

# Poetry and the American Popular Song

## What a Combo

By Norman Hill

**P**oetry? Poetry? YECH! Poetry is for girls!" This was yours truly talking, as an acne-dripping, unhappy teenager.

What changed my mind so drastically and "shaped up," so to speak, my world view? Maybe it started with words from a freshman English teacher. Although she was not particularly likable, her argument has always stayed with me: "You ask yourself, 'Why study Literature when I'm surely going to be an

engineer?' Well, if you do, you'll be a better engineer."

But more than her assertion, however relevant, my turnaround came with my interest in music. This would be the popular variety, not classical, and certainly not the very questionable rock and roll then coming on the scene. Initially, I was fascinated by Gershwin's "Rhapsody in Blue", and I could listen to the music for long periods of time. But then I slowly shifted to the lyrics, the words that went along with

compositions of geniuses like George Gershwin.

Even in my confused teenage years, I was always a romantic at heart. I was attracted to romantic stories in songs, where boy meets girl, and boy gets girl. I could bear some degree of unrequited love or love lost or unhappy endings, but these didn't keep my interest and, if too extreme, actually turned me off.

As my tastes grew more articulate, it dawned on me that my views reflected what I had heard described as "The American Sense of Life—a passionate, even if implicit, desire for happy endings, just endings, productive effort and (usually) romantic endings." I soon saw that not everyone, even in the U.S., shared this sense of life. But enough did and I latched on to it, heart and soul.

More and more, I appreciated the lyrics of American popular songwriters as the ultimate in poetic expression. George Gershwin's melodies, and those of others, played a part, of course. But it was the lyricists, those poets extraordinaire, who, more and more,

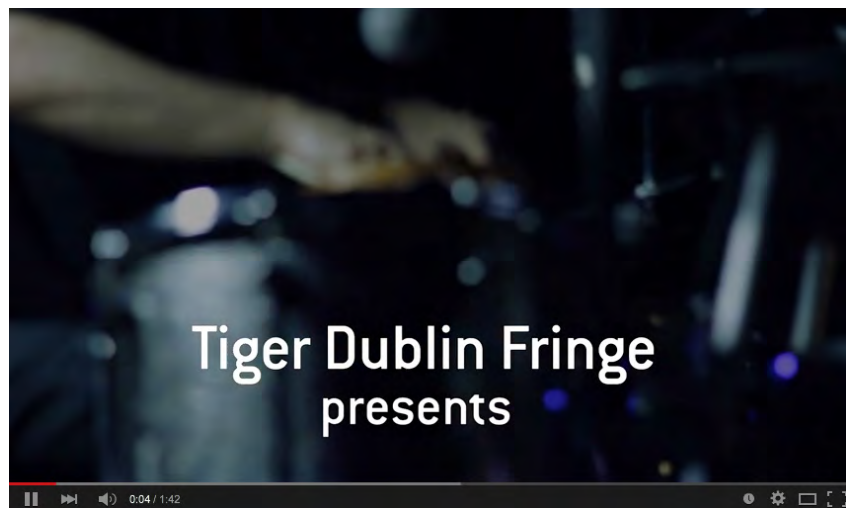
drew my attention and acclaim.

In no particular order, these poetic lyricists included: Ira Gershwin, brother of George; Oscar Hammerstein II, who teamed up with several songwriters and achieved his greatest fame with Richard Rodgers; Larry Hart, longtime partner of Richard Rodgers, who, while often associated with melancholy lyrics that echoed his own unhappy life, also composed many romantic, life-celebrating verses. Two geniuses, Irving Berlin and Cole Porter, wrote both their melodies and lyrics.

There are a host of other top flight lyricists as well, who have contributed to American popular songs. Although I sometimes refer to them as second tier, they belong on a very high tier indeed.

It would take a lengthy book to give substantial credit to the lyrical efforts of these topflight American popular song craftsmen. But below, I'll throw out a brief sample of verses that I particularly like.

Ira Gershwin, from "Our Love is Here to Stay": "But oh, my dear, our love





Cole Porter.  
Image courtesy of  
publicbroadcasting.net

ABOVE  
George Gershwin. Image  
courtesy of mtv.com

is here to stay...in time, the Rockies may tumble, Gibraltar may crumble, they're only made of clay, but our love is here to stay."

From "Who Cares": "Who cares if banks fail in Yonkers, long as you've got a kiss that conquers...life is one long jubilee, so long as I care for you and you care for me."

Larry Hart, from "There's a Small Hotel": "There's a small hotel, with a wishing well, I wish that we were there, together...we'll thank that small hotel, we'll creep into our little shell, and we will thank that small hotel, together."

From "Manhattan": "We'll have Manhattan, the Bronx and Staten Island too...we'll turn Manhattan into an isle of joy."

Oscar Hammerstein II, from "People Will Say We're in Love", with slightly different lyrics for male and female versions: "Don't throw bouquets at me, don't please my folks too much, don't laugh at my jokes too much... they'll see, it's all right with me, people will say we're in love."

From "Some Enchanted Evening", suitable for either male or female: "Some enchanted evening, you may see a stranger, across the crowded room...so fly to her (his) side and make her (him) your own, or all through your life, you may dream all alone."

Irving Berlin, from "Always": "I'll be loving you, always, with a love that's true, always...not for just a year, but always."

From "It's A Lovely Day": "Just as you were going, leaving me all at sea, the clouds broke, they broke, and oh, what a break for me...it really doesn't matter if the sky turns grey,

long as I can be with you, it's a lovely day."

Cole Porter, From "Begin the Beguine": "Oh, yes, let them begin the beguine... let the stars that were there before return above you...and we'll suddenly know what heaven we're in, when they begin the beguine."

From "It's DeLovely": "And if you want to go waltzing, dear, it's delightful, it's delicious, it's delovely...you can hear dear mother nature murmuring low, let yourself go...it's deluxe, it's delovely."

Of course, many romantic lyrics were created to be sung by a male to a female or vice versa. Examples of songs written for female singers include:

Oscar Hammerstein II, from "I'm in Love With A Wonderful Guy": "I'm as corny as Kansas in August, I'm as normal as blueberry pie...If you'll excuse this expression I use, I'm in love, I'm in love...with a wonderful guy."

Robert Mellin, from "My One and Only Love": "You fill my eager heart with such desire, every kiss you give sets my soul on fire, I give myself in sweet surrender, my one and only love."

Arthur Freed, from "This Heart of Mine": This heart of mine was doing very well...and then, quite suddenly I saw you and I dreamed of gay amours...as long as life endures, it's yours, this heart of mine."

Ira Gershwin, from "Someone to Watch Over Me": "I'd like to add his initials to my monogram, tell me, where is the shepherd for this lost lamb...although he may not be the man some girls think of as handsome, to my heart,



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When Indy's Libertine Liquor Bar landed on *Esquire's* "Best Bars in America" list, it was acknowledgment of not only a bar, but a scene that has been building. From our breweries raking in gold at the Great American Beer Festival to our chefs stirring up buzz over our dining scene, Indianapolis is serving up more than the race cars and hoops we're known for. Take a long weekend and discover the Midwest's best kept secret for yourself.

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he'll carry the key...oh, how I need,  
someone to watch over me."

As for males singing to females  
(or by proxy), there are plenty  
of those too.

Oscar Hammerstein II, Otto Harbach,  
and Frank Mandel, from "One Alone":  
"One alone to be my own, I alone to  
know her caresses; she would be  
eternally the one my worshiping soul  
possesses. At her call, I'd give my  
all...it would be the perfect world  
for me if she were mine alone."  
Granted, this is more like operetta,  
but I diversified into that realm  
fairly quickly, once my devotion  
to romantic songs was set.

Frank Loesser, from "More I Cannot  
Wish You" (melody and lyrics): "More  
I cannot wish you than to wish you  
find your love...standing there gazing  
at you, full of the bloom of youth...  
with the sheep's eye and the licorice  
tooth...and the strong arms to carry  
you away."

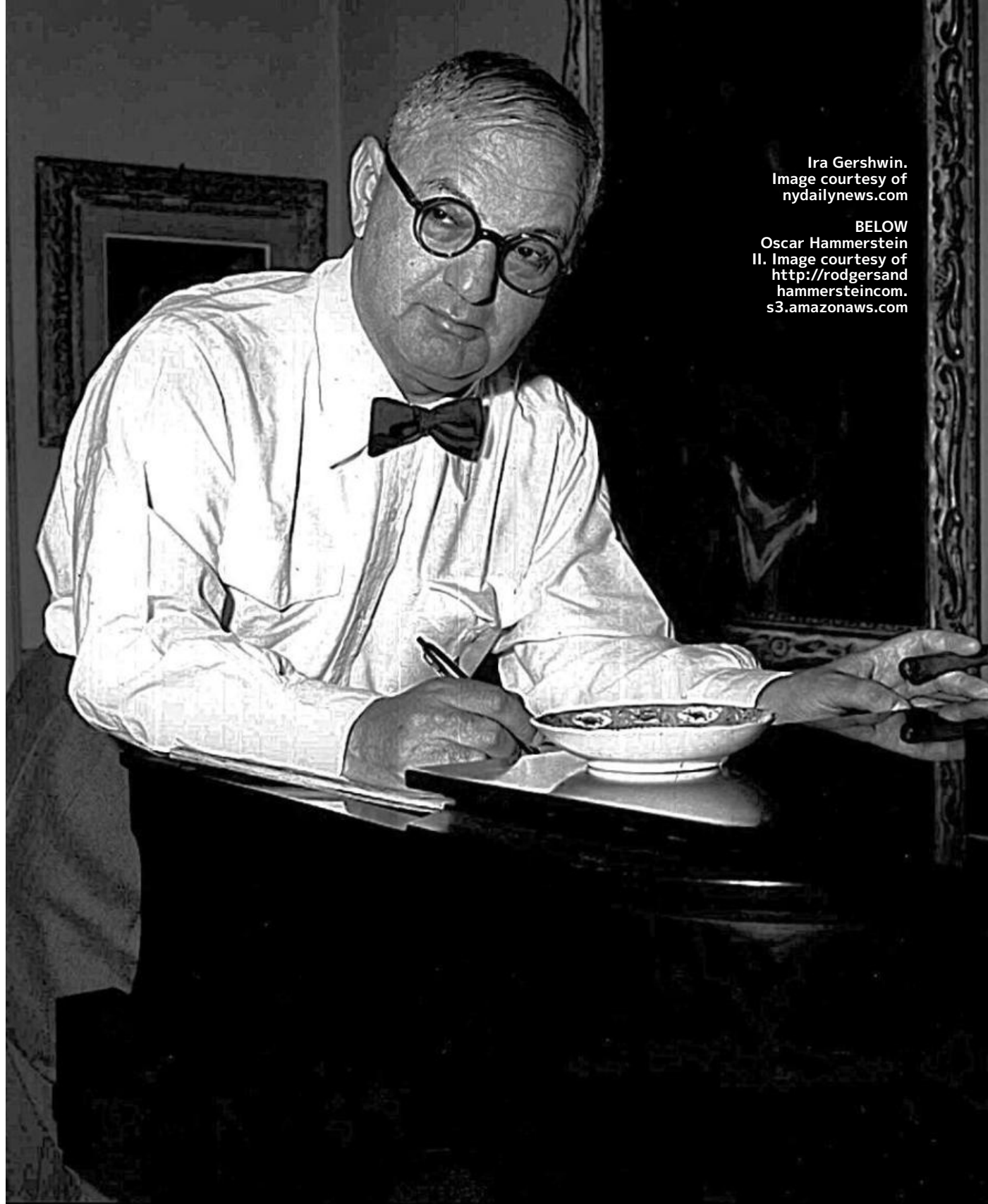
Many other lyrics have strong  
romantic elements but are also comic  
or created to fill a certain unique  
aspect of musical plots. Due to time  
constraints, I won't cover them here.  
But rest assured, if they end happily,  
they're included in my loving lyrical  
inventory of poetry.

YouTube video credits:

G. Gershwin - Rhapsody in Blue,  
FORTISSIMO FEST 2010  
[youtu.be/qLTManObB40](http://youtu.be/qLTManObB40)

Robert Palmer - People Will Say  
We're in Love (Rodgers &  
Hammerstein's Cover)  
[youtu.be/qLTManObB40](http://youtu.be/qLTManObB40)

Ella Fitzgerald - It's DeLovely -  
Cole Porter Songs De Lovely  
[youtu.be/txBnEh-SpGg](http://youtu.be/txBnEh-SpGg)



Ira Gershwin.  
Image courtesy of  
[nydailynews.com](http://nydailynews.com)

BELOW  
Oscar Hammerstein  
II. Image courtesy of  
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