

Rhapsody In Blue (1924)**George Gershwin**

Born September 26, 1898 in Brooklyn, N.Y.

Died July 11, 1937 in Hollywood, California

Rhapsody in Blue was commissioned in January of 1924 by Paul Whiteman for an experimental concert of popular music. It was orchestrated by Ferde Grofé and was premiered at Aeolian Hall in New York City on February 12, 1924 with the composer at the piano.

On January 4, 1924, George Gershwin, his lyricist, Buddy DeSylva and his brother (and future lyricist) Ira Gershwin were relaxing with a game of pool during the hiatus between openings of their show *Sweet Little Devil* in Boston and New York. Ira happened upon an article in that morning's *New York Tribune* about a concert Paul Whiteman was planning called "An Experiment in Modern Music." The concert would feature his dance orchestra performing a program of completely "American Music" with the emphasis on jazz. A panel of judges including Efrem Zimbalist, Jascha Heifetz and Sergei Rachmaninoff (hep cats one and all) had been enlisted to define exactly what "American Music" was. Ira and George got a chuckle out of that, but the next paragraph brought them up short: *"Irving Berlin is writing a syncopated tone poem, Victor Herbert is working on an "American Suite" and George Gershwin is at work on a jazz concerto."* This was the first that George had heard of his participation in the concert. He and Whiteman had discussed his writing a special piece for the band, but he'd heard nothing more definite until this newspaper article. *Sweet Little Devil* was in final rehearsals for its New York opening and George was playing a major recital with soprano Eva Gauthier in a couple of weeks; there really wasn't time to write Whiteman's piece in the five weeks left before the event. Nevertheless, with Whiteman frantically urging him on, Gershwin completed a two-piano score of a jazz piece he called *American Rhapsody* and gave it to Whiteman's musical arranger, Ferde Grofé, to be orchestrated just in time for the concert. George was excited---he knew he'd written something special, but brother Ira wasn't happy with the title of the piece. He was the word-man of the family, and he felt it needed something more poetic and striking to grab the public's attention. He found it in the works of his favorite artist, James McNeill Whistler, who gave his paintings descriptive titles like *Arrangement in Gray and Black*. Ira renamed the piece *Rhapsody in Blue*.

The concert took place in Aeolian Hall on the afternoon of Tuesday, February 12, 1924. Conceived as a publicity gimmick by Paul Whiteman to promote his orchestra, the event billed itself as an experiment in musical education. The avowed object was to expose the public to the best in modern American music, but what it really amounted to was a medley of selections from Whiteman's already familiar dance-band repertoire, featuring such rousers as Edward MacDowell's *To a Wild Rose*, Rudolf Friml's *Donkey Serenade*, and some "semi-symphonic" arrangements of Irving Berlin show-tunes. As a cultural event, the concert turned out to be a resounding dud, and many of the glittering elite of New York society in attendance lost interest early and had already left the hall by the time the flushed, excited young composer took his place at the piano to perform his *Rhapsody in Blue*. What happened next brought those in the aisles right back to their seats, put Whiteman and his "experimental concert" into the history books, and made George Gershwin world-famous and rich.

From the unforgettable opening growl and whoop of the "outrageous" clarinet cadenza, through the places in the score where Gershwin in his haste had left several piano cadenza bars blank and penciled a direction for Whiteman to *Wait for nod*, to the swaggering, exuberant finale, the new piece grabbed listeners, shook them, got their attention and kept it with its audacity, its intensity, its sentiment and its out-and-out unabashed Americanism.

Olin Downes, the magisterial music critic of the *New York Times*, wrote after the concert that an "exciting voice---fresh and new and full of promise" had been heard in American music. Deems Taylor of the *New York World* wrote: "Mr. Gershwin will bear watching; he may yet bring jazz out of the kitchen." For Gershwin, it was the turning point, the beginning of a career that would make him the most widely performed American composer of the 20th century. It was also a turning point for modern music. By "making a lady out of jazz", the *Rhapsody in Blue* set in motion an entire new trend in "serious" music. Composers all over the world perked up their ears at this new sound and began writing serious works in the jazz idiom, often with great success. Above all, the *Rhapsody* is truly *American* music. David Ewen writes: "The nervousness, energy, youth, optimism, strength and infectious charm of this country are caught in its infectious rhythms. The color and background of America are reflected in its harmonies. The *Rhapsody* is music about the age of steel and speed; it is the voice of the great modern metropolis. Surely future historians will come to know what we were during the fabulous era of the 1920s by listening to the *Rhapsody in Blue*."

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