

## CHAPTER FOUR: “I GOT RHYTHM”: THE GOLDEN AGE OF TIN PAN ALLEY SONG

### Chapter Outline

#### I. The Golden Age of Tin Pan Alley Song

##### A. Introduction

1. During the 1920s and 1930s, certain characteristic musical structures and styles of performance dominated popular song.
2. Professional tunesmiths wrote some of the most influential and commercially successful songs of the period.
3. The potential for fame and financial success on a previously unknown scale lured composers and lyricists with diverse skills and backgrounds.

##### a) Irving Berlin (1888–1989)

(1) Grew up poor in the Jewish ghetto of New York City

(2) Began his career as a singing waiter

(3) Achieved his first success writing ragtime-influenced popular songs

##### b) Richard Rodgers (1902–79)

(1) Produced many of the finest songs of the period, in collaboration with lyricists Lorenz Hart and Oscar

Hammerstein II

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(2) The college-educated son of a doctor and a pianist

c) Cole Porter (1891–1964)

(1) Born into a wealthy family in Indiana

(2) Studied classical music at elite institutions such as  
Yale, Harvard, and the Schola Cantorum in Paris

d) George Gershwin (1898–1937)

(1) The son of an immigrant leatherworker

(2) The songwriter who did the most to bridge the gulf  
between art music and popular music

(3) Studied European classical music but also spent a great  
deal of time listening to jazz musicians in New York City

4. The Tin Pan Alley composers produced many standards, songs that remain an essential part of the repertoire of today’s jazz musicians and pop singers.

### B. Jewish immigrants

1. From Central and Eastern Europe

2. Played a central role in the music business during the early twentieth century as composers, lyricists, performers, publishers, and promoters

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3. The rise of anti-Semitism in Eastern Europe during the 1880s led to the emigration of millions of Jews.
4. By 1910, Jews made up more than a quarter of the population of New York City.
5. Young entrepreneurs from the burgeoning neighborhoods of the East Side had secured a foothold in a variety of businesses, including the entertainment industry.
6. Some of the hundreds of Jewish performers who worked the vaudeville circuit went on to become major celebrities on Broadway and in Hollywood:
  - a) Al Jolson
  - b) Sophie Tucker
  - c) George Jessel
  - d) Jack Benny
  - e) George Burns
  - f) Milton Berle
7. Lower-class immigrants, denied the possibility of upward mobility for centuries, poured their ambition into music, dance, and comedy, perfecting

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their skills on the streets of New York before gaining a foothold in vaudeville.

8. By the turn of the century, many of the biggest theatrical booking agencies were managed by Jews, and young performers did not face the degree of anti-Semitism present in other established businesses.

9. The music business offered a kind of rough-and-tumble justice: if you could write songs that made money for the music publishers, you were a success.

### C. Irving Berlin (born Israel, or Isadore, Baline)

1. The most productive, varied, and creative of the Tin Pan Alley songwriters

2. His professional songwriting career started before World War I and continued into the 1960s.

3. It has been said that Berlin often composed from three to seven songs a week.

4. In 1969, the catalog of Irving Berlin compositions still available in print included 899 songs.

5. His most famous songs include the following:

a) "Alexander's Ragtime Band"

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- b) "Blue Skies"
- c) "Cheek to Cheek"
- d) "There's No Business Like Show Business"
- e) "White Christmas"
- f) "God Bless America"

6. Like many Tin Pan Alley composers, Berlin was a European immigrant.

- a) Born in Temun, Russia, in 1888
- b) Fled the anti-Jewish pogrom there in 1892
- c) Began life in America in desperate poverty

(1) Berlin was selling newspapers on the streets by age eight, and at fourteen, he left home for good.

(2) He worked as a guide for a blind street musician, as a saloon pianist, and as a singing waiter.

- d) Berlin began his career as a song plugger.

(1) As a teenager, he was paid five dollars a week by the songwriter Harry von Tilzer to join in "spontaneously"

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from the audience when von Tilzer's songs were performed.

7. "Alexander's Ragtime Band"
  - a) Published in 1911
  - b) The song that first brought Berlin mass acclaim
  - c) Actually had little to do with ragtime as performed by the great black ragtime pianists of the day
  - d) Sold 1.5 million copies almost immediately
8. After World War I, Berlin set up his own publishing company and founded a theater for the production of his own shows.
9. Berlin wrote songs for the Broadway stage and for the new medium of sound film (he wrote music for eighteen films).
  - a) "Blue Skies," performed by Al Jolson in the first talkie, *The Jazz Singer*
  - b) The first motion picture featuring an entire score written by Berlin was the Marx Brothers' debut movie, *The Cocoanuts*, produced in 1929.

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c) The 1942 film *Holiday Inn* introduced one of Berlin’s most successful songs, “White Christmas.”

d) The 1946 Broadway musical *Annie Get Your Gun* included more hit songs than any other show:

(1) “They Say It’s Wonderful”

(2) “The Girl That I Marry”

(3) “Doin’ What Comes Naturally”

(4) “There’s No Business Like Show Business”

e) Berlin was the most prolific and consistent of the Tin Pan Alley composers, with an active songwriting career spanning almost sixty years.

### II. Tin Pan Alley Song Form

#### A. Song forms inherited from the nineteenth century

1. The AABA structure of “Jeanie with the Light Brown Hair”
2. Verse-and-chorus form of “After the Ball”

#### B. Verse-refrain form, with an AABA refrain

1. Verse

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- a) Usually sets up a dramatic context or emotional tone of the song
- b) The most important part of nineteenth-century popular songs
- c) Regarded as mere introductions by the 1920s
- d) Today, the verses of Tin Pan Alley songs are rarely performed.

### 2. Refrain

- a) Usually made up of four sections of equal length
  - (1) A—the main melody, basic pattern of lyrics and a set of chord changes to support them
  - (2) The music of the A section is repeated with new lyrics, often with slight variations.
  - (3) “The bridge”—new material, new melody, and new chord changes
  - (4) A melody and chords are repeated.
- b) Such song forms became the basis of listening habits.
- c) The best Tin Pan Alley songwriters were able to work creatively within the structural limitations of standard popular song forms.



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### C. Listening: “My Blue Heaven”

1. Performed by Gene Austin (1927)
2. Austin was one of the first “crooners.”
  - a) Singers who mastered the intimate style of singing made possible with the electric microphone
3. This recording was one of the bestselling records of the era.
4. Verse-refrain form
  - a) Introduction
  - b) Verse: two sections of equal length with nearly identical music
  - c) Refrain: four sections, AABA—the A sections all end with the words “my blue heaven”
  - d) The B section, or “bridge” or “release,” provides variety.
5. The song depicts the deepest aspirations of the Tin Pan Alley listening public.
  - a) The lyrics poetically reinforce a familiar and comfortable motif of the American dream: home and family.

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b) Gene Austin’s performance reinforces the sentiments expressed in the lyrics: quiet intimacy and tranquility.

### D. Listening: “April Showers”

1. Performed by Al Jolson (1921)
2. The orchestral introduction presents a melodic phrase from the song’s refrain, providing an identifying hook. The same hook is repeated to conclude the song.
3. This recording reveals the sound and style of the premicrophone period.
4. Jolson’s singing style reflects the performance techniques used on the vaudeville stage before the invention of microphones and sound amplification.
5. His vocal style was declamatory rather than lyrical.
6. Verse-refrain form (refrain follows an ABAC structure)

### E. Listening: “April Showers”

1. Performed by Al Jolson (1932)
2. The brief introduction played by the dance band does not present any music from the verse or the refrain.

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3. It is merely anticipatory, as some ascending, billowy "cloud" music settles down gently to prepare the singer's entrance.
4. In this version, Jolson breaks into rhythmic speech during the repetition of the refrain, considerably heightening the impact of the performance.

### III. What Are Tin Pan Alley Songs About?

- A. Predominately aimed at white, urban middle- and upper-middle-class Americans; they said little in the way of social or political commentary.
- B. Although the best composers and lyricists produced songs of great beauty, Tin Pan Alley songs were generally escapist.
- C. Both the lyrical content of Tin Pan Alley songs and their typical mode of performance were linked to the prominence of *privacy* and *romance* as cultural ideals.

### IV. Tin Pan Alley and Broadway

- A. Mutually beneficial relationship between Tin Pan Alley Songs and Broadway shows
- B. The proximity of the music publishers on Tin Pan Alley to the stages of Broadway was no accident.

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C. The relationship between the songs and the shows was never more fruitful than in the 1920s and 1930s—the so-called Golden Age of Tin Pan Alley song.

1. Tin Pan Alley at this time offered a seemingly endless supply of fine new songs for contemporary audiences.
2. Broadway’s musical shows presented songs daily to new crowds receptive to contemporary entertainment.
3. Tin Pan Alley supplied a product for which Broadway had a demand.
4. Broadway, in turn, offered an outstanding showcase for that product.
5. In the period just following World War I, it was a relatively simple matter to incorporate Tin Pan Alley songs into Broadway’s musical shows.

D. Revues

1. Featured sequences of diverse skits, songs, dances, and performers
2. Shows that were obvious successors to vaudeville, with titles such as “Follies” and “Scandals,” remained popular with audiences of the time.
3. Many writers could contribute songs to a single show of this type, and new songs could be introduced (or substituted for others that had worn out their welcome) to freshen things up if the show had a long run.

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4. The emphasis placed on plot and characterization in the vast majority of these productions was decidedly secondary to the emphasis placed on good songs and dancing.

a) The shows generally revolved around the musical numbers.

b) It was not a complicated matter to interpolate new songs or to make substitutions.

c) Berlin, Porter, the Gershwin brothers, Rodgers and Hart, and other prominent songwriters of this period all wrote the scores to many Broadway shows during the 1920s and 1930s.

d) It is their songs that are remembered and that continue to live today, not the shows from which they came.

### E. *Show Boat* (1927)

1. The musical *Show Boat* (1927), with a score by Jerome Kern and lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, was a tremendous success.

2. *Show Boat* was, for its time, a musical show of unprecedented seriousness and depth.

3. It addressed racial issues and presented a complex plot in which characters were allowed to experience genuine sorrow as well as joy.

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4. There was an attempt in *Show Boat* to tie the songs more obviously to specific characters and situations.

5. Songs from the musical became popular, but they were known as songs from *Show Boat*.

### F. Musicals as an integrated whole

1. The trend toward musicals in which plot, character, and musical numbers were conceived as a highly integrated whole was clearly in the ascendancy by the 1940s.

2. The partnership between Oscar Hammerstein II and Richard Rodgers, beginning in 1943 with *Oklahoma!*, marks the triumph of this conception.

3. The ties between Tin Pan Alley and Broadway were clearly becoming frayed.

### G. Rock 'n' roll

1. When rock 'n' roll took over the pop charts in the later 1950s, the connection between Broadway and mainstream popular song had completely dissolved

2. Not until 1968, with *Hair*, did Broadway have a musical that employed elements of rock style.

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3. Songs from *Hair* became pop hits, but such a phenomenon remains to this day the exception rather than the rule.

### V. What Makes a Song a Standard?

#### A. Standards

1. Songs that remain an essential part of the repertoire of today’s jazz musicians and pop singers
2. Possess a continuing appeal that surpasses nostalgia
3. Tin Pan Alley composers produced many standards.

#### B. George Gershwin (1898–1937)

1. His songs set new standards in excellence in terms of harmonic complexity and melodic flow.
2. More classically trained and ambitious than other songwriters; sought and achieved success in the world of concert music and popular music.
3. Influenced by jazz and blues
4. Listening: “I Got Rhythm”
  - a) Written by George Gershwin and performed by Ethel Merman
  - b) Example of an up-tempo (fast) Tin Pan Alley song

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- c) Verse-refrain form
- d) The refrain of “I Got Rhythm,” with its syncopation, conveys a jazz-influenced flavor unlike anything we have heard in the previous Tin Pan Alley examples.

- e) Verse

- (1) Long, sets up the refrain

- (2) Slow, flexible tempo

- (3) In a minor key

- (4) Straightforward rhythm—little syncopation

- f) Refrain

- (1) Shifts to major key

- (2) Lots of syncopation

- g) Merman’s vocal style is similar to Al Jolson’s. She is described as a “belter.”

### 5. Listening: “Embraceable You”

- a) Written by George and Ira Gershwin and performed by Nat King Cole (1943)



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- b) Instrumentation: trio of piano, guitar, and bass
- c) As in many jazz performances of Tin Pan Alley songs, the verse is omitted after a brief instrumental introduction.
- d) The refrain has an ABAC form (like “April Showers”).
- e) ABAC form—played twice through
- f) Vocal by Cole first time
- g) Guitar solo second time on A and B
- h) Piano solo on A, vocal on C

### VI. Conclusion

A. Popular song both reflected and helped shape the profound changes in American society during the 1920s and 1930s:

1. The intermixing of high and low cultures
2. The adoption of new technologies
3. The expansion of corporate capitalism
4. The increasingly intimate interaction of white and black cultures during a period of virulent racism

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5. The emergence of a truly national popular culture
- B. Tin Pan Alley and the singing style known as crooning were important influences on rhythm & blues and rock 'n' roll during the 1950s and 1960s.
- C. Many Tin Pan Alley songs are still used by contemporary jazz musicians as a basis for improvising.
- D. Current pop stars still perform them:
1. Elvis Costello's recording of “My Funny Valentine” (composed by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart)
  2. Willie Nelson's version of “Blue Skies” (Irving Berlin)
  3. Bono's duet with Frank Sinatra on “I've Got You under My Skin” (Cole Porter)
  4. The Smashing Pumpkins' revival of “My Blue Heaven” in 1996
  5. In the early 1990s, the veteran crooner Tony Bennett appeared on MTV's *Unplugged* series, finding a new audience among fans of “alternative” music.