for freedom by reinforcing his desire to join into the majority (white) society depicted in the musical's libretto by seemingly disassociating with the jazz style. It might also be understood as making the character less threatening to the musical's majority, and therefore his plea for freedom more palatable both to the onstage community and the majority, white offstage audience. In a later interview, lyricist E. Y. Harburg noted a direct connection between the musical style of the "Eagle and Me" and the lyrical expression of a desire for African American freedom. He later claimed that Harold Arlen's unique use of musical language in the piece had created a new type of song, one not before heard by African American characters on the musical stage:

"The Eagle and Me" occupies a transitional place among what we might term the "black plight" songs of the American theater; that is at once its distinction and its limitation. . . . "The Eagle and Me" is a ballad of the Forties, when, for the first time, a nascent civil rights movement was beginning to direct public attention to the possibility of curtailing institutional racism. A lamentation would no longer suffice, and "The Eagle and Me" is not a song in the same vein as its predecessors. It is, rather, the first theater song of the fledgling civil rights movement.²⁵

That the song style of "The Eagle and Me" represents Pompey's desire to be accepted into American society and achieve freedom is further clarified through comparison to how more obvious markers of African American styles are applied to other African American characters. In a pivotal scene in which Evalina and Bloomer

²⁵ Harburg and Meyerson, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz*, 197.

Girls find themselves in prison for their protest efforts, they meet a group of incarcerated African American men, who attempt to cheer their spirits with the rousing, “I Got a Song.” This song, in the style of a chain gang song, is the only musical number featuring any other African American characters. The work is not necessarily in the jazz style, but demonstrates many of the hallmarks of African American musical styles typically found in a song in this style. The piece is structured in a call-and-response format, in which one character proclaims: “he got a song,” and the rest of the group answers with a description of the kind of song. The kind of song the singer has in his heart changes with each verse, and the verses contain images stereotypically associated with African Americans, as the singer announces he’s got a “basket full of songs!” Whether you need: “Railroad, woman, singer, bullfrog, steamboat, underground songs. I got ‘em, I got ‘em.” In a later reprise of the song, the words are further changed to a verse in which the lead singer has a “freedom song.” In addition to the call-and-response style and lyrical tropes, the number also features pentatonic melodies, jaunty rhythms, and prominently placed blue notes that set it apart from the other numbers of the classical style (see example 10). By creating the association with the sounds of blackness and the image of imprisonment, Arlen reinforces that for Pompey the parlor or white style represents freedom and acceptance.

He got a rail-road song!

5
rail-road needs a hamm-er ham-mer got-ta be Rail-road gits a

ham-mer an back d' that ham-mer is li-ttle ole' me'

Example 36: "I Got a Song"

The blues or jazz style is further associated with another significant scene that reinforces the connection between the sounds of African American music and images of captivity comes later in the score during a number in which a slave is sold at auction. The slave's body is described in a gross objectification and denigration of humanity as the man is sung into slavery with markers of African American music including blue notes and gapped scale melodies (see example 37).

Man for sale! Nice big ma-n for sale!

This musical score shows the first six measures of the piece. The vocal line is in a 2/4 time signature with a key signature of one flat. The lyrics are 'Man for sale! Nice big ma-n for sale!'. The piano accompaniment features a steady eighth-note bass line in the left hand and a more complex melody in the right hand, including triplet figures.

Look at dem hands

This section covers measures 7 through 14. The vocal line has a rest for the first six measures, followed by the lyrics 'Look at dem hands' in measure 7. The piano accompaniment continues with its rhythmic pattern, featuring several triplet markings in both hands.

Look at dem strong Cot-ton pick-ing hands

This section covers measures 15 through 22. The vocal line has a rest for the first six measures, followed by the lyrics 'Look at dem strong Cot-ton pick-ing hands' in measure 15. The piano accompaniment continues with its rhythmic pattern, featuring several triplet markings in both hands.

Example 37: “Man for Sale”

This association further strengthens the idea that while for the Bloomer Girls, jazz and other associated sounds of blackness represents freedom, for the African American characters it represents being imprisoned in a society that can only see blackness and Black people in one way: as slaves

Connections between the sounds of blackness/whiteness and the juxtaposition between freedom and imprisonment are made further clear by yet additional musical allusions to the minstrel show in Pompey’s music. Returning to his “The Eagle and

Me,” while obvious references to the jazz style found in other numbers from the show cannot be heard here; gone are the blue notes and exaggerated dotted rhythms; there is reference to another African American music tradition: the cakewalk, a dance tradition from the days of slavery that laid the foundation for the syncopated rhythms of ragtime. This reference can be heard in the short-long-short long long rhythm that dominates every other bar in the opening chorus. This rhythm is called attention to by repetitive patterning in the lyrics: “River it like to,” “Eagle it like to,” etc. That Arlen would reference this tradition, consciously or not, is interesting given the ethos of the song and the cultural significance of the genre.

A couple dance, performed by strutting in a circle, the cakewalk has been thought to represent African American’s comical mocking of the over-the-top behaviors and outlandish modes of dress of whites, particularly fitting in a musical comedy in which the hoopskirt and the social beliefs that led to its design serve as a central focus.²⁶ In addition to the cakewalk rhythm, the work also contains an arch-shaped phrase created from a largely diatonic melody, placing this tune within the world of Pompey’s aspirations.

Considered within the broader context of the musical, which has clear overtones of the minstrel show, Pompey’s use of the cakewalk style here is significant to our understanding of his character. The subversive nature of the cakewalk itself fits well with the expression of Pompey’s desire to break forth from a system of white repression. Many scholars have likewise noted how when black performers engaged

²⁶ Jeffrey Magee, “Ragtime and Early Jazz” in *The Cambridge Companion to American Music* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1998),

in black-face minstrelsy, as in the case of black minstrel troupes, they did so in a way that drew attention to the oddity of the stereotypes and racial prejudice of minstrel performance.²⁷ The presence of the cakewalk rhythm simultaneously also reveals complicated dimensions and limitations of white understandings of African American culture.

The cakewalk rhythm highlighted in “The Eagle and Me” was a familiar, traditional marker of Blackness in music (the subversive nature of the genre was often unrecognized or unacknowledged by white writers). The rhythm was frequently used in Broadway-style spirituals popular in the 1930s and 40s, including Arlen’s own “Get Happy.” The song also contains other notable markers of the spiritual genre in general as well such as lyrical references to “scripture,” “the good Lord,” and “the way the Lawd ‘awanted it.” The river imagery likewise calls to mind the imagery of spirituals like “Deep River” and others that refer to the river Jordan, not to mention specific connections to the Broadway spiritual “Ol’ Man River,” which likewise uses a cakewalk rhythm (inverted).²⁸ The connections to the spiritual further add dimension to how Arlen used music to help make Pompey’s plea to the onstage characters and offstage audience, as the genre lyrically draws upon the well-known suffering of the Jewish people in the Old Testament in order to draw Christian’s

²⁷ Robert C. Toll, *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1974), 262.

²⁸ The parallels with other Broadway spirituals call into question Harburg’s comments about a “new type of song,” though he seems to suggest it is the upbeat attitude of the lyrics in “The Eagle and Me” that set it apart from other similar songs about freedom.

attention to the evils of slavery. The performance of this work by Dooley Wilson, who had risen to fame in the all-black film musical, *Cabin the Sky* and later as Sam in “Casablanca,” further lends gravitas to the song.

In any case, Pompey’s performance seems to belie a kind of duality that engages audiences on a multitude of levels. The possible double-meaning of Pompey’s musical performance is given further credence by the frequency of double-meaning not only in many African American performance traditions but also those of immigrant traditions for whom musical performance often acted as a discursive site to create community and challenge social conditions.²⁹ A framework in which the audience can understand the presence of layered meanings within the show is central to interpreting the meaning of the show as a whole.³⁰ This becomes clear in two other poignant musical examples that engage with the theme of racial equality in the score of *Bloomer Girl*. These include Daisy’s “Never Was Born” and “Watch out for the Ice, Eliza” performed as part of the Bloomer girls’ production of a play-within-a-play, *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*.

Similar to Pompey’s “Eagle and Me,” in “Never was Born,” Arlen and Harburg engage in musical irony in order to show the absurdity of racial prejudice. Therein they juxtapose stylized dialogue meant to imitate slave speech with an upbeat, major key European march. This odd juxtaposition coupled with the

²⁹ Henry Bial, *Acting Jewish: Negotiating Ethnicity on the American Stage and Screen* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005), 16.

³⁰ Werner Sollors, *Beyond Ethnicity: Consent and Descent in American Culture* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 249.

opposition of a negative text with major key music creates a place for satire. Indeed, the continual triadic nature of the melody, which rolls incessantly up and down, is meant to demonstrate via exaggerated musical simplicity bordering on the inane, the complete absurdity of how slaves' humanity was viewed as people yes, but somehow whose stories were not of consequence or value (they just seem to appear in the fields one day like cotton and corn). The location of this song in a white voice offers the final punch as it challenges audience members to consider whether or not it would make sense to think of Daisy (as Liza), a young white woman, in this same manner and suggesting that to do so would be absurd, thus pointing out the hypocrisy.



Example 38: "I Never Was Born"

The appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* within the work is a significant moment within *Bloomer Girl's* score. It is in this moment that the two marginalized groups within the musical—women and African Americans—come together in a visible way that unites their individual causes most clearly. A play based on a novel of the same name by Harriet Beacher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852), was a seminal book of the pre-Civil War abolitionist movement.³¹ The plot follows the lives of slaves, Tom and Eliza who attempt to escape to freedom after learning that their

³¹ Harriet Beacher Stowe, *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1852; reprinted Bedford, MA: Applewood Books, 2001).

supposedly benevolent but financially strained master, Arthur Shelby, intends to sell Tom along with Eliza's son Harry to repay his debts. Eliza manages to escape with baby Harry and finds her already escaped husband, George along the way, while Tom is sold to cruel slave traders who ultimately end his life.

The dominant theme of the novel, the condemnation of slavery, is achieved through multiple references to family and faith. Stowe's novel was one of the most influential works of literature to humanize African American slaves, and ask white readers to view slaves as real people with real families, depicting in particular Eliza's struggle to save her young son and the cruelty of family separation. Like many in the mid-nineteenth century, Stowe also viewed women as the moral authority and center of the family. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the female characters—Eliza who escapes from slavery to save her son and Eva, a young white girl whose kindness and Christian faith leads her to friendship with Tom and reform her family's racist beliefs are the primary characters who seek to change readers hearts and minds.³² Indeed, Stowe's novel was written in a sentimental style typical of domestic fiction popular among female readers in the nineteenth century, showing her appeal to women as actors of

³² Elizabeth Ammons, "Stowe's Dream of the Mother-Savior: Uncle Tom's Cabin and American Women Writers Before the 1920s," in Eric J. Sundquist (ed.), *New Essays on Uncle Tom's Cabin* (Cambridge University Press, 1986), 159.

change.³³ The idea that women have the power to affect society and lead people to a moral course of action in Stowe's work has strong connections to *Bloomer Girl*.

Stowe's novel similarly grapples with themes of religion. Within the course of the novel, Eliza and George save the life of a slave trader who pursues them because of their Christian faith, the white St. Clare family that buys Tom experiences a Christian awakening about the evils of slavery and racism. The form of Stowe's text itself sometimes takes the form of a sermon and the work is rife with biblical references, particularly to the old testament and stories of Moses leading the Israelites to freedom.

Old testament stories have often been cited as a point of connection between the African American and Jewish communities. References to old testament scriptures were often used in African American spirituals for example to draw attention to the parallel suffering of Black and Jewish peoples.³⁴ It is therefore interesting not only that as Jewish writers Arlen and Harburg were drawn to Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, but that Stowe's work, and specifically the scene in which escaped Eliza must cross frozen water in a parallel to the Israelites crossing the Red Sea, would also appear in the musicals of at least two other Jewish American

³³ "Domestic or Sentimental Fiction, 1820–1865," American Literature Sites, Washington State University (<https://hub.wsu.edu/campbell/literary-movements/domestic-or-sentimental-fiction-1820-1865/#:~:text=Sometimes%20referred%20to%20as%20%E2%80%9Csentimental,middle%20of%20the%20nineteenth%20century>), retrieved September 7, 2020.

³⁴ Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues*, 5–7.

composers: Kurt Weill (*Ulysses Africanus*, 1939) and Richard Rodgers (*The King and I*, 1955).³⁵

In *Bloomer Girl*'s “Watch out for the Ice, Eliza,” Arlen uses a writing style that bears striking similarity to what will later be seen in Rodgers and Hammerstein's evocation of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in *The King and I* (1955). In the play's depiction within both musicals, the songwriters treat the text in melodrama, using speech-like eight-note rhythms, parallel-chord writing, and tremolo accompaniments (see examples 38–40).



Example 39: “Look out for the Ice, Eliza” (Bloomer Girl)



Example 40: Rhythm, Excerpt from “The Small House of Uncle Thomas” Ballet

³⁵ Performances of Stowe's play also have a long history of appearance in the minstrel show. See Graham 183–203.

The image shows a musical score for a chorus. The top staff is a vocal line in 3/4 time, marked *ff* and labeled "CHORUS:". The lyrics are "Praise to Bud - dha, Praise to Bud - dha." The piano accompaniment is in the same time signature and features a prominent tremolo effect in the right hand and parallel chords in the left hand. The score concludes with the instruction "lunga Sra.: (Curtain) ff" and "End of Ballet" with a double bar line and the word "attacca" below it.

Example 41: Parallel-chords and tremolo, Excerpt from “The Small House of Uncle Thomas” Ballet

In both “Watch Out for the Ice Eliza” (*Bloomer Girl*) and “Poor Eliza” (*The King and I*), a non-African American character—Daisy (*Bloomer Girl*) and Tuptim (*The King and I*)—takes on the role of Eliza in order to demonstrate the similarity of her own plight with the escaped slave from Stowe’s famed tale. In both musicals, that plight arises from the circumstances of her gender. In both musicals, this scene then helps to further bring together the themes of racial and gender inequality in a coherent and obvious way.³⁶ Both works also make use of and perpetuate portrayals of African American slaves as docile, accepting, and paternalistic in order to pursue political ends. The political impact of such scenes is layered to say the least. I further argue that these “Uncle Tom” scenes, grounded in Old Testament imagery and written by

³⁶ Shannon Steen, “How Uncle Tom’s Cabin Killed the King of Siam,” in *Racial Geometries of the Black Atlantic, Asian Pacific and American Theatre*, Studies in International Performance (London, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

Jewish immigrant songwriters, bring together the themes of racial and gendered injustices in the musicals with the Jewish experience.

This syncretism between Black and Jewish identities is also sounded in the cast recording, wherein Arlen himself sings the earlier described “Man for Sale.” This brief number, the cry of a slave trader at auction, becomes complex in the moment of Arlen’s performance. Sung in a slow tempo, the melancholy minor melody and the vocal flourishes sound almost as though they belong as much in the synagogue as they do on the block of the auctioneer. In performing this work, in a style influenced by his upbringing within the synagogue, Arlen creates a further analogue between the suffering of Jewish and African Americans. However, as a white man this moment also draws attention to Arlen’s position of power and privilege. Even still it is important to acknowledge that Arlen’s recognition and self-identification as white would have been in flux during the period of the musical’s creation when identities such as Jewishness, were understood as race.³⁷

Political Readings

Through their complex portrayal of race and gender, Harburg and Arlen create multiple possible readings of the political message of *Bloomer Girl*. In particular, their treatment of themes of race and gender challenge the “assimilation narrative”

³⁷ The idea of a dominant “white” culture that included such ethnicities did not begin to develop until the 1950s. See Matthew Frye Jacobson, *Whiteness of a Different Color: European Immigrants and the Alchemy of Race* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998), 91 and Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and American Popular Songs* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, Press, 1999), 62. For more on race and ethnicity in this era see also Gary Gerstle, *American Crucible: Race and Nation in the Twentieth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

identified by scholars such as Andrea Most and Bruce Kirle. These scholars describe assimilation as a common thematic trope in the musicals written by Jewish-Americans, who in their works often showcased an ethnically or racially othered character who changes and is accepted by the dominant white society of the musical. They suggest that this process of an ethnic or racial outsider gaining acceptance from the musical's white community serves as a metaphor for the acceptance of Jewish American immigrants. Therein the musical's authors argue for their own ability to gain full acceptance as Americans on stage.

The assimilation narrative has been observed in the work of Rodgers and Hammerstein in particular with *Oklahoma!* (1943), a close chronological predecessor of *Bloomer Girl*, serving as a particularly relevant example.³⁸ According to Andrea Most, in *Oklahoma!*, the character of Ali Hakim, represents the ethno-racial other. Identified as a Persian, his profession as a peddler positions him as Jewish. His Jewishness is further suggested by his speech inflection, love of haggling, and humorous tendency to wallow in self-pity. As a character, Ali Hakim represents the clown. By turning the Jewish character into a comedic type Hammerstein undercuts American anti-Semitic rhetoric and negates the notion of the Jew as a danger to American society. The play ends with Hakim's marriage to Ado Annie, a metaphor for assimilation into American society.

³⁸ The following analysis is drawn from Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2004); Bruce Kirle, "Reconciliation, Resolution, and the Political Role of *Oklahoma!* in the American Consciousness," *Theatre Journal* 55/2 (May 2003): 251–74.

In Oklahoma! Ali Hakim argues for the acceptance of Jews into the fabric of American society by contrasting Jews and African Americans represented by the musical's villain, Jud. While Jud is not specifically described as an African American character, he embodies many of the racist stereotypes of African American men as violent or sexualized. Others have read his character as Native American, given the musical's setting in the setting in Indian Territory and his lyrical characterization with short ungrammatical phrases. In either case, his character, unlike Ali Hakim, is shown to be irredeemable and does not gain acceptance in the musical's community.

In the history of Black-Jewish relations in the U.S., Jewish Americans sought to find ways to express their differences from African Americans just as often as they sought to show their similarities through parallel suffering, as a strategy for gaining social acceptance. The emphasis that Jewish writers often placed on ethnic inclusiveness did not stop them from perpetuating racial stereotypes about Blacks. Jews (and many other immigrant groups in the early twentieth century) found that a powerful strategy for becoming fully American was to adopt the prejudices of whites towards Blacks as their own. Jews in show business often used blackface (and its less visible counterparts) as a way of aligning themselves with the dominant white culture.³⁹

In *Bloomer Girl*, the status of insiders and outsiders is likewise presented using the well-worn tropes of white and "other" that appear in many other musicals of

³⁹ Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 13.

the age. However, in *Bloomer Girl*, the othered outsiders (Women/Black/Jewish) fulfill the role of insider while the white dominant community in the musical are presented as the true outsiders. Through this change, the musical suggests not that others need to be accepted by the dominant society, but that the dominant society needs to change and become more accepting of difference. This message of acceptance as the responsibility of the dominant community was unusual for its time period.

Indeed, given the clear resonance between the Civil War setting of the musical's plot and the wartime 1940s of its premiere, *Bloomer Girl* seems to take a more critical look at the country than many of its Broadway counterparts.⁴⁰ By exploring the nineteenth-century plight of women and African Americans in the United States in the context of the contemporary plight of the Jewish people in Europe, the musical suggests that anyone, including Americans, is capable of committing discriminatory acts of injustice. It calls Americans to confront their own prejudices not just those of their European counterparts.

The critical stance of *Bloomer Girl*, however seemingly overt in the musical, has largely gone unnoticed by audiences and critics, who see the Civil War setting of the musical's plot as a celebration of American morality as it was the time period in

⁴⁰ While this type of subversive comedy and political outlook was uncommon in musicals of this era, it has nevertheless been a part of Broadway's history and is well discussed in the following sources: Alisa, C. Roost, "The Other Musical Theatre: Political Satire in Broadway Musicals: From *Strike Up the Band* (1927) to *Anyone Can Whistle* (1964)" (Ph.D. diss. The City University of New York, 2001) and Donald Elgan Whittaker III, "Subversive Aspects of American Musical Theater" (Ph.D. dissertation, Louisiana State University, 2002).

which American's advanced the cause of freedom for African Americans (at least on paper). In his widely accepted analysis of the musical, Mordden argues that *Bloomer Girl*, with its clear focus on the issue of women's rights, justified America's involvement in the war effort by establishing Americans as the good guy:

Good guys have a sense of humor, dance well, try not to be racist, and sing Irving Berlin songs. Alternatively, good guys ride horses, try to get along with their neighbors, and sing Rodgers and Hammerstein. But they don't jail or sue the bad guy: they kill him. You have to or he'll keep coming at you. So, in many different ways, the wartime musical took a look at why we were the good guys. According to Harold Arlen and E. Y. Harburg's *Bloomer Girl* it was because of feminism.⁴¹

Surely *Bloomer Girl* does sound a call to action, trumpeting the belief that "injustice anywhere is a threat to justice everywhere" by drawing parallels between the plights of women, African Americans, and Jews. As Harburg himself once explained, *Bloomer Girl* is about the "indivisibility of human freedom."⁴² However, it calls into question America's portrayal as "the good guy," or a nation above and beyond prejudices of anti-Semitism then devastating Europe.

In either case, a political reading of the musical suggests support for the nation's involvement in the war effort overseas, an involvement that was not unilaterally supported as rising tides of anti-Semitism swept across parts of the United States in the pre-war era when the United States was divided between interventionists, who wanted to join the Allied forces and fight fascism, which they perceived as a threat to American democracy and human rights, and isolationists, who

⁴¹ Mordden, *Beautiful Mornin'*, 197.

⁴² Meyerson and Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz?* Yip Harburg, Lyricist, 187.

believed that America should not interfere in European affairs. Although Roosevelt's administration was officially neutral, New Deal liberals were linked with interventionists whereas conservatives were linked with the isolationists.

Surprisingly, the politics of *Bloomer Girl* were not acknowledged by critics at the time of the musical's premiere. This can partially be explained by the shadow of Rodgers and Hammerstein's *Oklahoma!* (1943), which had announced the new style of the book musical that would come to dominate the Broadway stage. Audiences seem to have been more focused on how Arlen's work compared to this seminal show than in greeting and interpreting the work on its own terms. In subsequent revivals of the work, of which there have been two—the 1956 television production and the 2001 Center City Encore production—this has continued to be true.

Conclusions

While *Bloomer Girl* may be an outlier in the history of the American musical, it is nevertheless an important one because it highlights that narratives are tools not rules. While the assimilation narrative is helpful as a way to gloss musicals created during this time, and can serve as an effective teaching tool, it also has the potential to obscure historical truths. More damaging, it has the potential to lead us to create generalizations about groups of people and their experiences that devalue individuals. As Harold Arlen's work suggests, the relationships between Jewish Americans and the history of popular music is far more complex than how it is told. While it would be impossible to highlight every individual experience in music, it is nevertheless possible to bring to light those stories which can be told, like in the case of Arlen. Stories and the way we tell them matter.

We can continue to see Arlen at work on the Broadway stage in his subsequent work for the medium and one of his most celebrated scores, *St. Louis Woman*. As I will show, *St. Louis Woman* offers a rare example of a piece of musical theater that takes jazz not as an extra resource for the score, but as the entire lifeblood of the score, as it brings to life a work of literature from the Harlem Renaissance.

CHAPTER 4:

Jazz Takes the Stage Part Two: *St. Louis Woman* (1946)

Following the success of *Bloomer Girl* (1944), Arlen was living at his home in Hollywood and searching for a new project. He was eager to find his way back to Broadway where he hoped, like so many of the great Tin Pan Alley songwriters, to make his mark as a composer. The Broadway show remained one of the surest ways to have one's songs reach listeners and for Arlen, success on Broadway seems to have been a personal yardstick by which he measured his success. Arlen's return ticket came in 1945 in the form of a phone call from Arthur Freed, a department head in MGM's music division, who had a script he felt would be perfect.¹ The script was for *St. Louis Woman*, a show based on the novel, *God Sends Sunday*, by the Harlem Renaissance writer Arna Bontemps. Who better to set this Harlem Renaissance tale than the young songwriter who had come of age working at the very epicenter of the movement in New York's famed Cotton Club alongside the likes of Duke Ellington and Count Basie? Arlen excitedly agreed to the project. Though the show would go on to become the subject of fierce criticism on the basis of its libretto, the score stands as one of Arlen's most celebrated works for the Broadway stage.

In this chapter, I will explore how in *St. Louis Woman*, Arlen create a new kind of score for the Broadway book musical, one completely invested in the

¹ The following is drawn from Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 197–206; 288–306.

language of jazz.² While Arlen had used jazz to great effect in *Bloomer Girl*, in *St. Louis Woman*, jazz forms the work's entire lifeblood.

In *St. Louis Woman*, Arlen uses jazz to sonically shape the onstage world and to develop the show's characters. In particular, he uses differing styles of jazz to create strong character contrasts, especially between the two female lead characters—Della and Lila. Musical analysis suggests that the tension created by the different jazz styles associated with these characters reflects a racial narrative common in depictions of Black life in white artists' work during the Harlem Renaissance. In this narrative, white artists and authors capitalized on the perceived "alterity of African American identity that animated Harlem's touristic economy." African Americans were frequently depicted as having both "savage" and "civil" natures, qualities that Arlen musically maps on to Della and Lila respectively.³

Intersections of Music and Literature: The Harlem Renaissance

In order to understand how Arlen uses jazz functions as a dramatic tool, engaging with his literary subject, we must first understand how the libretto figures into the Harlem Renaissance more broadly. *God Sends Sunday*, the source material for *St. Louis Woman*, was written in 1931, and represents the final period of the Harlem

² On the sound of the book musical established by Rodgers and Hammerstein see Joseph P. Swain, *The Broadway Musical: A Critical and Musical Survey* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), 73–99. While jazz had been the musical language of Broadway scores in significant part in works such as *Shuffle Along* (1921) and *Hot Chocolates* (1929), these were musical revues.

³ Nathaniel Sloan, "Stormy Relations: The Cotton Club, Broadway Spirituals, and Harlem Encounters in the Music of Harold Arlen and Ted Koehler," *Musical Quarterly* 101 (2018): 129.

Renaissance.⁴ The novel does not meet audience expectations for a work in this style in several significant ways. Rather than featuring a setting in New York, the action takes place variously in the bayous of New Orleans, the mid-western city of St. Louis, the state of California, and the country of Mexico. Moreover, rather than presenting a story about contemporary African Americans, author Arna Bontemps sets the work in the late nineteenth century. Most unexpected, however, is the novel's treatment of its African American characters. While many authors viewed the Harlem Renaissance as an opportunity to celebrate African American culture and uplift the community, Bontemps explores an uncomfortable side of life—the realities of the lower classes, and the glamorous allure and negative effects of living the “high life” of gambling, drinking, and more.⁵

Set in the last years of the nineteenth century in St. Louis, Missouri, the plot follows the story of the anti-hero, Little Auggie, a talented and superstitious jockey. Weak and frail as a child, Little Auggie believes he will go on to accomplish great things because he was born with a caul over his eyes, an unusual phenomenon. He eventually meets and befriends Badfoot, a groom employed by Horace Church-Woodbine, better known as Mr. Woody, a wealthy white horse owner. Auggie discovers his natural talent with horses and charms Mr. Woody with his musical skills

⁴ Cheryl A. Wall, *The Harlem Renaissance: A Very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016).

⁵ A precedent for this style of Harlem Renaissance literature dealing with the nightlife of the characters established in the work of Carl van Claude and George Schuyler. Van Vechten's work in particular, like Bontemps's work, was met with scrutiny. Gwendolyn B. Debnam, “The Imaginative Fiction of Arna Wendell Bontemps,” (M.A. thesis, Atlanta University, 1977).

(there are written folk songs in the novel), and thus begins his foray into the world of professional horse racing.

Auggie's rapid success leads him down a path of pride, arrogance, and greed. He becomes an unruly drinker, gambler, and womanizer. He falls in love with a beautiful mixed-race woman, Florence Dessau, who turns out to be the romantic partner of his employer, Mr. Woody. Disappointed, he briefly pursues the scandalous woman of the town, Della Green. Though he eventually forsakes Della and claims Florence as his own, Auggie continues to fall deeper into his misguided ways. As he loses his fortune to drink and game, Florence leaves him. Devastated, he brashly murders his arch-nemesis and fellow jockey, Bigalow Brown. In the end he is forced to flee to his sister's home in California where he lives the quietly disappointing life of a farmer until he finds himself again in a skirmish that ends in probable murder, this time with the local town Casanova. He flees once more to Mexico in another feigned attempt to escape who he has become.

In order to make the story suitable for the Broadway stage, Countee Cullen who worked on the libretto, made several notable changes. First and foremost, the dramatic tone of the novel was toned down in favor of a script that lent itself more to light-hearted comedy ending with a *lieto fine*, and the character of Little Auggie is somewhat redeemed. In *St. Louis Woman*, Auggie fights to win the affections of Della Green, a barmaid in the employ of the abusive Bigalow Brown, who is also her lover. He eventually wins her affections by showcasing his talents in a cakewalk. Yet, while Auggie is away at the racetrack, Brown pursues Della further and becomes infuriated when she rebukes him. Brown's former lover, Lila, inserts herself and proclaims

herself his true love, begging him to take her back. As Auggie approaches a shot is fired. Though no one has seen the shooter, Brown lies dying. Thinking it must be his nemesis, Auggie, he curses the young jockey. Superstitious, Auggie takes the curse to heart and begins to lose and pulls away from Della, only in the end to declare superstition false and reclaim his title's as best jockey and Della's love.

In addition to the tonal and dramatic changes made to the script, *St. Louis Woman* also notably erases the element of class from the story. It seems noteworthy that the higher-class statuses of Bigalow Brown and Lila reflect the races of their original character counterpoints: Mr. Woody and Florence. Despite significant changes to the libretto, Countee Cullen was ultimately unable to free *St. Louis Woman* of its problematic and negative portrayals of African American life. These problematic portrayals are further resounded in the musical's score.

The Use of Jazz in St. Louis Woman

The score for *St. Louis Woman* highlights problematic uses and portrayals of African Americans in the arts. The trouble begins with the musical's title. Derived from a famous blues lyric by W. C. Handy, "St. Louis Woman" and a few other of the author's lyrics had originally appeared in Arna Bontemps novel *God Sends Sunday*. Therein, the lyrics were presented as folk songs, and not as belonging to the work of a well-known and established composer. W. C. Handy was reportedly unhappy with this portrayal. His efforts to obtain the promised compensation for the inclusion of his

works were also met with difficulty, and he balked at the lyric being used as the title of a new musical with book by Countee Cullen without his permission or consent.⁶

Throughout the score for *St. Louis Woman*, Arlen uses multiple different styles and idioms of jazz to depict the musical's characters, reflecting the character's race and class status in a way evocative of Jerome Kern's *Showboat* or George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, creating similarly problematic representations that often plagued the efforts of white writers engaging with African American characters and stories.⁷ Specifically, his poignant use of two jazz styles highlights a "civilized"/"savagery" binary that appears frequently in the works of white authors dealing with African American topics, particularly in the context of the Harlem Renaissance.⁸ During this era, institutions such as the Cotton Club of Arlen's formative years advertised and exploited African Americans and Black culture as an exotic attraction

⁶ "W.C. Handy Singing Blues Again; Speaks Piece on *St. Louis Woman*," *New Amsterdam News* (March 9, 1946).

⁷ Todd Decker, *Showboat: Performing Race in an American Musical*, Broadway Legacy Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). See also Naomi André, "Contextualizing Race and Gender in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*," in *Black Opera: History, Power, Engagement* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2018).

⁸ Nathaniel Sloan traces this binary to the controversial, white Harlem Renaissance novelist Carl Van Vechten. See Sloan, "Stormy Relations," 129. Not only does Van Vechten discuss this binary but he ties it directly to this directly to African American expression in the arts. See also Emily Bernard, *Carl Van Vechten and the Harlem Renaissance: A Portrait in Black and White* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2012).

for white audiences and consumers. This is reflected in the Cotton Club's many songs and shows featuring "jungle" music.⁹

"Sweetening Water" and "Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home"

Among the earliest numbers in the show is a pairing of songs that establish the female romantic lead, Della Greene, the town beauty and girlfriend of bar owner, Bigalow Brown. These works emerge organically from dialogue, making the transition smoothly from speech to song. We first meet Della in the local bar, where men extol the virtues of alcohol as a tool for persuading young ladies: "He bought her a Scotch and she was unimpressed, so I ordered a sweeten-in water and she acquiesced." This banter transitions directly into the chorus "Sweetnin' water, sweet as it can be." The song is set in the key of F major and the jaunty blue-note inflected melody lyrically and rhythmically mimics the vocal inflections of the sly, would-be suitors. This melody is immediately picked up by Della who cleverly turns the men's desire to buy women's consent with a well-ordered cocktail into a ballad of empowerment as she sings about her "free and easy ways" and her desire to break from the web of her current romantic entanglement with Bigalow Brown:

Cross the river, round the bend
Howdy Stranger, so long friend,
There's a voice in the lonesome win' that keeps whisperin' roam.

The song thus transforms into her show-stopping song, "Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home."

⁹ Nate Sloan observes that this binary was present in works Arlen composed for the Cotton Club, including his "Primitive Prima Donna" (1934). He points out other Arlen works such as "Raisin' the Rent" (1933) present a more nuanced view of Harlem life. See *ibid.*

In these numbers, Arlen uses what I will call “show jazz,” given its reliance on over-exaggerated and cliché stylistic elements. These songs are informed by the sensibilities of vaudeville tunes from the early twentieth century. Indeed, John Lee of the Los Angeles *Sentinel* assessed *St. Louis Woman* as “a beautiful hodge podge that comes closer to being a thinly-veiled vaudeville show than a musical—as was intended.”¹⁰

While there is no uniform vaudeville song style, vaudeville writers frequently used over-the-top, onomopoetic gestures to heighten comedy or mickey-mouse imitate and animate the action on stage.¹¹ Beginning with a cliché piano vamp and the stereotypical dotted-eighth sixteenth rolling bass ostinato Arlen sets the scene of the drunken debauchery. The opening vocal melody shared by both Della and the would-be-suitors (A-B^b-A-F) mirrors in parallel intervals and rhythm the bass pattern established in the piano introduction: (F-C-D-C-F).

The short and sassy melodic lines, which rhythmically emphasize half step motion, draw out the romantic tension building between the two characters while the appoggiatura figurations and syncopation create a sense of play and fun. Taken together, these qualities show that Della will be the youthful, love interest of the

¹⁰ John M. Lee, “‘St. Louis Woman’ came to town on a Phony Plot,” *Los Angeles Sentinel* (Los Angeles, California: April 11, 1946).

¹¹ For more on the style of vaudeville song see Nicholas Gebhardt, *Vaudeville Melodies: Popular Musicians and Mass Entertainment in American Culture, 1870-1929* (Chicago, Ill: University of Chicago Press, 2017), especially chapter 8. See also Peter Van Der Merwe’s *Origins of Popular Style: The Antecedents of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Oxford, 2007), and Charles Hamm, *Songs from the Melting Pot: The Formative Years 1907-1914* (New York: Oxford, 1997).

musical (see example 42).¹² They also sexualize her character, which was not common for a leading lady in theater at the time, and comment on her class status.

¹² On female character types in the musical see Richard M. Goldstein, “‘I Enjoy Being a Girl’: Women in the Plays of Rodgers and Hammerstein.” *Popular Music and Society* 13, no.1 (1989), 1–8 and Julie Noonan “The Sound of Musicals’ Women: *Tessitura* and the Construction of Gender in the American Musical” (Ph.D. diss. University of Kansas, 2006).

Slowly, with a steady rock

The musical score is written in B-flat major and 4/4 time. It features a piano introduction with triplets in both hands, marked *f* very marked. The vocal line is performed by DELLA. The piano accompaniment includes chords and guitar-style chord diagrams. The lyrics are: "Free an' eas-y that's my style how - dy do me watch me smile, fare thee well me af - ter - while 'cause I got - ta roam an' an - y place I hang my hat is home!"

Chord diagrams shown in the score include: F, Bb, F, Faug, Db, Bbm6, F, Bb7, F, Gm, Fdim, Gm, and F.

Example 42: "Any Place I Hang My Hat is Home"

The association of this style of jazz with the notion of lower-class status is further reinforced by both the setting of the performances in places of ill-repute (performed in a saloon), as well as by the singers' performance decisions. In the original cast

recording, Ruby Hill (Della) delivers the vocal lines of “Any Place I Hang My Hat is Home” in a perfunctory, dry style, keeping each melodic line short and brief to emphasize the character’s sass and comedic wit.¹³ By contrast, in the 1998 Broadway revival Vanessa Williams draws out the melodic line by over-exaggerating and sliding through the opening half-step in a vocal scoop at a slow tempo to emphasize Della’s sexuality.¹⁴ Such scoops evoke the timbral gesture of sliding trombones popular in musical comedic sketches for vaudeville. Williams’ cultural recognition as a beauty and sex symbol after her very public resignation as Miss America a decade earlier following a nude photo scandal, the first and only resignation of the pageant’s history, further strengthens the relationship between this style and an overt expression of sexuality that comment on the character’s class.¹⁵

“Legalize My Name” and “A Woman’s Prerogative”

Echoes of Della’s music can be heard in the musical numbers of her comic counterpart and secondary female comic lead, her friend, the barmaid, Butterfly. Both of these songs are written in the key of F major, sonically locating Della and Butterfly within the same musical space. Their further shared features, namely their similar use of features that sound like jazz-like caricatures, creates a dramatic pairing between

¹³ *St. Louis Woman: Original Broadway Cast Recording*, Broadway Classics (Middlesex, England: EMI Records, Angel Records, originally recorded on Capitol Records, 1946, 1992) LC 0110 ZDM 7 64662 2.

¹⁴ *St. Louis Woman: 1998 Encores! Center City Cast* (Chicago, Ill: Mercury, 1998), 314538148-4.

¹⁵ Jennifer Latson, “The Scandal that Cost a Miss America Her Crown,” *Time Magazine* (July 23, 1984).

these two characters. Both “Any Place I Hang My Hat” and “Legalize My Name” are announced with bawdy triplet introductions that capture the women’s strong, sassy character. The melodic contour of both numbers likewise performs similar functions. Both play with the interval of the third. While in “Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home” the melody constantly dips and decorates a descending third. “Legalize My Name” plays with ascending and descending thirds as Butterfly playfully teases about the possibilities of intimacy before marriage, “will I, won’t I.”

The chromatic contour of Butterfly’s “A Woman’s Prerogative” (example 43) also hearkens back to the chromatic motion of Della’s “Free and Easy.” Surprisingly for such a bawdy number, Arlen also incorporates his signature octave leap as Butterfly talks about the emptiness of promises, reflected by the expansive vocal range, leaping first the seventh and then the full octave. Arlen later throws us for a harmonic curve through a brief modulation to D minor as Butterfly sings the lyric “throw him a curve.”

Slowly and steadily

mf (with humor) *f*

(steadily)

Detailed description: This section shows the piano introduction. The right hand starts with a melodic line in the treble clef, featuring a half note G4, a quarter note A4, and a half note Bb4. The left hand provides a harmonic accompaniment in the bass clef. Dynamics range from mezzo-forte (mf) to forte (f). The tempo/style is 'Slowly and steadily'. There are triplets in the right hand starting at measure 3.

F Eb C7 F Fdim C7

Will I? _____ Won't I? _____ Do I? _____ Don't I? _____
 Love words, _____ sweet talk, _____ you an' _____ me talk, _____

p

Detailed description: This section contains the first verse of the song. The vocal line is written in the treble clef with lyrics. The piano accompaniment is in the bass clef. Chords are indicated above the vocal line: F, Eb, C7, F, Fdim, and C7. The piano part starts with a dynamic marking of piano (p). The lyrics are: 'Will I? Love words, _____ Won't I? sweet talk, _____ Do I? you an' _____ Don't I? me talk, _____'.

F Cm C F A7(#5) |

All you wan - na do is bill an' - coo, - but you's emp - ty hand - ed when the
 you say just a glimpse of my al - lure - is a glimpse of Par - a - dise, I

with a slow rock

Detailed description: This section contains the second verse of the song. The vocal line is in the treble clef with lyrics. The piano accompaniment is in the bass clef. Chords are indicated above the vocal line: F, Cm, C, F, and A7(#5). The piano part includes the instruction 'with a slow rock'. The lyrics are: 'All you wan - na do is bill an' - coo, - but you's emp - ty hand - ed when the you say just a glimpse of my al - lure - is a glimpse of Par - a - dise, I'.

2 Bb C7 Fmaj7 F7 Bb7

bill is due. - If you real - ly love me an' you love me true,
 can be sure. - Broth - er, if you wan - na take the dol - lar tour

Detailed description: This section contains the third verse of the song. The vocal line is in the treble clef with lyrics. The piano accompaniment is in the bass clef. Chords are indicated above the vocal line: Bb, C7, Fmaj7, F7, and Bb7. The lyrics are: 'bill is due. - If you real - ly love me an' you love me true, can be sure. - Broth - er, if you wan - na take the dol - lar tour'.

Example 43: "Legalize My Name"

With lazy steadiness

f well marked

F F+ Dm F7 Fmaj7 F6 B^bm7 *ten.*

1. I don't know who it was wrote it, or by whose pen —
 2. An - y fruit, e - ven a lem - on, should have a beau -

mp *ten.*

C7 F6 Fmaj7 F7 F6 F+

— it was signed. Some - one once said and I quote it: "It's a
 - ti - ful rind. But if that lem - on's a lem - on, It's a

F Gm7 Am7 F B^b C7 F6

wom-an's pre - rog - a - tive to change — her mind."
 wom-an's pre - rog - a - tive to change — her mind.

Example 44: "A Woman's Prerogative"

The connection between this style of jazz and class, further has problematic racial connotations. It is noteworthy that the "show jazz" style used for Della and her female compatriot have their origins in the sonic world of vaudeville, which in turn is strongly connected to the theatrical tradition of the minstrel show. This suggests a

reading in which the class representation of these characters is strongly racialized through the problematic legacy of minstrel tropes in which African Americans were frequently depicted as overly sexualized. This interpretation is given further credence that this musical style is used to differentiate these characters from the contrasting, serious female lead, Lila, who was originally based on a mixed-race character, Florence, perceived to be of a higher class in Bontemps's original novel.

"I Had Myself a True Love" and "I Wonder What Became of Me"
Arlen contrasts the characters of Della and Butterfly with Lila, Bigalow's spurned former lover by shifting Lila's tonal center one full step down to E^b. The contrasts do not stop there. Indeed, Arlen uses a wholly different style of jazz to characterize Lila. Portrayed as older and more mature, and also as the more moral character (she truly loves not lusts as the other characters), Arlen has her use what I will call "concert hall jazz." This jazz, in the tradition of Gershwin or Ellington, is more dependent on interesting harmonic adventures than rhythmic cliché's or stereotypical gestures (melodic chromatic motion or the bass ostinato) for its substance. Indeed, Jablonski refers to Lila's numbers as art songs. Lila's disassociation in the libretto from the bawdy venues of the contrasting style of jazz in the score, reinforce this distinction.¹⁶

Surely, Lila's music sounds as though it belongs more in the world of the opera house. The melodic lines are complex, and the rhythm is frequently displaced across the bar by triplet figures and the irregular placement of strong and weak beats, giving the piece the feel of a wandering aria. The harmony is also more diverse, and frequently features the use of extended chords with ninths and thirteenth.

¹⁶ Jablonski, *Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 205.

Not only is “I Had Myself a True Love” written in a more complex style in terms of harmony and melodic and rhythmic gestures, but its form is likewise of note. “I Had Myself a True Love” is without question the most Arlen-esque piece in the score. As Wilder explains, it is another of Arlen’s tapeworms that winds its way well beyond the conventions of the 32-bar song form.

It is a long song, sixty-four measures, and very nearly an aria. But it’s so beautifully made and under such adroit control that it never gets out of hand as ambitious, highly emotional songs often do.¹⁷

In addition to its spiraling form, Arlen also signs the piece with an octave leap in the final measures, as the open space in the melody signifies the distance between Lila’s past and present.

The image displays a musical score for the song "I Had Myself a True Love". It features a vocal line and a piano accompaniment. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The score includes various musical notations such as notes, rests, and dynamic markings like *poco rit.*, *a tempo*, *p molto espressivo*, and *rit.*. Chord diagrams are provided above the vocal line, including Fm9, Eb, F7(b9), Bb7, Eb, Bb7, Gm, Bbm, C7, Cb, and Eb. The lyrics are: "Now I ain' got no love an' once up - on a time I had a true . love .". The final measures of the score show a significant octave leap in the melody, indicated by a large interval between notes.

Example 45: Octave Leap, “I Had Myself a True Love”

Arlen uses this more complex approach to jazz to give more dimension to Lila’s character and more dramatic weight to her songs, which in and of themselves

¹⁷ Wilder, 282–83.

feel like scenes. Indeed, Arlen’s accompaniment figures vary throughout, highlighting Lila’s many emotions explored in the piece. Wilder praises Arlen for his subtle but interesting use of this feature.

The nature of Arlen’s piano accompaniment, which is notably a good one, is such as to indicate another, more compositional concern for this song than any others I’ve seen. The use of thematic material in the cadences, the shifting styles in the left hand of the piano, the dynamic markings, the introduction, all bear out this opinion.¹⁸

The shifting of the piano accompaniments, especially in the left hand, as described by Wilder point to the wide variety of textures used to highlight dramatic changes within the multi-sectional form and bring it under control. The title line of the song is accompanied by a steady broken chord accompaniment. This same accompaniment pattern appears later in the piece, albeit rhythmically altered, when a chorus echoes Lila’s lament. Borrowing from the rhythmic and melodic patterns of Della’s earlier, “Any Place I Hang My Hat Is Home,” the music is transformed from lament to bitter mockery, pointing lyrically and musically to what Lila has lost to Della.

The image shows a musical score for the song "I Had Myself a True Love". It consists of three staves: a vocal line, a piano right-hand line, and a piano left-hand line. The key signature is B-flat major (two flats). The vocal line has the lyrics: "I had my - self a true love, a true love who was some - thin' to see, —". Above the vocal line, four chord diagrams are shown for E-flat major (E♭), B7, E-flat major (E♭), and B7. The piano right-hand line is marked *loco* and *p* (piano). The piano left-hand line features a steady broken chord accompaniment pattern, with notes moving in a sequence that corresponds to the chords above. The score is enclosed in a yellow border.

Example 46: Broken Chord Accompaniment, “I Had Myself a True Love”

¹⁸ Wilder, 282–83.

in the eve - nin'! In the door - way, com - in'

a tempo *steadily*

Example 47: Block chord accompaniment, “I Had Myself a True Love”

Similar changes in accompaniment texture also contrast Lila’s thoughts of Bigalow Brown in the morning and evening. As the rhythmic pace slows while Lila describes her morning time longing for her love, the accompaniment, too, slows and becomes more open. When Lila’s thoughts turn to where her love is at night in the arms of another woman, however, the accompaniment again shifts, quickening the pace to repeated eighth notes, as the melody repeats mounting in agitation, until reaching a climax on F as the harmony becomes increasingly dissonant.

first thing in the morn - in' I still try to think up a

way to be with him, some part of the eve - nin' an'

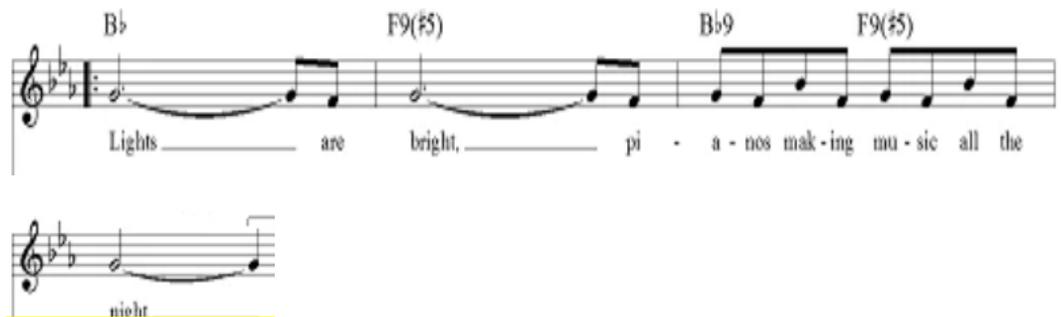
Example 48: Open Chord Accompaniment. “I Had Myself a True Love”

The cumulative effect of these features is to establish a new, contrasting jazz style and a multi-dimensional portrayal of Lila.

Lila's "I Wonder What Became of Me" is similarly heavy in dramatic weight. Likewise situated in the key of E^b, with its frequent references to "rain" and "champagne" and other such liquids, it is her rejected lover's solo parallel to "Come Rain or Come Shine." The touching incorporation of the swing rhythm from the protagonist's numbers earlier in the musical shows her distance from the life she imagined as she "wonders what became of me."



Example 49: Swing Rhythm, "I Wonder What Became of Me"



Example 50: Patter, "I Wonder What Became of Me"

The patter style writing, oscillating continually back-and-forth to B^b similarly parallels the repetitive note patter of Della and Brown's duet "Come Rain or Come Shine."

In all, "I Wonder What Became of Me" is another meandering number, which except for the repeat of the opening A feels through composed. The vocal melody spans a wide range, extending over the octave, and many of the vocal line weave complex, nearly instrumental melodies, betraying Arlen the master.

Taken together, the styles of jazz Arlen uses throughout the score sonically reflect the problematic narrative tropes of “savagery” and “civility” often associated with African Americans by white authors during the Harlem Renaissance. Understanding the score in this way, can further help to illuminate Arlen’s use of jazz in his theatrical works. It also further gives a perspective into how Arlen and Mercer’s score participated (albeit behind the baton) in the spectacular failure of the musical.

Reception: A Flawed Fairytale

On the surface, *St. Louis Woman* had all of the potential for a successful Broadway production. The original novel had already been converted into a play with the help of yet another poet of the Harlem Renaissance—Countee Cullen—and had been produced in the early 1930s and revived by the Federal Theater Project (FTP) in 1938. Thus, it had already proven its potential as a staged work. Its period setting offered opportunities for flashy costumes and colorful sets that would lend themselves well to the stage. Its African American characters allowed for an all African American cast, an enthusiasm for which had been in large part created by the FTP, a program created by President Franklin Delano Roosevelt’s New Deal to reinvigorate the theater industry. The FTP included multiple Negro Units, which produced shows with all-Black casts, often of classic works such as *Macbeth* (1936) or *The Swing Mikado* (1938). The vogue for all-black casts had likewise recently been reinvigorated by the 1942 revival of Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. Freed was so confident in its ability to succeed as a musical, in fact, that through clever planning he had positioned himself to be able to sell the rights of the show to MGM to produce a

film musical following in the tradition of successful African-American musical films such as *Cabin in the Sky* (1943) and *Stormy Weather* (1943).

Given the ease with which the pieces seemed to come together for the creation of *St. Louis Woman*, it seemed as though its production would be an easy success. The fairytale that should have been the creation was not to be. The show, re-titled *St. Louis Woman*, would go on to become the center of controversy and a curious part of Arlen's compositional legacy.

There were countless signs along the way. From the beginning, neither Arlen nor Mercer was very fond of the script, a fact that would in retrospect appear to serve as an early warning. They felt that it was dramatically disproportionate; the first act greatly outweighed the second, making it difficult to balance the musical moments of the score. But the script also suffered from other, more damning, ills. Despite the fact that the book had been written by two African American authors of the Harlem Renaissance the portrayal of the African American characters within its pages was deeply problematic. There were reductive, racist stereotypes and the plot presented African American culture in a negative light of sexual deviance, violence, and superstitious belief. Similar critiques have likewise been levied against Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*.

Reactions to Edward Gross's public announcement of the project sounded the final alarm. In an effort to quell negative reviews, Freed sent advanced copies of the script to Walter White, secretary of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People. White publicly denounced the play, claiming that it "pictured Negroes as pimps, prostitutes, and gamblers with no redeeming characteristics" and

more condemning, “detracted from the dignity of our race.” His words were the first in a fury of public outcry in the press. The Interracial Film and Radio Guild, who had also been sent an advanced copy decried the work as “atrocious” and an “insult to Negro womanhood.”¹⁹

The critical reactions to the script turned the tides of production. The would-be star of *St. Louis Woman*, Lena Horne, removed herself from show. She had been personally promised by Freed that he would find a role for her that was not a cook or a maid or other racial trope, but it seemed he had gone back on his word. “It was not until I had fallen in love with the music that I received the script to read. The role I was to play was a flashy whore who was in love with a jockey there were all sorts of the usual cliché characters in it.”²⁰ The *Chicago Defender*, a leading African American newspaper of the age, quoted Horne as saying the show “sets the Negro back a hundred years, though interestingly, counted Arlen’s score among its most successful aspects.”²¹

The production staff began searching in earnest for a new star. According to a story presented in the show’s playbill, they scoured local high schools and acting conservatories for “a glamorous actress who could also sing.” Through their search, they found Ruby Hill, a high school student from Richmond, Virginia who was in

¹⁹ Walter Rimler, *The Man That Got Away: The Life and Songs of Harold Arlen* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2015), 104.

²⁰ Ibid.

²¹ Horne quoted in Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 199.

New York studying with Al Siegal, a former mentor of Ethel Merman. To balance out the cast, Gross and his team assembled a roster of more experienced if not A-list talent including Rex Ingram (Bigelow Brown), Harold and Fayard Nichols of the dancing team the Nicholas Brothers (little Auggie and Barney), Pearl Bailey (Butterfly), and June Hawkins (Lila). The solid casting was not enough to hold up the scaffolding of the weak script.

Two days before the start of rehearsals, Countee Cullen suffered a stroke and died at the age of forty-three, leaving those behind to struggle with the script in his stead. According to Mercer's biographer, Philip Furia, Cullen was "broken by accusations that he had defamed his race."²² As Walter Rimler poignantly observes, "Had he lived, he'd have had to cross an NAACP picket line to attend the premiere."²³

The out of town tryouts were plagued by further catastrophe. At the opening in Boston on February 19, 1946, audience reviews were mixed at best. The same was true of the run in New Haven. Panicked and in search of a life raft to save his show, Gross reached out to Freed for help. Freed brought in Rouben Mamoulian to replace Lemuel Ayers. Mamoulian had successfully directed a number of big-name shows including, *Oklahoma!* (then still in production) and the original production of *Porgy and Bess*, to name a few. Surely, he could breathe life back into the show. Ayers

²² Quoted in Rimler, 105.

²³ Ibid.

would stay on as the set and costume designer, but Mamoulian assumed official directing responsibilities by the time the show reached Philadelphia in early March.

As is often the case when there is a change in management, Mamoulian promptly began making bold changes, the first of which was to fire Ruby Hill and replace her with the more experienced, Muriel Rahn, leading to discord among the cast who had become fond of their young protégé. He also replaced choreographer Antony Tudor with Charles Walters,

Outside of his cutting and pasting on the personal roster, Mamoulian also took his scissors to the script, which he reworked from the unbalanced two acts into a three-act play. He attempted to restore emotional balance, and moved the upbeat “Cakewalk your Lady,” which had previously been buried in the middle of the first act to the end, which had concluded with Lila’s embittered ballad “Sleep Peaceful Mr. Used-To-Be.” After leaving the audience on a high note, his second act proceeded through the more serious moments in the plot beginning with the duet “Come Rain or Come Shine” and ending with the funeral scene. Finally, he began his new third act with a choral reprise of “Come Rain or Come Shine,” rendered more effective by its separation from the duet by an intermission, and transformed the final scene reuniting Della and Little Auggie into a staged spectacular in which Auggie wins a horse race (horses not depicted on stage), jumps the fence to the audience of spectators, and embraces Della followed by a rousing choral performance.

Arlen and Mercer scrambled to keep up with Mamoulian’s changes, especially the restructuring of the plot. Several numbers were cut, including “I Wonder What Became of Me” (judged as too similar to Lila’s “I Had Myself a True Love”), the

introduction to the spiritual “Talkin’ Glory,” and three other numbers cut during the Philadelphia run. They replaced Auggie’s “A Man’s Gotta Fight” with the comical “We Shall Meet to Part, No Never.” And added three new numbers to the score: “Ridin’ On the Moon,” “Least That’s My Opinion,” and “Come On, Lil’ Auggie.”

The revisions complete, in the view of the show’s creators, everything seemed set for the New York premiere, which was scheduled for March 30, 1946 though no major efforts were made to address the offensive portrayals of African Americans that had led many to balk at the musical. And there was yet more drama to unfold backstage before curtain could rise. Pearl Bailey led an insurrection among the cast to have Ruby Hill reinstated, delivering an ultimatum: Ruby Hill or no opening. Desperate and defeated, Gross consented.

It seems that Gross knew his production, which had faced extraordinary challenges from the instant of its creation to the moment the curtain rose on its premiere, was doomed to fail. The premiere took place on Saturday so that reviews would not appear until Monday. When the reviews finally came, they were summed up by John S. Wilson in the *New York Times*: “St. Louis Woman: Fine Score, Weak Book.”²⁴

As Wilson’s title suggests, the libretto of *St. Louis woman* has been the subject of fierce criticism for its negative portrayal of African Americans, while the score, largely drowned out by the book’s criticism, has been heralded for representing some of Arlen’s finest work for the Broadway stage. In particular, he is praised for

²⁴ John S. Wilson, *New York Times* (October 22, 1967).

his command of jazz in the medium of the musical theater score as explored above.

As critic John Chapman effused:

The best Negro musical in many seasons, and the best new musical of this season up to this late date. Mr. Arlen is one of the dwindling number of songsmiths who still believe that a man should turn out a tune, even if he has to steal it from himself, and Mr. Mercer is a lyricist who can work up a mess of words which is neither arty or smarty, but just right. In the main, *St. Louis Woman* is a pleasure. . . . I think, because every number is a number. Each scene, each song, has been presented as though it was designed to be the best of the evening.²⁵

Perhaps most enthusiastic was Burton Rascoe of the *New York World Telegram*, who “enjoyed it so much, when the final curtain descended, I felt I should have liked to see the whole thing all over again.”²⁶

The few criticisms of the music seem to concern the show’s inability to fit neatly within the boundaries of categorization. Lewis Nichols of the *New York Times* described the show’s failed “hybridity,” distinguishing itself neither as a dramatic folk opera or musical comedy.

No doubt the basic trouble is that “St. Louis Woman” never fully decides what it wishes to be. Presumably the original design was to make a folk play of it, something on the order of “Porgy and Bess.” The scenes, being largely of saloons, cakewalks and carnival, take it away from folk opera and put it into the classification of musical comedy. When Augie’s friends are dancing and singing, it is at times good musical comedy—but then it remembers its more serious purpose and returns to the plot. It is a hybrid affair, and unfortunate. The flesh is willing but the spirit is weak.²⁷

²⁵ John Chapman quoted in Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 203.

²⁶ Burton Rascoe quoted in *Ibid.*, 204.

²⁷ Lewis Nichols, “The Play,” *The New York Times* (April 1, 1946).

Louis Kronenberger in *PM* found the score a missed opportunity to make up for what he perceived as the poor quality of the script.

First-rate music might have yet turned the tide but Harold Arlen's songs and orchestral that are second-rate even for him. They are most of them romantic and atmospheric enough, but they lack distinction. They lack melodic urgency they lack excitement and cohesive power that folk drama demands. It is an agreeable score, but nothing more than that.²⁸

Given the mixed reception, *St. Louis Woman* would run for only 113 performances. Despite its Broadway run being a flop, *St. Louis Woman* would later acquire cult status among theater fans and Arlen aficionados as one of the best theater scores of all time, and it is now, curiously, regarded as both Arlen's most and least successful musical. The orchestrations by a team of Ted Royal, Alan Small, Menotti Salta, and Walter Paul, and choral arrangements by conductor Leon Leonardi have been praised as some of the finest of all time.²⁹ Certainly the show's standout song "Come Rain or Come Shine," would go on to be one of Arlen's most popular compositions, appearing on pop charts soon after its record release and later covered by such artists as Judy Garland, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holliday, Frank Sinatra, Etta James, Ray Charles, Bob Dylan, and Norah Jones.

It is a point of interest that according to Edward Jablonski, the shift in attitude toward the score coincided with the recording and release of the original cast album.

²⁸ Louis Kronenberger quoted in Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 204.

²⁹ It is an unfortunate mystery that the orchestral parts for the original score have been missing since the show first closed on Broadway. A recent attempt to reconstruct the score, primarily from recordings, was undertaken by Center City Encores in 1998. Rick Lyman, "Behind the Scenes; Reconstructing Harold: Arlen's Lost Musical Revived," *New York Times* (April 30, 1998).

First recorded by Capitol Records on Sunday, April 7, 1946, the album was also followed by Mercer's recording of the cut number "Least That's My Opinion," and later an Arlen recording (also for Capitol Records) of "Come Rain or Come Shine." As these recordings made their way into the public without the problematic and fraught attachment to the play, audiences increasingly recognized the score's brilliance.³⁰

Conclusions

St. Louis Woman uses a multitude of jazz styles to carry the dramatic weight of characterization, participating in problematic and multi-faceted artistic trends of the Harlem Renaissance. In *Bloomer Girl*, Arlen pushes against standard assimilationist narratives, but in *St. Louis Woman* he more clearly participates in racialized discourses in which Jewish songwriters and show creators used African Americans as a way of claiming their own whiteness.

Perhaps because of its attempts to portray a folk-like tale, *St. Louis Woman* would be identified as a possible source for a new American opera, one in the vein of *Porgy and Bess*. In the following interlude, I describe *St. Louis Woman's* journey to the operatic stage. Therein, I situate Arlen's operatic efforts both within the context of his admiration for Gershwin, as well as his awareness of contemporary searches to create an American classical music. By participating in this search, just as in *Bloomer*

³⁰ The songs' status as uncelebrated gems of Broadway history reached yet new heights when the recordings went out of print, making them a coveted collector's item. *St. Louis Woman* was eventually recorded again in the 1960s and released in long-play format, first on ten-inch and later on twelve-inch discs. These recordings likewise went out of print and onto the shelves of the connoisseur collector. The score was re-issued once again on compact disc in 1993.

Girl, Arlen demonstrates that for him jazz could serve a different socio-cultural function than the assimilation narrative so often described. Indeed, rather than assimilation, Arlen's *St. Louis Woman* and its journey to the operatic stage seek to create, rather than to assimilate to American culture.

INTERLUDE 2:

An American Opera for Arlen?

Harold Arlen's relationship with jazz was shaped profoundly not only by his background as a performer and composer, but also by the social and cultural contexts of American music in the twentieth century, in particular, the struggle to define a national musical voice.¹ His music should be understood as sitting at the junction of his own desire to find his unique voice as a composer and his desire to participate in the national quest to define an American musical sound. In this interlude, we will seek to understand the socio-cultural function of jazz in Arlen's music through this framework. The transformation of Arlen's 1946 stage musical *St. Louis Woman* into *Free and Easy: A Blues Opera* serves as a compelling case study. Through this venture into the world of opera we will see how Arlen's participation in the movement to define an American music, as influenced by his hero-mentor George Gershwin, impacted his artistic choices and how growing explorations between the worlds of classical and popular music framed his thinking as a composer.

¹ The idea of America's struggle to define a national voice is well described through Charles Hiroshi Garrett, *Struggling to Define a Nation* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2008).

A Few Blocks Journey—From Broadway to the Opera

In the early 1950s Arlen was approached about the possibility of transforming *St.*

Louis Woman into an opera. In a *New York News* article, Robert Coleman announced:

While composing the “House of Flowers” score, Arlen started work on what he considers to be his most ambitious and distinguished project, “Blues Opera.” Thus will have a book by Mr. and Mrs. Robert Breen based on “St. Louis Woman.”

“Blues Opera” is to be included on the agenda of Belvins Davis and Breen’s American Musical Repertory Theater. It will have a cast recruited from “Porgy and Bess,” when that U.S. ambassador of goodwill to Europe returns in triumph to our country. Arlen’s favorite composer is George Gershwin, so it is fitting that “Blues Opera” should command the attention of Breen.”²

Robert Breen was a producer who together with Belvins Davis, had formed the aptly named Everyman Opera Company in 1952 to produce the first performance of *Porgy and Bess* in its original, operatic form since its initial premiere in 1935–36. Having completed his tour of *Porgy and Bess*, Breen was: “searching for another American folk opera of stature which, as Gershwin’s work is, would be worthy to represent its country in the music centers of Europe and the East where he intends to present it, as he did Porgy.”³

² As quoted in Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press, 1996), 262.

³ Original LP Liner, Harold Arlen, *Blues Opera/The Grandma Moses Suite*, Andre Kostelanetz and His Orchestra, released 1945, 1953, and 1958, Sony; re-released Columbia Records Masterworks.

Breen found traditional opera to be dull: “I’m the sort who got more genuine rest and sleep at English and Continental opera performances than I got in bed.”⁴ He hoped to find another work, like Gershwin’s, that would invigorate what he perceived to be the stuffy sounds of the opera house with the more lively rhythms of popular music (as mediated through safe, established white musicians). According to an anecdote told by Arlen’s biographer, Breen began his search for this new opera by assembling a list of songs that he felt best captured “indigenous American sound.” He then took the list to Cab Calloway, who was then portraying Sportin’ Life in *Porgy and Bess*. Calloway informed him that Harold Arlen had written nearly all of these songs. Like so many, Breen knew Arlen’s work but not his name. Breen then contacted Ira Gershwin for help getting in touch with Arlen. Happily, Ira and Arlen were at work on the score for *A Star is Born*. It was arranged that the pair would meet in New York in 1954.

Breen explored many possibilities for operatic treatment and was particularly interested in something that he felt captured the essence of “folk.” The first consideration was a setting of the African American folk hero John Henry, who swings his hammer faster than any man and races a steam drill to create the railroad. Other propositions included similarly folk-based texts such as Jean Girardoux’s *The Madwoman of Chailot* and Mary Chase’s *Mrs. McThing*. Still in search of the right work on which to base his new opera, Breen discussed his ideas with lyricist Betty Comden, who suggested that he look no further than Arlen’s own *St. Louis Woman*, a

⁴ As quoted in Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* 265.

musical based on a literary work from the Harlem Renaissance. Breen had found his subject.

According to Jablonski, Arlen was excited about the possibility of resurrecting *St. Louis Woman* from its shadowy Broadway grave and breathing new life into its score, but he had reservations about writing an opera, which for him was a foreign territory. Despite his experience writing for Broadway, he saw himself primarily as a songwriter not a composer. His scores were comprised mostly of standalone works with little relationship between them. He was apparently particularly uncomfortable with the idea of using unifying reminiscence structures such as the *leitmotiv* and writing recitative, devices with which he had no experience. Moreover, Arlen's earlier work for the classical sphere had consisted mostly of works in miniature: suites, art songs, and the like, and the demands of an opera were daunting.⁵

Despite his lack of comfort in the genre, Walter Rimler has suggested that Arlen agreed to the project because he saw it as an opportunity to transition from the ranks of the unknown songwriter to a household name:

We don't know why he said yes to Breen, given that he was already overextended with work on *A Star Is Born* and *House of Flowers*, but it's a good bet he saw this as his last and maybe best chance to become a famous composer. To write an opera and have it linked to and playing in tandem with *Porgy and Bess* would all but guarantee public reception.⁶

That Arlen may have seen this as an opportunity to advance his name says something important about the relationship between popular music and opera in the first half of

⁵ Rimler, *The Man That Got Away*, 140–41.

⁶ *Ibid.*

the twentieth century. In particular, it points to a heightened exchange between these two seemingly disparate musical worlds. Arlen's operatic efforts must be understood within this exchange and more so, within the motivation behind this exchange: the search for an "American" sound in opera.

Setting the Stage: American Opera at the Turn of the Century

At the turn of the twentieth century, opera and particularly American opera, was ready for a new path. The outcry for an "American classical music" was resounding from beyond the halls of the symphony. In 1908, the music critic Henry Krehbiel notably declared that opera would remain "experimental" in the United States until the "vernacular becomes the language of the performances and native talent provides both works and interpreters."⁷ Joseph Horowitz would later add to Kreihbel's criticism that more than language or authorship what American opera lacked was self-representation: "opera did not 'show the culture' of any community."⁸

There were several American composers who sought to answer this call primarily through the lens of African American culture.⁹ Inspired by the zeitgeist of the Harlem Renaissance, many composers began to incorporate the modern and urban

⁷ As quoted in Joseph Horowitz, *Classical Music in America: A History of Its Rise and Fall* (New York: Norton, 2005), 359.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 358.

⁹ See Naomi André, Karen M. Bryan and Eric Saylor, eds. *Blackness in Opera* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012).

sounds of jazz into traditionally classical genres, like opera.¹⁰ In 1922, music critic (and later the biographer of Victor Herbert) Joseph Kaye confidently declared that “In Afro-American music . . . and in the modern syncopated concoctions is to be found material to make genuine American opera.”¹¹ Kaye’s assertion echoed the earlier proclamations of symphonic composer Antonín Dvořák who in the late nineteenth century had famously declared that the soul of American music lay in the music of its folk, namely African Americans. It was not American composers, however, but European composers who first heard in jazz the possibilities for operatic revolution. The sounds of jazz can be heard in the *Zeitopern* (“topical operas”) of Paul Hindemith, Ernst Krenek, and Kurt Weill.¹²

By the mid-1920s, Otto Kahn, chairman of the board of the Metropolitan Opera and himself a German immigrant, stated his intention to bring jazz to the hallowed halls of America’s most prestigious operatic institution.¹³ Yet the composers he approached for the creation of such an opera were not those names typically heard in classical music circles, but rather those who made their mark a few

¹⁰ For more on the concept of “modernity” in jazz opera see David Gutkin, “American Opera, Jazz, and Historical Consciousness 1924–1994” (Ph.D. dissertation Columbia University, 2015).

¹¹ Joseph Kaye, “Says Jazz Would Galvanize American Opera,” *Musical America*, July 22, 1922; reprinted in *Jazz in Print*, 195–96.

¹² For more see Susan C. Cooke, *Opera for a New Republic: The Zeitopern of Krenek, Weill, and Hindemith* (Ann Arbor, MI: University Microfilms International, 1988).

¹³ “Plans for Jazz Opera for Metropolitan—Kahn Offers Composers Chance of Production—Prefers Tragedy of Bobber Hair, Shop Girl, and Flapper,” *The Boston Daily Globe*, November 18, 1924.

city blocks away in New York's Tin Pan Alley: Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern, and George Gershwin.¹⁴ In doing so, Kahn highlighted the fact that to bring jazz into the world of opera meant not only crossing a color divide of Black and white, but also the divide between classical and popular, or more to the point, highbrow and lowbrow so often mapped onto color lines.¹⁵

Henrietta Malkiel excitedly described what she saw as a real possibility for a new direction in American opera, led by the sound and stance of Broadway's musical theater. As she eloquently stated:

The great American opera, the idyll of the wide open spaces, has come down to earth. It has come to Broadway. The dream of an American Wagner has passed with the day of Indian librettos. It is now the jazz opera that waits for a composer and a plot. A new native consciousness is stirring, we are told, and a new native art. The jazz opera must be "typically American," and Indians and cowboys are no longer "typically American." The American opera must follow the path of the American drama. There are the mountaineers of the Carolinas and West Virginia. There are the farmers of New England and the boosters of the Middle West. There are New York subway risers and Harlem cabarets. And there is always Broadway. There the jazz opera must begin.¹⁶

¹⁴ "Jazz Opera in View for Metropolitan—Otto H. Kahn tells Berlin and Kern That He Would Be Glad to Consider One—On 'Grand Opera' Scale," *The New York Times*, November 18, 1924, 23. See also Carolyn Guszki, "American Opera the Metropolitan, 1910–1935: A Contextual History and Critical Survey of Selected Works (Ph.D. diss., City University, 2001), 29–30.

¹⁵ For more on the dichotomy of "highbrow" and "lowbrow" as a construct in American culture see Lawrence Levine, *Highbrow Lowbrow: The Emergence of Cultural Hierarchy in America*, The William E. Massey Sr. Lectures in American Studies (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1988).

¹⁶ Henrietta Malkiel, "Awaiting the Great American Opera: How Composers are Paving the Way" reprinted in *Jazz in Print (1859–1929) An Anthology of Selected Early Readings in Jazz History*, edited by Karl Koenig (Hillsdale, NY: Pendragon Press, 2002), 405.

Irving Berlin once asserted: “If an American composer writes an opera in the standard foreign forms it will not be an American opera. The American people want climaxes. They want many of them and in quick succession. Hence jazz. An American opera will have to be in jazz-tempo.”¹⁷ Yet it was not Berlin, whose ragtime-inspired songs had achieved such popularity, who would bring jazz to the operatic stage. Nor was it to be Jerome Kern, although his *Show Boat* (1927) scored success as the first-rationally integrated musical, its score did not contain jazz-elements. The ground-breaking composer would be George Gershwin, whose first effort at incorporating jazz into a serious staged work was the one-act opera *Blue Monday* (*Opéra à la Afro-Américain*) (1922). *Blue Monday* received mixed reviews from a white public that was as of yet largely unfamiliar with the idea of incorporating jazz into the operatic form. Finally, in 1935 Gershwin found success with *Porgy and Bess*, the opera that would come to represent in perpetuity the jazz-opera moment.

While this phenomenon came to be ascribed to prominent white composers, more particularly Gershwin, “it was the African American composer, however, who brought jazz to opera for the first time, creating a new dramatic expression that would become the signature of George Gershwin, Marc Blitzstein and other modern American composers.”¹⁸ African Americans had been a part of the American opera scene since at least the nineteenth century. However, the same racial barriers that

¹⁷ “Creators of Jazz Don’t Want it in Grand Opera—Playing It in the Metropolitan Would Be ‘Best Way’ to Ruin It,” *Boston Daily Globe* (The Associated Press), December 22, 1925, A25.

¹⁸ Elise Kuhl Kirk, *American Opera* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 205.

denied them full participation in other areas of society were likewise present in classical music culture.¹⁹ While singers Marie Selika (1849–1937) and Siseretta Jones were celebrated as solo vocalists, they were not cast in full-scale operatic productions at major institutions. All-Black opera companies existed as early as 1872, the first being the Washington D.C. Colored Opera Company, yet many of these institutions struggled financially and were short-lived.

African American composers of opera likewise struggled to have their works performed, chief among them Scott Joplin, who composed his *Treemonisha* in 1911. Despite the composer's popularity, Joplin was unable to secure a staged performance of his work, eventually paying out of his own pocket for the score to be published and performed in piano-vocal format.²⁰

It was only two decades later that the voices of African Americans began to find lasting resonance in the spaces and places of classical music. Louis Gruenberg *Emperor Jones* (1933) became famous for being the first opera by an African American composer (and only the eleventh by an American composer!) to be performed at the Metropolitan Opera. The opera took as its subject matter an African American convict who escapes to an island in the West Indies and names himself "Emperor." The score is rich in the colors of blues and jazz and likewise draws upon

¹⁹ The following is drawn from *Ibid.*, 184–206.

²⁰ The first staged performance of *Treemonisha* took place at the Memorial Arts Center in Atlanta January 28–29 1972. A more successful performance was given at the Houston Grand Opera May 23, 1975 with new orchestral score by Gunther Schueller, featuring Carmen Balthrop singing the title role.

the wellspring of African American spirituals. This opera was the first to successfully introduce the elements of African American popular music to the operatic stage.

Gruenberg's success was followed by Harry Lawrence Freeman (1869–1954). Known as the “colored Wagner,” he composed more than twenty staged works during his lifetime, many of which were likewise notable for their incorporation of jazz.

The later incorporation of jazz idioms by white composers in the realm of classical music and opera specifically raises interesting and important (albeit unanswerable) questions about intention:

Were such endeavors by white creators truly noble efforts to elevate the art of black folk music to the prestigious concert stage or simply neominstrel practices (this time minus the blackface) aimed at commodifying black otherness for consumption by white audiences who longed for glimpses of authentic culture to countervail their increasingly complex, modern world?²¹

Arlen's venture into opera is not exempt from such questions. His *Free and Easy: Blues Opera* and his use of jazz idioms therein should be understood as participating in the complex search for an American voice.

Writing a Blues Opera

Arlen's initial reservations about writing an opera proved substantiated as he struggled to create the score for this new operatic project, initially titled simply as *Blues Opera*. Work on the *Blues Opera* was regularly interrupted both by Arlen's efforts on other projects, including *House of Flowers*, *Jamaica*, and *Saratoga*, and by the composer's own health issues. Arlen had been hospitalized for a bleeding ulcer, and according to Rimler, became too weak even to write: “He composed the

²¹ Ray Allen, “An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americanness in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*,” *The Journal of American Folklore* 117/465 (Summer 2004), 244.

recitatives in his head and, and too weak to write them down, hummed them to Matlowsky, who did the notation.”²²

Perhaps owing to the difficulties he encountered in writing the score for *Blues Opera*, Arlen began to assemble the score as a pastiche of his music, new and old, fused with the original score for *St. Louis Woman*. Rimler asserts that while Arlen contributed few new songs to the score, “as time went on, the rigors of this work became a drain on his limited strength, and he started to pad the score with some of his and Mercer’s old songs, including “Blues in the Night” and “That Old Black Magic.”²³ Arlen also included several songs he’d written with Koehler: “I Gotta Right to Sing the Blues” and “I’ll Wind.” This fact apparently outraged Mercer who believed that his works, and his works alone, would find voice in the new opera score.”²⁴ In addition to works from his years spent in popular music, Arlen also included references to some of his classical efforts. Among the more notable interpolations is Arlen’s early *American minuet*, which he had composed for the Maxwell House Hour in 1939 and two from his *Americanegro Suite* (“I Got Dat Feelin’” and “Ace O’ Spades”).

²² Rimler, 40.

²³ Ibid., 141. Arlen’s newly composed numbers included “Dis Little While,” which Arlen apparently numbered among the favorite of his compositions. Other newly composed numbers included “Won’t Dat Be de Blessed Day,” “Many Kinds of Love,” and “Blow de Whistle.” See also Jablonski, *Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 288.

²⁴ Ibid.

The score for *Blues Opera* was apparently complete as early as 1954, but like its predecessor, it was plagued by trouble from the start. MGM, which had financially backed the original production of *St. Louis Woman* (via Freed's efforts), still owned the rights to the production and were contemplating a film version. Although MGM ultimately abandoned this plan, the legal battle continued until November 1956 when MGM finally conceded to Breen.

In the spring of 1959, Breen asked Stanley Chase, who had produced a successful revival of Kurt Weil's *Three Penny Opera*, to become his co-producer and the pair traveled to meet Arlen, who was then living in Beverly Hills, to discuss the show's future. All seemed optimistic. The show was set for try outs in Brussels and a premier in Amsterdam on December 7, before moving on to Paris and a European tour, and finally, Broadway. This was not to be, however.

The show was quickly mired in conflict. Breen and Chase had a falling out, the details of which are not entirely clear. The feud was reported by Walter H. Waggoner of the *New York Times*: "Curtain Rises on Producer-Director Feud." In the article, Waggoner suggests that "the heart of the trouble that has led to the estrangement of producer and director lies, perhaps, in the impatience of the former and the perfectionism of the latter." Evidently Chase wanted to keep the production on schedule while Breen believed that the show should delay its premiere until Paris to allow time for refinement.²⁵

²⁵ Walter H. Waggoner, "Curtain Rises on a Producer-Director Feud: Producer-Director Feud Abroad," *New York Times*, 20 December 1959.

The article similarly describes conflict between Breen and the musicians: a group of eighteen players led by jazz arranger Jones, who Waggoner described as “a lot of free spirits unaccustomed to the firm hand of a director.” Breen describes difficulty explaining to the musicians, whose chief accomplishments lay in the art of improvisation, that the instruments needed to play a subordinate role to the singers in a staged drama. *Blues Opera* was in Breen’s estimation, the first time that there had ever been a jazz orchestration for an entire staged work. He had also arranged for the band to play onstage alongside the actors, so that they too could be part of the drama, another unique, albeit difficult, feature.²⁶ In the view of Edward Jablonski, Quincy Jones *inflicted* the idioms of “modern jazz” on the score.²⁷

Jones’s orchestration was wrong for Arlen’s music, despite Jones’s reputation as a brilliant trumpeter and arranger. The apposite and beautiful orchestrations for *St. Louis Woman* were ignored (and, it was later learned, lost), and then-current “modern jazz” orchestrations were inflicted on Arlen’s songs and dances. As great as he was, Quincy Jones was not the musician to orchestrate an Arlen musical. Their musical incompatibility was evident in Arlen’s comment when he heard a Jones recording of “I Never Has Seen Snow. “To enjoy it,” he said, “you’ve got to be on the weed.”²⁸

There was likely more at play in this dynamic than a simple case of conflicting aesthetics, as the power differential between Jones and the white Broadway figures was palpable. In any case, a power struggle ensued between Breen and Chase. The elder and more experienced Chase won out in the end. By the time of the Amsterdam

²⁶ Jablonski, *Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 304.

²⁷ The Quincy Jones orchestrations do not survive, nor do recordings of his orchestrations.

²⁸ *Ibid*

premiere, which occurred ten days later than planned, Breen had become “dissociated” with the show. Chase changed the name of the show to *Free and Easy*, wary that the inclusion of the lofty word ‘opera’ in the work’s title might put off potential viewers, and replaced Breen with his own assistant, Donald McKayle, as director.²⁹ Breen’s name was further omitted from the printed program. In a feigned bravado, the theater manager Karle Wunnick attempted to provide a glossy shine over the situation:

The curtain rises for a new musical drama: Harold Arlen’s ‘Free and Easy’ . . . May this baptism on the border of the river Amstel be a good omen, so that the coming tour of Stanley Chase and his Company shall have an equal and triumphant career as the tour of ‘Porgy and Bess.’³⁰

While Breen remained hopeful that he and Chase would be able to make amends and he would rejoin the show, this was not to be the case. In an almost cruel irony, Breen’s absence seems to have gone unnoticed by the critics who praised his efforts, more praise in fact, than almost anyone else involved in the show. As Jan Spierdijk wrote in Amsterdam’s *De Telegraf*: “The scenery was beautiful and practical, the costumes magnificent and colorful, the most striking factor, however, was the staging of Robert Breen.”³¹ Lex Van Delden of *Het Parool* similarly praised with his pen:

²⁹ Jablonski alludes to the possibility of the name change based on Chase’s fears about audiences’ aversion to the term ‘opera.’ See Jablonski, *Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 302.

³⁰ As quoted in Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 302.

³¹ As quoted in *ibid.*, 303.

“Not much could be made out of such a meager story, but Breen could only show his great talent a director in the mass scenes.”³²

The world premiere was finally given at the Carré Theater in Amsterdam on December 17, 1959 before the work traveled to France, where a performance was given at the Alhambra in Paris on January 15, 1960. Despite some press about the show’s upcoming performances, *Free and Easy* received only nine more performances before closing. It never made it to Broadway, or anywhere else for that matter. By the time the final curtain fell on *Free and Easy*, the show was at a loss of three hundred thousand dollars; not a paltry sum in the 1960s. The show had been left in such dire financial straits in fact, that Chase could not afford to fly the cast and crew home to the United States. An anonymous cast member wrote to *Variety* contesting its praise of the show:

On the very day in which this article appeared we were broke, stranded in Paris and the producer did not have the fare to ship us home. We only managed to get home because of the kindness of two Americans in Paris, a certain M. Kaufman and a certain Mr. Reed. But your article stated that business is great and that we are prolonging the run.³³

Since its closing, *Free and Easy* has never been revived. *St. Louis Woman* too has been infrequently revived, in part owing to the difficulty of its orchestration, which is lost. It was revived by Center City Encores in 1998 and recently by New York State Theater as part of Lincoln Center Festival where it appeared as an hour-long blues ballet.

³² Ibid.

³³ Quoted in in Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 304.

The score for *Free and Easy* does, however, live on through its arrangement as *The Blues Opera Suite*. According to the liner notes for the recording of the suite: “A look at the score shortly after the opera was completed so fired Mr. Kostelanetz’ (conductor Andre Kostelanetz) admiration for its freshness and lyricism and authentically American vigor that he urged an orchestral suite be made from it.”³⁴ The suite, with orchestration by Samuel Matlowky, was premiered on August 28, 1957 in Minneapolis and repeated in performance at Carnegie Hall later that November. Lasting approximately twenty-five minutes, the suite presents the opera in miniature; structured as a collection of seventeen works divided into two parts (based on the two acts of the opera) and played without pause, it follows the same sequence as the opera.

Reception and The Gershwin Connection

At the time of its premiere, *Free and Easy: Blues Opera* was frequently compared to similar works in the style, especially Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. In his *New York Time*’s article, Walter Waggoner poignantly observes: “According to some local veterans, one problem facing any musical of this nature is that it invites comparisons with the incomparable ‘Porgy and Bess,’ which left this city, among others, breathless with admiration.”³⁵ He similarly quotes a sharp-tongued and to the point Dutch critic: “We all have seen ‘Porgy and Bess’ and that is our only standard.”³⁶ Indeed, in

³⁴ Original LP Liner notes, Harold Arlen, *Blues Opera/The Grandma Moses Suite*, Andre Kostelanetz and His Orchestra.

³⁵ Walter H. Waggoner, “Curtain Rises on a Producer-Director Feud: Producer-Director Feud Abroad,” *New York Times*, 20 December 1959.

³⁶ *Ibid.*

addition to participating in larger national cultural trends in music, Arlen's operatic venture also demonstrates his admiration and also his distinction from his peer and hero-mentor, George Gershwin. Nowhere is Arlen's relationship to George Gershwin clearer than in his effort to participate in this cultural moment with an operatic treatment of *St. Louis Woman*.

Porgy and Bess also received negative reviews, especially from the African American presses who found it inauthentic at best and neo-minstrel at worst.

Gershwin is an individual artist, as free to write about Negroes in his own way as any other composer to write about anything else. The only thing a really creative artist can be expected to give us is an expression of *his own* reaction to a given stimulus. We are not compelled to agree with it or even like it. It is not to be considered as just another photograph of *our* old estimates snapped by a new photographer . . . [We must] accept [Gershwin's] contribution as the sum-total of what he really feels. What we are to consider then is not a Negro opera by Gershwin, but Gershwin's idea of what a Negro opera should be.³⁷

He went on to describe his belief that only a true cultural insider could appropriately and adequately handle such material.

So that our (African American) folk-culture is like the growth of some hardy, yet exotic shrub, whose fragrance never fails to delight discriminating nostrils even when there is no interest in the depths of its roots. But when the leaves are gathered by strange hands they soon wither, and when cuttings are transplanted into strange soil, they have but a short and sickly life. Only those who sowed the seed may know the secret of that root.³⁸

³⁷ Hall Johnson as quoted in Richard Crawford, "It Ain't Necessarily Soul: Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* as a Symbol, *Anuario Inteamericano de Investigacion Musical* (1972).

³⁸ Hall Johnson as quoted in Ellen Noonan, *The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess: Race, Culture, and America's Most Famous Opera* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 182.

A search of African American presses including *The Chicago Defender*, *The Philadelphia Tribune*, *The Baltimore Afro-American*, and *New Amsterdam News*, yielded few critiques of Arlen's score. Critiques of Arlen and Mercer's score were generally positive when the music was discussed at all, and more focus was placed on the importance of the show as a vehicle for Black talent and as a precedent for greater roles for Black artists in the future. Surely, Arlen's work received less press attention given the smaller stature of his reputation and the opera's short and troubled performance run. Yet, a brief comparison of their works also highlights the two composers' different understandings and uses of jazz in opera as central to the reception.

The differences in Gershwin and Arlen's works can be seen beginning in a comparison of their books: *Porgy and Bess* written by a cultural outsider, white American author Dubose Heyward, and *God Send Sunday* by African American author Arna Bontemps, establish a different perspective and tone to the works that affected their reception

In a now well-known and oft iterated tale, in order to undertake the composition of *Porgy and Bess*, Gershwin studied on Gullah Island, looking for inspiration in exotic sounds of another culture. He further was outspoken about his desire to "elevate" those exotic elements, namely jazz, beyond their popular status.

Jazz authenticity was not an issue for Gershwin at this point in his career. Indeed, he never saw himself as a purveyor of genuine black jazz and purposefully distanced himself from the earthier sounds of vernacular jazz, which he characterized as "crude" and "vulgar." As a composer and creative artist, he envisioned himself as a cultural elevator-one who transformed the raw building blocks of jazz in order "to bring out [jazz's] vitality and to

heighten it with the eternal flame of beauty' and to "improve and transform [jazz] into finer, bigger harmonies."³⁹

Gershwin also saw his use of jazz within the context of folk music, aligning himself with his European peers, unlike Arlen. For Gershwin, by the time of *Porgy and Bess*, jazz came to represent folk music. He consciously distanced himself from jazz and allied himself with European composers by describing jazz as folk.⁴⁰

Arlen had no such lofty designs. Rather than seeking to adapt his personal musical style and use of jazz to conform to the expectations of opera-going audiences, Arlen presents a score that is almost entirely popular in nature, and unapologetically so. A pastiche, it is comprised almost entirely of popular hits from earlier in Arlen's career, both from *St. Louis Woman* and from his collaborations with Koehler. That Arlen does not dramatically transform these tunes, previously understood and accepted as belonging to the 'popular' sphere, before interpolating them into the *Free and Easy* score requires something interesting of audiences: it requires them to re-listen to and accept these popular tunes as equally belonging in the classical world. It seems as though Arlen suggests that anything can be considered "classical" dependent upon its context, in this case the performance of these tunes on an operatic stage. The existence of Arlen's popular hits in the score's pastiche alongside snippets of some of his efforts in the classical world, such as the two excerpts from his *Americanegro Suite*, further complicates audiences' hearing. Presented side-by-side, their inclusion further suggests that both "Blues in the Night" and the *American*

³⁹ Allen, 245.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 255.

Minuet can occupy space within the same sound world and that both can serve dramatic purpose. Finally, the performance of this work in Europe under the direction of jazz arranger Quincy Jones, put into dialogue Arlen's musical style as adapted from jazz in the 1920s and 1930s, and developed during the 1940s, with newly emerging jazz aesthetics of the 1950s and 60s, showing the continuing adaptability and viability of the genre.

Perhaps Émile Vuillermoz of the *Paris Presse* described the score and its unique differences from Gershwin's work best.

Harold Arlen has treated his subject quite different from Gershwin. He has described it as a blues drama and in fact it is a systematic and methodical apotheosis of the blues in all their forces which we find in the score of this seemingly disordered show. Arlen seems to have wished to show us that the elastic and balanced rhythm of the blues can lend itself to the expression of all the human sentiments. In the completely intellectual period in which we live, an age of scientific and mathematical music and research directed toward the abstract and ascetic, this score, in which all is sensitivity, passion, and pathos, contains a mighty lesson for all of us.⁴¹

Conclusions

While his score was highly praised, sometimes even more highly praised than Gershwin's, Arlen never found the same level of success on the operatic stage as his mentor. The genre of the jazz opera similarly never finds a permanent place in the classical repertoire. Film-scholar Jennifer Fleegeer has described how "jazz-opera" never found a permanent place in the operatic repertoire it did find "a home in the sound films of the conversion era," pointing to the co-existence of jazz and opera

⁴¹ Vuillermoz as quoted in Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Happy with the Blues* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 229.

side-by-side within the same scores.⁴² Arlen too would come to make his most lasting impression in the world of film.

In the following chapters, I explore two of Arlen's most memorable works for film—*Blues in the Night* and *The Wizard of Oz*. The juxtaposition of these two works, which represent Arlen's most full embrace and full rejection of blues and jazz, return us to the central question that has framed this work: Can Arlen be “happy with the blues” and “Over the Rainbow”? Therein, we explore how for Arlen jazz was more than an expression of the musical or the cultural, it was personal.

⁴² Jennifer Fleegeer, *Sounding American: Hollywood, Opera, and Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 2.

ACT THREE

As much as jazz and blues were fundamental to Arlen's expression of a cultural identity, they were also fundamental to his expression of personal identity. As we have learned, these styles were more for Arlen than topics, they were the core of his sound; they were more for Arlen than a fleeting fascination, they formed significant chapters in his life's biography. Arlen explored the idea of his own personal relationship with the blues and jazz most obviously in his works for film. In the following chapters, I will explore Arlen's work for two films, *Blues in the Night* (1941) and *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Taken as a pair, the music Arlen composed for them represent the extreme opposites of a stylistic spectrum. While in *Blues in the Night* we find Arlen comfortably at home with the blues, in *The Wizard of Oz*, he ventures into the symphonic. Through analysis of this stark sonic juxtaposition, it becomes clear that these two films represent Arlen embracing and rejecting his own relationship with jazz. In *Blues in the Night*, he strives for an "authentic" sound while in *The Wizard of Oz* he strives for the "fantastic." An understanding of Arlen's film music through these dual frameworks—embracing and rejecting/authentic and fantastic—helps to both demonstrate contentions about Arlen's position in the Tin Pan Alley canon and also reconcile seemingly disparate sides of Arlen the composer.

CHAPTER 5:

Arlen, Authenticity, and *Blues in the Night*

In the quiet hours of the night, a lonesome Black prisoner leans against the cold metal bars of his jail cell, staring into nothingness. His eyes shimmering with emotion, somewhere between sorrow and anger, remorse and hope, he begins to sing in a low baritone. The resonant sound of his voice fills the jailhouse, “my momma done tole me, when I was in knee pants.” His mournful call is answered by a low echo from his fellow cell mates, “what’d she say?” From across the jail, a ragtag outfit of white jazz musicians, lift their heads at the sound of music, drawn forward as if in a trance.

Jigger: You hear that Peppi? It’s great!

Peppi: It sure is, Jigger.

Jigger: That’s the real misery, ain’t it boys.

Peppi: You could sure beat that out, couldn’t ya, Jigger?

Another: We all could

Jigger: We all will! Boy, that’s the real low-down New Orleans blues!

The music continues in the background, the singing now taken over by a group of white musicians, as a montage of stereotypical scenes and stock images begin to play across the screen: African Americans picking cotton, throwing hay bales, unloading a truck of watermelons. The camera then moves to a close-up of a map, outlining a musical route from St. Louis to Memphis and finally, New Orleans.

The short scene above is drawn from Arlen’s 1941 film score for Warner Brother’s *Blues in the Night*. In this chapter, I explore how Arlen’s music for *Blues in the Night* serves as a metaphor for Arlen’s journey as a composer and his search to find his own compositional voice within the worlds of blues and jazz. His works for the film, in particular the title track, serve as a vehicle for his personal expression of

self. Indeed, it is within the genre of film music that we see Arlen's use of jazz most clearly as expression of his personal identity.

Searching for Authenticity, Searching for Self

Billed as the “inside story of the blues,” *Blues in the Night* participates in a tradition of movies about jazz beginning with the *Jazz Singer* (1927, starring Al Jolson), which enjoyed a resurgence in the 1940s with such titles as *Birth of the Blues* (1941, starring Bing Crosby and Mary Martin), *Syncopation* (1942, with Jackie Cooper and Bonita Granville), and *Stormy Weather* (with Lena Horne, Ethel Waters, and Fats Waller). Film scholar Jennifer Fleegeer notes that the three major studios of the era—Warner Brothers, Paramount, and MGM—each featured film that directly dealt with jazz.¹ She further details the divergent strategies each studio followed in dealing with jazz in the context of the film. While Paramount and MGM often presented jazz as salacious or deviant, Warner Brother's sought to present jazz as more wholesome, even American. Warner Brother's accomplished this through scripts that presented pseudo-biographical searches for the origins of jazz, which seemed to tell a story of jazz being created by amateur African American performers and learned by professional white musicians. Both *The Jazz Singer* and *Blues in the Night* fall within this strategy. These films likewise fall within what Todd Decker has described as

¹ Jennifer Fleegeer, *Sounding American: Hollywood, Opera, and Jazz* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 150.

“popular music plot,” plots which highlight not only the history of popular music but African American contributions therein.²

Like its predecessor *The Jazz Singer*, however, *Blues in the Night* is more than biographical; it is also autobiographical. In the scripts for each, a young Jewish musician leaves home and rejects the traditions and values of his heritage to the new and exciting world of popular music. In both, the stories of the real-life musicians involved in the film are told in part through the film’s plot.

In *The Jazz Singer* this action takes place on the screen. The film presents a thinly veiled metaphor for Jewish-American star Al Jolson’s own life. The story follows that of Jackie Rabinowitz, the son of a cantor, who aspires for his son to follow in his own footsteps despite his growing obsession with jazz. After finding his son performing at a local bar, the elder Rabinowitz drags his son home and beats him, “I’ll teach him better than to debase the voice God gave him!” Jackie runs away as his father yells behind him, “I never want to see you again—you *jazz singer!*” Years later, we see Jackie as Jackie Robin, who has fashioned a new identity for himself as a performer, not only with a new name, but with burnt cork as a blackface performer.

While in *The Jazz Singer*, the autobiographical narrative is visible on screen, the narrative for *Blues in the Night* can be seen or rather, heard, behind the scenes, not in blackface but in the *blacksound* of the film’s musical score. Therein, Arlen takes on the sounds of African American music as his own as an expression of his personal

² Todd Decker, *Showboat: Performing Race in an American Musical*. Broadway Legacy Series (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).

identity.³ Therein, Jigger's search for the "authentic blues" mirrors Arlen's own lifelong devotion to African American popular music, which reaches its zenith in the film. Although many of Arlen's songs have been called blues songs or jazz songs, he composed only one true blues, the title track of the film "Blues in the Night," a style of writing he researched in order to create "authentically."

Discussing the song's composition, Arlen described his desire to write something that sounded "authentic." Authenticity is a central theme in the film, which highlights a stereotypical connection between "Blackness" and "authenticity" informed by racist discourses. The film's search for authenticity via jazz parallels Arlen's own search to discover his musical voice through jazz in his life.

The thematic idea of finding authenticity manifests in multiple forms throughout *Blues in the Night*. Based on the play *Hot Nocturne* by Edwin Gilbert and Elia Kazan, the story follows the exploits of white jazz band members, led by Jigger (Richard Whorf), who after their release from prison strike out in search of "real blues," stowing away in the back of train cars and touring across the country. They are joined by trumpeter Leo (Jack Carson) and his wife, Character (Priscilla Lane), who in a pivotal scene proves that he is worthy of joining the band by jumping up in a New Orleans club where the band is dining and performing (uninvited) a solo with the African American musicians on stage, showing that if he is good enough to be accepted by Black musicians, he must be an authentic practitioner of jazz. Along their

³ Matthew Morrison, "Race, Blacksound, and the (Re) Making of Musicological Discourse," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 72 (2019): 782.

journey, the band also meets and befriends the gangster, Del (Lloyd Nolan), who invites them to perform at his not so subtly named New Jersey roadhouse, The Jungle, where one can hear authentic jazz. Following some romantic troubles with Del's sometime partner in crime, Kay (Betty Field), and her accomplices Sam and Brad, Jigger leaves the band and takes a high paying gig in New York with Guy Heiser's Band, a professional ensemble featuring an all-white band in all-white suits. He quickly spirals into depression and alcoholism, feeling that he is not playing authentic jazz. In the end, he is only redeemed by rejoining his friends and making "real," read Black, music again.

The distinction drawn in the film between Black and white musics as more or less authentic is further underscored by the presence of two jazz bands in the film. As the film trailer boasts: "Jimmy Lunceford and his band sockin em solid and Will Osbourne and his band sending em sweet." Meanwhile, Lunceford's all-Black jazz band provides the sonic and visual imagery for authentic, hot, music in the film. This sweet (white) and hot (Black) music is contrasted directly in the film when Osbourne's band (playing the role of Guy Heiser's Band) performing along with (an uncredited) Mabel Todd the comically bad novelty number, "Says who, Says you, Says I." Problematically, although Black music is presented as real throughout the film, the Black musicians are largely uncredited, including the performance of the title number, "Blues in the Night," by William Gillespie, an African American singer who trained at Fisk and later Juilliard.

The marketing for the film likewise gives credence to the film's proposed idea that African American music is not only something worth imitating, but something

that can be more than imitated, even mastered by whites. As the movie poster proudly projects, “They make music by day. They *live* it by night,” suggesting that through shared experience whites too have not only the ability but “have a right to sing the blues.”

Arlen as blues writer

How did Arlen’s attempt to create an authentic work for *Blues in the Night*? For possibly the first time in his career, he actively researched how best to write his piece. In doing so, he simultaneously downplayed his own knowledge of jazz and blues learned from a lifetime in music while also acknowledging his outsider status in direct contradiction to the narrative of the film.

So I said to myself, any jazz musician can put his *foot* on a piano and write a blues song! I’ve got to write one that sounds authentic, that sounds as if it were born in New Orleans or St. Louis. So I did a little very minor research. I found out that the blues was always written in three stanzas, with twelve bars each. That was the first thing . . . I didn’t have a handle for this blues thing, but I knew I could write a blues . . . the fires went up and the whole thing *poured* out. The first stanza, the second stanza, the third, the repeat of the first, and the coda—just as my research had told me it had to.⁴

Despite his research, in his work for this film, Arlen fuses together elements of his compositional style with the blues, creating a synthesized style representative of his search for himself within other musical traditions. Thus, his compositions for the film’s score, in particular “Blues in the Night,” represent his efforts at finding a personal expression derived from blues and jazz.

⁴ Arlen, quoted in Max Wilk, *They’re Playing Our Song: Conversations with America’s Classic Songwriters*, Revised and Updated (New York: Easton Studio Press, 2008), 171–72.

Unlike many Arlen hits, “Blues in the Night” did not grow from a pre-existing melodic sketch or “jot.” Arlen later recalled that he locked himself away in his studio (a converted detached garage that housed his piano), trying to coax a melody from the piano when “Blues in the Night” started to emerge from the keys. He immediately knew that he had something good, an uncharacteristic admission for Arlen, and called his wife to the studio to hear it.

And I played it and I knew in my guts, without even thinking of what John could write for a lyric, that this was strong, strong, *strong!* You can’t say that about all melodies. I can’t tell about melodies until I get a lyric. And it’s happily wedded, fine. If not, I’m in trouble. But this I knew was strong. As a matter of fact, it was one of the highpoints of *knowing* in my while life.⁵

His melody in hand, Arlen went to Mercer’s house. He recalled “I didn’t stay around long I played him the melody. No questions asked, no experiments, no saying . . . He just listened, I played it a couple of times, and then I went away.” Such was the process with “cloud boy,” fellow songwriter Harry Warren’s nickname for Mercer, who would reportedly spend hours lying about with his head in the clouds dreaming up lyrics. Explaining their working relationship, Arlen said, “our working habits were strange. . . . While Johnny made himself comfortable on the couch, I’d play the tunes for him. He has a wonderfully retentive memory. After I would finish playing the songs, he’d just go away without a comment. I wouldn’t hear from him for a couple of weeks, then he’d come around with the completed lyrics.”⁶ “ ‘With Johnny Mercer . . . ’ Arlen threw up his hands. ‘You trust him. That’s all. You have

⁵ Arlen, quoted in Wilk, 172.

⁶ Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Happy with the Blues* (New York: Doubleday, 1961), 136–37.

faith. He takes your melody away and comes back with the words.’ ”⁷ As for Mercer, he described Arlen as one of the few musicians with whom he could work: “Some guys bothered me. I couldn’t write with them in the same room with me, but I could with Harold.”⁸

When he came back later, Mercer had written out the entire lyrics. Remarkably everything stayed except for the first twelve bars that began with the rather innocuous “I’m heavy in my heart, I’m heavy in my heart.”⁹ The usually amiable Arlen described these lyrics in a fleeting display of artistic temper, describing the lyric as “weak tea.”¹⁰ Looking around on Mercer’s desk, Arlen spotted a scrap of paper with the words, “My momma done tol’ me, when I was in knee pants, my momma done tol’ me hard.” Inspired by a fellow writer’s jots, he hesitated only momentarily before suggesting the replacement lyric to Mercer. It fit well with the tone of the lyrics and the dialect added to the feigned air of authenticity. “It was one of the few times I’ve ever suggested anything like that to John,” Arlen later recalled.¹¹ Happily, Mercer agreed, although there are conflicting accounts about how quickly the disagreement was solved. Furia and Lasser claim that the changes were made immediately, while Arlen’s biographer Jablonski asserts that it took about a week to

⁷ Wilk 176

⁸ Ibid 137.

⁹ Philip Furia and Michael Lasser, *America’s Songs: The Stories Behind the Songs of Broadway, Hollywood, and Tin Pan Alley* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 170.

¹⁰ Alec Wilder, *American Popular Song, The Great Innovators: 1900–1950* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1972), 272.

¹¹ Wilder, 272.

polish the final product.¹² Mercer described his partnership with Arlen, “[we] didn’t come from the same neck of the woods or anything, but we really [had] a thing about jazz and blues, and creativity and originality, and structure. I appreciate his work so much that possibly he thinks I get the right words to it.”¹³ It is noteworthy that many of Mercer’s lyrics feature a Southern-inspired dialect that evokes the ethos of the minstrel show, creating yet another layer to the outsider status at odds with the film’s central narrative.

The pair disagreed about the title; Arlen proposing “My Momma Done Tol’ Me” while Mercer preferred “Blues in the Night.” Unable to reach a decision, they took the quarrel to popular song godfather, Irving Berlin, who sided with Mercer. When the producers at Warner Brother’s heard the song, they were so impressed that they likewise changed the title of their film from *Hot Nocturne* to *Blues in the Night*.

A Personal Blues

The success of “Blues in the Night” rests in the personal element so palpably present in the song. While “Blues in the Night” represents Arlen’s only 12-bar blues it nevertheless reflects his voice as a composer. Reaching a sprawling 58 bars, the song is another Arlen tapeworm, as he brings together the two styles in hybridized form with an impressive cohesiveness.

¹² Furia and Lasser, *America’s Songs*, 171; Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 156.

¹³ Wilk, 150.

Blues in the Night is a train song that bridges the gap between blues and pop, between black and white musical traditions, between pop standards and jazz. . . Musically as well, the song has a train like quality in that it is one of those Arlen melodies that is like a freight train consisting of an endless string of cars.¹⁴

In true Arlen fashion, “Blues in the Night” follows a modified AABA structure (there is no verse) —A (12) B (12) C (10) C’ (8) A (16).” Therein, the A and B sections follow the harmonic pattern of a basic blues progression (I-IV-V-I).¹⁵ In doing so, the A and B sections creates a sense of unity within the work, even though melodically the two sections contain different music. Further creating continuity, is Arlen’s pervasive “motivicity.” The opening A section like so many Arlen works is motivically driven from the start. Beginning in the introduction, the left hand of the piano announces a rising triplet motive that conjures an onomatopoetic representation of] the train rumbling down the tracks. This triplet motive is transplanted to the voice beginning with “my mama done tol’ me.”

¹⁴ Wilk, 140.

¹⁵ Walter Frisch, “Arlen’s Tapeworms: The Tunes That Got Away,” *The Musical Quarterly* 98/1–2 (March 2015), 156.

Example 51: A Section “Blues in the Night”

The B section features interjections of the triplet motive “my mama done tol’ me.”

Both sections likewise end with the same melodic gesture on “A worrisome thing”

(A) and “Clickety Clack Echoing Back,” (B).¹⁶

¹⁶ Frisch, “Arlen’s Tapeworms,” 156.
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Now the rain's a fal - lin', hear the train a - cal - lin', who - ee _____ my
ma - ma done tol' me Hear dat lone - some whist le blow in' cross the tres - sle,
who - ee _____ my ma - ma done tol' me. Cli - cke - ty clack a e - ch - oin' back the
blues _____ in the night.

Example 52: First Release, “Blues in the Night”

This section problematizes the third scale degree, which despite other blues references, has remained intact in the major form suggested by the key signature. Through placement on long notes and strong beats that fall on the important words “now,” “hear,” and “who-ee” it becomes clear that this pitch is a central focus of the section. It appears sometimes as D and other times as D^b, suggesting a harmonic ambiguity that oscillates between the major and minor mode and therefore reflect back on the lyrics, which speak of a man’s quickly changing affections and eliciting the major-minor polarity Arlen favored in many of his works.

The following C sections, which feels as though they function as the release (A and B being harmonically and motivically unified), continues the work’s sense of integration as a whole through continued focus on the third scale degree, now through decoration with upper and lower neighbor tones (C and E^b).

The ev nin' breeze ll start the trees to cry-in' and the moon ll hide its light,
when you get the blues___ in the night.

Example 53: Second Release, “Blues in the Night”

Both the B and C sections are vocally challenging in terms of the unusual intervals found in the structure of the meandering melody, in typical Arlen fashion. As Wilder describes:

Blues in the Night becomes increasingly difficult as it develops, so much so that I know no non-musicians who can sing more than the first part of it. . . But the first phrase is so immediately provocative, and easy to remember, that the public seemed to need no more in order to accept it, except of course, it’s perfect lyric by Johnny Mercer.¹⁷

The “perfect lyric” described by Wilder alludes to more indexes of the personal in “Blues in the Night,” as the lyrics highlight personal connections in the lives of both lyricist and composer. Describing the elements of the “perfect lyric,” Furia cites the way that “even some Southern place names sounded like earthy poetry: ‘From Natchez to Mobile/From Memphis to Saint Jo,’” and “how Mercer had crafted a haunting bit of onomatopoeia for the sound of a train whistle: ‘A whoo-ee-duh-who-ee.’”¹⁸ He places these sounds within the context of Mercer’s youth in Georgia, noting that Mercer’s mother had grown up on a farm near Savannah near the train tracks, and would often describe the sound of the train whistles for her children and

¹⁷ Wilder, 79 and 272.

¹⁸ Furia and Lasser, *America’s Songs*, 172.

how they sounded “so lonesome and so mournful.”¹⁹ He further proposes that the lyrics could also allude to romantic difficulties in the lives of both Arlen and Mercer.

Although it is highly speculative to connect the writing of popular songs to the personal lives of their creators, there is a sudden and poignant sadness that appears in Mercer’s songs with Arlen at this time. In previous lyrics, written with other composers, there had been passion, but the songs he wrote with Arlen a completely new depth of sorrow suddenly registers itself, a quality that can only reflect Mercer’s affair with Judy Garland. . . . Arlen too also felt trapped in an unhappy marriage, and the blend of his plaintive melodies and Mercer’s melancholy words registered their mutual misery.”²⁰

Film as a Vehicle for Personal Expression

That Arlen would have used the genre of the film musical as a vehicle for the expression of self makes sense considering two factors: the intimacy of the film medium and Arlen’s own sense of connection to Hollywood as home. In *The American Musical and the Formation of Personal Identity*, Raymond Knapp discusses the film musical as a natural vehicle for narratives of personal identity. In particular, he argues that in film, unlike in other staged productions, the juxtaposition of fiction against the backdrop of reality creates a space for multi-level awareness and interpretations, leading audiences to identify with themes and characters in a personal way.

¹⁹ Furia, *Skylark*, 11.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 126.

In film, the artificiality of songs and dance was often placed against a more naturalistic setting than the stage could provide, which helped open up an interpretive space for camp and other related strategies of layered interpretation in both performance and reception, so that one and the same artifact could serve two seemingly very different theatrical modes.”²¹

In addition to the intimacy of film as a medium, film was in a way home for Arlen in the sense that Hollywood embodies home. While throughout his life Arlen moved back and forth between the East and West coasts as work demanded, it was always California that he considered his home. Hollywood was a liberating atmosphere for Arlen. Away from the gray and grind of New York and the demanding schedule of the Broadway circuit, he found the freedom of the studio schedule gave him time to compose at his leisure. And he was able to spend time enjoying the company of many of his friends, who had likewise found a second home in Hollywood, after the Depression threatened the theater economy, driving many composers away from the Broadway stage.

²¹ Knapp, *The American Musical and the Formation of Personal Identity* (New York: Oxford, 2006), 6.

It was a great period! Maybe it was the accident of all of us working there because of the Depression. Practically every talent you can name. So many. Jerry Kern, Harry Warren, the Gershwins, Dorothy Fields and Jimmy McHugh, Oscar Hammerstein—even Berlin, although he didn't stick around. All of us, writing picture so well. We were all on the weekly radio Hit Parade. If we weren't first, we were second; if we weren't second, we were fourth. A sensational period. Lovely for me. I went to the studio when I damned well pleased, or when they? called me. Got? my check every week. And we were pouring out Oh sure, we all wrote picture scores that were bad. But people were having flops on Broadway too, weren't they? It was a great life. Most of us played golf? or tennis, or swan, and did our writing at the same time. I wrote at home. I could write at midnight, or at five in the afternoon, at nine it made no difference. A long as I came in with something that the so-called producers liked. And believe me, when it came to matters of quality, their guess was as good as mine.²²

Harold Arlen seems to have never been happier than he was in Hollywood, something else that perhaps allowed him to write such personal music for the screen.

Conclusions

Despite Arlen and Mercer's musical efforts, *Blues in the Night* would go on to become a film of little import. Unfortunately, when the title track was finally put into the film for which it was written, it lost, in the opinion of at least some audience members, its raw passion and intensity. As Margaret Whiting said:

When they put it into the picture they really murdered it. But the song had its own strength . . . that whole thing about the whistle blowing in the night, the associations that were built into Johnny's lyric. And Harold had written that kind of steady blues refrain that kept on repeating. Trains are such a marvelous symbol. Somebody's always coming in, or leaving on one, so it's neither sadness nor happiness, it's the way *you* react to it, how *you* respond.²³

Whiting's description, however, is insightful as it points to another quality of his music, one also best observed in his works for film: its ability to serve as personal

²² Wilk 170–71.

²³ Whiting in Wilk, 140.

expression for others. While *Blues in the Night* serves as an extended metaphor for a composer searching for his own voice within the blues, Arlen's most popular film score was anything but personal at least on the surface, while his "Over the Rainbow" has gone on to become a personal anthem for many repressed groups. In the next chapter, we will see how in the *Wizard of Oz* Arlen creates a "fantastic" world, distant from jazz, while retaining many of his personal characteristics beneath the surface.

CHAPTER 6:

The Feigned Fantasy of “Over the Rainbow”

Arlen’s most widely remembered contributions to film were written for the 1939 Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer film *The Wizard of Oz*. For those familiar with Arlen’s musical style, the *Wizard of Oz* presents a kind of puzzle. The film’s iconic score sounds at once foreign to the Arlen who wrote “Stormy Weather” and yet also intimately familiar. In the film’s standout song, “Over the Rainbow,” Arlen seemingly rejects his jazz roots in an effort to create something fantastical. In this section I will explore how in the score of *The Wizard of Oz* Arlen distanced himself from jazz in order to create something that sounded fantastic because to his ear it sounded like the least authentic expression of self. Meanwhile, careful analysis will show that despite this distancing, the influence of his jazz background and the fundamental hallmarks of his style can be heard just behind the rain. Through retaining the essential hallmarks of his style, Arlen opened the doors for “Over the Rainbow” to be used by others for their own expressions of self in its many iterations in its over seventy-five-year lifespan.

The Journey to Oz

The journey to Oz began not in Hollywood but in New York. It was New York where Arthur Freed, an aspiring film producer and member of Metro Goldwyn Mayer’s musical production team had been sent to scout Broadway musicals that could be potential scripts for the studio. One evening in late 1937 Freed found himself in the audience for a performance of Arlen and Harburg’s politically charged *Hoorary for What*. As the sounds of “In the Shade of the New Apple Tree” filled the

theater, Freed's creative intuition was sparked. The tone of this song, lyrically and musically, appealed to Freed. He felt that its combination of nostalgia and modernity would be a perfect fit for his new project.

Freed had for some time been considering a project based on the fantastic stories of L. Frank Baum set in the magical land of Oz. Walt Disney Studio's recent success with *Snow White and the Seven Dwarves* (1938), an animated musical directed toward young audiences, had begun a new spirit of inspiration and competition among the Hollywood film studios to produce a movie musical capable of matching its success.

Freed remained convinced that the Oz stories had the stuff of movie-musical magic. And, he believed he had found the ingredients for success in Harburg and Arlen. Work on Project No. 1060, as the *Wizard of Oz* became known in the studio, began immediately in summer 1938 and filming was set to begin in September. Arlen and Harburg relished in their good luck and set to work.¹

Making The Music: Classical as “Universal”

When the creators of the *Wizard of Oz* set out to make their film, they recognized that the quintessential essence of a fantasy lies in its binarism. A truly fantastic story is not only the creation of a fantastic world, but a story set within that imaginary world that is germane to the real world, one that speaks to human truths, at least in the

¹ Bibliographic information for this chapter is drawn from Edward Jablosnki, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Boston: North Eastern University Press, 1996) and Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg with the assistance of Arthur Pearlman. *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995).

experiences of the film's proposed audience. In *The Wizard of Oz*, viewers are introduced to the wild and fantastic world of Oz, a world inhabited by witches and wizards and magic. The dilemmas that the protagonist Dorothy Gale faces in this strange land are not likely to be familiar to audiences, but the themes brought to light through her journey—the search for self and a place in the world—speak to many. These themes are made more applicable to the real world by placing real people on screen rather than animated creatures. In doing so, the producers create characters with whom audiences are more likely to identify and empathize, not only as figures within the plot but as real-life performers as well.²

When approaching the music for the film, the music directors searched for what they perceived as the same “universality” in sound. It is important to note that there was a clear racialized aspect to the music directors' idea of universality. They found it in the past—in the world of “classical music” of the nineteenth-century German tradition—a music that would be simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar to their presumed audience of predominantly white, middle-class listeners, and that therefore had the desired timeless quality. That the musical directors consciously avoided any music that might sound modern or otherwise be identified with a time, place, or group, is evident in the fate of an unpublished number, “The Jitterbug,” which was cut from the film by Herbert Stothart, studio composer and head of the music department at MGM, because its lively jazz rhythms made sonic reference to time and place that would date the film.

² Raymond Knapp, *The American Musical and the Performance of Personal Identity* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005), 132.

The sounds of universality are thus clearly linked with whiteness through their association with classical music while the sounds of modernity are linked to Blackness. Moreover, the sounds of Blackness are linked to urbanity, something clearly at odds with the film's celebration of rural life; a way of life that was under threat both at the time of the film's creation and the publication of the novel on which the work is based, Frank L. Baum's *The Wizard of Oz* (1900). Therein, the world of Oz is quite literally divided and color-coded according to the racial or ethnic makeup of its fictional inhabitants: Munchkins (blue), Winkies (yellow), Quadlings (red). In the MGM production the Wicked Witch is likewise further othered by the addition of green makeup, a decision in part made to showcase the techni-color capabilities of the film. The focus on skin color would be taken up in Stephen Schwartz's *Wicked* (2003) and is featured centrally in *The Wiz* (1978), which showcased African American stars in the central roles. Thus, it is impossible not to hear the dichotomy of universality and modernity in the score in a non-racial context.³

In addition to attempting to create a sense of timelessness through reliance on musical traditions of the past, the writers also drew upon the conventions of nineteenth-century opera to create scenic cohesion throughout the film in a manner that would be followed in subsequent film scores. Many of the musical numbers in the *Wizard of Oz* are titled "sequences" rather than songs. Arlen and Harburg had been brought into the project at a fortuitous moment. The script was still in its early

³ Carly A. Orshan, "An American Tale: Incarnations of the Wizard of Oz and the Negotiation of Identity, Race, and Gender, in Popular Culture" (2012). *FIU Electronic Theses and Dissertations*, <https://digitalcommons.fiu.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1817&context=etd>.

phases, primarily overseen by Noel Langley, and Arlen and Harburg were able to weave the songs seamlessly into the script as it developed. The result is one of the first fully integrated film musicals.

The continual flow of music in these scenes avoids what Harburg termed “stop plot pieces” in favor of more realistic drama, for example the Munchkinland Musical Sequence, to which Harburg also contributed the dialogue. The musical portion of that sequence begins with Glinda’s coaxing the munchkins, “Come Out, Come Out,” and proceeds through their introductions and welcome of Dorothy, and finally the rousing “Ding, Dong! The Witch is Dead!” As Knapp notes, there are only four truly developed songs in the film: “Over the Rainbow,” “Ding-Dong! The Witch Is Dead,” “If I Only Had a Brain,” “The Merry Old Land Of Oz,” and “If I Were King of the Forest.” The rest are fragmented and woven throughout the score in leitmotivic fashion.⁴

As Yip Harburg explained in an interview with Max Wilk, “I loved the idea of having the freedom to do what were not just songs but scenes. That was our idea, to take some of the scenes from the book and do some of the scenes in complete verse. All of that had to be thought out by us and then brought in and shown to the director so he could see what we were getting at.”⁵ Arlen later recalled that when proposing the idea for such sequences to the studio, Harburg gave an impassioned speech using

⁴ Knapp, 139.

⁵ Max Wilk, *They’re Playing Our Song: Conversations with America’s Classic Songwriters*, Revised and Updated (New York: Easton Studio Press, 2008), 296.

“such involved language that I had trouble following him. . . . We never did get to demonstrate the song. When we left the office, I jumped Yipper. ‘What were you up to, what were you trying to tell them? We didn’t even get to play the song.’”⁶

Happily, the studio was amenable to the idea.

In addition to these sequences, which reflect the flowing scenic structures established by Rossini and Wagner, the influence of the classical is felt elsewhere in the score as well. Stothart interpolated several snippets of “classical” music in the final score, including Schumann’s “The Happy Farmer” (during the opening scene on the farm), Mendelssohn’s Op. 16, No. 2 from Three Fantasies (during Toto’s escape from the Witch’s Castle), and Mussorgsky’s “Night on Bald Mountain” (during Dorothy’s rescue from the witch). Indeed, part of the continued allure of *The Wizard of Oz* is its uncanny ability to continually capture the affection of new generations of audiences, in which the music plays a decisive role.⁷

A lighter approach favored in comic operas or operettas can be heard in what Arlen called “lemon drop songs” for Dorothy’s accomplices, the scarecrow, the tin man, and the cowardly lion. “If I Only Had a Brain” was created from a formerly dismissed song “I’m Hanging on to You” from *Hooray for What*, while “If I Were King of the Forest” was styled after another Arlen hit, the “Woodsman Song.” Both feature simplistic, lilting melodies that serve as a vehicle for the quietly comedic lyrics and dialogue of the respective scenes.

⁶ Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Boston: North Eastern University Press, 1996)128.

⁷ Knapp, 139.

When the music was nearly complete, Arlen felt as though something were missing, something with a “broad, long line” to balance out the more light-hearted songs in the score: a ballad. But for whom? According to Jablonski, Freed originally proposed the idea of inserting a “Wizard’s Song” toward the film’s close, which he was talked out of by Harburg, who then wrote the bitingly satirical scene in which the Wizard bestows upon Dorothy and her companions the gifts they have been seeking: the scarecrow with a rolled-up diploma in “thinkology,” the lion with a triple cross medal for the legion of courage, and the tin man a beating heart he can wear on his sleeve in the form of a pocket watch. The pair then turned their sites upon Dorothy, after all, it is Dorothy and not the Wizard who is the true protagonist of the tale.

In a now infamous memo to script writer Noel Langley, Freed explained his feelings on a ballad for Dorothy. He argues Oz needed its own melodic *raison d’être*, a song for Dorothy that motivates the journey she will take in the film to a land of fantasy and her return to Kansas. But writing a ballad for Dorothy turned out to be difficult for both composer and lyricist. Most ballads are motivated by romantic love, but here the objective was to create a ballad for a child, a little girl; a ballad in which the longing was not for a romantic love but for another life in a world beyond one’s imagination. Finally, an idea came to Harburg in the form of a rainbow.

You always have trouble writing a ballad. Of course, I was writing for a situation of a little girl who was desperate, had never seen anything beyond an arid Kansas where there was no color in her life; there were no flowers [according to Baum]. It was all brown and sepia and at a moment when she was troubled in a childish way, she wanted to escape in a song of escape—where could she go? The only thing colorful that she’s ever seen in her life was the rainbow. The book had no references to a rainbow. In fact, it gave the makers of the picture, the producers, the director, the idea of having the first part done in routine everyday black and white, so that when she got over the rainbow, she got into a colorful Munchkinland. So I had that idea in mind: of a little girl wanting something, a place somewhere that was over that rainbow and I told Harold about it and we went to work on a tune.

A Child’s Ballad?

Arlen waited for inspiration to strike, but the “unsought for phrase” as he often called his melodies, would not come to him.⁸ One evening, while taking a break from his work, he was driving on Sunset Boulevard headed to Grauman’s Chinese Theater with his wife Anya when an idea struck him like a lightning bolt. He begged Anya to pull over in front of Schwab’s Drug Store and scribbled down the first few bars of a song that would go on to be named “Song of the Century:” “Over the Rainbow.”⁹ Unable to contain his excitement, he immediately phoned Harburg, and the pair agreed to meet. Harburg recalled the scene:

⁸ Jablonski, *Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, 130.

⁹ In 2001, “Over the Rainbow” was voted song of the century by a joint survey conducted by the National Endowment for the Arts and the Recording Industry Association of America.

He approached the piano with the usual blue-eyes-toward heaven ritual and played the first eight bars of “Over the Rainbow.” My heart fell. He played it with such symphonic sweep and bravura that my first reaction was: “Oh no, not for little Dorothy! That’s for Nelson Eddy.” Harold, always sensitive, never aggressive or defensive, was shattered. His Hillcrest [county club] sultan suddenly took flight. I was miserable I confess with head bowed low: the song almost suffered extinction by me while it was still aborning.¹⁰

In Harburg’s view, the song was too unwieldy for a young girl:

But it was the trouble of a child. In *Oliver*, the little boy was in a similar situation, was running away. Someone thought up a song for him, “Where is Love?” How can a little boy sing about an adult emotion? I would never write “Where is Love?” for a child. That’s analytical adult thinking, *not* childish thinking. . . . This little girl thinks: *My life is messed up. Where do I run?* The song has to be full of childish pleasures. Of lemon drops.¹¹

The pair’s friend Ira Gershwin, disagreed and loved it, causing Harburg to reconsider.

Later, Arlen composed a simplistic middle section based on a piano exercise that brings the song more within the scope of a child. In a comical scene, in his 92nd Street lecture, Harburg later claimed that Arlen had based the middle on a whistle he used for his dog, Pan, when Arlen who happened to be in the audience stood up on corrected his friend much to the audience’s amusement.¹²

Still, Harburg struggled to come up with a title and a lyric to fit the song’s difficult opening octave leap:

¹⁰ Harold Meyerson and Ernie Harburg with the assistance of Arthur Pearlman. *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz? Yip Harburg, Lyricist* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 131.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 132.

¹² As described in Harriet Hyman Alonso, *Yip Harburg: Legendary Lyricist and Human Rights Activist* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 2012), 83.

“Over the Rainbow Is Where I Want to Be” was my title, the title I gave Harold. A title has to ring a bell, has to blow a couple of Roman candles off. But he gave me a tune with those first two notes [an octave apart]. I tried *I’ll go over the rainbow*, *Someday over the rainbow* or *the other side of the rainbow*. I had difficulty coming to the idea of *Somewhere*. For a while I thought I would just leave those first two notes out. It was a long time before I came to *Somewhere over the Rainbow*.¹³

The song met with resistance from other players as well. Harry Link, a representative of the publisher Leo Feist, had misgivings about the opening leap being too difficult for average singers, preventing sale of the song, as well as the song’s overly simplistic mid-section. More importantly, the song that would go on to carry the film’s success, was deleted from the score no less than three times by studio executives looking to trim the overly long film. The first cut was made unannounced. Arlen discovered that the song had been cut at a private preview at the Fox Theater in Pomona on June 16, after which he raged to his wife “No more previews! From now on I’m going to write ‘em the best I can, turn ‘em in, and forget ‘em!” Freed angrily ordered the song re-instated only to have it cut again, and again. When a meeting was finally called on the matter the objections boiled down to two: again, producers argued that it was too difficult to sing and would not sell; moreover, they objected to its placement. Its setting in the farmyard was visually uninteresting and it slowed the pace of the movie. In a brazen move, Freed offered an ultimatum: “Rainbow stays, or I go.” The song was reinstated for the preview screened at the Westwood Village Theater on July 18, 1939 where it was greeted with cheers from the audience. Finally, the film was complete.

¹³ Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz?*, 132.

By the time the film premiered in August, opening on the 15th at Grauman's Chinese Theater in California and two days later at New York's Capitol, the song was already a success. A coast-to-coast promotion on the popular Maxwell House "Good News Hour," and a contrived scene in which Arlen and Harburg played "Over the Rainbow" for Garland for the first time, had already entered the song into the public conscious. It would go on to shatter records on the Hit Parade and win Arlen and Harburg the award for Best Song of the Year at the Academy of Motion Picture Awards.

In the years since the premier of the *Wizard of Oz*, which recently celebrated its seventy-fifth anniversary, "Over the Rainbow" has become Arlen's most well-known song. For Arlen enthusiasts and scholars, "Over the Rainbow" is among the least Arlenesque works in the songsmith's archive. Aside from its trademark octave leap, the song has no other obvious Arlen hallmarks, inviting the question: "Why?" Why has it become so enduringly popular?

What makes the Rainbow?

For Arlen, to create music with a "universal" sound meant to write outside of his normal idiom or rather to find a way to adapt and mold his musical style to new templates as can be heard in "Over the Rainbow." Unlike many Arlen songs, "Over the Rainbow" is a conventional 32-bar form, a surface level but strong announcement of its peculiarity within the Arlen canon. Despite such surface level anomalies, however, many of Arlen's characteristic features can still be observed in the song, translated into new usages. This is particularly true of the song's "motivicity."

The opening refrain of "Over the Rainbow" begins with the trademark Arlen octave, although reversed. While many Arlen songs feature an octave drop, few

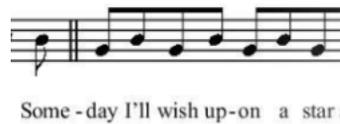
feature the upward octave leap that so fittingly captures the heroine's yearning for something more. The reversal of this gesture seems in and of itself a marker of the reversal of many of his usual features within the score. The octave leap gesture is quickly reversed by a brief descent down to the leading tone, transforming the rising hopeful gesture. This three-note motion is repeated three times at different pitch classes on "Somewhere Over" (E^b-E^b-D), "Way Up High" (E^b-C-B^b), "There's a Land" (C-A^b-G) before closing the leap and reversing the gesture to return to the tonic at "Once in a Lullaby (F-D-E^b). The melody thus unfurls through sequential motion and repetition, leading first away and finally back to the tonic. The transformation of this gesture through larger and smaller leaps has led to many interpretations. As Raymond Knapp writes:

the broadly arching opening phase projects the rainbow of the title, and the song then draws its possibilities close through less extreme "reaching gestures and suggests, in musical terms, an abundance of color notably lacking in the landscape we see around Dorothy and Toto. Moreover, in its relative quietude, the song also anticipates Dorothy's eventual return to Kansas, when, indeed, she will become the focus of all the (friendly) adults' indulgent attention.¹⁴

This sort of motion, in which a small idea (just three notes) gives rise to an expansive melody, is nothing if not quintessentially Arlen, even though it does not sound so upon the first listen.

¹⁴ Knapp, 138.

The two-note motion of the B section, with its natural, speech-like repetition of notes also sounds quintessentially Arlenesque, who often drew upon the smallest fragments and intervals to form his motives, as earlier seen in his obsession with the second in “Ill Wind” or the infamous repetitive notes of “Come Rain or Come Shine.”



Example 55: Release from “Over the Rainbow”

This figuration likewise appears in the piano introduction and final coda.

In the published version of “Over the Rainbow,” the famous chorus is also preceded by a slow vocal verse, usually cut from performance. Therein the vocal melody appears at first unrelated to the well-known chorus, but further analysis reveals their close kinship. Both feature a short motivic idea, treated in descending sequence. The motivic ideas are further related, as the two-note rise that marks each segment of the phrases in introduction, “when all” (B^b-C), “darken” (F-G), “there’s a” (E^b-F), and “to be” (D-E) form part of the opening melody “Over the (B-C)” “that I” (E^b-F), and “in a” (D-E). That the beginnings of the phrases in the introduction correspond motivically to the middle of choruses makes the connection difficult to hear while also giving the listener a sense of familiarity. Arlen also previews the opening octave leap of “Over the Rainbow” in this opening vocal verse on “leading from your window pane.”

The image shows a musical score for the verse of "Over the Rainbow". It consists of two staves of music in G major, 4/4 time. The melody is written on a treble clef staff, and the lyrics are written below the notes. The lyrics are: "When all the clouds dar-ken up the sky-way there's a rain-bow high-way to be found lead - ing from your win-dow pane." The melody is a simple, square rhythm, starting with a quarter rest, followed by a quarter note, a half note, and a quarter note, then a series of quarter notes, and finally a half note and a quarter note.

Example 56: Verse, “Over the Rainbow”

The presence of these motivic features in the score is mitigated by a number of features not typical to Arlen. The rhythm is uncharacteristically square for Arlen, for whom dotted rhythms and off beat accentuations are part and parcel of his musical language. The harmonies, many of which were likely the work of the film’s arrangers and orchestrators are also unusual for Arlen in their straightforward tonal approach which mostly moves from the tonic through the subdominant and dominant areas before returning home.¹⁶ Walter Frisch describes how this tonal motion serves as metaphor for Dorothy’s journey away from home and her need to come home again to find herself.¹⁷ The overall tonal plan of the film score itself receives similar discussion in Rodman Ronald’s “There’s No Place Like Home,” Tonal Closure and Design in *The Wizard of Oz*.¹⁸ As these authors have observed, by utilizing more straight-forward tonal language, “Over the Rainbow” is able to use the audience’s basic aural familiarity with moving away from and back to a tonic to musically

¹⁶ See Laura Lynn Broadhurst, “The Cumulative Creation of the Oz Songs” in *Adapting the Wizard of Oz* (2019).

¹⁷ Walter Frisch, *Arlen & Harburg’s Over the Rainbow* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 53–63.

¹⁸ Rodman, Ronald. “There’s No Place Like Home,” Tonal Closure and Design in the *Wizard of Oz*. *Indiana Theory Review* 19 (Spring/Fall 1998).

portray the film's narrative—coming home to find oneself—in miniature. Thus, his choice of tonality helps to establish the idea that the work communicates personal expression.

Universal as Personal

In striving for universality over the personal, both the text and music from “Over the Rainbow” have become associated with the very idea of personal expression. It has been covered by countless groups and in styles too plentiful to be explored in this dissertation. Walter Frisch has discussed some of “Over the Rainbows” performances in detail in his *Over the Rainbow* (2017) as well as “Beyond the Rainbow: Afterlives of the Songs from the *Wizard of Oz*” (2019).¹⁹ It seems the open structure of the music, in which Arlen has left the blueprint of his style, has left room for countless others to make their own mark on the song. Thus, while the song is less a vehicle for the composer's personal expression, it has become a vehicle for performers' personal expression.

For one performer in particular, “Over the Rainbow” has become heard as more than an outlet of personal expression, it has come to represent her: Judy Garland. The song “Over the Rainbow” itself, while not often recognized as an Arlen tune, is also widely recognized as a Garland tune, the interpreter to most make her mark on the song. In fact, the song became something of a personal theme song for Garland. As the singer later recalled:

¹⁹ Frisch, *Arlen and Harburg's Over the Rainbow* (2017) and in “Beyond the Rainbow: Afterlives of the Songs from the *Wizard of Oz*” in *Adapting the Wizard of Oz* (2019).

As for my feeling toward *Over the Rainbow* now, it has become a part of my life. It is so symbolic of everybody's dream and wish that I am sure that's why people sometimes get tears in their eyes when they hear it. I have sung it dozens of times and it's still the song that is closest to my heart. It is very gratifying to have a song that is more or less known as my song, or my theme song, and to have it written by the fantastic Harold Arlen.

Garland went on to become widely considered an icon of the LGBTQ community, in part because of the perceived juxtaposition of her unabashedly emotional performances in songs such as "Over the Rainbow" and the public repression of her body at the hands of studio executives, as well as her troubled romances. As Barry Walters once wrote in the LGBTQ paper *The Advocate*, she became "a symbol of emotional liberation, a woman who struggled to live and love without restraint. She couldn't do it in her real life, of course, and neither could her fans. But she did it in her songs, and with them she brought along anyone who dared to care too much."²⁰

As Garland became viewed as a queer icon, her theme song, "Over the Rainbow," went on to become an important symbol for the LGBTQ community. Indeed, the song's clear emotionality of the octave leap, coupled with the lyrical metaphor of longing for a different world beyond the rainbow, a place of acceptance and "somewhere there isn't any trouble," has led the song to become an anthem for many who feel repressed. Thus, through its association with Garland, Arlen's "Over the Rainbow" has become a vehicle of personal expression not only for its performers but for audiences as well.

²⁰ Barry Walters, "An Icon for the Ages," *The Advocate* (October 13, 1998).

This has been particularly true for oppressed groups, especially the LGBTQ community.²¹ As Knapp explains, there are many elements that allow *The Wizard of Oz* as a whole to be read as queer, most notably qualities of Dorothy's three companions. Indeed, the phrase "friends of Dorothy" was once used as codeword among homosexual communities.

For the growing homosexual audience for the film in more recent decades, their elaborate drag and exaggerated modes of behavior give them a distinctly gay aspect; thus the Scarecrow's desire to be "conferrin' with the flow'rs"; the Tin Man's interest in "the boy who shoots the arrows" and his shyly giggling "We do" in answer to Dorothy's "We know each other now, don't we?"; or the Cowardly Lion's lament about having been "born to be a sissy," his "dandy-lion" gestures and tail-swishing walk and his penchant for operatic singing and overly precise locution ("If I Were King of the Forest," here we also hear him fresh from getting "a permanent just for the occasion," preoccupied with the fabric of his projected regal robes: "satin, not cotton, not chintz" . . . (And, of course, from this perspective Judy Garland is herself in a kind of drag, pretending to be a little girl despite that big voice and her tightly wrapped bosom.²²

In part because of the presence of these elements in the film, Garland emerged as a cultural icon in the queer community.

The rainbow of Arlen's song has also found physical form in the LGBTQ pride flag. In 1978, gay rights activist Harvey Milk charged Gilbert Baker to create a flag to be flown during the San Francisco Gay Freedom Day Parade. It seems no

²¹ This connection is greatly detailed in Hannah Robbins, "'Friends of Dorothy': Queerness in and Beyond the MGM Film," in *Adapting the Wizard of Oz* (2019). For more on musical theater and the LGBTQ generally community see also John Clum, *Something for the Boy: Musical Theater and Gay Culture* (London, UK: St. Martin's Press, 1999; reprint Palgrave Macmillan, 2001) and D. A. Miller, *Place for Us: Essays on the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1998).

²² Knapp, 133

coincidence that Baker, an openly gay artist from the Kansas of Dorothy's fantastic tale, chose the symbol of a rainbow. Like Dorothy for whom the bright colors of the rainbow represented a beautiful reality beyond the dusty brown of Kansas, bright colors have historically been a way for closeted people to express their sexuality. For example, the pinning of a brightly colored flower to one's lapel was sometimes used as a way to signal one's homosexuality to others who recognized its symbol. Similarly, in the pride flag, each of the colors represents pride in a diverse aspect of LGBTQ life and identity.²³

Lyricist Yip Harburg himself also adopted the symbol of the rainbow as his own personal expression of desire for a better, more peaceful world. "After *Oz*, the rainbow was no mere rhetorical device for Yip, but a complex symbol of human aspiration."²⁴ Harburg later began referring to himself as a "rainbow hustler." In an impassioned speech to the United Nations, Harburg charged future generations with rainbow chasing:

Ever since the famous contract between God and Noah, which was confirmed and blessed by the sign of the rainbow, man has been pursuing that arc in living color, hoping to make it his own; and our own minstrels have aided and abetted in that survey with song and slogan.

Rainbow chasing has always been unorganized and chaotic. The misguided have pursued it in Wall Street, the misbegotten in Washington D.C.—and the dreamer in Glocca Morra.

²³ See Rob Sanders, *The Story of Harvey Milk and the Rainbow Flag* (New York: Random House, 2018).

²⁴ Harburg, *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz*, 135.

When I joined the chase, I thought I'd outfox everybody. I went straight from Delaney Street to the Land of Oz. So swift was the fight that I found myself over the rainbow before I had the chance to enjoy the view from under it. That's how it is with Rainbow Runners.

However, from that new and fanciful vantage point, I could see my fellow man with a whimsical eye, and proceeded to record in song our follies, our booms, our busts, but never losing sight of our dreams. The songs were all good humored and were fashioned to keep our love alive and the chase exciting.

Neither I, nor any of my generation, did latch on to the rainbow—so we can't hand it down to you. But we can give you the songs that kept us hanging in—and by hanging on to our laughter; affection and a certain grace. After all, songs have always been the world's anodyne against tyranny and terror. Rarely ever can you throw the fellow who can rise and shout- I got a song.²⁵

In the end, Arlen's rainbow has become much more than just an expression of Arlen, but a tool Arlen has given others for the expression of self.

Conclusions

Musically, when taken together, Arlen's contributions to *Blues in the Night* and *The Wizard of Oz* represent the two ends of the spectrum of the composer's compositional style. Both films show the composer using film as an outlet for personal expression albeit through two opposing lenses. That these two seemingly opposite works and the styles they embody can both represent Arlen returns us again to a fundamental question at the center of this work: how do we reconcile these disparate sides of Arlen? The answer lies in a more nuanced understanding of not only Arlen's relationship to jazz, but the role of blues in jazz in the sound of Tin Pan Alley.

²⁵ "I Got a Song" (Speech), E. Y. Harburg Papers, New York Public Library.

Coda:

“The Man Who Got Away”

Harold Arlen died on April 23, 1986 at the age of 81. Two days later the Metropolitan Diary column of the *New York Times* published a report from the “Department of Away Above the Chimney Tops” that a “spectacular rainbow” appeared in the sky spreading all the way to Northern New Jersey: “All the rainbow reporters mentioned two facts: that they hadn’t seen a rainbow in a long time and that April 25th was also the day that Harold Arlen was buried . . . there was also some mention of lemon drops and happy little bluebirds, but enough is enough.”¹

Recent years have seen considerable growth in the literature on Arlen, with a new biography (2015), a book-length study of “Over the Rainbow” and a handful of articles by Walter Frisch and Nathaniel Sloan.. This dissertation builds on the growing work on Harold Arlen by focusing specifically on his relationship with African American musical idioms in the three areas of popular music for which he composed: the jazz club, Broadway, and the film music. In doing so, I not only offer a nuanced analysis of how Arlen uses African American popular music to create musical, cultural, and personal forms of expression, but challenge his sometimes dismissal as an outsider to Tin Pan Alley song as well summarized in the following one-line appraisal of his music from the *Cambridge History of American Music*, which attempts to account for his absence from an earlier discussion of Tin Pan Alley composers: “Much of Arlen’s material, like that of Carmichael, went straight into the

¹ Ron Alexander, Metropolitan Diary, *New York Times* (May 7, 1986).

jazz repertory, for before he turned to Broadway and Hollywood he was composing songs such as *Stormy Weather* (1933) for Cotton Club revues, perhaps more typical of him than his later songs for the film *The Wizard of Oz* (1939).”²

The questions of Arlen’s classification—bluesman or Tin Pan Alley songster?—begets yet another question . . . why does it matter? Why can’t Harold Arlen be both “happy with the blues” and “somewhere over the rainbow”? Are we as scholars and musicians so invested in telling a story of Tin Pan Alley that is tied to European roots that we cannot acknowledge in full the role of African American musical styles?

As a disruptive figure, discussions of Arlen and his music fuel the fire of long-heated debates about the impact and influence of African American popular music and Tin Pan Alley Song. Definitions of the term ‘Tin Pan Alley’ are nebulous at best, described and used differently in the hands of different authors, often to suit their own ends. Throughout my research on the Golden Age of Song, I have been continually struck by the interchangeability of the terms “Tin Pan Alley,” “Broadway Song” and “Hollywood soundtrack” (and notably the absence of other associations).

As Stephen Banfield eloquently asks, “For all that it has glorified in a local habitation and a name it is not an easy entity to define, and for a unified musical product of specific substance, dimensions, and characteristics, singularly lacks identification and anatomy. What was it that arose some time before 1900 and, like Latin after the Renaissance, lost linguistic authority to the rock revolution in and after

² Banfield, 331.

the 1950s?”³

As this dissertation has shown, African American musical idioms served as more than topical reference in the works of Harold Arlen. As such, his music, so heavily influenced by Black musical styles, serves as a clear case study for understanding this dual exchange between Black and white musical styles in popular music at the turn of the twentieth century. His music further suggests a different narrative about the history of American music and musical style, one that more fully acknowledges and meaningfully explores the contributions of African American music.

Perhaps because of the strong undercurrent of racial prejudice in American popular music, Harold Arlen’s biographer, Edward Jablonski, fought tirelessly to avoid Arlen’s being identified as, or in his view reduced to, a blues writer.

Although he has composed in a “blues” style, Harold Arlen is not strictly “Happy with the Blues.” Nothing annoys him more than being typed. The fact is that the blues is a musical form—with its implied structure and harmony—is minimal in the total output of Harold Arlen. A further fact is: of all the composers of stature, and in whose company he belongs by virtue of his rich achievement, Harold Arlen may well be the most versatile. And, significantly, he has developed this versatility without sacrificing personal style.

Though Arlen is happy with the blues he has written—“Blues in the Night,” for example—he has written songs of simple purity containing absolutely no references to the blues in mood or musical characteristics: “Over the Rainbow,” “Let’s Fall in Love,” “My Shining Hour,” “Sing My Heart,” “Right as the Rain.” This is not a point to labor, but it does emphasize that Arlen’s full contribution has yet to be appreciated.”⁴

³ Stephen Banfield, “American Popular Song and Popular Music on Stage and in Film,” in *The Cambridge History of American Music*, ed. David Nicholls (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), 310.

⁴ *Happy with the Blues*, 19

Indeed, in his revision of the composer's biography, Jablonski changed the title of his book from *Harold Arlen: Happy with the Blues* (several references to which he makes above) to *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues*, pointing to the composer's stylistic range. In an effort to expand his new volume to accommodate the new sources and information to which he was able to gain access, it is striking that many of the edits sacrifice Arlen's roots in jazz.

The official Harold Arlen website (haroldarlen.com) maintained by S. A. Music Co. founded by Arlen's adopted son, Samuel, likewise emphasizes Arlen as "more" than a bluesman. A bolded and starred note at the bottom of one of the biographical passages reads: "It should be noted that while Harold Arlen's songs have often been mischaracterized as blues, they are actually rhythm numbers, jazz pieces, novelties, ballads and torch songs. The only song deliberately written in the blues style is *I've Gotta Right to Sing the Blues*."⁵

Even Arlen himself expressed reservations about his own perceived relationship to African American song late in life:

I have been able to capture the feeling, and only the feeling of the black experience in my music. Songs like "I'll Wind" (1934) aren't jazz or blues. . . . What I mean to say is that since I started at the Cotton Club, I was enormously impressed by the blues and it would seem that being influenced by them, I had inherited some sort of mantle which is not altogether legitimate. There are a number of blues strains in my songs and the contribution of Ted Koehler and Johnny Mercer give an additional blues mood to the pieces. . . . I had one 'bluesy' song and that was 'Stormy Weather,' but technically you can't really call that the blues either.⁶

⁵ "A Dream to Perform" on the Official Harold Arlen Website (www.haroldarlen.com).

⁶ Michael Whorf, *American Song Composers: Oral Histories, 1920s–1950s* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2012), 29.

In addition to problematizing the musical relationship between Tin Pan Alley and jazz, Arlen also challenges prevailing ideologies or rather pathologies of the socio-cultural functions of this music in the hands of Jewish-American composers. Several authors, most notably Michael Rogin and Andrea Most, have suggested that Jewish-Americans were not drawn to African American musics for sonic reasons alone, but because by donning an aural mask of blackness they were able to assimilate and naturalize themselves as belonging to America, while also sacralizing themselves through comparisons to African American pain and suffering in slavery via parallels in biblical narratives that have often formed the core of civil rights sentiments.⁷ Richard Crawford similarly describes Tin Pan Alley song as a physical site where old identities could be shed, and new identities taken on, often through the trope of romantic love:

The songs of Broadway and Tin Pan Alley's Golden Age connect three separate elements in a fusion that proved enduring: the social outlook of individualism, the subject of romantic love, and a musical idiom that blends conventional form with nuanced, sometimes unstable harmony. Individualism allowed people to reject ancestral ties, to speak, dress, and behave as they wished, and to pursue their own desires, including romantic involvement. But those who claimed such independence risked giving up the support and connection that ancestral ties provided. The new romantic love song celebrated individuals who loved with a passion strong enough to overshadow these other social connections.⁸

⁷ Michael Rogin, *Blackface, White Noise: Jewish Immigrants in the Hollywood Melting pot* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998); Andrea Most, *Making Americans: Jews and the Broadway Musical* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004).

⁸ Crawford, *America's Musical Life: A History*, 674.

A study of Harold Arlen's music demonstrates that there is more diversity to the sound of Tin Pan Alley than is often acknowledged. Describing Arlen's position as a Tin Pan Alley composer, Jeffrey Melnick creates a lineage between Gershwin and Arlen, suggesting that there may be several camps, or perhaps better "streams" that feed into the broader body of musical water known as Tin Pan Alley.⁹

By understanding Harold Arlen's music and acknowledging the challenges that it poses to current thinking about Tin Pan Alley we are forced to confront our own biases and predilections (our desire for canons and categories) as scholars, educators, and consumers of American popular music. As David Ewen explains, Tin Pan Alley is more than a place or a style, it is a broad body of music that captures in song a period of time in American history. "Tin Pan Alley was something else, too," he writes "It was a mirror to and a voice of America during a period of formidable growth and change."¹⁰ A study of Harold Arlen's music provides a much-needed hard look in the mirror for musicology. One that asks, why has the history of American popular song been told in this manner and what would happen if we questioned or changed how that story is told.

In a tribute to the composer sponsored by the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Performers (ASCAP) in November 1986, Arlen's contemporary and life-long friend Irving Berlin described Arlen's important, albeit unrecognized role, in American popular music: "[He] wasn't as well-known as some

⁹ Jeffrey Melnick, *Right to Sing the Blues*, 51 (emphasis mine).

¹⁰ David Ewen, *The Life and Death of Tin Pan Alley: The Golden Age of American Popular Music* (New York: Funk and Wagnalls, 1964), xiii–xiv.

of us, but he was a better songwriter than most of us, and will be missed by all of us.”¹¹ My hope in this dissertation is that future generations of listeners and scholars alike will keep asking the question. “Harold Arlen, who?” so that we might come to a better understanding of this moment in American musical history.

¹¹ Irving Berlin ASCAP Tribute November 1968; quoted in Edward Jablonski, *Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows, and Blues* (Boston, MA: North Eastern University Press, 1996), xiii.

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Additional Resources

The Official Harold Arlen Website, <http://www.haroldarlen.com/bio-3.html>