'A NIGH-ON DEFINITIVE ACCOUNT OF POP'S DEVELOPMENT AND IMPACT' MOJO

electric SHOCK

FROM THE GRAMOPHONE TO THE iPHONE – 125 YEARS OF POP MUSIC

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VINTAGE

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'I'd lower the volume on the radio and put my ear right up against it. The music I heard became the best thing in my life. Daddy didn't like that. "You're wasting your time, listening to them old records on the radio," he'd say. "That ain't real, you know. Those people ain't really there. That's just a guy sitting there playing records. Why'd you listen to that fake stuff?"'

Johnny Cash

CHAPTER 6

BLUES IN THE NIGHT

'Hill Billies are the most incorrigibly lazy mortals it is possible to meet ... The greatest difficulty is to keep them quiet while recording. There is much scraping of boots, and usually after the third verse the artist wishes to clear his throat, with commendable thoroughness, and spit very audibly. Many waxes are spoilt also by the "artist" refusing to stop when the end of the record is reached.'

Cyril Ricketts, folklorist, 1931

Record companies originally called them 'Old Familiar Tunes', unable until the Second World War to find a valid description for the music of white rural America. 'Hillbilly' was one label that stuck, though (like the N-word in hip hop) it was an insulting term applied to country folk by outsiders and only adopted by performers with a mixture of defiant pride and (here the rap comparison fades) self-deprecation. The song-collector John A. Lomax named his 1910 anthology *Cowboy Songs and Other Frontier Ballads*; Cecil Sharp's research in Kentucky and Tennessee yielded *English Folksongs from the Southern Appalachians*. Both those strands contributed to the multifaceted genre that became known (but only after 1945) as country music, or country and western, or even 'folk'. But by the time the folklorists reached the American South, the 'purity' that they hoped to discover in the region's music had already been tainted by countless other influences, black and white, popular and traditional. After radio reached the mountains, prairies and swamps of rural America, 'hillbilly' singers (and their African-American equivalents) would be just as likely to entertain their friends and neighbours with show tunes and vaudeville novelties as with anything that could be traced back to their forefathers.

Similar problems had been experienced by Cecil Sharp and his peers when exploring the folk heritage of Britain. They had chosen not to document or preserve any song with a commercial root, opting for the supposed purity of 'traditional' material. (Moreover, many collectors bowdlerised lyrics that were bawdy or likely to offend polite ears.) There was a certain doomed majesty to the process, as the poet and collector Alfred Williams conceded in 1923: 'The songs themselves, as far as singing goes, are practically defunct. There is no need to revive them. To do so, in fact, would be impossible. It is also desirable. We live in a new age, almost in a new world . . . Let us, then, be content to say that folk-song is dead.' But Williams insisted that the old songs should be saved, 'not for their artistic or strictly literary value, but in order to have records of that which amused, cheered, consoled and so profoundly affected the lives of the people of an age that has for ever passed away'. There was a sense of *noblesse oblige* within this impulse: of educated men preserving the culture of those too ignorant to perform the service themselves. Most American collectors adopted a

somewhat less puritanical and patriarchal attitude towards the material they gathered.

To avoid the denigrating connotations of the H-word, performers from the rural South would accentuate the heroic qualities of cowboys and mountaineers, traditions which were rooted in a kind of fact and which could be cleaned up and polished for national and (later) international consumption. Tempting though it is to imagine that the pioneers of the blues and country were inspired only by an excess of emotion, both traditions quickly extended beyond local entertainment into a form of career structure. Rural musicians, toting a banjo, fiddle or guitar, would travel from community to community, with commerce on their mind, as country-music historian Charles Wolfe explained: 'Many of the songs were printed on small cards about the size of a postcard (still called "ballet cards" by old-timers), usually signed by the composer or singer; rural minstrels wandered through the mountains singing at rural courthouses and making some money by selling their ballet cards for a penny or a nickel each.'

In 1923, radio station WBAP in Fort Worth broadcast ninety minutes of old-time dance music by fiddler Captain M. J. Bonner, eliciting more telegrams and calls of appreciation than any previous presentation. Thus began the tradition of the radio barn dance, reaching an early pinnacle with the launch of the *Grand Ole Opry* from WSM in Nashville two years later. These shows were self-consciously 'old-timey' from the start: their appeal was to the entire family, especially those old enough to imagine that they remembered when mountain music and cowboy ballads were heard at every fireside. The advent of radio sparked a passion for old-time fiddlers – boosted, ironically, by that pioneer of mass-production engineering, Henry Ford, who reckoned that rural fiddle tunes could calm the immorality of the iniquitous modern age. The star fiddlers, as determined by nationwide contests, were showcased on the *Opry*, initially alongside brass bands and vaudeville stars, until primitive market research determined that the audience preferred their music to sound as if it came from their own kind.

There was a field of opportunity in the old-time milieu for anyone brazen enough to reap it – for Vernon Dalhart, in particular, with his mid-1920s rural ballads describing train wrecks, or prisoners' laments. The first of these, 'The Prisoner's Song' (1924), is estimated to have sold more than 6 million copies.

The tradition was inaugurated when folklorist Ralph Peer journeyed to Atlanta in 1923 to record Fiddlin' John Carson's 'The Little Old Log

Cabin in the Lane'. The song had been familiar for decades; modern technology's freshest inventions were being used to deliver comfortable nostalgia. Radio (and, in time, electrical recording techniques) might have been invented to display the fireside intimacy of such performances, and the second half of the decade produced such unlikely star performers as Gid Tanner & the Skillet Lickers, a prototype string band, whose 'John Henry' seemed to have been cut amidst a moonshine orgy; and Uncle Dave Macon, the self-proclaimed 'King of the Hillbillies', who travelled the South in a horse and cart when everyone else was using a Model T Ford. His cart carried an advertising slogan: 'Uncle Dave Macon, Slowing Down But Still Moving, Old Time Religion, Old Reliable Way, My Gasoline Consists of Corn, Oats, Whip and Hay.'

Radio exposure ensured that Uncle Dave would never be short of his 'gasoline'. Such determined primitivism was clearly a trademark of rural authenticity for the 'hillbilly' audience: why else would Vernon Dalhart record a series of disaster ballads (floods, train wrecks, the death of Rudolph Valentino) with a deliberately out-of-tune guitar? Ralph Peer criss-crossed the South in search of talent to tap into Dalhart's huge audience, and in Bristol, Tennessee he uncovered two of the most influential American acts of the century. The Carter Family was a trio made up of husband, wife and wife's sister (who was conveniently married to A. P. Carter's brother). The sister was 'Mother' Maybelle Carter, widely credited with inventing a style of country guitar picking that is still prevalent today. Her brother-in-law, A. P., was, like John Lomax and Cecil Sharp, a song-collector. He was also a canny entrepreneur, who mined the collective memories of the towns and villages that the Carter Family visited, uncovering 'traditional' melodies and lyrics which he updated for a modern audience – carefully claiming the composing credits and royalties for himself. Soon he was being sent such material through the mail, a mix of age-old oral tradition and modern efforts in the same vein, all of which was incorporated into the Carter Family songbook. The trio's backwoods harmony singing, naïve but unaffected, has survived virtually unchanged into modern Americana, a genre that pays passionate homage to the Carters' memory.

Ralph Peer's other 1927 discovery was too idiosyncratic to be imitated so widely. Jimmie Rodgers (alias 'The Singing Brakeman') was, in the opinion of 1930s–40s country star Alton Delmore, 'simply the greatest. There has never been one man in the whole history of entertainment that packed the wallop he did by himself. There have been good singers, good players and

performers that have made great hits with the public and made millions of dollars. But there has never been one man with a single instrument that could sing and play like he could.' Had Rodgers not been felled by tuberculosis in 1933, aged just 35, he might have carried his fearless blend of hillbilly sentimentality, cowboy swagger, blues emotion and (his trademark) Alpine yodelling into the mainstream of rock 'n' roll and beyond, as the white equivalent of a Muddy Waters or John Lee Hooker. But in a six-year recording career, his procession of 'Blue Yodel' songs conjured up the image of the lonesome troubadour, patrolling the prairies with his guitar and dawg for company. (He had no first-hand experience as a cowboy, but he had indeed been ridin' the rails and hoppin' the freights since his early teens.) Rodgers provided a template for the singing cowboys who populated the 1930s, on record or on screen, and for those – such as Bing Crosby – who imitated them so profitably. The cowboy tradition strayed into the mainstream of popular music with Billy Hill's 1933 song, 'The Last Round-Up', the first in a long tradition of western-themed hits which would stretch into the early 1960s.

By recording with Louis Armstrong, and casually sweeping the blues into his music, Jimmie Rodgers blurred the lines between white and black entertainment. He was not alone: the Allen Brothers duo were recorded on location by a Columbia engineer in 1927. He sent their discs to New York, where executives noted that both songs were blues tunes, and promoted the Allens amongst the label's black performers. But the Allens were white, and threatened to sue Columbia for the damage to their reputation. Despite the racial tension and segregation still scarring the US, however, many musicians kept their ears and minds entirely open and free of prejudice. The radio barn dances (notably the *Opry*) were consumed avidly in black and white homes across the South, and such notable contributors to African-American music as Louis Armstrong, Ray Charles and Chuck Berry soaked up as much of the hillbilly tradition as they could.

Yet music made by rural performers of their own race was carefully ghettoised, to prevent black styles and ideas veering in the opposite direction. When Ralph Peer began to record black artists such as Ed Andrews, he was forced to tread warily in the marketplace: 'We were afraid to advertise Negro records, so I listed them as "Race" records.' Even when, in 1930, the blues trio the Mississippi Sheiks blatantly imitated Jimmie Rodgers's style with 'Yodeling Fiddling Blues', their music had no chance of reaching Rodgers's white audience. But this segregation allowed the blues, as it grew

from a style into a culture, to spark emotional and physical responses that would have been considered taboo in a more integrated milieu.

> Blind Lemon [Jefferson] and Lonnie [Johnson] hit me hardest, I believe, because their voices were so distinct, natural and believable. I heard them talking to me.
>
> B. B. King

> It's funny how collectors want to know about records. In those days [we] just made them and forgot all about it. If we had known the interest that those things would arouse today, we would have paid more attention.
>
> Victoria Spivey

Gertrude Pridgett – known as 'Ma' Rainey after her marriage to William 'Pa' Rainey in 1904 – could command a crowd. 'She wouldn't have to sing any words', poet Sterling Brown told blues scholar Paul Oliver. 'She would moan, and the audience would moan with her . . . Ma really *knew* these people.' She'd learned to gauge their temperature at 14, when she first took the stage at an Atlanta music hall. At 19, she was one of the Rabbit's Foot Minstrels who worked a tent show across the South, eventually recruiting the young Bessie Smith to join the company. By 1914, Ma and Pa were an after-hours attraction with a travelling circus: something for the adults to enjoy once the kids had been sent home, when the self-styled 'Assassinators of the Blues' could play out sexual passion and romantic despair for folks who identified with every word.

By the time she recorded 'See See Rider Blues' in 1924, Ma Rainey was 38 – a performer with every inch of her body: flamboyant, charismatic, theatrical, unchained. She invested the song with such desolation that it barely moved at all: voice and instruments, Louis Armstrong's cornet and Don Redman's clarinet, merged into a seamless groan of anguish, a vision of despair that, like the best of the silent films, could convey the story of a lifetime via only one of the senses.

The greatest of the so-called classic blues singers were great actors, as Rainey must have been. They dressed to dazzle, sang to kill or thrill. With few exceptions, the material they sang was generic – albeit from a genre so compelling that many of its songs have survived undiminished for almost a

century. Performers could, and did, swap verses from one number to another; repeat lines that tore out an audience's heart; claim ownership (until the copyright lawyers were alerted) of scenarios and phrases that were the shared currency of a generation. What counted was the moan; the catch and flutter; the full-throated roar or half-choked sigh; all the tricks and idiosyncrasies of phrasing which separated Ma Rainey and Bessie Smith from the dozens of other women who were out to seize their thrones in the 1920s.

Blues aficionados often lament Bessie Smith's decision in the late 1920s, when she was struggling with alcoholism and her voice was fraying, to coarsen her appeal with the double entendre of 'You've Got to Give Me Some' and 'I'm Wild About That Thing'. Subsequent critics might have preferred more subtlety, but in the 1920s, only the blues made it possible to admit that sex existed, and make a shameless declaration of how it felt to fuck, and want to be fucked.

It was not only women who laid themselves bare this way. The jocular 'Shake That Thing' by Papa Charlie Jackson from 1925 masqueraded as a dance tune, but Papa's gal must have been a private dancer. More explicit still was 'It's Tight Like That' by Georgia Tom and Tampa Red from 1928, an unashamedly rude set of nursery-rhyme lyrics which could only allow for one interpretation. At a time when the pinnacle of pop eroticism was Ukulele Ike crooning 'I Can't Give You Anything But Love', the blues skipped dinner and the walk in the park and raced straight to the bedroom.

When folklorists and record company scouts set out to discover the 'authentic' black music of the American South in the 1920s, much of what they unearthed was soaked in everyday passion. One of the most successful early field recordings was made in Atlanta in 1927, when Columbia Records documented Peg Leg Howell's 'Beaver Slide Rag' – a rambunctious fiddle and guitar instrumental interrupted by barely decipherable shouts about what animals did in the stall. Impossible to categorise today, pitched as it is somewhere between blues, folk and country, 'Beaver Slide Rag' sold more than 10,000 copies to people who recognised it instantly as their music. Figures such as this persuaded record companies big and small that they should delve beyond the female veterans of tent shows and the vaudeville stage, in search of more varied fare – anything to part black Americans in the country and the city from their dollars and cents.

Each male performer of the late 1920s had his own idiosyncratic route to what passed for fame – $5 advance from a big city record label, and (in the case of an unmistakable hit) enough cash to buy a car. In late 1925,

Paramount Records were alerted by a Dallas store owner to a blind guitarist who played regularly down the street. His name was Lemon Jefferson, but when Paramount took him to Chicago and heard his selection of down-home gospel songs, sung to the accompaniment of his solitary guitar, they renamed him Deacon L. J. Bates. The Deacon then made way for Blind Lemon Jefferson to become the (literally) inimitable father of a new tradition: the blues soloist. B. B. King talked of him in the same way Sterling Brown remembered Ma Rainey: as someone whose plaintive moan expressed the hidden feelings of everyone who heard him. 'I believed everything he sang', King recalled. 'Blind Lemon sang for sinners.'

Jefferson's moaning sounded positively polite alongside the raucous howl of another sightless Texan singer, Blind Willie Johnson. Columbia Records promoted him as 'The new sensation in the singing of sacred songs – and what guitar accompaniment!' He used the neck of a broken bottle to slide across his guitar strings, which let out an eerie, keening counterpoint to his tortured voice. Johnson offered no easy road to salvation: 'I was sick and I couldn't get well', he cried on his first release, which was supported by a song entitled 'Jesus Make Up My Dying Bed'. On the terrifying 'Dark Was the Night – Cold Was the Ground', he stumbled out into a darkness that only a blind man could feel, transcending the lasciviousness of blues or the hope of a second coming with a ghostly, lupine howl of despair.

At the opposite end of the emotional spectrum was Lonnie Johnson, a blues crooner who emerged as the victor of an eight-week singing contest in St Louis, and became one of the best-selling black performers of the century. Future generations revered his guitar playing, which was rich in vibrato, with a fluency matched only by the premier jazz instrumentalists. His contemporaries were sold on his voice, a comforting purr which coated even the bleakest of scenarios in fireside warmth. For the African-American audience of the late 1920s, a hint of urban sophistication trumped the echoes of the cotton fields every time. Hence the success, during his brief professional lifetime, of pianist Leroy Carr: with guitarist Scrapper Blackwell, he recorded the 1928 hit 'How Long, How Long Blues', phrasing as smoothly as Lonnie Johnson. This was the blues that black America most wanted to hear during the era of the Harlem Renaissance: it represented the promise of a less turbulent future, not the scars of a traumatic past.

What made the culture of the city so appealing? For the many thousands of black Southerners who came north to Chicago and Detroit in the early decades of the twentieth century, the city offered the hope of rebirth: financial security, escape from back-breaking labour, and refuge from the lingering shadows of the South's slave tradition. Not that labour was much softer in the north, where factory floors replaced the sun-scorched fields of the Southern states. Nor was the promised land free of prejudice; or, indeed, of violence, as the prolonged race riots in many cities, notably Chicago, demonstrated with fatal consequences between 1915 and 1919. In such an uncertain climate, black people clung to what they knew was true: the Father, the Son, the Holy Ghost, heaven and hell.

While the blues singers offered uncertain redemption, there was more encouragement from their evangelical peers – men such as Blind Joe Taggart, whose blues guitar licks were cleansed by his assurance that those who bought his records could 'Take Your Burden to the Lord', and Reverend E. W. Claydon, who put a bottle neck to sacred use on 'The Gospel Train is Coming'. Gospel quartets (the so-called 'jubilee' singers) brought the sanctity of the church to the phonograph, with harmonies that would eventually reach secular ground via the vocal group boom of the 1940s and 50s. But by far the most popular African-American records of the era confronted their audiences rather than comforting them.

Between 1925 and 1930, much of the newly settled black population of the north chose to fill its brief hours of leisure with the sound of preachers in full hellfire cry. Reverend J. C. Burnett declaimed on the subject of the 'Downfall of Nebuchadnezzer', while his congregation hummed in soulful warning. There was a 'Black Diamond Train to Hell', according to Reverend A. W. Nix, who shouted and groaned like the rawest bluesman from the Mississippi Delta. 'Death's Black Train is Coming', said Reverend J. M. Gates, transforming his lament for the fate of his flock into a passionate gospel chorus. As gospel historian Viv Broughton noted, these records illustrated 'the prevailing atmosphere that encompassed all the extremes of show-business melodrama and religious ecstasy'; and they previewed the ambiguous careers of the tele-evangelists to come.

For those who chose to avoid the preacher's call, there was both sweet and sour fruit. With the death slab revealed in Louis Armstrong's funereal 'St James Infirmary', the mortality of flesh was laid plain. Not that life was any more welcoming: Ethel Waters, stepping gracefully along the border between jazz and the blues, exposed the weight of adult experience on the rhetorical 'Am I Blue?' That was merely the prelude to the much

darker colouring of '(What Have I Done to Be So) Black and Blue', a vivid portrait of her race's suffering. With typical insouciance, Louis Armstrong chose to laugh in the face of such truth-telling: he sang all around the melody of 'Black and Blue', as if dismissing the burden it carried, and then let his cornet carry the voice of freedom, as it climaxed with a sustained high note which would become first a trademark, and then a gimmick, in the years ahead.

The most carefree vision of the future, however, came from an Alabama piano player named Clarence 'Pine Top' Smith, who had followed the trail up to Chicago. Late in 1928, he recorded 'Pine Top's Boogie-Woogie', an early celebration of the eight-to-the-bar piano style which, complete with the left hand walking up and down the scale, would become one of the steadfast foundations of rock 'n' roll in the 1940s and 50s. Not content with signposting the destiny of young America, Pine Top stamped his egotism across the tune, firing out dance instructions like a jaundiced drill sergeant: 'When I say "Hold yourself", everybody get ready to stop . . . Boogie-woogie – that's what I'm talking about!' He was Jerry Lee Lewis, glossing every piano solo with self-congratulation; Ray Charles, calling his crowd to 'shake that thing' and 'mess around'; even Ian Hunter of Mott the Hoople, targeting 'you in the glasses' amongst all the young dudes. But he was destined to die in his natural habitat, just three months later, victim of a nightclub shooting. A shock of even greater magnitude awaited America before the year was out.

> The day of the popular record as a big money maker is past.
>
> *Phonograph Monthly Review* magazine, New York, August 1931

> The public has lost its thrill in record-buying. There is little enthusiasm, and the hope of a return to the previous high figures is still remote.
>
> *Music Seller* magazine, London, October 1931

'I thought I was building a dream', sang Bing Crosby in 1932, in a timely borrowing from a Broadway show named *Americana*. 'Why should I be standing in line, just waiting for bread?' He was excoriated for delivering anti-capitalist propaganda, but the song in question, 'Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?', provided a rare insight from the creators of American popular music into the prevailing mood of their nation. Al Jolson redressed the political balance by portraying a 'happy hobo' with 'Hallelujah! I'm a Bum'. But as ever, Louis Armstrong had a more ambiguous response to Armageddon. His 1933 hit 'Hobo You Can't Ride This Train' was playful, exuberant, swinging as if all the carriages were swaying from side to side – and pointed, too, in its exclusion of those without a penny to their name from a train that might just as well have been bound for glory.

The Wall Street Crash of October 1929 wiped almost 40% off the value of American stocks in less than a month. As *Variety* magazine, the daily showbiz newspaper, declared: 'Wall Street Lays an Egg'. The Great Depression, as the financial crisis that afflicted the entire Western world was known, left many millions unemployed, plunged their families into poverty, erased the optimism of a generation, and arguably set Europe on a collision course with the illusory salvation of fascism. It was certainly not the only slump within living memory: the depression of 1893–7 had thrown a quarter of American men out of work. The reason why the 1929 crash passed into mythology as well as history was the abruptness of its arrival, just as America's financial community was boasting that the nation was about to enter a decade of unparalleled prosperity.

In such a crisis, music can offer consolation. Despite the popularity of 'Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?', there was little appetite for grim social realism. But several of the most compelling songs of 1930–1 betrayed America's rickety state of self-confidence. While Harry Richman invested 'On the Sunny Side of the Street' with a young man's carefree zeal, the public preferred Ted Lewis's reading of the lyric as an old man's regret for pleasures that could never return. In such a climate, dignity and decorum had to be sacrificed. Ruth Etting revealed the despair of the overworked dance teacher in 'Ten Cents a Dance', where 'trumpets are breaking my eardrums'. (The lyric by Lorenz Hart included an almost modernist rhyme of '*hero*' and '*queer ro*mance'.) Several months of dire necessity later, Libby Holman – her voice jaded with exhaustion and self-disgust – was offering 'Love For Sale', albeit 'love that's only slightly soiled'.

'There was a kind of desperate urgency that took over all of us in the early 1930s', recalled singer-songwriter Hoagy Carmichael. 'Everyone who could tried to shut out personal loss [and] the depression, and carry on as if the era were to last a thousand years.' As cultural historian Evan Eisenberg recounted, 'poor and rich alike felt shattered, splintered, isolated. What they found in radio, I think, was the solace of solidarity and of predictable, structured time.' More prosaically, radio required a modest initial outlay, and then continued to provide entertainment, week after

week, for the price only of batteries or electrical current. Record companies had already viewed radio as a threat to their business when stocks were riding high; now, during capitalism's most profound slump, radio appeared to be smothering their industry in its adolescent prime.

Two days after the crash, Thomas Edison pulled the plug on his own faltering record business, ceasing manufacture of discs, cylinders and the equipment with which to play them. Instead, he concentrated his production lines on radio. Corporations slashed almost thoughtlessly at their rosters, erasing entire divisions which promised to be unprofitable, regardless of individual sales figures. In an industry controlled by whites, black music was a predictable victim: only the most prominent performers, such as Duke Ellington and Louis Armstrong, retained their contracts. Popular singers and sweet dance bands survived; jazz was marginalised. Wall Street's excesses effectively killed the 'classic blues' tradition overnight: when Bessie Smith was asked to record again, in 1936, it was because producer John Hammond felt nostalgic for the pleasure she had brought him a decade earlier. Highbrow classical selections were also dropped in favour of light orchestral pieces and mock-serious arrangements of popular tunes. In 1927, more than 100 million records had been sold in the United States. By 1932, the collective figure had fallen to somewhere between 6 million and 10 million (embarrassment prevented some companies from revealing the depth of their commercial failure).

The more pessimistic analysts of the music business examined the decline in ticket sales for theatrical productions (although the newfangled 'talking picture' bucked the trend), the slashing of profits from sheet music, and the catastrophic collapse of the record market; and predicted that in future their industry would exist merely to service radio. Even that medium briefly seemed to be in jeopardy, as advertising revenues plummeted, and many smaller stations went into liquidation. In such a dark climate, however, radio was a familiar, comforting presence. Many of the biggest names in show business transferred their attentions from the variety theatres to the radio networks, where a single broadcast exposed them to more people than a year of vaudeville or concert performances. The likes of Bing Crosby and Rudy Vallee were now radio stars first, with the movies a close second, and records trailing far behind. There were exceptions to the prevailing gloom: the specialist trades in so-called 'hillbilly' and 'race' recordings weathered the hurricane with more courage than their mainstream 'popular' counterparts. The rest struggled: dance bands set out on ever more treacherous tours of far-flung small towns that they would never have deigned to visit five years earlier, sometimes performing for free in the hope of creating a loyal audience for the better days to come.

Many of the leading record companies in Britain and America amalgamated or changed hands. The Victor label in New York warned its artists that they would only be allowed one 'take' of each song they recorded, to save on studio bills. The same company also led a frenzied death-dance of technological innovation, in the apparent conviction that a change in record size or speed might revive a business that was being enervated by poverty. In the winter of 1931–2, Victor made the prophetic but tragically ill-timed decision to launch a new series of extended-length records, which would play at 33 rpm rather than the industry standard of 78 rpm. The new format would allow symphonies (Beethoven's Fifth was the initial release) to be contained within a single two-sided disc, rather than comprising four or five 78s in an 'album', as in the past. Besides full-length classical works, the longer-playing record – as yet untitled – could collect together all the songs from the score of the new Fred and Adele Astaire musical, *The Band Wagon*. Twenty years later, original cast recordings and anthologies of music from film soundtracks would help to guarantee the success of 33rpm reproduction. In 1931, when few potential buyers could afford the discs, let alone the machines on which to play them, no manner of creative thinking could give the new format life.

If length didn't work, then brevity might, or so Victor hoped. When the Woolworth's chain of stores issued its own brand of eight-inch discs featuring dance tunes, Victor copied the idea, and slashed their price to a dime, making it impossible for anyone else to undercut them – or, indeed, for Victor's scheme to be commercially viable. In Britain, a company named Homophone effectively invented another popular format of the 1950s, the extended play (EP) disc, featuring four songs for the price of two: another bright but doomed initiative. All the while, the established companies were losing profits to the Durium label, which was marketing ultra-cheap, single-sided recordings of current Broadway favourites. They were sold at news-stands rather than in music stores, and briefly commandeered the market, until the major labels persuaded the public that they should pay a little more to hear authentic Broadway stars instead of Durium's bargain-basement nobodies. To accentuate the charisma of their famous performers, labels such as Columbia indulged in gimmicks such as manufacturing records in bright colours, rather than a greyish-black, or engraving them with real-

istic autographs of the performers in the grooves. In the early 1930s, however, there was an easier way to manufacture stars: by ensuring that they were represented in the medium that was rivalling radio as the Western world's most intoxicating form of entertainment, the talking picture.

> The talking films are going to be a real nuisance. We are going to be deluged with a particularly unattractive form of American sentiment because, with few exceptions, the talkies make their appeal through sentiment and not through wit and humour.
>
> *Gramophone* magazine, July 1929

At home, and in the synagogue, he is Jakie Rabinowitz: a cantor's son, groomed as his father's successor, to place his voice at the service of Adonai. At night, on the vaudeville stage, he is Jack Robin: serving up sentimental ballads and ragtime for the Gentiles. 'The songs of Israel are tearing at my heart', he declares, 'the call of the ages – the cry of my race.' But the theatre has its own siren call, and for most of the action he is pulled between the secular and the spiritual. When his father arrives home unexpectedly to find him serenading his mother with a jazzed-up rendition of Irving Berlin's 'Blue Skies', full of vim and voo-dee-o-doh, he refuses to acknowledge his son. Jakie opts to live as Jack, until he hears that his father is on his deathbed, and the synagogue has no cantor. Can he still sing the 'Kol Nidre' that will send his father to his rest with a satisfied mind?

This was a movie, so of course he could; faithful to his race, respectful to his family, Jakie can become Jack once more with his mother's blessing, for which she is serenaded with the Oedipal love song, 'My Mammy'. Yet Jack is cursed with a compulsion which proves more telling than the mark of Cain. To become who he is at heart, he must pretend to be what he is not, and don the stage make-up which delights his mother, but will damn his act for posterity.

The movie is *The Jazz Singer* (1927), the first full-length feature in history to include synchronised dialogue; and Jakie and Jack are two of the faces of Al Jolson. We see him adopt another face during the movie: the burnt-cork make-up, exaggerated white smile and curly black wig of the 'blackface' performer.

Like Jolson himself, *The Jazz Singer* was both intensely modern, and a throwback to a minstrel tradition that was already in decline. Sixteen

years after his first appearance on Broadway, there was still nobody with Jolson's charisma or panache; nobody who could match the way he threw his arms wide as he sang to encompass the world, and punched home the key syllables of every line. Critics found the film's drama meretricious and banal; but the public lapped up every word (and gesture, during the lengthy silent-film sequences between songs). Jolson's career scaled new heights, and Hollywood reacted predictably by shepherding him through a series of hasty follow-ups, among them *The Singing Fool, Say It With Songs, Mammy* (with a final reel in Technicolor, no less) and *Hallelujah I'm a Bum*, by which time audiences were reacting to Jolson's trademark cry of 'Wait a minute, you ain't heard nothin' yet' with a jaded 'Actually, I think we have'. But *The Jazz Singer* offered a propulsive boost to his popularity, ensuring that his career would survive the onslaught of the Great Depression.

The tale of Jakie and Jack was far from being the earliest merging of music and film. During the silent era, pianists would improvise an emotionally appropriate soundtrack to what they and the audience were watching, or small bands would perform specially written scores. In many picture houses, the management installed one of the mighty theatre organs that are so redolent of the pre-talkie age: with multiple keyboards and even more multiple 'stops', they acted as a manual precursor to the synthesiser, allowing one man to represent the entire palette and scale of the orchestra. As early as 1894, music publishers concocted what were, in effect, promotional films for their latest offerings. A succession of slides would be arranged to accompany a song, delivered either by a live performer or a phonograph.

The popularity of the silent film, and the increasing vogue for recorded sound, convinced many entrepreneurs and inventors that there must be a viable method of combining the two. In the winter of 1894–5, inventors Thomas Edison and William Dickson combined a Kinetograph camera and an Edison phonograph to produce a sixteen-second synchronisation of sound and vision, Dickson playing an operatic theme on a violin while two men danced uneasily alongside him. In 1909, several leading Broadway stars were filmed while singing their best-known songs, and this footage was screened in a Brooklyn vaudeville theatre while gramophone records of the same songs were played simultaneously. The audience was unimpressed by this early experiment in lip-syncing, because the discs produced insufficient volume to reach beyond the front rows of the stalls. Sonic shortcomings also doomed another Edison venture, the Cinephonograph, which was used in 1913 to capture *Nursery Favorites*, an eight-minute operetta.

Not until 1923 did the physicist and inventor Lee de Forest succeed in using strips of film to document not only visuals but an appropriate soundtrack: a process he dubbed Phonofilm. Around 200 short films of vaudeville and (in Britain) music-hall stars were made and exhibited until the end of the decade, early offerings including *A Few Minutes With Eddie Cantor* (chronicling his collection of mother-in-law jokes), duets by ragtime pianist Eubie Blake and singer Noble Sissle, and a delightful routine by Mark Griver and his Scottish Revellers, whose riotous mix of jazz and comedy included a surreal medley of 'Rule Britannia' and 'Ain't She Sweet'. Business intrigue and battles of ego doomed de Forest's venture to failure, although his invention was effectively borrowed by Walt Disney for pioneering animations such as *Steamboat Willie* (1928), during which Mickey and Minnie Mouse 'performed' the traditional tune 'Turkey in the Straw' on a variety of helpless cartoon animals.

Meanwhile, Warner Brothers were investing in a rival system named Vitaphone, which depended heavily on 'live' recording while filming was in process. Inevitably the microphones sometimes mislaid the voices of the performers, and picked up the whirring of the cameras instead. This revolutionary (according to Warners) innovation was showcased with a gala premiere in New York on 6 August 1926. Guests were treated to a succession of classical performances, interrupted only by a showcase for the multi-instrumentalist Roy Smeck ('The Wizard of the String'), showing off his talents on Hawaiian guitar, banjo, ukulele and harmonica. Two months later, a second Vitaphone presentation featured lighter fare. Its highlight was *A Plantation Act*, a short film featuring Al Jolson in rags and blackface delivering two of his hits plus his latest recording, 'When the Red Red Robin'. Here, encapsulated, was all the Jolson charisma. It might be grotesque, from this distance, racially demeaning, awash with fake sincerity, yet it was still utterly compelling – a testament to the ability of show business to build and sustain illusions beyond sober analysis.

As the *Daily Mirror* noted when *The Jazz Singer* opened in London, and Jolson made his first appearance at the Piccadilly Theatre, 'He has a knack of establishing a feeling of intimacy.' Jolson had been wary of performing for the British public, in case his reputation should be dented by a moment of fallibility. Better, as many of his peers concurred, to capture perfection on screen, and let it tour the world in his place. 'It was made obvious', said another London newspaper, 'that we are on the eve of a revolution in cinematography and that the talking picture will introduce an entirely new type of entertainment that will sound the death knell of the sort of thing to which we are at present accustomed.'

This was entertainment literally larger than life, and for a year or two the spectacle conquered all qualms about the content. In Jolson's wake, a generation of vaudeville stars rushed to duplicate his success. The required ingredients, *The Jazz Singer* seemed to suggest, were a proven entertainer, songs for them to perform, and a luscious coating of sentimentality, preferably related to the deep love between a parent and a child. Film historian Richard Barrios relates that these projects were known sarcastically in the trade as 'mammy pictures', and there were dozens of them, featuring singers such as Maurice Chevalier and Sophie Tucker, whose stage experience enabled them to transcend the limitations of the medium. Less reliable was the songwriting, which – in an eerie preview of Elvis Presley's lame ducks of the 1960s – prioritised quantity over quality.

Regardless of their banality, film songs provided the leading entertainers with a promotional vehicle of unchallenged vitality and reach. Blues icon Bessie Smith and hillbilly pioneer Jimmie Rodgers made short films in 1929 (*St Louis Blues* and *The Singing Brakeman* respectively), which assumed enormous historical value as the only surviving footage of either performer. Without film, too, we would have no evidence of the prodigious and precocious talent of 7-year-old Sammy Davis Jr. In the wonderful 1933 short *Rufus Jones for President*, he is elected US president, with Ethel Waters as the maternal First Lady. By the end of the 1920s, 90% of the best-selling records in America were taken from films, and movie songs also dominated the sales of sheet music. 'Each Talkie', as a critic wrote in 1930, 'has one big theme song; many have four.' But the novelty value of the talking picture was soon exhausted, and audiences began to tire of musical films.

No wonder that a professional observer of the British film market, lamenting the death of the silent era, described 1929 as 'the most upsetting year in the motion picture industry', and groaned that '1930 marked its continuation'. One of his colleagues explained how 'Picturegoers made it quite clear that they objected very strongly to the substitution of screen music for the human orchestra, and many of the biggest cinemas paid respect to the wishes of their patrons by bringing back the orchestra.' There was a concerted campaign to have the reckless experiment with sound and film reversed, and to revive the altogether more artistic silent medium – in which actors were arranged on screen for aesthetic reasons,

rather than because they needed to stand next to a microphone hidden in a bunch of flowers. But there were no such qualms about the arrival of the 'talkie' in India, where the first sound film was released in 1931. The following year, the musical *Indrasabha* squeezed no fewer than seventy songs into its 211-minute running time. Movies and musicals were synonymous in India for the next twenty-five years, a period during which only two commercial films abandoned the convention that a story should always be told via song.

American cinema had ridden out the first wave of financial uncertainty after Wall Street's 1929 cataclysm with aplomb, but within a couple of years it seemed to be joining the record business in suffering from the relentless advance of radio. Several extravagant productions were shut down in mid-shoot, among them an epic entitled *The March of Time*. One of its dance routines, a prison-cell sequence featuring the Dodge Twins performing 'Lock Step', clearly remained in MGM's collective memory, as its set design and gimmicks were revived twenty-seven years later in the Elvis Presley vehicle, *Jailhouse Rock*.

By 1934, however, amidst the optimistic climate signalled by Franklin D. Roosevelt's New Deal, the movie musical was back in business. The revitalised American economy was not the only spur to this rebirth, nor perhaps even the most important. Hollywood producers benefited from the fact that the American popular song was enjoying a period of rare riches, focused not on the cinema screen, or the vaudeville stage, but in an arena which the movies had briefly threatened to make redundant: the Broadway musical comedy.

> Dance music is in the thraldom of the musical comedy song; a worse thraldom it is difficult to imagine, not so much because it is alien, but chiefly on account of the miserable degradation of the words of the so-called 'lyrics'.
>
> Gramophone magazine, January 1926

> I just read a magazine article in which he explains the secret of a real song hit. He says when a boy and girl are dancing together and they hear a perfect lyric, the boy wonders why he didn't think of that line, and the girl believes the line was written exclusively for her.
>
> Dance-band singer Carmen Lombardo on lyricist Gus Kahn

In May 1932, Broadway welcomed the return of a musical that had already enjoyed an eighteen-month run on the 'Great White Way' between Christmas 1927 and summer 1929. 'Musical comedies do not act that way', *Time* magazine reported. 'They make what money they can while they are new, then fade into limbo forgotten except perhaps for a stray tune. But four years ago, even before the first curtain went up, Broadway sensed that Jerome Kern's *Show Boat* was different.' When the curtain did rise, it presented a world far removed from the traditions of musical comedy: a line of black men loading a boat with cotton, singing 'Niggers all work on the Mississippi/Niggers all work while the white folks play.'

Kern was the composer, and Oscar Hammerstein II the lyricist, of a musical comedy that brought new levels of sophistication to a jaded genre. The standard item of the 1920s was either a trivial romance, an anthology of songs and routines held together by the flimsiest of plots, or a revival of Gilbert and Sullivan or Victor Herbert (who penned forty full-length operetta scores between 1894 and 1924). Even Kern's earlier work, for all the comic genius of P. G. Wodehouse's lyrics, had not transcended those limitations. But *Show Boat* was based on a critically acclaimed novel by Edna Ferber, which ensured a compelling narrative, and the songs consolidated or propelled the action. Moreover, as the *Time* reporter noted, 'Its prelude establishes the play's mood, introduces definite themes, just as Wagner introduced themes in his preludes to develop them later on. The people in *Show Boat* have characteristic motifs just as Wotan and Siegfried have theirs in the *Ring* operas.'

Kern and Hammerstein's creation launched the era of the 'book musical': a golden age of internally coherent, eminently revivable productions. They also helped to refine the film musical: while Broadway hits did not always translate comfortably to the screen (in the 1930s, at least), they set standards of excellence which film-makers found other ways to match during that decade, particularly when Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers were available (together or separately) to invigorate *42nd Street*, *Flying Down to Rio* or *The Gay Divorcee*.

With such writers as Kern and Hammerstein, Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, George Gershwin and his brother Ira, and the extraordinarily gifted composer/lyricist Cole Porter all in their prime, this was, as Gary Giddins has reflected, 'an explosion of melody and harmony to rival the recently faded glory days of Italian opera'. Alec Wilder, a songwriter in the same tradition, described its graces: 'More sophistication, more complex melody writing, much more involved harmonic patterns, shifting song form, greater elegance,

and infinitely superior theatre song writing.' The key word is 'theatre': for Wilder, Broadway represented the pinnacle of American song before the Second World War; second in rank was the Hollywood musical; finally, lagging in disgrace, 'pop music', by which Wilder meant the novelty tunes and sentimental ballads with no deeper intent than filling the dance floor.

If one accepts Wilder's criteria, 'sophistication' and the rest, it is difficult to disagree. The auteurs of this era, from Jerome Kern to Noël Coward, assumed an adult audience that was educated, literate, alive to the potential of social satire, not yet dead to the possibility of romance. The doyen of what theatre critic Mark Steyn called 'the Park Avenue smart set' was Cole Porter, a rare master of both words and music in an era when most songwriters hunted in pairs. His work has been described as 'a unique blend of the passionate and witty'; the wit apparent in his internal rhymes and wordplay, his casual references to (for example) Chopin and Georges Sand, and (in the same song, 'Let's Not Talk About Love', from 1941's *Let's Face It*) such tongue-twisting, uber-eloquent lines as 'Let's curse the asininity of trivial consanguinity.' And the passion? As a semi-concealed homosexual, Porter knew all about desire and how it could be expressed or suppressed: witness the tense beauty of such songs as 'Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye' and 'What is This Thing Called Love?'.

Britain's nearest equivalent to Porter was Noël Coward: novelist, playwright, actor, director, cabaret performer and, certainly not least, a songwriter whose passion and wit were coated in a distinctively British layer of irony. Unlike Porter, however, Coward never really transcended his surroundings; his songs and plays exist only in their milieu, while the charm and bite of Porter's writing has proved to be universal.

So too the work of composer Richard Rodgers, whose career in the theatre came in two acts, each with its lyricist partner: Lorenz Hart until his death in 1943; then Oscar Hammerstein II, fresh from collaborating with Jerome Kern. Rodgers and Hart, said Alec Wilder, 'produced what is arguably the most brilliant collaborative work of the American musical comedy'. In just one show, 1937's *Babes in Arms*, they introduced five future standards: 'My Funny Valentine', 'Where or When', 'The Lady is a Tramp', 'I Wish I Were in Love Again' and 'Johnny One-Note'. There were many more: 'Blue Moon', 'Little Girl Blue', 'Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered' – all adding to a catalogue that has survived attention from a bizarre array of singers, from Fred Astaire to Elvis Costello, Ella Fitzgerald to Janis Joplin.

After Lorenz Hart succumbed to alcoholism, Rodgers and

Hammerstein established arguably the most successful team in the history of the musical. They were responsible for five shows which – the least of their achievements, perhaps – dominated the album market in Britain and America before the Beatles: *Oklahoma!*, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*. Where Hart was brittle and debonair, Hammerstein was corny and sincere; and Rodgers adjusted his melodic lines to adapt. Again, a list suggests (but merely skims) their legacy: 'Happy Talk', 'Hello Young Lovers', 'Some Enchanted Evening', 'You'll Never Walk Alone', plus the perennial score for *The Sound of Music*, which seems to have been passed through the blood to each successive generation since its Broadway premiere in 1959. There was an easiness about Rodgers and Hammerstein's work which revealed that – personal tastes aside – they were working in a country that had been stripped of its formality by jazz, the crooners, radio, hillbilly and the blues: all the contemporary influences that were changing the way people spoke, felt and moved.

Other writers who worked in Broadway and Hollywood between the wars were active participants in the Jazz Age. Gus Kahn, working with Walter Donaldson and then bandleader Isham Jones, contributed enduring marvels to the century's repertoire: 'Makin' Whoopee', 'My Baby Just Cares For Me', 'I'll See You in My Dreams', 'It Had to Be You' and many more, rich in colloquial dialogue but never banal. Likewise, as a melodist, Harold Arlen, often teamed with lyricist Johnny Mercer, from whom came such timeless gems as 'Stormy Weather', 'Over the Rainbow', 'One For My Baby (and One For the Road)', 'Come Rain or Come Shine', 'Blues in the Night'; as relaxed and yet compelling a set of tunes as any American has ever assembled. And above and beyond them all, there was George Gershwin, his most common helpmate his brother Ira: creators of such astonishing musicals, with films usually to follow, as *Lady Be Good*, *Funny Face*, *Girl Crazy* and of course *Porgy and Bess*.*

If there was one performer equal to all of these shades and moods, it was Fred Astaire. He was not only the most brilliant dancer ever to grace a Hollywood sound stage; he was also, albeit with a clipped, almost stunted voice, an equally fluent, intuitive singer. As Irving Berlin (himself a master of the stage and film musical) recalled, 'He's as good as any of them – as good as Jolson or Crosby or Sinatra . . . not necessarily because of his voice, but by his conception of projecting a song.'

* It is often forgotten that the Gershwins' original four-hour production was a comparative flop in 1935; it only reached a wider audience after George's death, in much-truncated form.

Without ever pledging himself to the cause, Fred Astaire danced and sang like a jazzman. Jazz was also the lifeblood of a composer who never wrote a full-length score, but who contributed some of the most enduring songs of the standards repertoire. Hoagy Carmichael was a piano-pumping student in 1918 when he performed before a fraternity audience. 'I had never played with drums before,' he remembered, 'and had no conception of the surging emotion that I felt in my head. It was like a machine, a perfect machine that automatically placed my fingers on keys that I had never played before.' Like many of his kind, he fell under the spell of Bix Beiderbecke – except that this was no long-distance passion but a close friendship, ended only by the cornetist's death in 1931. Beiderbecke's playing was the inspiration for one of the most popular melodies in history, 'Star Dust', which Carmichael first recorded himself in 1927.* It proved to be an endlessly malleable vehicle for everyone from Bing Crosby (who approached it with a degree of care that was almost religious) to Louis Armstrong, for whom it was both a plaything (typically, he ignored the memorable melody of the opening lines) and an expressway to a level of spontaneity that is the very essence of jazz.

There was nothing else quite like 'Star Dust' in Carmichael's oeuvre (although 'Georgia On My Mind' ran it close). But his songs were permeated with the music of black America, imbued with his irrepressible humour, and filled with self-confidence. Like the young Bing Crosby, he epitomised a kind of hipness that white America had never glimpsed before, and which made it inevitable that he would wind up collaborating with a third member of the species, Johnny Mercer. Individually, Carmichael and Mercer made a series of records in the 1930s and 40s that have all the carefree assurance of Sinatra in his prime. They're witty and poignant at turns, occupying some strange place on the musical spectrum halfway between Bing and Jerry Lee Lewis. Indeed, it's possible to track the Carmichael spirit all the way to the Grateful Dead and the Band, while Willie Nelson (who adopted 'Star Dust' as his own) is arguably the logical inheritor of his style.

Carmichael made suitably relaxed cameo appearances in a dozen movies, notably *To Have and Have Not* (where the teenage Andy Williams was asked to provide ghosted vocals for the barely older Lauren Bacall). Anticipating Chuck Berry's 'Roll Over Beethoven', he and Mercer also

* In October 1931, jazz critic Edgar Jackson of the *Gramophone* informed his readers that 'Star Dust' was actually a reference to cocaine; just as the children's song 'Puff the Magic Dragon' was later believed to encourage the use of marijuana.

concocted 'The Old Music Master', a charming creation myth for 'swing, boogie-woogie and jive', which imagined 'a little coloured boy' teaching a nineteenth-century classical maestro the secrets of the 'happy cat hit parade'. And that was precisely the venue for the music that swept this golden era of American composition aside, with a relentless outpouring of riff and rhythm which issued a single stern command: swing!

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