

IRVING
BERLIN



**SONGS FROM THE MELTING POT:
THE FORMATIVE YEARS,
1907-1914**

CHARLES HAMM

IRVING
BERLIN



Irving Berlin in 1913

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"Dog Gone That Chilly Man"

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Preface

Irving Berlin and the Crucible of God

The great conglomeration of men from ev'ry nation,
The Babylonian tower, oh! it could not equal that;
Peculiar institution, where brouges without dilution,
Were rattled off together in McNally's row of flats.
It's Ireland and Italy, Jerusalem and Germany,
Oh, Chinamen and nagers, and a paradise for cats,
All jumbled up together in the snow or rainy weather,
They represent the tenants in McNally's row of flats.

"McNally's Row Of Flats," Ed Harrigan and
Dave Braham, 1882

David Quixando, the central character in Israel Zangwill's drama *The Melting-Pot*,¹ set in New York City in the first decade of the twentieth century, is a Russian Jew who comes to America after all of his immediate family are killed in a pogrom. A violinist and composer, he finds employment as a teacher and theater musician, then sets out to compose an "American Symphony" into which he pours his vision of the United States as a land "waiting, beckoning, shining—the place where God would wipe away tears from off all faces."

Though Zangwill was British and a Zionist, his play, dedicated to Theodore Roosevelt "in respectful recognition of his strenuous struggle against the forces that threaten to shipwreck the great republic which carries mankind and its fortunes" and first performed at Washington's Columbia Theatre on 5 October 1908, offered a hopeful vision of the future to the millions of immigrants who had come to the United States over the previous several decades. Quixando often visits Ellis Island, to be reminded that "America is God's Crucible, the great Melting-Pot where all the races of Europe are melting and re-forming!"² The sight of a thousand Jewish children saluting the American flag is for him "the roaring of the fires of God,"

and he is ecstatic when he thinks that “all those little Jews will grow up Americans!” His grandmother, who speaks only Yiddish, finds ways to communicate with and then befriends her Irish maid; Quixando falls in love with a Christian woman; and a kindly German conductor arranges a performance of his symphony for an audience of “new immigrants—those who have known the pain of the old world and the hope of the new,” people who can “understand [the] music not with their brains or their ears, but with their hearts and their souls.”³ After the first performance of his symphony, the composer stands at sunset on a roof looking over New York Harbor and the Statue of Liberty, imaging the scene to be “the fires of God round his Crucible.”

There she lies, the great Melting-Pot—listen! Can’t you hear the roaring and the bubbling? There gapes her mouth—the harbour where a thousand mammoth feeders come from the ends of the world to pour in their human freight. Ah, what a stirring and a seething! Celt and Latin, Slav and Teuton, Greek and Syrian—black and yellow—Jew and Gentile—yes, East and West, and North and South, the palm and the pine, the pole and the equator, the crescent and the cross—how the great Alchemist melts and fuses them with his purging flame! Here they shall all unite to build the Republic of Man and the Kingdom of God.⁴

At the time of the play’s premiere, Irving Berlin, like the fictional David Quixando an immigrant Jewish musician who had fled a pogrom, was also supporting himself with menial gigs while pursuing a career as a composer or, more accurate in his case, a songwriter.

What little we know of his early life has been pieced together from scattered official documentation, journalistic coverage of his activities, an early biography by his friend Alexander Woollcott, the lyrics and music of his earliest songs, and general information about life and culture in the Lower East Side.⁵ Born Israel Baline in Tumen in Western Siberia on 11 May 1888,⁶ the youngest of the eight children of a cantor, Moses Baline, and his wife, Leah (Lipkin), he had come with his parents and five of his siblings to the New World, arriving in New York aboard the SS *Rhynland* on 13 September 1893. The family found temporary lodging in a basement apartment on Monroe Street in Manhattan’s Lower East Side, then settled at 330 Cherry Street, in the southeastern corner of the Jewish quarter, in a flat that remained the family home until 1913.

The father was able to find only part-time employment, as a kosher poultry inspector and a manual laborer, and, as in so many immigrant families, everyone in the Baline household was expected to contribute to the family income. The mother became a midwife, three of the daughters found irregular employment wrapping cigars, the oldest son, Benjamin, worked in a sweatshop,⁷ and young Israel peddled newspaper and junk in the streets while attending public school and receiving religious instruction

at a *cheder*. With the death of the father in 1901, matters became even more difficult for the family, and Israel decided to strike out on his own:

[Berlin] knew that he contributed less than the least of his sisters and that skeptical eyes were being turned on him as his legs lengthened and his earning power remained the same. He was sick with a sense of his own worthlessness. He was a misfit and he knew it and he suffered intolerably. Finally, in a miserable retreat from reproaches unspoken, he cleared out one evening after supper, vaguely bent on fending for himself or starving if he failed. In the idiom of his neighborhood, where the phenomenon was not uncommon, he went on the bum.⁸

Faced with the necessity of supporting himself, the fourteen-year-old Israel fell back on his one obvious talent: singing. According to Woolcott, he was paid for singing popular songs on Saturday nights at MacAlear's Bar, not far from Cherry Street, was hired briefly in the chorus of the road company for *The Show Girl*, which had opened in New York on 5 May 1902, and briefly plugged songs from the balcony at Tony Pastor's Music Hall. Most of the time, however, he was one of the company of buskers who, having learned the latest hit songs brought out by Tin Pan Alley publishers, "would appear in the bar-rooms and dance-halls of the Bowery and, in the words of Master Balieff, 'sink sat sonks' until the patrons wept and showered down the pennies they had vaguely intended for investment in more beer."⁹

Early in 1904, Izzy, as he was now called, found a more secure position as a singing waiter at the Pelham Café, a saloon and dance hall at 12 Pell Street in Chinatown that was owned and operated by Mike Salter, a Russian Jewish immigrant whose dark complexion had earned him the nickname Nigger Mike. Salter capitalized on the location of his establishment in this sordid quarter to attract tourists, college students, and other "slummers" looking for vicarious thrills in the bowels of the city. In truth, though, "the sightseers usually outnumbered the local talent [at the Pelham], and the grand folk who journeyed eagerly from Fifth Avenue to Nigger Mike's seeking glimpses of the seamy side of life were usually in the predicament of those American tourists who retreat to some quaint village in France or Spain only to find its narrow streets clogged with not strikingly picturesque visitors from Red Bank, N.J., Utica, N.Y., and Kansas City, Mo."¹⁰

Izzy served drinks to the patrons of the Pelham Café and also entertained them by singing for coins tossed his way, specializing in "blue" parodies of hit songs of the day to the delight of both regular customers and tourists. In his free time he taught himself to play the piano, an instrument available to him for the first time in his life at the Pelham, and tried his hand at songwriting, his first attempt being "Marie From Sunny Italy," written in collaboration with the Pelham's resident pianist, Mike Nicholson. For rea-

sons never fully explained, he chose to identify himself in the published sheet music of that first song as Irving Berlin, a name that he retained for the rest of his life.

His way with lyrics came to the attention of representatives of the popular music industry, who supplied him with the latest songs. Max Winslow, for instance, a staff member of the Harry Von Tilzer Company, came often to the Pelham to hear Izzy and was so taken with his talent that he attempted to place him in that publishing firm. As Von Tilzer described the episode in his unpublished autobiography:

Max Winslow came to me and said, "I have discovered a great kid, I would like to see you write some songs with." Max raved about him so much that I said, "Who is he?" He said a boy down on the east side by the name of Irving Berlin. . . . I said, "Max, How can I write with him, you know I have got the best lyric writers in the country?" But Max would not stop boosting Berlin to me, and I want to say right here that Berlin can attribute a great deal of his success to Max Winslow. Max brought Berlin into my office one day shortly afterwards, and we shook hands, and I told him that I was glad to meet him and also said, "You have got a great booster in Winslow." Berlin told me that he had a song that he had written with Al Piantadosi and said he would like to have me hear it. I said I would be glad to hear it.¹¹

Even though Von Tilzer agreed to publish the song, "Just Like The Rose," he didn't offer Berlin a position on his staff.

In 1908 Berlin took a better-paying position at a saloon in the Union Square neighborhood run by Jimmy Kelly, a one-time boxer who had been a bouncer at the Pelham, and moved into an apartment in the area with Max Winslow. Collaboration with such established songwriters as Edgar Leslie, Ted Snyder, Al Piantadosi, and George Whiting strengthened his ties with Tin Pan Alley, and in 1909, the year of the premiere of Zangwill's *The Melting-Pot*, he took a position as staff lyricist at the Ted Snyder Company. His meteoric rise as a songwriter in Tin Pan Alley and then on Broadway is chronicled in the chapters of this book.

Even though Berlin had left home as a teenager to pursue a life unimaginable to his parents and their peers, he retained close ties with his family, as well as with their community of immigrant Eastern European Jews. When he was the featured performer at Hammerstein's vaudeville house in the fall of 1911, as the wealthy and world-famous writer of "Alexander's Ragtime Band" and dozens of other songs, the New York *Telegraph* for 8 October reported that "a delegation of two hundred of his friends from the pent and huddled East Side appeared . . . to see 'their boy,' as one man among them expressed it, when he stopped the show long enough to tell the audience that 'Berlin was our boy when he wasn't known to Broadway, and he had never forgotten his pals during his success—and he is still our boy.'" The account goes on to say that "all the little writer could do

was to finger the buttons on his coat and tears ran down his cheeks—in a vaudeville house!” In addition, according to the *Telegraph*, “the home [on Cherry Street] is envied by all who are invited into it from the original neighborhood where Berlin first saw the light. There his mother and sisters enjoy the benefits—all of them—of his first years’ royalties.” In 1913 he moved his mother into a new home at 834 Beck Street in the Bronx, in what was then a much more fashionable neighborhood, and on opening night of his first musical show, *Watch Your Step*, he shared his box at the New Amsterdam Theatre with his mother and his sisters.

In addition to maintaining his ties to his own community, Berlin was very much a part of New York City’s radically multicultural milieu, which encompassed, in addition to his own group, Jews who had been in the United States for several generations; other recent immigrants to the New World from such places as Italy, Sicily, Portugal, and Turkey; Irish, Germans, and Scandinavians who had come over a generation or two ago; Americans of British heritage who had a much longer history in the United States and who had largely shaped the nation’s political, educational, and cultural life; and some blacks, who were still very much on the fringes of American society. Like David Quixando in Zangwill’s play, Berlin had personal and professional association with many people outside his own ethnic group: Chuck Connors, a friend and protector during his early days in Chinatown; his first collaborator, Mike Nicholson; Edgar Leslie, born in Stamford, Connecticut, and a graduate of the Cooper Union; the Irish-American George M. Cohan and the Dublin-born Victor Herbert, who became mentors and friends. He associated as freely as was possible at the time with such black musicians as Eubie Blake. And he fell in love with and married Dorothy Goetz, a Catholic, and some years after her tragic early death married another Catholic.

Berlin, then, was a product of the multiethnic and predominantly immigrant/first-generation community of turn-of-the-century New York City, of which the Jewish enclave of Manhattan’s Lower East Side was merely one component. His early songs, like those of his peers on Tin Pan Alley, encode or reflect or perpetuate or shape or empower—depending on how one views the social function of popular music—the culture and values of this complex community.

Remarkably, though, despite their regional origin and character, Tin Pan Alley songs came to be accepted far beyond the community in and for which they had been created. A parallel suggests itself. At exactly the same time, a quite different community, this one of African Americans, was forging its own body of popular music, created for and performed within its home community at first but eventually finding favor elsewhere as well. This music was jazz, and its acceptance by people outside its home community, like that of Tin Pan Alley song, seems to be explainable by this obser-

vation: Although it retained important aspects of the character and the distinctive musical style of the people who created it, it also accommodated and assimilated enough external aspects of America's older and more dominant culture to make it easily accessible to those outside the community as well.

Neither jazz nor Tin Pan Alley songs of the first decades of the twentieth century can be understood as products of a "melting pot," in which all differences among various groups and their cultures have been obliterated. Both genres were, rather, products of the "crucible of God," in which the fundamental style and the inner character of a subordinate culture had been modified but not eliminated through contact with and accommodation to a dominant culture.

A school of "melting pot theorists" at the University of Chicago has described the cultural strategies of immigrants to a country with a language and a dominant culture quite different from their own. The theorists suggest that adaption to a new and often unwelcoming environment proceeds in three stages—contact, accommodation, and assimilation—bringing about a "superficial uniformity" with the dominant culture without, however, obliterating deep-seated differences in "opinion, sentiments, and beliefs."¹² Successive chapters in this book focus on these three stages in Berlin's early songs, by (1) identifying and describing the song repertoires with which he came into contact during his formative years; (2) discussing ways in which these repertoires represented an accommodation to a "mainstream" American music; and (3) tracing Berlin's own assimilation of various of these stylistic elements into what became a mainstream popular style itself.

Berlin was a "little Jew who grew up American," but this book argues that the "American-ness" of his songs was more a product of the crucible of God than of the melting pot.

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I'm deeply indebted to Paul Charosh. Given the emphasis in this book on contemporary performance of Berlin's early songs, it seemed important to include a discography of period recordings. An abortive attempt to assemble such a discography myself served only to remind me that I lack the necessary skills, and Paul graciously agreed to take on the job. The result of his work, offered here as Appendix 3, is the first comprehensive and professionally done discography of early recordings of Berlin's songs and might serve as a model for discographies of similar repertoires.

Most special thanks go to Mary Ellin Barrett, Linda Emmet, and Elizabeth Peters, Berlin's daughters, for facilitating my access to the Irving Berlin Collection in the Library of Congress in Washington and materials in

the offices of the Irving Berlin Music Company in New York, and for allowing me to quote from unpublished lyrics and letters. Robert Kimball, who together with Linda Emmet is editing a comprehensive collection of Berlin's lyrics, has helped in ways too numerous to list here from the beginning of my study of Berlin's songs. Ted Chapin, Executive Director of the Rodgers and Hammerstein Organization (which now owns the catalogue of the Irving Berlin Music Company), and members of his staff, particularly Bert Fink, were cooperative and helpful.

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Introduction

Irving Berlin and the Nature of Tin Pan Alley Song

Between 1907, when Irving Berlin wrote “Marie From Sunny Italy” in collaboration with Mike Nicholson, and December 1914, when his first full-length musical show, *Watch Your Step*, opened at New York’s New Amsterdam Theatre, 190 songs for which he had written lyrics, music, or both were copyrighted and published.¹ These are listed, alphabetically by title, in Appendix 1.

These were not the only songs he wrote during these seven years. One interviewer reported that “Berlin turns out an average of three songs a week,” although “the majority of them never are heard by the general public. By a process of elimination about one in ten is finally published. It is upon the basis of that average that Berlin works. . . . He is willing to waste nine efforts for the sake of evolving one good tune.”² Berlin himself was quoted as saying, “I am merely a song-writer who has enjoyed a few successes and many failures. . . . Sometimes I turn out four or five songs a night, so you can imagine how many bad ones I write,”³ and elsewhere, probably more accurately, “I average from four to five songs a week and, by elimination, but one out of ten reaches the public.”⁴

Virtually everyone who came in contact with Berlin remarked on his obsession with turning out songs. Frederick James Smith reported that “he works practically without pause. . . . If there is one thing about his unassuming and almost eagerly alert personality, it is [a] quality of indomitable will.”⁵ Another writer noted that “the real basis of Berlin’s success is industry—ceaseless, cruel, torturing industry. There is scarcely a waking minute when he is not engaged either in teaching his songs to a vaudeville

player, or composing new ones. His regular working hours are from noon until daybreak. All night long he usually keeps himself a prisoner in his apartment, bent on evolving a new melody which shall set the whole world to beating time.”⁶ Berlin himself satirized this preoccupation in an unpublished lyric:

He wakes her up and cries
 I've written another song
 You've got to listen to it
 She rubs her eyes and answers
 I don't want to hear it
 I don't want to hear it
 He keeps it up all morning
 Until the day is dawning
 And when he sees her yawning
 He starts to holler louder—she takes a sleeping powder
 And then he wakes her up and cries
 I've written another song
 She has to listen to it
 She simply cannot keep him shut
 He's a nut—He's a nut—He's a nut—
 One night she went to her Mother's home.
 While she was sleeping there all alone
 He called her up on the telephone
 And cried I've written another song . . .^{7*}

Evidence supports these accounts of Berlin's high rate of productivity. Appendix 2 lists the titles of more than a hundred songs that he is known to have written in addition to the copyrighted and published pieces, brought together from various sources: handwritten or typed lyric sheets, ranging from fragmentary to complete, of otherwise unknown songs;⁸ lead sheets of unpublished songs; phonograph recordings of songs that were never copyrighted or published; reviews and programs identifying unpublished pieces sung in musical shows or in vaudeville; and several working lists compiled by Berlin of his own songs.⁹

Creation, Collaboration and Originality

More than a third of Berlin's early songs were written in collaboration with one or more other songwriters, raising the question of whether these pieces should be included in the canon of his work. He was clear in his own mind on this: At one point he drew up several lists of his songs, which include not only those pieces for which he was sole author but also the ones written with other songwriters, and his personal six-volume set of

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early songs, bound in leather and stamped "My Songs," also contains collaborative efforts.¹⁰

Writing a Tin Pan Alley song was a both a complex and a corporate process. As Berlin described his own working method, he would begin with an idea for "either a title or a phrase or a melody, and hum it out to something definite. . . . I am working on songs all of the time, at home and outside and in the office. I gather ideas, and then I usually work them out between eight o'clock at night and five in the morning."¹¹ He would jot down lyrics as they came to him, on whatever material was at hand; some of his unpublished lyrics are written on scraps of paper or on hotel or business stationery, and others were typed out by a staff member of his publishing house.

In the next stage, words and music would be worked out more fully in collaboration with another songwriter and/or an arranger. Berlin's first biographer describes the genesis of Berlin's first song, "Marie From Sunny Italy":

It was agreed that [Berlin and Mike Nicholson] must publish a song. Nick, of course, would invent the tune and [Berlin] must write the words, for which, they said, he had a knack because he was already famous in Chinatown for the amusing if seldom printable travesties he improvised as the new songs found their way downtown. . . .

This masterpiece was wrought with great groaning and infinite travail of the spirit. Its rhymes, which filled the young lyricist with the warm glow of authorship, were achieved day by day and committed nervously to stray bits of paper. Much of it had to be doctored by Nick, with considerable experimenting at the piano and a consequent displeasure felt by the patrons at Nigger Mike's who would express their feelings by hurling the damp beer cloths at the singer's head. Truly it might be said that Berlin's first song was wrought while he dodged the clouts of his outraged neighbors.

Finally the thing was done and then the two stared blankly at the bleak fact that neither of them knew how to record their work. Nick could read sheet music after a fashion but he had no notion how to reverse the process. . . . [W]hen the song was finally transcribed, the work was done by a young violinist who shall remain unidentified in this narrative because he has since clothed himself in the grandeur of a Russian name and betaken himself to the concert platform with the air of a virtuoso just off the boat from Paris.

Next the masterpiece was borne with shaking knees to Tin Pan Alley, where it was promptly accepted by Joseph Stern for publication.¹²

Some songwriters were primarily lyricists, writing texts to which more musically adept collaborators added music, and at the beginning of his career Berlin was considered to be one of these.

He was hired as staff lyricist for the Ted Snyder Company early in 1909, and as Table 1 shows, most of his songs for the next several years were written in collaboration with Snyder himself.¹³

Table 1

<i>Year</i>	<i>Total songs</i>	<i>By Berlin alone</i>	<i>Collaborations</i>	<i>With Ted Snyder</i>
1907	1	-	1	-
1908	2	-	2	-
1909	24	5	19	13
1910	30	7	23	21
1911	39	26	13	5
1912	41	32	9	3
1913	33	27	6	-
1914	20	20	-	-
Totals	190	117	73	42

Most of the forty-two songs the two men wrote together have music attributed to Snyder and lyrics to Berlin, but this is probably more a function of the respective positions and statuses of the two men in the publishing house, and of royalty distribution, than of their respective contributions to the song in question. Berlin probably drafted the lyrics for most of these pieces and Snyder came up with the first musical ideas, but distinctions between composer and lyricist almost certainly broke down in the throes of creation, and both words and music of the completed songs must represent some degree of collaboration. Berlin was quite capable of writing music for his lyrics by this time, and had in fact published several successful songs for which he had written music as well as words. Occasional disagreements between the attributions on the first page of a song and those on its cover, or between either of these and the information submitted for copyright entries, support the notion that the division of labor in writing a song was not strictly maintained. The title page of "I Just Came Back To Say Goodbye," for instance, attributes the words to Berlin and the music to Snyder, while the cover reads, "Words and Music by Irving Berlin"; similarly, the cover of "Thank You, Kind Sir! Said She" attributes the piece to "Berlin and Snyder" while the title page reads "Words by Irving Berlin/Music by Ted Snyder."

There is little beyond anecdote, such as the description quoted earlier of how "Marie From Sunny Italy" was created, to document how two or more Tin Pan Alley songwriters worked together on a piece. Typical is an account of the genesis of one of Berlin's most successful early songs:

Henry Waterson, head of a music firm, tells a funny story about Berlin's second [*sic*] song, "Sadie Salome, Go Home." For two weeks previous to submitting the song Berlin, with a pianist [Edgar Leslie], occupied a room adjoining Waterson's, and [they] played and sang until Waterson said he dreamed of "Sadie Salome." At the expiration of two weeks Berlin called him into the piano room

to hear the song; but at the conclusion of the introduction, and before he heard a word of it, Waterson said he'd take it. "Play it a tone lower, and I'll sing it for you," he said to the surprised writers, which he did, much to their embarrassment.¹⁴

And Rennold Wolf gives an account of how he, Berlin, Vincent Bryan, and Channing Pollock worked together on a show song in Atlantic City:

We assembled in Mr. Berlin's imposing suite of parlors, where there was a piano. . . . Seated at the instrument, he was not long in conceiving a melody, which immediately he began to pound out. All night, until dawn was breaking, he sat on the stool, playing that same melody over and over and over again, while two fagged and dejected lyric writers struggled and heaved to fit it with words. . . . One cigarette replaced another as he pegged away; a pitcher of beer, stationed at one end of the keyboard, was replenished frequently; and there he sat, trying patiently to suggest, to two minds that were completely worn out by long rehearsals and over-work, a lyric that would fit his melody. Mr. Pollock and I paced the floor; we sat, in turn, in every chair and on every divan in the rooms; we tore at our hair; we fumed, we spluttered, and probably we cursed.¹⁵

In some cases, Berlin's contribution to a song seems to have been more in the nature of tinkering with an already written song than of contributing to the piece in its early stages. W. Raymond Walker tells how Berlin was called in to revise "Oh, What I Know About You" after Walker had written the song in collaboration with Joseph H. McKeon and Harry M. Piano, but even though Walker says that the published song was "a great deal different" from the first version, Berlin's name doesn't appear on the published song.¹⁶ "Virginia Lou" was originally copyrighted and published as a song by Eddie Leonard and Earl Taylor, then withdrawn and republished with a new lyric by Berlin. The sheet music for "There's A Girl In Havana" credits the piece to E. Ray Goetz and A. Baldwin Sloane, but the copyright deposit card in the Library of Congress adds Berlin's name as coauthor, and several other songs attributed to the team of Goetz and Sloane—"Lonely Moon," "My Heather Bell," and "Take Me Back To The Garden Of Love"—were included in a catalogue of Berlin's songs brought out in 1948 by the Irving Berlin Music Corporation. It seems that Berlin may have "doctored" these songs, then decided to withdraw mention of his input.

Despite such collaborations and team efforts, Berlin wrote both words and music for almost two thirds of his early songs, and in later years it became the exception for him to collaborate with another songwriter. He described the advantages of being both lyricist and composer this way:

Nearly all other writers work in teams, one writing the music and the other the words. They either are forced to fit some one's words to their music or some

one's music to their words. Latitude—which begets novelty—is denied them, and in consequence both lyrics and melody suffer. Writing both words and music I can compose them together and make them fit. I sacrifice one for the other. If I have a melody I want to use, I plug away at the lyrics until I make them fit the best parts of my music and vice versa.¹⁷

Even when Berlin was writing both words and music for a song, he was still engaged in collaboration. Like other songwriters of the day, he depended on someone else to take down his tunes in musical notation and to work out details of the piano accompaniment; as he put it, “when I have completed a song and memorized it, I dictate it to an arranger.”¹⁸ Though he has often been criticized for this, it was in fact standard procedure for Tin Pan Alley songwriters, even those fluent in musical notation, from Charles K. Harris on.

After depending on one or another of the staff musicians at the Snyder Music Company for this sort of help for several years, Berlin hired his own “musical secretary” in early 1913. According to one account:

At the time “In My Harem” was written, Mr. [Cliff] Hess was working in the Chicago office of the Waterson, Berlin and Snyder Company. Berlin went to Chicago on the 20th Century Limited and worked out this tune in his head while on the train. When in Chicago he played it over (all on the black keys, as he always does) and Mr. Hess sat by him and wrote it down on paper as he played it. This struck the composer as a great time-saving device, for Mr. Hess afterwards transposed it into a simpler key, and arranged it in its less complicated commercial form.¹⁹

Berlin hired Hess on the spot and brought him back to New York.

Hess resides with Berlin at the latter's apartment in Seventy-first Street; he attends to the details of the young song-writers's business affairs, transcribes the melodies which Berlin conceives and plays them over and over again while the latter is setting the lyrics. When Berlin goes abroad Hess accompanies him. Hess' position is not so easy as it might at first appear, for Berlin's working hours are, to say the least, unconventional. Much of the night Hess sits by his side, ready to put on record a tune once his chief has hit upon it. His regular hour for retiring is five o'clock in the morning. He arises for breakfast at exactly noon. In the afternoon he goes to the offices of Waterson [*sic*], Berlin and Snyder and demonstrates his songs.²⁰

After Berlin gave a public demonstration of his songwriting technique in London, a journalist described the two men working together:

A musician sat at the piano. Mr. Berlin began to hum and to sway in the motion of ragtime. Round and round the room he went while the pianist jotted down the notes. Mr. Berlin stopped occasionally: “That's wrong, we will begin again.” A marvelous ear, a more marvelous memory, he detects anything amiss in the harmony and he can remember the construction of his song from the

beginning after humming it over once. The actual melody took him an hour. Then he began on the words. While he swayed with the pianist playing the humming gave way to a jumble of words sung softly. And out of the jumble came the final composition above. This is how most of his ragtime melodies have been evolved. For one melody he must cover several miles of carpet.²¹

It would be impossible to document precisely what Hess contributed to the final versions of Berlin's songs. The piano accompaniments were, in all likelihood, mostly his work.²² Lyrics and tunes were Berlin's inventions, and various accounts agree that he knew what harmony he wanted as well; one of his later musical secretaries reported, "I'd play [the song] back for him to hear what he'd dictated, and he'd say, 'You got one chord wrong in there.' And he'd be right."²³ But Hess was much more than an accomplished pianist with a good ear; in later years he published songs under his own name, and it's difficult to imagine that he didn't have some input into the shaping and polishing of tune, rhythm, and harmony that took place as he and Berlin worked together to transform the latter's fragments of lyrics and music into finished songs.

The point of this discussion of the Tin Pan Alley mode of song production is not merely to justify the inclusion in the Berlin canon of pieces written by him in collaboration with others but, more important, to underline that the creation of a popular song is a vastly different process from the composition of a classical piece. And the difference between popular and classical music extends far beyond the mechanical details of how a new piece within each genre comes into being to such issues as the concept of "originality" and the relationship of music and its composers to the community for which it is created.

This era in classical music, falling at the tag end of the Romantic era, was marked by the exaltation of the individual genius/composer to the position of a visionary capable of creating objects of art unimaginable to anyone else. As a result of this focus on radical individuality, a composer's music was expected to differ stylistically from the music of all earlier composers and also from that of other contemporaneous writers, and it was judged in large part by the extent to which it moved forward, breaking new stylistic ground.

The suggestion that a new classical piece sounded like the music of another composer could be meant (and taken) as negative criticism. Audiences were often resistant to new pieces written in more complex styles than they were accustomed to, but some composers and critics viewed audience rejection as an inevitable reaction to the stylistic progressiveness of the piece in question.²⁴

In contrast, a popular song was judged by its conformity to the taste and standards of the community in and for which it was created and by its reception within this community.

For songwriters such as Berlin, widespread approval by performers and audiences was the distinguishing mark of a good song, and a poor song was one no one wanted to hear again. Since mass audiences were unlikely to respond favorably to a song that sounded too different from those they already knew, writing a good popular song required, first of all, the use of musical and textual materials already familiar to audiences. Popular songwriters weren't concerned with turning out products that moved beyond the style of their peers, but in working with them in a common idiom and establishing common ground with their audiences. Thus one cannot judge their songs according to whether or not they broke new harmonic, melodic, or structural ground, and audience rejection signalled failure, not success.²⁵

In order to achieve this instant familiarity, as it might be called, writers of popular songs not only conformed stylistically to the music best known to their audiences but often quoted and parodied familiar melodic material, as well.

Like his Tin Pan Alley peers, Berlin "knew all the music his audiences knew, and his songs make use of the common melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic patterns of this music and frequently offer direct quotations from one familiar piece or another"; as a result, his songs were "almost—but not quite—already known to his listeners when heard for the first time."²⁶ As Berlin himself once put it, "we depend largely on tricks, we writers of songs. There has been a standing offer in Vienna, holding a large prize, to anyone who can write eight bars of original music. . . . Thousands of compositions have been submitted, but all of them have been traced back to some other melody." He concludes that "our work is to connect the old phrases in a new way, so that they will sound like a new tune."²⁷

Writing elsewhere, Berlin insisted that he "[knew] the danger of writing melodies that are too original" because "it must be remembered that the public is the final and supreme judge of song merit." He was confident that audiences are "getting wiser every day regarding the caliber of songs [they] desire" and predicted that "the time will come when this indirect censorship will produce song[s] that will express real human emotion in the way such emotion should be expressed." The best songs are original in some way, he observed, but the "the real originality in song writing consists in the construction of the song rather than in the actual melodic base."²⁸

Berlin's songs of 1913 and 1914 are considerably different in melody, rhythm, harmony, subject matter, and expression from those of five years or so earlier, and new subgenres emerged between 1907 and 1914. Popular song, like classical music, does change; new stylistic and formal ground is broken; and I will make the case later that Berlin was one of the most "important" songwriters of the period precisely because he was one of the chief instigators of several new developments. But there's a critical distinc-

tion between stylistic and expressive "progress" in popular and classical music, a distinction that speaks to the most elemental differences between the two genres.

The aesthetic of popular music insists that there is a social contract among members of its community that demands that a piece be acceptable to all members of the group. Stylistic changes in Tin Pan Alley song in the early twentieth century took place in the context of interaction and collaboration among songwriters, between songwriters and staff pianists and arrangers, between songwriters and performers, and, most critical of all, between songwriters and audiences. The aesthetic of classical music, at least at this time, insisted that stylistic change was the prerogative of the composer alone, a choice made in artistic isolation.

During the second week of July 1911, Berlin appeared at the Hippodrome in London in the revue *Hullo, Ragtime!*, singing a selection of his own songs. *The Encore* of London reported on 10 July that "he met with a most enthusiastic reception," and *The Times*, uncharacteristically reviewing a show for the popular musical stage, admitted on 8 July that "[he] sings his rag-time songs with diffidence, skill and charm" and that they "sound, indeed, quite new, and innocently, almost childishly, pleasing." In curious coincidence, Stravinsky's *Le Sacre du Printemps* was given its London concert premier the same week; *The Times*, on 11 July, complained that "harmonically it is extraordinarily rough and strident. . . . There is much that is hideously and cruelly harsh, even to ears accustomed to modern music, and much, too, that is exceedingly monotonous."

Berlin's songs and Stravinsky's ballet suite were both perceived as original works, by both audiences and critics. Berlin's originality was accepted and appreciated immediately by his audience; Stravinsky's was not.

The Material Form of Tin Pan Alley Songs

Tin Pan Alley songs were disseminated primarily in the material form of published sheet music. Production of such a piece began with its collaborative oral creation and its subsequent capture in musical notation, as described earlier, after which the song was sent off to be engraved. A small run of first-proof sheets from punch plates was sent back to the publisher for correction and also for prepublication distribution as professional copies to singers who might be persuaded to perform the piece. An artist was commissioned to design and execute a front cover, which might take the form of: 1. a pictorial representation of one or more of the song's protagonists; 2. a portrait of the singer who had agreed to perform the piece; or, less often, 3. an "art" cover of floral or geometric design. Illustrations of each type will be found in the following chapters. A back cover intended

to advertise one or more other songs in the publisher's catalogue was then designed; sometimes the first several staves of the chorus of a single song would be given, sometimes the opening measures of several songs, sometimes a list of the titles of songs recently added to that publisher's catalogue.

Unlike the later practice of depositing handwritten lead sheets to obtain copyright protection before a song had been engraved or even completely finished, two copies of the engraved song, with or without covers, were sent to Washington, D.C., for copyright. Two more went to Ottawa for Canadian copyright and two to London for Commonwealth copyright. Copyright and publication took place simultaneously, in effect.

The finished product, in large (ca. 14"×11") format, was attractive and functional. Covers were often stylish and colorful examples of one of the "minor" art forms of the day, serving to attract the eye of potential buyers. The paper and ink were of excellent quality, as proved by the excellent condition of many remaining copies after three quarters of a century, and the sheet music sat well on the piano stand. The music itself was engraved in large notes, with generous space between staves and in the margins; many of the craftsmen did beautiful work, comparing favorably in artistry with published music of any period. Any mistakes made in the process of engraving remained uncorrected in subsequent runs, since the same plates continued to be used without alteration. A new cover might be designed to replace the original one if a song sold well enough to warrant further printings, however, particularly if the piece had been taken up by a popular performer or interpolated into a show.

This sheet music was available for purchase at the offices of publishing companies, where prospective buyers, in addition to browsing through the stock, could also have songs played and sung by staff musicians. Distribution also took place at retail outlets, some specializing in music and others offering sheet music as part of a larger stock. Dissemination also took place to a lesser extent through other media. In the early years of the century, newspapers such as the *Boston Sunday American* and the *New York American and Journal* included a piece of sheet music in each week's Sunday supplement, and the lyrics of popular songs were still circulated in text-only songsters. Installments of *Delaney's Song Book*, containing the lyrics of new songs brought out by the major Tin Pan Alley publishing houses, appeared from 1892 into the 1920s; most of Berlin's early songs appeared in this popular series. In addition, publishers themselves sometimes distributed the texts of their new songs on single sheets, as broadsides.

In their material form as published sheet music, Berlin's early songs appear to exhibit a high degree of uniformity, among themselves and also in relation to pieces by other songwriters. Structurally, virtually every one of them is made up of the same component parts:



Figure 1. Front cover of “Grizzly Bear.”

TWO NEW SONG SUCCESSSES

DRAGGY RAG



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Write for
Beautifully
Illustrated
Catalogue
FREE



A Hot Melody - Instant Hit - All-Time



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For sale by
all leading
dealers of
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Figure 2. Back cover of “Grizzly Bear.”

1. a brief piano introduction, drawn usually from the final bars of the chorus or the beginning of the verse
2. a two- or four-bar vamp, with melodic and rhythmic material drawn from and leading into the verse
3. two (or sometimes more) verses, usually sixteen or thirty-two bars in length, depending on the meter of the song
4. a chorus, usually equal in length to the verse, with first and second endings. The first ending indicates a repeat of the chorus; the second gives instructions for either a da capo return to the introduction or a dal segno return to the vamp

The songs also appear to be quite uniform in melodic, harmonic, and rhythmic style. Texts are set in a predominantly syllabic fashion, to mostly diatonic tunes confined to a vocal range of an octave or less, with an occasional chromatic passing note. Harmonies are tonal and triadic, shaped into two- or four-bar phrases, with secondary dominants and other chromatic chords sometimes lending variety. Modulation may lead to another key for a phrase or two, and from early on Berlin had a mannerism of abruptly shifting a phrase to a key a third away from the tonic, without modulation.²⁹

Most of what has been written about Berlin's early songs takes this sheet music as the primary (and often only) text, and most recent performances of these pieces are more or less literal readings from this text. But the songs were rarely performed just as they appear on the printed page. A literal reading from the sheet music results in a performance shaped as follows:

- piano introduction
- vamp
- first verse
- chorus with first ending
- repeat of chorus, with second ending
- vamp
- second verse
- chorus with first ending
- repeat of chorus, with second ending

But we know from period recordings and other evidence that this sequence was subject to change in performance. Only the first verse might be sung, or additional verses not found in the sheet music might be added. The chorus might be sung only once after each verse, "catch" lines of text might be interpolated into the second chorus, or there might be a completely different set of lyrics, not found in the sheet music, for the second chorus. The singer might alter notes in the melody or deliver the entire song in a semispoken way without precise pitches. The accompaniment might take

GRIZZLY BEAR

Words by
IRVING BERLIN

Music by
GEORGE HOTSFORD

Moderato

Vivace

Out in San Fran - cis - co where the
Let's sit down and rest a min - ute,
weath - er's fair, They have a dance out there... They call the
hon - ey, dear, My head feels aw - ful queer, Please call the
griz - zly Bear... All your oth - er liv - in' danc - es
wait - er near, "Wa - ter, wa - ter, quick the la - dy's

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Figure 3. First page of "Grizzly Bear."

over for a half or a full chorus without the singer(s), the instrumental introduction might be repeated after the last chorus, or the song might end with a coda not found in the sheet music.

Beyond that, when these songs were sung on the vaudeville or legitimate stage or in the recording studio, they were accompanied by an orchestra rather than a piano, and they were frequently sung by two or more voices despite having been published as vocal solos. A period recording of a “double” version of “Alexander’s Ragtime Band” illustrates how a piece notated for one voice could be transformed into a double version in performance:

Oh my honey [*Yes?*], Oh my honey [*Yes?*],
 Better hurry and let’s meander,
 Ain’t ya goin’ [*Where ya goin’?*], Ain’t ya goin’ [*Where ya goin’?*],
 To the leader man [*Ragged meter man*],
 Oh my honey [*What?*], Oh my honey [*What?*],
 Let me take you to Alexander’s **grand stand, brass band,**
Ain’t ya comin’ along?
 Come on and hear [*I’d like to hear*], Come on and hear [*I’d like to hear*],
Alexander’s ragtime band,
 Come on and hear [*Oh yes my dear*], Come on and hear [*Oh yes my dear*],
It’s the best band in the land,
Can dey play a bugle call like I never heard before?
 Why, it’s so natural that you want to go to war,
That’s just the bestest band what am, Honey lamb,
 Come on along [*I’m goin’ along*]. Come on along [*I’m goin’ along*] . . .³⁰

(brackets and italics indicate the second voice, bold type indicates both voices singing together)

The problem with taking the notated form of these songs as the primary text, then, is that, unlike compositions of the classical repertory, which throughout the modern era were assumed to be “ideal objects with an immutable and unshifting ‘real’ meaning,”³¹ a popular song may be “rearticulated” in any given performance.³² In other words, “dissemination of [a popular song] as printed sheet music was only the beginning of its history; it then became fair game for performers, who according to the conventions of the genre were free to transform [it] in details of rhythm, harmony, melody, instrumentation, words, and even overall intent.”³³

Throughout its history, popular music has been marked by the extraordinary flexibility with which its text has been treated by performers, and also by the variety of meanings that listeners have perceived in these songs. Stephen Foster’s “Old Folks At Home” was sung by amateurs clustered around pianos in private parlors, performed on the minstrel stage in blackface, sung on the concert stage by famous performers of the classical repertory, interpolated into stage versions of *Uncle Tom’s Cabin*, sung around campfires by groups of Civil War soldiers of both sides, reworked into

elaborate display pieces for virtuoso pianists and trumpet players, paraphrased in classical compositions by Charles Ives and others, and quoted in Irving Berlin's "Alexander's Ragtime Band." In each instance, the overall shape, stylistic details, and the performance medium were different, as was the meaning of the song for its performers and listeners.³⁴

Today's literal, note-for-note performances of Berlin's early songs have their own validity and their own meaning, and recent analyses of the music and lyrics of these pieces using their notated form as the primary text can tell us useful things about their style and structure. But my concern is not with the performance and reception of these songs today but with their meaning for Berlin and his audiences at the time of their composition and their first performances.

To recover this meaning, one must look beyond their material form as sheet music.

Meaning in Berlin's Early Songs

Berlin's early song aren't as homogeneous a group as they appear to be in their notated form. The corpus in fact includes pieces of many different genres and subgenres, each with its own style, content, and meaning.

The issue of genre has been a favorite topic of literary critics throughout the twentieth century. Earlier, when most critics were under the spell of modernist modes of thought, the chief focus was on the construction of taxonomies based on close readings of the texts of novels, plays, poems, essays, and other literary forms, in relative isolation from the contexts in which these works were conceived, written, produced, disseminated, and received. More recently, the emphasis has switched to the flexibility and overlap of genres and to the necessity of taking factors other than the printed text into consideration.

Similarly, earlier musicological writing on genre was concerned largely with somewhat simplistic distinctions among various instrumental and vocal forms, while more recent scholars have argued that one must consider semi-otic, behavioral, social, ideological, economic, and juridical dimensions as well.³⁵ As Jim Samson puts it, discussions of genre should "extend beyond musical materials into the social domain so that a genre is dependent for its definition on context, function and community validation, and not simply on formal and technical regulations."³⁶ Even more directly and radically, Robert Walser argues that "musical meanings are always grounded socially and historically, and they operate on an ideological field of conflicting interests, institutions, and memories," so much so that "the purpose of a genre is to organize the reproduction of a particular ideology."³⁷

The issue of genre is much more complex in popular songs than in literature, or for that matter even in instrumental music, and not only