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## Roots of Bob No. 4: George & Ira Gershwin

Posted by lostchords - 2007/07/05 21:35

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When Dylan appeared - much to the surprise of his fans - at a tribute for George Gershwin in 1987, he proved that he had a much more wide ranging view of his musical roots than many of his admirers.

Bob Dylan, Soon. 1987 atYouTube

mp3 (remastered by Charlespoet):<http://www.sendspace.com/file/kvzxra>

[http://www.coldhaus.com/~tobywansdad/pix/1987/GERSHWIN\\_tribute\\_finale.jpg](http://www.coldhaus.com/~tobywansdad/pix/1987/GERSHWIN_tribute_finale.jpg)

from the Bob Dylan Picture Archive

George Gershwin was one of the most influential composers of popular songs and his brother Ira (who is unfortunately often forgotten when talking about the Gershwin songs) was one of the outstanding lyricists of his era. Ira was a master of wordplay and rhyme, witty and clever (although sometimes a little too clever and arty), with a deep mistrust for sentimentality (and after George's death he worked with Kurt Weill, Vernon Duke and Harold Arlen). In the 20s he and a group of younger songwriters (including also f. ex. Lorenz Hart, "Yip" Harburg and Dorothy Fields) set out to improve and develop the lyrics of popular songs. They "loved popular song, and they knew that song lyrics could be better" and they were influenced by contemporary light verse and the Gilbert & Sullivan operettas and used sophisticated rhyming techniques and urban vernacular language. In fact Lorenz Hart (who liked to criticize the "brutally cretin aspect" of earlier popular music) once congratulated Ira Gershwin for proving that "songs can be both popular and intelligent".

Michael Gray (The Bob Dylan Encyclopedia, New York & London 2006, p. 206) claims that Dylan in the 60s - just like T. S. Eliot in the field of poetry in the 20s - "was answering the demands of the times for a new poetry folk-rock broke the rules of song what it's lyrics could deal with and the language it could use Dylan used 'popular' music, and married it with fresh language, including much slang, street patois and the double-meanings and double-imagery of cult terms the result was a solid body of work, 'poetry that freely expresses a modern sensibility, the ... modes of experience of one fully alive in his own age' ". This is of course an excellent description of Dylan's achievements but is equally valid for what the Gershwins, Cole Porter, Hart, Berlin, Ms. Fields et al. achieved in the 20s and early 30s. They in fact did revolutionize Musical Theater as well as popular song in general.

Musical Theater in the 30s was up-to-date contemporary art: "Anything Goes" seems his most mirthful celebration of what the freer spirits in America have achieved in their tussle with puritanism. One critic, writing in 1935, saw 'Anything Goes' as one of the American musicals that outclass serious drama even with regard to satirizing faults in society. 'Kaufmann and Gershwin led off with 'Of Thee I Sing'; Hart and Berlin followed with 'As Thousands Cheer'. 'Anything Goes' follows in this vein." (William O'Brien, Cole Porter. The Definitive Biography, London 1999, p. 168 ). Musical Theater with script writers like George Kaufman or Moss Hart wasn't apolitical. Berlin's "As Thousands Cheer" was a topical revue including the first mainstream song about lynching (some years before "Strange Fruit"). The Gershwins wrote political satires ("Of thee I Sing", "Strike Up The Band" etc), "Yip" Harburg (a strictly left-wing writer, blacklisted in Hollywood in the 50s) was busy writing political musicals.

They are very few traces of the Gershwin's songs in Dylan's repertoire (although I think "I'll Be Your Baby Tonight" includes an allusion to "Nice Work If You Can Get It") but he obviously had great respect for their abilities as songwriters: "None of my songs are that good, it's the way they're performed, that's what it is. Hoagy Carmichael songs are much better than mine, so are George Gershwin's and Irving Berlin's, too" (Bob Dylan, Elliott Mintz Interview for Westwood Radio, 1991)

But what he had in common with them is the social background as well as the aspiration to create something special. The Gershwin brothers were well educated kids from an immigrant middle class family - like Dylan - who americanized themselves - like Dylan - through assimilation of all kinds of American music and who were fascinated with African American culture and music. Also they shared a wide knowledge of classic and contemporary high culture and had a certain aspiration (not to say frustration) to get acknowledged by high brow culture. And both Dylan and George Gershwin were masters of eclecticism and were never afraid to borrow.

"Some time in the 1960s, I interviewed Robert Russel Bennett in his office in New York. He was then, I would think, about seventy He was for a long time the premier arranger and orchestrator of Broadway musicals. Bennett talked of George Gershwin as if he were some sort of idiot savant. He said that Gershwin had a peculiar capacity to pick up any musical thought that was in the air and use it. He came just short of calling him a plagiarist. I said: 'But Mr. Bennett, how is that you can hear only two or three bars of a song and know that it's a Gershwin tune?' 'Ah,' he said, 'but that's genius.' Not talent. Genius". (Gene Lees, Singers And The Song II, New York & Oxford 1998, p. 217 ). He of course was inspired by a lot of different musicians and that he borrowed and reworked ideas from somewhere else is clear. Harold Arlen is quoted as saying: "You can't tell many people that they borrowed, but you could George of course George made everything distinctively his own - he never just copied" (Pollack)

<http://nla.gov.au/nla.mus-an5445343-s1-v.jpg>"Soon" is one of the Gershwins' simpler (and also more obscure) songs. It was written for the second version of Strike Up The Band in 1930 (replacing "The Man I Love", a song that is built on the

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same melodic motif) and has rarely been covered in later years (but Ella Fitzgerald and Frank Sinatra recorded it)

Victor Arden with Phil Ohman & Orchestra, 1930  
<http://www.sendspace.com/file/z6wunb>

Dylan showed considerable taste in selecting this hidden gem and turns it into one of his best performances of the decade. Maybe this experience encouraged him to include songs like "I'm in The Mood For Love" in his early NET shows.

The most current biography of George Gershwin is:

Howard Pollack, George Gershwin. His Life And Work, University Of California Press 2006

For further reading I can recommend Philip Furia's biography about Ira:

Philip Furia, Ira Gershwin, The Art Of The Lyricist, Oxford & New York 1997 (OUP),

describing his development as a lyricist in detail and in historical context (I really wonder why nobody is able to write this kind of book about Dylan as a songwriter). Also worth checking out is Ira's own collection of his writings:

Ira Gershwin, Lyrics on Several Occasions. A Selection Of Stage & Screen Lyrics Written For Sundry Situations; And Now Arranged In Arbitrary Categories. To Which Have Been Added Many Informative Annotations & Disquisitions On Their Why & WhereFore, Their Whom-For. Their How; And Matters Associative, New York 1997 (1959)

Online:

Eyolf's transcription of Bob's version of Soon  
George & Ira Gershwin - The Official Website (with "Juke Box")  
American Masters - George Gershwin (PBS)  
George Gershwin: American Genius  
The Gershwin Legacy (Library Of Congress)  
Ira Gershwin (Songwriters Hall Of Fame)

a short snippet of Pete Seeger singing Summertime is available at Smithsonian Global Sound (rec in 1962)

From YouTube:

ca. 30 seconds of George Gershwin himself, playing piano

Jack Gibbons, montage of contemporary films with George Gershwin & friends having a good time

Fred Astaire, They Can't Take That Away From Me (1937)

Gene Kelly & Fred Astaire, The Babbitt & The Bromide

Audrey Hepburn & Fred Astaire, 'S Wonderful

Danny Kaye, Tschaikowsky (And Other Russians), 1941 by Ira Gershwin with music by Kurt Weill (at the end of the recording: "Refrain of forty-nine Russian composers rattled off in 39 seconds". According to Ira Gershwin Kaye managed to do it in 31 seconds in a live performance)

Post edited by: lostchords, at: 2007/07/05 21:35

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## Re:Roots of Bob No. 4: George & Ira Gershwin

Posted by 4th Time Around - 2007/07/06 00:23

Jascha Heifetz - It ain't necessarily so  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AhOeK57OZdw>

Nina Simone - Porgy (I Love You, Porgy)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NclunSkns0s>

Janis Joplin - Summertime (Stockholm, 1969)  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mzNEgcqWDG4>

Barbra Streisand - Grammys, 1986 - Tribute to Gershwins  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cpSCUH6Lsls>

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## Re:Roots of Bob No. 4: George & Ira Gershwin

Posted by lostchords - 2007/07/06 01:03

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Thank you!

Lee Wiley, 1939, from her album "Sings The Songs Of Ira & George Gershwin & Cole Porter" (Liberty Shop)

Sweet And Lowdown

<http://www.sendspace.com/file/62fe14>

But Not For Me

<http://www.sendspace.com/file/l2c327>

I've Got A Crush on You

<http://www.sendspace.com/file/udhop3>

She was the first one to do this kind of songwriter albums.

<http://www.allaboutjazz.com/articles/lwiley.jpg>

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## Re:Roots of Bob No. 4: George & Ira Gershwin

Posted by clairdelalune - 2007/07/06 01:53

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At about 3:30 into this clip, the talk turns to Summertime.

<http://www.npr.org/dmg/dmg.php?prgCode=WESAT&showDate=26-Jul-2003&segNum=9&mediaPref=WM>

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## Re:Roots of Bob No. 4: George & Ira Gershwin

Posted by lostchords - 2007/07/07 19:57

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Thank you!

Another "Summertime": Peggy Lee, 1946 with a small group, a very beautiful performance:

<http://www.sendspace.com/file/p6uqmx>

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## Re:Roots of Bob No. 4: George & Ira Gershwin

Posted by Warren - 2007/07/07 22:08

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Fascinating thread, lostchords. Thank you.

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## Re:Roots of Bob No. 4: George & Ira Gershwin

Posted by josepi - 2007/07/08 04:02

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I remember hearing that years ago

Its nice to hear it again

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