

CLAIMS

Department





The good human known as Aaron Spielman may have said it best - "Gershwin? What can you say that hasn't been said?"

Has that ever stopped me before?

That fact is I didn't grow up with a lot of classical music. Some, for sure, like the Lollipop Concerts at the SF Symphony, plus, movie scores and Looney Tune cartoons helped. It wasn't until I was in high school that I acquired something of a love for classical music that I could identify as such.

Though it was 1984 when I discovered a song that I didn't know was 'classical' (and yes, I know the term is misapplied here, but also I don't care) through the 1984 Olympics... but you'll have to wait to hear about that.

The first three issues were a mixed bag from the point of view of making them. Talking Heads flew on to the Word window without too much trouble. Being out of the house and waiting out the storm was probably a big part of that. Tori took longer, and I don't think I got as much into it as I would have liked. Arcade Fire went so fast, possibly because I'd already written the first piece at least twice before.

Go figure.

This one goes out to my kids. They're the ones who have to suffer along and listen to their dad's weird music in the car!



Discovering Rhapsody in Blue

The 1984 Olympics were huge. As a Clifornia kid, we were getting the Olympics and that was gigantic. There were other huge stories that over-whelmed the lead-up, including the San Ysidro McDonald's massacre, but mostly, it was all about the Olympics. I was excited to see the Opening Ceremony more than anything. I remember going to see the Olympic torch being run down El Camino Real and wearing my City of Santa Clara Sports Camp t-shirt. As always, I got my way up to the front and was right next to the woman who would be carrying the torch the next mile.

And she was holding the torch, waiting until the previous runner would bring their torch to light hers. I wished her luck, she patted me on the head, and then we took a picture of me holding the torch! I love that pic, and it's one of the few pre-1999 photos that still exist of me.

So, I was all about the Olympics, and the ceremony was pretty cool...

...and then *Rhapsody in Blue*.

An orchestra was installed in the Rose Bowl, and a bunch of dancers in pale blue started dancing, subtly, and then 84 pianists on 14 tiered risers were pushed in. These weren't no upright, they were freaking Grand Pianos. The wind picked up slightly, blowing the scarves of the dancers.





The song, though, blew me away.

I can't say for sure I'd never heard it, but until that day, I could never have said I knew it. You're aware of it, of course, with the beautiful sense of the modern American drive towards exceptionalism. It's a piece that represents The American City. It's super fun, and it leaves a mark. At least it did on this 9-year old.

We recorded the Ceremony on our VCR and I probably watched it twenty times. That Olympics, more than any other, I watched constantly. Diving, gymnastics, boxing (LOTS of boxing) wrestling, and swimming were my faves at the time, but I'd also pop that tape in every day or two and re-watch. Especially *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Fast forward a few years, and I'm going to Boston to visit Emerson College. I choose to fly United, because they had a direct, and I like the friendly skies. I'm in my seat, 18 years old and on a plane alone for the first time. The stewardess comes down and she's handing out the headphones, those weird ones with the two plugs and the hollow tubes that connected to your armrest. I take it and plug in just as the pre-flight music started up. They only played one song on a loop before the plane took off.

It was *Rhapsody in Blue*.

Now, United has used *Rhapsody in Blue* since 1980 as their airline theme song. It's actually perfect for an airline because it evokes a sensation of movement along the way. Much like Michael Nyman's *TGV*, it's





something that feels like it's soaring, and that is a good thing for an airline, right? It's also full of different moods, as it's epic at time, funny, kinda silly, and both frantic and languid at points. There's little better a single piece of music can be.

"We only had Gershwin's professional work for 19 years before we lost him to effing brain cancer. Which is why I sent a time traveler to do something about that!"

Laura Frankos, author of *Broadway Revival*.

I had kids. Two of them. They were born three months early. We were at Stanford's Lucille Packard's Children's Hospital in Palo Alto, one of the finest children's hospitals in the world. We moved from the NICU, where the real worry for the kids lived, to the PICN, which was a step-down in danger and there was a looser attitude. It was certainly less scary. I would bring my phone in and play music for the kids from time to time. The first couple were just whatever was on my playlist while I was holding them. The first two - *Little Lion Man* by Mumford & Sons. Then, an excerpt from *Einstein on the Beach*. After a while, I thought I should make a playlist that had the songs that would help them understand their dad a little, or at least the part of their dad that related to music. There was stuff my dad played for me, Herb Alpert & the Tiajuana Brass and Jim



Croce for example, but it was mostly my stuff.

And it opened with *Rhapsody in Blue*.

They don't remember that, but about 4 years ago, when they were three, I found a video on YouTube. They love music videos, and often dance around, but this time, I put on the *Fantasia 2000* cartoon version of *Rhapsody in Blue*. It's a fantastic cartoon, funny and smart, but it's so tied in to the idea of the music, and it plays with those shifting tones, moods, and tempos. I can not recommend it highly enough.

So, that's what Gershwin has meant to me, or at least *Rhapsody in Blue*





Summertime –or– The Power of 'And'

Stephen Sondheim was a very, very smart man.

I mean, it makes sense, right? Arguably the greatest writer of musicals of the 20th century, a writer of mysteries, a game player extraordinary, and all in all, a wise fellow. He noticed something and talked about it, something smart people tend to do.

“That “and” is worth a great deal of attention. I would write “Summertime when” but that “and” sets up a tone, a whole poetic tone, not to mention a whole kind of diction that is going to be used in the play; an informal, uneducated diction and a stream of consciousness, as in many of the songs like “My Man’s Gone Now”. It’s the exact right word, and that word is worth its weight in gold. “Summertime when the livin’ is easy” is a boring line compared to “Summertime and”. The choices of “ands” [and] “buts” become almost traumatic as you are writing a lyric – or should, anyway – because each one weighs so much.”

That’s a deep dive, right? I mean, it’s a single word, but as we know, a single word can make all the difference (Neil Armstrong kinda proved that when he landed on the moon.” But he’s also completely right, and for far more reasons than he mentions.





'Summertime and...' is different from 'Summertime when...' because it takes us into a new corner conceptually. It actually says more about summertime as a concept than we think, but only if we approach it through an idea that there is an overall meaning to summertime.

Summertime is an oppressive time, temperature-wise. This makes working out in the fields a difficult matter, and one that would have been a primary concern of African-Americans before The Great Migration into northern American cities. In some parts of the country, such as Texas and Louisiana, cotton is picked as early as July, and throughout much of the South, it's being done by Late September. The lyric 'and the cotton is high' speaks to that idea. As *Porgy & Bess* takes place in the early 1920s, it is a very recent memory of times when summer would be oppressive as hell. That 'and' is clearly acting as something like a 'but' or a 'though' in this case, making note of the place and time as a way of pointing out the level and importance of change.

A summertime that is seen as a time of relaxation, of abundance, could be seen as a reflection of progress, and perhaps Debose Heyward saw it like that, ignoring the myriad other problems still in tow.



Amy Winehouse & Someone to Watch Over Me

There are no end of versions of Gershwin songs. George's genius was in the tune, and his Tin Pan Alley-style output is remarkable. The music for *Oh-Kay*, a show that I literally walked out of once because it was butchering the score with an abundance of synths. The music for it is fantastic, but the highlight is, of course, *Someone to Watch Over Me*, and the amazing lyrics of Ira Gershwin.

The lyrics are as follows—

There's a saying old, says that love is blind
Still we're often told, seek and ye shall find
So I'm going to seek a certain lad I've had in
mind

Looking everywhere, haven't found him yet
He's the big affair I cannot forget
Only man I ever think of with regret

I'd like to add his initial to my monogram
Tell me, where is the shepherd for this lost
lamb?

There's a somebody I'm longin' to see
I hope that he turns out to be





Someone who'll watch over me

I'm a little lamb who's lost in the wood

I know I could always be good

To one who'll watch over me

Although he may not be

The man some girls think of as handsome

To my heart, he carries the key

Won't you tell him please to put on some
speed

Follow my lead, oh, how I need

Someone to watch over me

Those are pretty dang good, no? That's why just about everyone from Ella Fitzgerald to Sarah Vaughn (friend of my Dad's!) to Keely Smith to Linda Ronstadt.

But my favorite is Amy Winehouse.

In her younger, more vulnerable days, Amy was excellent at interpreting classics, and while none of them made it on to her debut album *Frank*, many have been released over the years. *Someone to Watch Over Me* was released on a deluxe edition of *Frank*, though I know it from Spotify on the "Everything Amy" playlist.

You see, before she went all in one Blue-Eyed



Soul, she was doing R&B. Her first significant hit, *Fuck -Me Pumps* is along those lines. She had such an expressive voice, and a range that could be used to hammer home an emotionally vulnerable note.

And that's exactly what she did with *Someone To Watch Over Me*.

I'm not sure what it is specifically about her performance, as I've heard dozens of versions, but she makes me feel, deeply, that she's wounded, the lamb who's lost, and desperately needs someone to take care of her. She was young, and maybe it's the understanding of the youth of their own vulnerability that had yet to wash off. She hadn't faced many of the substance and drinking issues she'd face yet, but she seems to have that sort of longing for protection.

I love this version too much. I do love the Ella version, and heard Keely Smith perform hers in Vegas in 1995, but really this is the only where it's not just about a great piece of beautiful songwriting serving as a platform, but an actual plea.

You know, they say if you can fake sincerity, you've got it made.





An American in Paris v. Rhapsody in Blue

There are songs that I have trouble connecting with. *An American in Paris* is one of them, and I'm not sure. The themes seem to be ripped from the same play-book as *Rhapsody in Blue*, but there's something different about it. I gave it a hard listen in the car between work and home the other day, and I had thoughts... and here they are.

The theme of the sounds of the modern city is better expressed in *Rhapsody in Blue* through the pacing and exchange of beats and tempo changes, while *An American in Paris* relies on what I can only hear as car horns. Now, that's a valid sound to define a city, but when the edge of what could be Parisian music wafts in, it's never given any sort of root. It's a song that feels as much LA as it does Paris to me, but maybe that's just my frame of reference.

In fact, it does sound very LA, partly due to the interruption of the string with their sorrowful mood. That's LA, joy and fun and goofiness, interrupted by maudlin and sorrow. It is a town that gets the blues easily, and while the bombast and the brash is what we think of, if you've experienced a lot of LA, you know that there's the downside of the highs... sometimes liter-



ally.

Now, if you told me that this was what Paris felt like, I might believe you. Other than the airport, I've never been. There's an idea of Paris, though, and that is one of romance, of quiet awe, of strikes, reflection, escape. This isn't a work of any of those things. I can't think of any escape, though the main trumpet throughline does have a dreamy quality to it.

I can not deny for a second the power of the final minutes. It builds like few other works, but it also continues the rise and fall, the breath of the music. *Rhapsody in Blue* does much the same, but in a more regimental way. There's a looseness to *An American in Paris* that seems to evolve with an organic sense of purposeless inevitability. I have to admit, I get why it's a classic, but I can't help but feel there's something I'm missing. Sure. It's music I can soak in, but it never truly quenches the thirst.



Comments? johnnyeponymous@gmail.com

Next Issue - Midnight Oil!