

Author Philip Furla on Tin Pan Alley: An Excerpt

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[*Pound's Cantos Declassified*](#) (1984)

The Poets of [Tin Pan Alley](#): A History of [America's Great Lyricists](#) (1992)

[*Ira Gershwin: The Art of the Lyricist*](#) (1996)

[*Irving Berlin: A Life in Song*](#) (1997)

Skylark: The Life and Times of [Johnny Mercer](#) (2004)

America's Songs: The Stories Behind the Songs of Broadway, Hollywood, and Tin Pan Alley (2006), with Michael Lasser, host of Peabody Award-winning public radio program *Fascinatin' Rhythm*

The Songs of Hollywood, with Laurie Patterson (2010)

He has graciously provided landmarktinpanalley.org the following excerpt from his new book manuscript.

The Birth of the American Popular Music Industry

Tin Pan Alley

In 1900, songwriter Monroe H. Rosenfeld did a story for the *New York Herald* about the sheet-music publishing industry in downtown Manhattan. Rosenfeld went to the stretch of West 28th Street between Broadway and Sixth Avenue where many of these publishers had their offices. There, out of the windows of the closely-packed buildings, came the cacophony of dozens of upright pianos, creating or demonstrating new songs. The racket, so the story goes, reminded Rosenfeld of rattling tin pans and inspired him to christen that section of 28th street “Tin Pan Alley.”

The location of Tin Pan Alley kept changing—it had started out in the 1880s around Union Square then followed the movement of theaters uptown at the turn of

the century, then migrated again in the 1920s to the stretch of Broadway between 42nd and 50th. By the 1960s, when sheet music had largely been displaced by records and people became, in Irving Berlin's terms, "consumers" of popular music rather than "producers" of it on their home pianos, Tin Pan Alley had shrunk to the confines of the Brill Building at 1619 Broadway, just above Times Square. Whatever its address, however, Tin Pan Alley was always located, as lyricist Irving Caesar put it, "close to the nearest buck."

It may seem odd that the exquisite standards that constitute *The Great American Song Book* should emerge from such a crassly commercial industry as Tin Pan Alley. Yet it was the very methods of popularizing and producing songs developed by the sheet-music publishers of Tin Pan Alley that laid the groundwork for the masterpieces of Cole Porter, Rodgers and Hart, and the Gershwins. The very notion of "popularizing" a song was practically invented by these music publishers. Older, established publishers, such as Oliver Ditson & Co. of Boston, were not especially interested in publishing popular songs. Their main products were classical piano pieces, church hymnals, and music instruction booklets. Occasionally they might publish a song but only after it had already become popular through performances in minstrel and variety shows. Even then, demand for such songs was not heavy, since, as Warren Craig has noted, "sheet music was found only in the nation's more affluent homes furnished with pianos."

In 1852, the sale of 75,000 copies of sheet music for Stephen Foster's "Massa's in de Cold, Cold Groun'" was considered phenomenal. Music publishers had

not tried to solicit or promote the song. As David Ewen observed of nineteenth-century music publishers,

Composers, performers, even the public had to beat a path to their doors. To go out in search of song material, to manufacture songs for specific timely purposes or events, to find performers and even bribe them to introduce such songs, to devise ingenious strategy to get a public to buy the sheet music—all this was not in the philosophy of conducting a music-publishing venture.

These techniques for producing and promoting popular songs would become the province of the sheet-music publishers of Tin Pan Alley.

The first song to be promoted through a national advertising campaign was “Grandfather’s Clock” in 1876, coincidentally the same year that an instrument for mass communication—the telephone--was invented. By the end of the nineteenth century, mass production made pianos more affordable (in 1900 the Montgomery Ward catalog advertised upright pianos for as little as one hundred dollars). As these pianos graced more and more middle-class parlors, home entertainment--in the days before radio, record players, and television--consisted of sing-alongs around the family piano. That created a demand for easily playable sheet music. To meet that demand, a new kind of music publisher emerged in New York. For these publishers—Maurice Shapiro and Louis Bernstein, Leo Feist, Edwin Marks, Joseph Stern, the Witmark brothers—songs were *made* not *born*—“Made to Order” as one firm advertised its wares.

Most of these publishers were first or second-generation Jews who had joined the swell of immigration in America's urban, commercial, and industrial expansion after the Civil War. They had started out as salesmen: Stern had sold neckties; Marks, notions and buttons; Feist had been field manager of the R and G Corset Company, figuring, as Kenneth Kanter has said, "anyone who could sell corsets could also sell songs."

And sell songs they did. What by the 1950s would be scandalously labeled "payola" began with these publishers as the perfectly acceptable practice of bribing vaudeville performers to sing their firm's songs. The bribe could range anywhere from offering a good cigar to giving a big-name performer such as Al Jolson a "cut in"—placing his name on the sheet music as one of the composers or lyricists of a song so that he would receive a portion of whatever royalties its sheet-music sales earned.

Even more effective in the promotion of songs was the practice of "plugging." In the publishing offices that lined 28th Street, piano "pluggers" relentlessly demonstrated their company's latest wares to vaudeville entertainers in search of new songs for their acts. George Gershwin quit high school to work as a plugger for the Remick Company on 28th Street—at age fourteen, the youngest piano plugger on Tin Pan Alley. When he tried to perform some of his own compositions, he was told, "You're here to play songs, Gershwin—not write them."

Pluggers also visited music stores where they demonstrated songs for the public in search of the latest hits. They were sent out to restaurants, bars, anywhere crowds were gathered. They sometimes sat at a piano on the bed of a truck,

serenading people on street corners, or from a balloon floating over Coney Island. The best place to plug a song, however, was in vaudeville. Vaudeville (a name that probably sprang from songs performed in theaters in the northern French region of Vau de Vivre --Valley of the Vivre River), emerged from Tony Pastor's theater in Union Square in the 1880s. Pastor's theater diverged from the rowdy variety shows, aimed at male audiences in saloons, to "family acts" that women and children could enjoy in a proper theater.

By the end of the nineteenth century, vaudeville had displaced the minstrel show as the staple of musical theater. In minstrel shows, songs were performed with the entire company on stage, but in vaudeville songs were rendered by individual performers. Getting a vaudeville star to use your publishing company's latest song in her act gave it the biggest plug. One of the most innovative forms of plugging was the "singing stooge." A singer (often a young boy with a winning voice) would be planted in a theater audience. After a vaudeville performer sang one of his company's new songs from the stage, the stooge would rise and, as if carried away by the song's beauty, sing an encore and invite the audience to join in. It was as a singing stooge, at Tony Pastor's vaudeville theater, that Irving Berlin got his start on Tin Pan Alley.

After the turn of the century, vaudeville, following the example of the booking agents known as The Syndicate, which sent Broadway shows to some 700 theaters across the country, expanded beyond New York into two huge national "circuits"—the "Keith-Albee" circuit of theaters east of the Mississippi and the "Orpheum" circuit to the west of the river. As performers moved from theater to

theater across the country, they gave new songs national exposure. These travelling performers, as Richard Crawford has observed, “multiplied amateurs’ contact with professionals, revealing new customs and ways of approaching songs.” Tin Pan Alley sheet-music publishers took advantage of these national networks that brought vaudeville singers to towns across America by gracing sheet music covers with photographs of vaudeville performers. Such shrewd visual plugging on sheet-music implied, “Here is Lillian Russell, whom you’ve heard singing this song—now *you* can play and sing it as well.” With this array of plugging techniques, by 1910 almost every popular song in America emerged from Tin Pan Alley.

Such mass marketing called for mass production, and the publishing houses of Tin Pan Alley also differed from traditional sheet-music publishers in that they produced the songs they sold rather than waiting for songwriters to come to them. The din that struck Monroe Rosenfeld’s ear at Broadway and 28th Street came from the many cubicles where pianos were pounding out new songs assembly-line fashion. Publishers devised simple formulas for creating songs so that any new song would instantly sound familiar to the public because it was built along the same musical and lyrical lines of previous popular songs. These formulas were so simple that many successful “composers” could not read a note of music (including, for much of his career, Irving Berlin). They simply whistled or hummed a tune to one of the publishing house “arrangers,” who would then transcribe and harmonize the melody. Only then would a lyricist be called in to set words to the music. The theme and even the title of the lyric were usually dictated by the publisher, who kept his eye on the newspapers for topical subjects. After reading a story about a little girl,

whose mother had just died, picking up the telephone and asking the operator to connect her with heaven because that's where her mother was, a music publisher had his firm crank out "Hello, Central, Give Me Heaven."

In the 1880s and '90s, Tin Pan Alley songs followed the musical and lyrical formulas of nineteenth-century songs. That is, they were *strophic*—telling a story through a series of narrative verses ("In a cavern, in a canyon, excavating for a mine/ Lived a miner forty-niner and his daughter Clementine . . . ") and brief, repeated lyrical refrains of eight or sixteen bars ("Oh my darling, oh my darling, oh my darling Clementine/ You are lost and gone forever . . . "). The music for the verses and the refrains was repeated, but while the lyrics for the verses recounted an unfolding story ("Light she was and like a fairy/ And her shoes were number nine . . . "), the lyrics for the refrains were as repetitive as the music ("Oh, my darling, oh, my darling . . . ").

This traditional strophic formula was used by Tin Pan Alley songwriters to tell stories on a variety of subjects, from "The Pardon Came Too Late" through "The Picture That Is Turned to the Wall" to "The Convict and the Bird." Many of these songs were about romantic love, but love was nowhere near the preponderant subject it would become in popular songs in the 1920s, '30, and '40s, the decades that produced most of the classics of *The Great American Song Book*. Still, the most phenomenally successful of these early Alley songs was about romantic misunderstanding, heartbreak, and remorse.

Charles K. Harris' "After the Ball" told the story—in its verses—of a little girl who crawls upon her uncle's knee and asks him why he has never wed. The uncle

then recounts the night “years ago” when he was at a ball with his fiancée. She asks him to fetch a glass of water, but when he returns he finds her kissing another man. Shocked, he drops the glass and storms off, never to see her again. Years later, he learns that the man was her brother, and she was kissing him out of joy over her engagement. To top off this absurd misunderstanding, she died of a broken heart and the “uncle” never married.

Harris, tried to get a noted singer to plug the song, but she scoffed at the melodramatic lyric, saying, “If I sang a line like ‘Down fell the glass, pet, broken that’s all,’ the customers in my saloon would shatter their beer mugs in derision.” Another singer agreed to plug the song, but when he did he forgot the words. His lapse is understandable since the lyrics for the sixty-four bar verses are filled with arch diction (“list to the story”), verbal padding (“I’ll tell it all”), awkward inversions (“Where she is now, pet, you will soon know”), and mismatches of musical and verbal accents (so that “**ball**room” has to be pronounced “ball**room**”). Harris waved away such infelicities as the result of “certain allowances” that had to be made to fit a story to music. “When the song is rendered,” he insisted, “the defects are not so apparent.”

Undaunted, Harris kept trying to get singers to plug “After the Ball,” and in 1892, he persuaded the prominent baritone, J. Aldrich Libby, to sing it as part of his performance in *A Trip to Chinatown*, a popular stage show. As such, “After the Ball,” was an “interpolation,” a song added to a Broadway show after it had opened and which was not written by the composer of the show’s original score. Harris was delighted that Libby rendered “After the Ball” with “overwhelming effect.”

That effect must have arisen from the refrain rather than the verses. Stilted and awkward as the verses are, the refrain is superb, both musically and lyrically. The lyric for the refrain consists of a single sentence, beginning with four parallel phrases that match four rising musical phrases:

After the ball is over,
After the break of morn,
After the dancers' leaving,
After the stars are gone

As music and lyric rise to a climax, the off rhyme between “morn” and “gone” is barely noticeable, and the sentence reaches its main clause:

Many a heart is aching

But then the melody climbs even higher, traversing a full octave and even an interval beyond, and the lyric follows with a soaring subordinate clause:

If you could read them all;

As the music descends to its close, the lyric shifts from clause to phrase with what would become a staple Alley device for plugging a song—repeating its title at the conclusion (so listeners would know what piece of sheet-music to ask for at the music store).

Compared to the strained verbiage of his verses, Harris' lyric for the refrain is relatively simple and conversational. Musically, he struck a balance between verse and refrain. Unlike most nineteenth-century songs, which have refrains of eight or sixteen measures, “After the Ball” has a refrain of thirty-two bars. As Charles Hamm has noted, by the end of the nineteenth century the relationship between verse and

refrain had altered so that songs had fewer and fewer verses and the “chief melodic material” had shifted to the refrain or, as it increasingly would be called, the “chorus.” One indication of that shift is that anyone who knows “After the Ball” today, either from its interpolation into the musical *Show Boat* or its use on the soundtrack of the movie *Driving Miss Daisy*, can sing its refrain but not its verses.

If the verses to “After the Ball” look backward to the nineteenth century, the refrain looks forward to the twentieth century. Like most songs in *The Great American Song Book*, the refrain for “After the Ball” is divided into four units using two different melodies—an “A” melody and a “B” melody. The first measures represent the A melody:

CHORUS

Af - ter th ball is o - ver Af - ter th break of morn

The next section presents a slight variation of the A melody:

Af - ter th danc - ers are leav - ing Af - ter th stars are gone

The third section presents yet another variation:

Ma - ry a hope was van - ished If you could read them all

Ma - ry(a) heart was bro - ken Af - ter the ball.

Then the final section introduces the B melody:

Thus the pattern of the refrain for “After the Ball” would be designated AA’A”B. Most songs in the Great American Song Book, however, have an AABA or ABAB pattern, while a few have an ABAC (e.g. “Pennies from Heaven”) or even an ABCD structure (Irving Berlin’s “Always”).

It was the refrain, with its fusion of lyrics and music, that made “After the Ball” the first big national hit song. In 1892, it sold more than a million copies of sheet music—a staggering advance over Stephen Foster’s sale of 75,000 copies of “Massa’s in de Cold Cold Groun” some thirty years earlier. “After the Ball” caught the ear of John Philip Sousa, who had his band perform it at Chicago’s World Columbia Exposition of 1893, which so many Americans visited, and over the next few years sheet-music sales topped five million copies. “After the Ball” proved that there was indeed money to be made on Tin Pan Alley.

Charles K. Harris

In many respects, Charles K. Harris was one of the great innovators on Tin Pan Alley. He was born in Poughkepsie but grew up in Milwaukee, where he was fascinated by minstrel shows and especially by the banjo players. Unable to afford a banjo, he built a makeshift version out of a broomstick and oyster cans, regaling anyone who would listen with old minstrel tunes. As audiences tired of these numbers, Harris tried writing his own songs. When one of these met with mild success—but only earned him eighty-five cents in royalties--Harris realized that the money to be made in popular music went largely to the sheet-music publisher. He set up his own publishing company in Milwaukee, then, after the success of “After

the Ball,” moved his firm to Union Square in New York where other sheet-music publishers as well as theaters, saloons, dance halls, penny arcades, and brothels were clustered.

Harris also claimed to be the first Tin Pan Alley publisher to figure out how to plug songs in the newly-created medium of the movies. Although the movies were silent, they had musical accompaniment—by pianos or violins in small-town theaters; by huge organs or even full orchestras in big-city movie palaces. Movie reels had to be changed every ten minutes, so Harris introduced “song slides”—hand-painted photographs on glass slides that spelled out and illustrated a song’s lyrics. A plugger would show these slides and get the movie audience to join in a sing-along as the reels were changed. Such incorporation of popular songs into movie theaters paved the way for the close collaboration between Tin Pan Alley and Hollywood after the advent of talking pictures in the late 1920s.

While his success as a songwriter ebbed, Harris never lost his mastery of salesmanship. When Johnny Mercer was just starting out as a songwriter, he and his newly-wed wife Ginger lived with her mother in Brooklyn. Every day Mercer would try to peddle his songs to Tin Pan Alley publishers. “I had twenty-five cents a day,” he recalled. “I’d take the subway over for a nickel, have two hot dogs and an orange drink (fifteen cents) for lunch, and use the last nickel to take the subway back to Brooklyn for supper.” One day as Mercer was walking along Broadway, he noticed a sign on a second-storey window that read “Charles K. Harris Music Co.” As a kid, Mercer idolized the songwriters of the popular songs of the day, so he knew Harris as the composer of “After the Ball” and other chestnuts. “I timidly climbed the stairs

to see what a music company looked like, and perhaps a real live songwriter as well. To my surprise, there was no secretary, and I was greeted by a little, old gray-haired cat in his seventies, or perhaps even older, with a cordial, 'What can I do for you, young man?'"

Mercer told Harris he was a fan of his songs, and the composer regaled him with stories of his triumphs, which included going "down the line" in Chicago (visiting all the high-priced bordellos on State Street). Mercer grew bored but, "being a polite Southern lad," sat through more stories, including the fact that Harris had recently written a book about his career.

"Indeed?" I inquired politely.

"Oh, yes. Would you like an autographed copy?"

"I'd be honored," I replied.

"Whereupon, with much flourish and in an elegant, Spencerian hand, he wrote extravagantly upon the flyleaf: 'To my good and dear friend, Johnny Mercer, with the best wishes of the Author, Charles K. Harris.'"

As Harris escorted Johnny Mercer to the door, he said "quite clearly, 'That'll be two dollars!'"

At the time, Mercer recalled, "I had only about three dollars to my name."

For all his breakthrough success, Charles K. Harris remained tied to nineteenth-century song traditions. He clung to the strophic song-story formula that alternated between verses that rendered a narrative and refrains that punctuated it with a repeated lyrical exclamation. "Just Behind the Times" (1896) bewailed the forced retirement of an old-fashioned minister. "Break the News to Mother" (1897)

had started out in 1891 as a song about a fireman's dying words to his father after fighting to save a burning building. The song was not a hit, but in 1897, after the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, Harris shrewdly changed the fireman to a dying soldier, and sales of the song took off. Harris' last hit gave voice to a little boy who longs for his dead mother and suffers under his new stepmother who constantly scolds him for being "Always in the Way" (1903). Although Harris lived until 1930, his successful career as a songwriter was short-lived. Musically, he clung to the waltz and upheld the Victorian standard of elevated diction in his lyrics, advising aspiring songwriters to "avoid slang." Like the minister depicted in one of his lyrics, Charles K. Harris fell "Just Behind the Times."

Ragtime

Chicago's Columbian Exposition of 1893 not only helped "After the Ball" become the biggest hit Tin Pan Alley had yet seen, it introduced many Americans to an entirely new kind of music. Ragtime was a raucous, syncopated piano style that had emerged from the red-light district of New Orleans. The pianist would maintain a steady *oom-pah* beat, reminiscent of marches, with the left hand, while the right hand came in slightly before or after those regular beats, "ragging" the rhythm with syncopation. Tin Pan Alley quickly seized upon the popularity of ragtime by creating what were then termed "coon songs"--vernacular, comic songs reminiscent of minstrel show numbers. As in minstrel shows, these songs were performed by "coonshouter" whites in blackface, and most coon songs were written by white songwriters, though some were written by blacks such as Ernest Hogan, who would later regret composing "All Coons Look Alike to Me" (1896).

Yet coon songs brought in a new musical idiom and the lyrical style Charles K. Harris warned songwriters to avoid—slang. Setting colloquial lyrics to even mildly syncopated music steered coon songs away from the narrative strophic pattern of nineteenth-century song. Instead of telling a story through a series of verses, coon songs merely sketched a situation in one or two verses and concentrated on a lyrical refrain in which a caricatured black might plead “I Want Yer, Ma Honey” (1895), celebrate “My Black Baby Mine” (1896), or lament the loss of his woman’s sexual appetite in “You Been a Good Old Wagon But You Done Broke Down” (1896). Not only did such coon songs create a shift from sentimental narrative ballads such as “After the Ball” to more “lyrical” effusions, the use of dialect made the words themselves more playfully prominent. In Ben Harney’s “Mister Johnson, Turn Me Loose” (1896), for example, listeners were delighted by the idiomatic plea of the singer to “Mister Johnson” (slang for the police):

Oh, Mister Johnson, turn me loose!

Don’t take me to the calaboose!

The lyrics of the coon song, as Isaac Goldberg has observed, “were as different from the words of the waltz-tragedies as was the music of those waltzes from the jagged melodies of the raging ‘rags.’” When those lyrics turned to love, as they increasingly did, they created what Goldberg has termed “a vocabulary of unadorned passion—a crude *ars amandi*.” Thus with a forthrightness unimaginable in a sentimental ballad, a coon song “shouter” could plead, “All I want is lovin’—I don’t want your money.”

But soon the ragtime coon song began mingling its vernacular idioms with the elevated diction of the sentimental waltz ballad. Such stylistic clashes as “yon

nig” color Ernest Hogan’s lyrics, and in Barney Fagan’s “My Gal Is a High Born Lady” (1896) a black bridegroom looks forward to his wedding day in these elegant terms:

Sunny Africa’s Four Hundred’s gwine to be thar,
To do honor to my lovely fiancée;
Thar’ will be a grand ovation
Of especial ostentation

Kerry Mills’ “At a Georgia Camp Meeting” (1897) shows the same stylistic schizophrenia, suddenly switching from “how the Sisters did shout” to “’Twas so entrancing.” By the turn of the century, one might say of the coon song the same thing one of its caricatured lovers says of his “baby”--“She’s Getting Mo’ Like the White Folks Every Day”:

Now she can sing “The Swanee River”
Like it was never sung before,
But since she’s worked in that hotel
She warbles “Il Trovatore.”

Some of these songs barely sound like coon songs today; only if one listens carefully to the words (or sees the sheet music cover adorned with racist caricatures) does their heritage emerge. Still, their vernacular punch, their comic touches, and their passionate flair were a refreshing change from the sentimental ballads of the 1880s and ‘90s. For the most part, moreover, these ragtime songs were not strophic narratives in which a story unfolded in a series of verses punctuated by a short lyrical refrain of eight or sixteen bars. The verse increasingly

served merely as an introduction to the refrain, which was lengthening to a “chorus” of thirty-two bars.

Even today, one can still hear such ragtime coon songs as “Hello, Ma Baby” (1899). The only touches that would have marked “Hello, Ma Baby” as a coon song to its original listeners were slang phrases such as “ma baby” and “tell me I’se your own,” as well as the exuberant expression of romantic passion that would not have been deemed appropriate for white lovers:

Send me a kiss by wire,
Baby, my heart’s on fire!

Joseph E. Howard and Ida Emerson refresh the standard telephone greeting by “ragging”—reversing—the verbal accent against the musical beat: not the normally accented “Hel-**lo**’ but the ragged “**Hel**-lo.” They also use feminine rhymes (two-syllable rhymes in which the accent falls on the next to the last syllable, leaving the final syllable “effeminately” weak and unaccented):

If you re-**fuse** me,
Honey, you’ll **lose** me

Poets from Byron to W. S. Gilbert had found such feminine rhymes created comic effects more easily than masculine rhymes in which the final syllable is accented (“wire”/“fire”).

The musical and lyrical structure of “Hello, Ma Baby” is a distinct departure from nineteenth-century strophic songs. Both verse and chorus are sixteen measures long, striking a balance between the two parts of the song. And while there are two verses, they don’t tell a story so much as set up the chorus as the main

part of the song. One verse ends with “And this is what I say to baby mine”; the other with “And so each day I shout along the line.” Both verses serve as introductions to the chorus rather than strophic segments of a developing narrative. Thus “Hello, Ma Baby,” like so many later songs, can be performed by dropping the verses altogether and singing only the chorus.

While some ragtime coon songs such as “Hello, Ma Baby” could shed their racist caricatures over time, others have indelibly retained them. “Bill Bailey, Won’t You Please Come Home,” for example, still bristles with racist stereotypes of the philandering black man and the woman who nevertheless longs for him.

The syncopated musical phrases “rag” the lyric into verbal shards:

‘member dat
rainy eve dat
I drove you out
Wid nothing but
a fine tooth comb?

Yet what could be more useless than a “fine” tooth comb for the woolly-haired caricatures depicted on the sheet music? Still that “comb” provides a clever off-rhyme to the title’s “come home.”

Such an anguished, erotic plea for a lover’s return would have been unthinkable in a sentimental ballad for whites, but soon such passion—and humor—worked their way into mainstream lyrics. It was, in fact, a team of black songwriters who nurtured the hybrid of coon song and sentimental ballad. By making its lyrics “noticeably more genteel,” J. Rosamond Johnson, his brother James

Weldon Johnson, and Bob Cole were hailed as a collective “Moses” who led “the coon song into the promised land.”

In “Under the Bamboo Tree,” the writers, according to Rosamond Johnson himself, tried to “clean up the caricature,” using only “mild dialect” to express love “in phrases universal enough” to meet the “genteel demands of middle-class America.” It was lyricist Bob Cole who suggested to Johnson that “Nobody Knows the Trouble I’ve Seen” could be turned into a ragtime song. Johnson at first thought the suggestion sacrilegious, but at Cole’s insistence, he syncopated the spiritual. In the lyric, Cole placed his lovers in Africa, where he could sidestep the coon caricature by having a dignified “Zulu from Matabooloo” propose to a demure “maid of royal blood though dusky shade.” Cole concocted what Sigmund Spaeth called “a brand new synthetic dialect”:

If you lak-a-me,
Lak I lak-a-you,
And we lak-a-both the same,
I lak-a-say,
This very day,
I lak-a change your name

Here, too, one can see another feature of ragtime songs unheard of in the sentimental ballad—deliberately using the music to distort or “rag” the lyric. Turning the one-syllable “like” into the two-syllable “lak-a” gave Cole a verbal equivalent for the syncopated eighth-note/sixteenth-note pattern in the music. It also inspired him to create something no sentimental “song-story” balladeer would

ever bother with—a pun, and a triple pun at that: on “like” meaning *wish* (“I lak-a change your name”), *love* (“If you lak-a me”), and—in what would become Tin Pan Alley’s favorite grammatical error—“like” in place of *as* (“lak I lak-a you”). Such ways of using music to “rag” words—reversing verbal patterns, breaking up phrases, splitting syllables—would later become prominent features in the lyrics of Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, Yip Harburg, and other great lyricists. While it has not endured as part of *The Great American Song Book*, “Under the Bamboo Tree” was revived for the 1944 MGM film musical, *Meet Me in St. Louis*, where it was given a rousing performance by Judy Garland and Margaret O’Brien.

Whether or not “Under the Bamboo Tree” cleaned up—or merely transplanted—the racist caricatures of the ragtime coon song, it certainly made for a more artful lyric, one that achieved its effects not by sentimental strophic storytelling but by a lyrically clever fit (and sometimes ragged misfit) between verbal and musical phrasing. Its colloquial ease, moreover, offered a new idiom for romantic expression—a cut above the dialect of the coon song yet still well below the highflown style of such ponderous narratives as “A Bird in a Gilded Cage” (1900). The ragtime coon song, as Max Morath has argued, began “transcending its racial slur and dialect” and “licensing the use of slang and colloquialism, even bad grammar.”

George M. Cohan

A key figure in the spread of ragtime syncopation and vernacular lyrics in the early years of the twentieth century was George M. Cohan. Although he may not, as his lyric for “Yankee Doodle Dandy” claimed, been born exactly “on the Fourth of

July” of 1878, it was close enough. More telling was that his parents were performing at a theater in Providence, and George Michael Cohan was born in the wings.

He travelled the vaudeville circuit with his family and made his first stage appearance at eight years old. Soon he was performing in an act of his own, “Master Georgie—Violin Tricks and Tinkling Tunes,” earning the nickname “that Cohan brat” from other performers and crew members.

Taking over the family act of “The Four Cohans,” Georgie decided that they need to get out of vaudeville and move up to the “legitimate” theater with musical comedy. In 1903, his show *Little Johnny Jones* produced several hit songs with flag-waving energy that dismayed critics but delighted audiences.

Although his early songs, such as “When the Girl You Love Is Many Miles Away (1893) are mired in the Victorian sentimental ballad tradition, Cohan quickly embraced ragtime. Knowing that the code words for sex in ragtime coon songs were “hot” and “warm”—“Dar’s No Coon Warm Enough for Me,” “A Hot Coon from Memphis,” “A Red Hot Coon”—Cohan contributed his own “The Warmest Baby in the Bunch” (1896). He then reversed the formula with “You’re Growing Cold, Cold, Cold” (date?), advertised as “the story of a coon with an iceberg heart.”

Although he quickly dropped such racist motifs, Cohan was determined to bring ragtime’s jaunty rhythms and vernacular argot to Broadway. Broadway at the time was dominated by European models—Viennese operetta, French *opéra bouffe*, and the comic operettas of Gilbert and Sullivan. Cohan used ragtime songs to give Broadway an infusion of American fresh air. Although *Little Johnny Jones* (1904) is

now regarded as the first genuinely American musical, it at first fared poorly on stage. Undaunted, Cohan peddled its songs directly on Tin Pan Alley and turned some of them into independent hits:

In “Give My Regards to Broadway,” Cohan uses the ragtime device of matching short and long vowels to the eighth-note/quarter-note pattern. He also uses musical phrasing to truncate verbal phrasing and create lyrical shards with surprising rhymes:

Give my regards to Broadway,
Remember me to Herald Square
Tell all the gang at
Forty-second Street that
I will soon be there.

To give voice to such homegrown sentiments, Cohan created a persona—an insouciant, urbane New Yorker, as brash as the city he celebrates.

Cohan could also transform America’s oldest popular song into a New Yorker “I Am” song. In the original “Yankee Doodle,” a country bumpkin sticks a feather in his cap and calls it “macaroni”—the Italian term for elegant attire. In “Yankee Doodle Boy,” Cohan has his urbane New Yorker flaunt his “dandified” sophistication.

Cohan’s brusque New Yorker sidestepped solemn patriotism with jagged musical and verbal phrases:

You’re the emblem of
The land I love
The home of

The free and the brave

Such abrupt fragments disclose surprising rhymes on *land* and *and*, *em-* and *-blem*, and *of* and *love* --a desperate maneuver in a language that has fewer rhymes for “love” than almost any other four-letter word. French has fifty-one rhymes for *amour*, including some wonderful ones such as *toujours*, but the Germanic English language has only five--“dove,” “above,” “glove,” “shove,” and, in a pinch, “of.”

For years, however, Cohan’s was one of the few vernacular voices on Broadway. Franz Lehár, Rudolf Friml, and Victor Herbert “led the American public,” as Leonard Bernstein has put it, “straight into the arms of operetta,” with its exotic settings, melodramatic plots, lush music, and “stilted and overelegant lyrics.” Operetta songwriters adhered to the principle of “integration,” tailoring a song to the characters and story of the libretto. Only a few songs from operettas were able to detach themselves from their dramatic context to become independently popular through Tin Pan Alley’s sheet-music sales. The few that did, such as Edward Teschemacher and Helen Guy’s “Because (You Come to Me with Naught Save Love)” (1902) and Rida Johnson Young and Victor Herbert’s “Ah! Sweet Mystery of Life” (1910), survive today only as stuffy wedding songs.

But beginning in 1910, a few songs, one by one, began to go beyond popularity in their own day to become the “standards” that form The Great American Song Book, the closest thing America has to a vital repertoire of classical song that is reinterpreted year after year, generation after generation, by singers and musicians.