



Stephen Foster

The most important elements of popular music are rhythm, melody and lyrics. Harmony does not play a large role, because it is one of the more complex musical elements, and popular music tends to be stripped down, simplified, so that anyone can understand it.

### The Roots of Popular Music

American popular music is one of the major success stories of the century. It is recognizable all over the world as a symbol of the culture that spawned it, fascinating, forceful, energetic and sometimes just a little frightening to those in other countries who worry about it overwhelming their own musical culture. If we define popular music very broadly, there are five major movements involved, some of which could be further subdivided. These five are ragtime, blues, jazz, the Broadway musical and rock and roll.

We can find the roots of popular music in a couple of different places. One basic source for much of popular music was the American popular song, which first became a distinctive style in the mid-nineteenth century. But ragtime, blues and jazz all essentially sprang from the African-American experience. They came from the spirituals and work songs of the black south, music that was developed by blacks in their churches and in the fields while they worked. It was a blend of African music, Christian religious music, and the songs that were part of the white culture.



One of America's greatest songwriters, Irving Berlin, is shown here playing the piano for Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. Astaire and Rogers's movies in the 1930s made American songs popular around the world.

### The American Popular Song

The first major American songwriter was Stephen Foster (1826–1864). He wrote more than 200 songs, including *O Susannah* and *The Old Folks at Home*. He was a master at combining an appealing melody with emotional words. In the following decades, thousands of songs were published as sheet music, songs like *Take Me Out to the Ball Game* and *When Irish Eyes Are Smiling*, whose composers have long been forgotten. The songs tended to be simple, catchy and easily remembered.

The music publishing industry was centred in an area in New York City called Tin Pan Alley, and dozens of composers were hired to churn out popular songs as fast as possible. Vaudeville shows played in music halls across the country, and singers like Al Jolson and Sophie Tucker popularized Tin Pan Alley songs across America. One of the most intensive periods of American song writing was the 1920s and 1930s. This was the heyday of George Gershwin, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern and Irving Berlin. Their songs have become classics. This was also the period when the radio, the phonograph and the movies became widespread, fostering the song industry.

## Ragtime

Ragtime music appeared in the late nineteenth century and was popular until the 1930s. Wandering black pianists, playing in saloons and dance halls throughout the Midwestern United States, blended European structures and harmonies with African rhythms to create the first African-American music to influence mainstream popular music. "Ragging" meant taking an existing tune and syncopating it (putting the accents in unexpected places) while the left hand played a steady, regular, march-like accompaniment. One of the main developers of ragtime music was Scott Joplin, (1868–1917) a black composer and pianist who began his career playing the piano in low-life establishments in St. Louis, Missouri. He wrote over 50 rags, but the most famous perhaps is the *Maple Leaf Rag*, published in 1899. Ragtime music was popularized through sheet music and piano rolls for mechanical player pianos. Joplin earned so much from the sheet music sales that he was able to retire and devote himself to composition. His music enjoyed a resurgence in popularity in the 1970s when a successful film called *The Sting* used Joplin's rags for its score. *The Entertainer* rag became particularly popular.



Scott Joplin

## Blues

Drawn from the music of the rural black South, the characteristic sound and spirit of the blues came to the notice of white audiences between 1912 and 1920. It became a dominant part of the jazz movement in the next 30 years, and has continued to influence jazz music. The blues were originally unaccompanied, but over time, performers began to add a banjo or guitar accompaniment to their songs of disappointment in love, betrayal and abandonment. Blues songs are generally in a three-line stanza, with the first two lines being the same. Each line is four measures long, so the verses form a 12-bar pattern, rather than ragtime's 8- or 16-bar patterns. The tempo is slower, the rhythm is smoother, and the chord progressions are very simple. The name blues comes from the "blue notes," the deliberate flattening of the third and seventh notes of the scale. The first blues work to become popular was W. C. Handy's *Memphis Blues*, which along with the *St. Louis Blues* has become a classic in the blues repertoire. The best known early blues singer was Bessie Smith, whose ability to communicate the blues' pain and emotion made her the "Empress of the Blues."



Bessie Smith

## The Broadway Musical

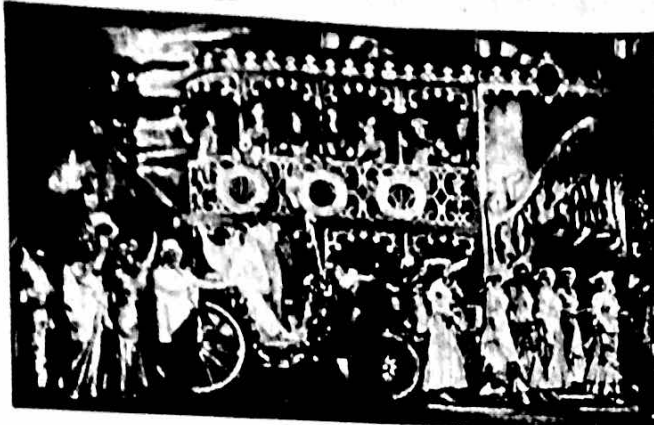
The American musical comedy is derived from European operetta, light opera with spoken dialogue, silly plots and attractive tunes. American audiences were looking for stories that were more reflective of the American experience, and songwriters obliged with shows they called musical comedies or musicals, and filled them with great tunes that had sophisticated lyrics. In the 1920s, many of the popular songs that were being consumed by the public were originally written for musicals. Two of the most important early musical comedy composers were Jerome Kern and George Gershwin, whose brother Ira was his brilliant lyricist. The songs from their shows have become standards that we still hear today.

In the 1940s, musicals began to be more than a vehicle for songs strung together by a silly plot. In *Oklahoma*, Richard Rogers and Oscar Hammerstein II came up with a whole new approach. The songs sprang from a plot that was actually interesting, and the action continued to evolve during each song. For the first time, the dance numbers were part of the plot. Rogers and Hammerstein followed this with a string of hits, *Carousel*, *South Pacific*, *The King and I* and *The Sound of Music*, their success lasting right through the 1950s. Other famous composer/lyricist teams were Alan Jay Lerner and Frederick Loewe, who are best known for *Brigadoon*, *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*, and Jule Styne, Adolphe Comden and Betty Green, who gave us *Gentlemen Prefer Blondes*, *Gypsy* and *Funny Girl*. In the 1960s, the first rock musical *Hair* appeared, although apart from *Jesus Christ Superstar*, and *Tommy*, a musical written by the British rock group The Who, there have not been many successful ones. One exception is *Rent*, a rock musical based on the opera *La Bohème*, which was a hit in the late 1990s.

The 1970s were dominated by Stephen Sondheim, who started out as the lyricist for *West Side Story* and *Gypsy*. He is also a talented composer and he has written the music and lyrics for a series of hit shows including *Company*, *A Little Night Music*, *Into the Woods* and *Sweeney Todd*. Sondheim has a darker view of the world than earlier musical comedy writers and his shows explore the cynicism and ambiguity of modern life. In the 1980s and 1990s the major musicals have come from outside the US. British composer Andrew Lloyd Webber produced *Cats*, *The Phantom of the Opera*, and *Sunset Boulevard*, which were all extremely successful. *Les Misérables*, an Anglo-French co-production based on the nineteenth-century novel by French writer Victor Hugo, was a huge hit.

## The Broadway Musical

This is the opening scene from Jerome Kern's masterpiece, *Showboat*.



Stage set for *Porgy and Bess*



One of the most successful musical comedy teams of all time, Richard Rogers (at the piano) and Oscar Hammerstein II



George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* is more a jazz opera than a musical comedy.

George Gershwin at the piano with his brother Ira, his lyricist leaning on his shoulder



*Oklahoma* was the first musical to incorporate the dancing into the plot. The show was choreographed by Agnes De Mille, one of the foremost ballet choreographers of the twentieth century.

One of the most important musical comedies of the 1950s was *West Side Story*, a modernized version of Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet* written by classical composer Leonard Bernstein. This scene shows teenage gang members getting ready for a "rumble."



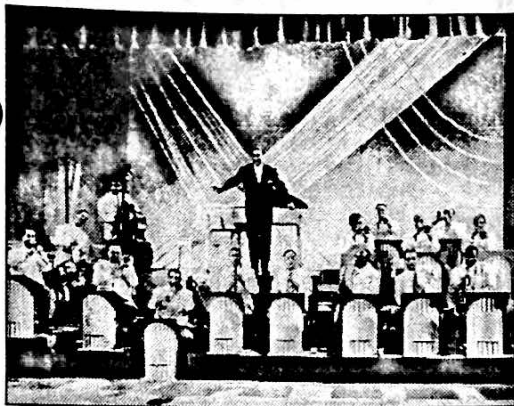
*My Fair Lady* was another huge hit show in the 1950s. Taken from George Bernard Shaw's play *Pygmalion*, it starred Julie Andrews as a Cockney flower girl who takes elocution lessons from a language teacher; so she can become a "lady."



### Jazz



The most important jazz musician to come out of the New Orleans tradition was the trumpeter Louis Armstrong. Armstrong made the soloist the most important musician in the band. He was an amazing improviser on trumpet, but he was also an innovative singer.



The Duke Ellington Orchestra

Duke Ellington was an important figure in the development of the big band. Many of his compositions, like *Take the A Train* and *Sophisticated Lady*, are standards today.



Ella Fitzgerald began singing when she was 16, and her career spanned more than 50 years.



Benny Goodman was the best known clarinetist of the big band era.

Growing out of ragtime and the blues was the phenomenon known as jazz. There are so many different ways of playing jazz music that it is difficult to generalize. However, there are a few constants. Improvisation has always been an important element in jazz. The players begin with the melody and chord progressions of a particular song, but then each musician in the band will have a chance to improvise new melodies based on those same chord progressions. If written scores, called charts, are present, they are there merely to provide the general structure of the piece. Jazz pieces are generally in a 32-bar form, with four 8-bar sections, or they may adopt the standard 12-bar blues form. Bands are usually made up of a rhythm section, piano, bass, drums and perhaps guitar, plus a combination of wind instruments: trumpets, saxophones, trombones.

There have been many jazz styles over the years, but the earliest was probably seen in New Orleans. As the black population moved north after WW I, jazz centres sprang up in other cities. Chicago and New York became particularly important. A combination of personal appearances and recordings made performers like trumpeter Louis Armstrong, pianist Duke Ellington, cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, and drummer Gene Krupa and many others world famous. Bands in the 1920s grew larger, ushering in the swing era of the 1930s with orchestras like those led by Ellington, Count Basie and Cab Calloway. The rhythms became more danceable, and orchestras were divided into instrumental sections, and worked more from written scores, although improvisation was still important. Another feature of the big band era

was the emergence of white bandleaders and arrangers like Benny Goodman, Glen Miller and the Dorsey Brothers. Important solo performers included jazz singers Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday.

## Jazz

Things began to change in the 1940s. The big bands were on the decline and a radical new style called bebop was invented. Bebop was still based on melodies improvised over chord progressions, but it was more complex, faster, with a broader emotional range. Most influential was saxophonist Charlie Parker, who often worked with trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie. The late 1940s brought in more experimentation, and one of Parker's protégés, trumpeter Miles Davis, developed what became known as West Coast cool jazz. Although the hot, bebop jazz style was still more prevalent, especially on the East Coast, cool jazz flourished through the 1950s and 1960s, with one of the most popular groups being The Dave Brubeck Quartet.

Towards the end of the 1950s and in the early 1960s, there were several new developments. Miles Davis, along with saxophonist John Coltrane and pianist Bill Evans, devised what became known as "modal jazz," in which the pieces stay in one key and mode and are based on one single chord progression for sixteen measures at a time. The Modern Jazz Quartet, primarily known as a cool jazz group, began to experiment with bringing classical musicians in to play music that called for techniques from both traditions. The alto saxophonist Ornette Coleman moved away from improvisation based on chord progressions and into atonality at times. Mainstream groups broadened the repertoire of songs on which they based their improvisations, including Brazilian music and the bossa nova.

In the late 1960s, jazz lost some of its audience. Rock was taking away many young people, and older fans were turned off by its abstract quality. Many jazz musicians began to incorporate ideas from rock, soul, and world music. This fusion style was embraced by Miles Davis, and pianists Herbie Hancock and Chick Corea. Rock musicians also adopted instrumental and vocal jazz stylings while maintaining a rock-type rhythm. Groups like Chicago and Blood, Sweat and Tears exemplify this style.

In the 1980s and 1990s there has been a resurgence of interest in serious rather than pop-oriented jazz, with musicians like the trumpeter Wynton Marsalis and the pianist Keith Jarrett, both of whom also make classical music recordings.



Miles Davis



Charlie Parker



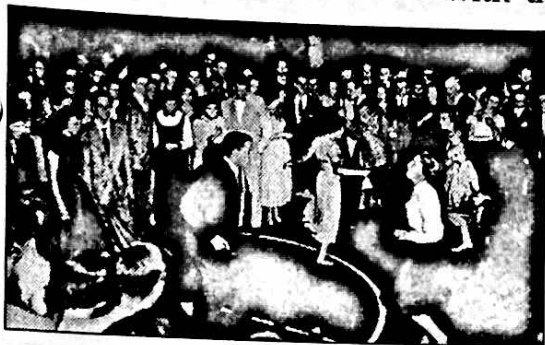
Miles Davis dressed for a fusion audience



Wynton Marsalis is equally at home in jazz or classical music.



When Elvis got his big break on the *Ed Sullivan Show*, the most-watched Sunday evening television show in North America, the cameras were only allowed to film him from the waist up for fear of shocking people.



High school students dance to rock 'n' roll music in the 1950s.



Diana Ross and the Supremes

## Rock

The roots of rock lie in many different musical styles. First there came a type of blues with a tough, driving accompaniment that was called rhythm and blues, but we can also see elements of country and western music, doo wop vocal singing, boogie-woogie piano and other variations of popular American music. There are, or have been, many different rock styles but common to almost all rock music is the electric guitar, an instrument first popularized in the early 1950s. Most rock bands contain at least a lead guitar player, a rhythm guitarist, a bass guitarist, and a drummer. Some add a keyboard player. Other common aspects are various elements handed down from African-American music, like the use of repeated patterns, syncopated rhythms, call and response patterns, and blue notes. Most rock songs conform to the 12-bar blues pattern, or the 32-bar popular song pattern. Rock has also benefited immensely from electronic technology, with the development of multi-tracking, or recording different segments of a song on top of each other, and digital sampling, where a computer reproduces sound patterns.

Radio disc jockeys in the 1950s, wanting to introduce records by black rhythm and blues musicians to white teenagers, called the music rock 'n' roll. Early rock 'n' roll stars were Little Richard, Chuck Berry, and Bill Haley and the Comets, whose *Rock Around the Clock* symbolized the rebellious spirit that appealed to teenagers. But none of these performers made the kind of impact that Elvis Presley did. Hard-driving hits like *Heartbreak Hotel* and *Hound Dog* and the open sexuality of his concert performances made teenage girls go hysterical over Elvis. The rock 'n' roll era really only lasted from 1955 to 1959. After that the music industry took over, hiring professional songwriters and studio musicians to produce the hits with teenage crooners and girl groups who softened rock 'n' roll's hard edge. Music producers like Phil Spector, who engineered particular sounds in the recording studio, came to the fore. Another phenomenon of the early 1960s was the Motown sound out of Detroit, where record producer Berry Gordy marketed the music of black groups like Diana Ross and the Supremes, Stevie Wonder, and Smokey Robinson and the Miracles to white teenagers. There were also other styles, like the California surfing music popularized by the Beach Boys.

## Rock

In the 1960s, when the Beatles arrived in North America from Britain, rock music ceased to be exclusively American. During their 9-year career, the Beatles made major innovations in the recording industry. With *Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band*, they introduced the concept album, in which all the songs have been written to fit in with a particular theme. Another British group, the Rolling Stones, who marketed themselves as the opposite of the "nice guy" Beatles with hard-driving, heavily R&B influenced songs like *I Can't Get No Satisfaction*, are still touring at the end of the century.



The Beatles in 1963, on their first North American tour

The folk music protest-song movement of performers like Bob Dylan was the basis for the music of other groups. Simon and Garfunkel, with their *Sounds of Silence* and *Bridge over Troubled Water* were extremely popular, as were the Byrds, who recorded Dylan's *Mr. Tambourine Man*. Acid rock associated with experimentation with drugs developed in San Francisco in the late 1960s and produced groups like the Grateful Dead, the Doors and the Jefferson Airplane, and singer Janis Joplin. Hard rock, with its emphasis on volume and guitar solos by virtuosos like Jimi Hendrix, developed then as well. Eric Clapton, lead guitarist for the British blues band Cream, also brought a new level of technical proficiency to rock guitar. Heavy metal, with groups like Led Zeppelin, Kiss and Aerosmith, was an outgrowth of acid rock.



A gifted writer of both melody and provocative lyrics, Bob Dylan has been one of the most influential songwriters of the last 50 years.

The 1970s were the days of rock groups like Fleetwood Mac and Chicago, and of jazz-rock fusion. In the late 1970s, punk rock bands emerged with their outrageous costumes and violent lyrics. Also in the late 1970s, the reggae music of Jamaican musician Bob Marley became influential. In the 1980s, the development of music television and music videos expanded the market for popular music. Rap music, which began in the 1980s and is still popular, is a form of rhythmic speech accompanied by bits of music. The alternative rock movement of the late 1980s and early 1990s, including the Seattle grunge groups Nirvana and Pearl Jam, evolved as a reaction to the commercialism of the music industry.



The heavy metal band Kiss