

Broadway and Tin Pan Alley

Introductory Essay

“Way Down Upon the Hudson River: Tin Pan Alley's New York Triumph”

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Broadway in the 1920s was a showcase for the sweeping changes transforming American culture in the early 20th century, including new roles for women, the mixing of social classes in new settings like Prohibition-era speakeasies and creative innovation by African Americans in jazz clubs and music halls. Sons of immigrants from Europe -- including the Gershwins, Irving Berlin, Jerome Kern and Harold Arlen -- made up a large percentage of the new word and music smiths writing for Tin Pan Alley and Broadway's musical revues. Their syncopated rhythms borrowed from the jazz craze and their lyrics helped create a vibrant, witty new American argot. Tin Pan Alley and Broadway contributed such classic standards as “Alexander's Ragtime Band” (Berlin), “I Got Rhythm” (Gershwin and Gershwin), “Ol' Man River,” (Kern and Hammerstein), “Stormy Weather” (Arlen and Koehler), “Ain't Misbehavin'” (Razaf, Waller, Brooks), “Anything Goes” (Porter) and many more. These songs formed the musical backdrop of an era. The production of these songs also became big business.

The first major book written about Tin Pan Alley was published in 1930 by Harvard professor Isaac Goldberg, and it was subtitled “A Chronicle of the American Popular Music Racket.” Goldberg's humorous use of the word “racket” captured something about the origins of the name “Tin Pan Alley” given to the music composed by poorly-paid songwriters banging away in cubicles in downtown New York City on cheap pianos. The word also expressed Goldberg's view that the burgeoning music industry of his time was a slightly shady one. Our contemporary understanding of this music, on the other hand, is shaped by decades of nostalgic packaging that enshrines these popular songs as “standards,” comprising the “great American songbook.”

In its own time, “Tin Pan Alley” was an insurgent popular music that was a challenge made by immigrants and their working-class children to the dominance of the polite middle-class “parlor” music of the time. It also borrowed a great deal from the popular music being created contemporaneously by African American musicians. “Tin Pan Alley” referred to an actual location where popular music publishers had their offices in New York City—first Union Square, then West 28th Street, and then further uptown. But “Tin Pan Alley” also meant a style of music that tended initially toward ethnic novelty songs and later, in the “classic” period (from the mid-1920s on), toward 32-bar love songs that relied heavily on internal rhymes and punning in the use of language. Such songs fed, and became the basis for, the burgeoning musical revues on Broadway.

Tin Pan Alley music was urban music, and its initial popularity relied on sounds and themes that were perceived by white audiences as connected to African American life in the United States. Even so, opportunities for actual African Americans to get a hearing on Tin Pan Alley were quite rare. The heyday of Tin Pan Alley coincided with what African American historian Rayford Logan has termed the “nadir” of race relations in the United States. While some commentators find evidence for intercultural sympathy in the sprightly rhythms, blue notes, and vernacular lyrics of Tin Pan Alley songs, it is also important to remember that the music flourished in a context of institutional racism.

The rise of Tin Pan Alley—as music and institution—depended on the mass immigration of East European Jews to New York beginning in the early 1880s, and the historical shift of America's black population from South to North. Around the time of World War I, African Americans began leaving the South in droves; ultimately more people of African descent *moved* in the first few decades of the 20th century than at any time since the Middle Passage. What we now call Tin Pan Alley depended on a meeting of Jews and African Americans in the modern American city, where the two cultures interacted informally in neighborhoods, music halls and businesses.

The key Jewish figures of Tin Pan Alley—Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Al Jolson, and Harold Arlen, to name a few—were consummate modern New Yorkers. Their careers were intimately wound up with their relationships to *actual* African Americans and with the sights and sounds of blackness. This was nothing new: Blackface minstrelsy had been the dominant form of American popular entertainment for much of the 19th century, and these Jewish artists were, on some level, the heirs of this tradition. It is no surprise that both Berlin and Gershwin had early hits with songs that made reference to the work of Stephen Foster—the most important songwriter for the minstrel stage in the 19th century.

The popularity of the music of Tin Pan Alley depended on networks of production and distribution that radiated out from the music publishing houses to the Broadway stage, and to increasingly national circulation. Until the end of the 19th century, American popular music was presented in a series of overlapping regional scenes, with only occasional songs or musical forms becoming nationwide successes. The Chicago World's Fair of 1893 changed this. As historian Susan Curtis explains, this event provided the opportunity for ragtime to move from an almost exclusively African American and mid-western phenomenon to a national trend. There was no ragtime played *at* the World's Fair, but numerous ragtime pioneers, including Scott Joplin, played around town and their music was carried from Chicago to the rest of the country.

The first generation of Tin Pan Alley composers was obsessed with ragtime and its musical and commercial possibilities. They were also interested in repackaging the instrumental ragtime compositions that Scott Joplin and his colleagues had developed as the foundation for their own novelty songs. The decade of Tin Pan Alley's rise, the 1910s, might be usefully marked off by the debut of Irving Berlin's "Alexander Ragtime Band" in 1911 on one end, and George and Ira Gershwin's "The Real American Folk Song (Is a Rag)" in 1918. Both songs rely on audiences hearing the music as sounding recognizably "black," while the lyrics tell tales of national triumphalism: the music of Alexander's band is so natural, after all, that it will make you want to go to war!

By the 1920s, the notion that Tin Pan Alley was a particular Jewish success story was so entrenched that when Cole Porter, an Episcopalian from Indiana, was asked how he would go about writing successful "American" music, he noted—with no seeming irony—that he would pen "good Jewish music." This triumph of Jewish immigrants' music-making paralleled a time of great nativism and prejudice in American political life, a development that culminated in the passage of the Immigration Restriction Act in 1924.

In the early part of the century, Broadway's popular "revues" were loosely cobbled-together amalgams of music, dance and vaudeville that relied on a constant stream of songs by Tin Pan Alley writers. But in the 1920s, Broadway shows became organized for the first time around fully-developed through-narratives, with 1927's *Showboat* marking the first musical with a beginning-to-end plot.

Although some Tin Pan Alley songwriters successfully became Broadway show writers—*Showboat* was written by Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein II—the business began to change. It became increasingly difficult for songwriters to pitch and place single songs in the more tightly organized new shows. At the same time, sound technology hit the movies, with the transformative success in 1927 of *The Jazz Singer*, the first full length motion picture with synchronized dialogue. Suddenly, the movies could not only talk, they could sing. The real action for songwriters began shifting to Hollywood, where vertically integrated shops hired songwriters to move West and work for the film studios. The same songwriters continued to dominate Broadway (and Hollywood), but they no longer needed to be situated on West 28th street.