

# SUMMERTIME

by Mark Steyn

*A Song For The Season*

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**A Song for the season**

**By George Gershwin and DuBose Heyward**

*This essay is drawn from Mark's book [A Song For The Season](#):*

Summer is icumen in and one's thoughts turn naturally to a song for the season. A good summer song has to be more than just a tune with a seasonal lyric. There are zillions of those:

*Here Comes Summer  
School is out, oh happy day...*

Which original lyric has been blotted out in my mind and replaced with some long ago jingle:

*Here Comes Summer  
Now let's get fresh with Fabergé...*

But there's no real scent of summer in the tune. I like a song that gives you a palpable whiff of time and place:

*Memphis In June  
A shady veranda  
Under a Sunday-blue sky  
Memphis In June  
And cousin Miranda  
Making a rhubarb pie...*

Hoagy Carmichael was one of the few big-time Tin Pan Alley A-list composers able to write music in a genuinely rural idiom. "Memphis In June", from the 1945 movie *Johnny Angel*, sounds like it's going to be a conventional 32-bar tune but, in fact, it finishes after 26, as if it's too hot and hazy to go on. Yet in those 26 bars Carmichael comes up with a wonderfully unhurried lazily meandering melody. As for the lyric, Paul Francis Webster, having saddled himself with Miranda and the veranda and a fiend of a rhyme scheme, then comes up with a real lulu of an image:

*Memphis In June  
With sweet oleander  
Blowing perfume in the air...*

That beats getting fresh with Fabergé. I always like specificity in lyrics and, for a long while, I thought that was the only song ever to use the word "oleander". But then I was on the radio one night and played a Steely Dan track I'd never really listened to that closely – "My Old School":

*Oleanders  
Growing outside her door  
Soon they're gonna be in bloom  
Up in Annandale...*

It's a very Steely Dan kinda word, "oleander": They specialized in a sort of headily perfumed rock. But if you're aware of any other "oleander" songs, let me know: I've been planning an album called *Mark Steyn Sings The Oleander Songbook* and so far we've got enough for a single.

Here's another song with a very particular image:

*The Summer Wind*

*Came blowing in  
From across the sea  
It lingered there  
To touch your hair  
And walk with me...*

A composer called Henry Mayer published it in West Germany in 1965, though, meteorologically speaking, the wind isn't German so much as Italian – the sirocco that blows in from North Africa each year to mark the end of summer. Few lyric writers were as finely attuned as Johnny Mercer to the potency of specifics, especially outdoors:

*Like painted kites  
The days and nights  
Went drifting by  
The world was new  
Beneath a blue  
Umbrella sky  
Then softer than  
A piper man  
One day it called to you  
I lost you to  
The Summer Wind...*

What's a "piper man"? Mercer himself could never quite account for the phrase, feeling vaguely that he might have heard it during his Georgia childhood. Wherever it comes from, it's a fine image for an idyllic summer romance that's stolen away from you before you're quite ready to say goodbye. A lot of seasonal songs have a rite-of-passage pages-of-our-lives aspect to them – "September Song", "It Was A Very Good Year". Down at the crasser end of things, this is one of those songs I used to love to play on the radio this time of year:

*It was a hot afternoon  
Last day of June  
And the sun was a demon  
The clouds were afraid  
One-ten in the shade  
And the pavement was steamin'...*

Bobby Goldsboro wrote it in the late Sixties: "Summer (The First Time)" – which pretty much gives the plot away:

*She was thirty-one, I was seventeen  
I knew nothing about love  
She knew everything...*

And, if you want to know just how good Paul Francis Webster's oleander image is, compare it with this rhyme:

*She threw back her hair  
Like I wasn't there  
And she sipped on a julep  
Her shoulders were bare  
And I tried not to stare  
When I looked at her two lips...*

Kenny Everett, a connoisseur of bad pop songs at Capital Radio in London, always liked to cite that as an example of the best of the worst: she sipped on a julep/And I looked at her two lips... By now it's clear where things are headed:

*We sat on the sand  
And a boy took her hand  
But I saw the sun rise as a man...*

Cue big orchestral swell and crashing waves.

In the end, though, the greatest summertime song is the one whose very title stakes its claim to be as near as you can get to the essence of the season: "Summertime", from George Gershwin's *Porgy And Bess*. A lot of

people assume the lyric's by Ira Gershwin, but it's not. It's by DuBose Heyward, co-author of the original novel and play of *Porgy*. In 1935, Heyward and Ira Gershwin shared the writing duties on the opera, and Stephen Sondheim likes to say that all the best lyrics in *Porgy And Bess* are Heyward's. You don't have to agree with that wholeheartedly to recognize that, while Ira's songs ("It Ain't Necessarily So") are perfectly fine, the Heyward contributions are the ones most particular to the character of the opera: "I Loves You, Porgy", "Bess, You Is My Woman Now", "My Man's Gone Now" ... and "Summertime".

For Ira Gershwin, *Porgy And Bess* was just a professional lyric-writer's latest assignment. For his brother George, it was an obsession and a passion that he had no choice but to pour his heart and soul into. It had been that way ever since one night a decade earlier when, in the wee small hours, the insomniac composer had opened up Heyward's novel in hopes that it might put him back to sleep. Instead, he found himself riveted by the tale of the crippled Porgy and his love for Bess, and wrote a letter to Heyward proposing an operatic version. By that stage, the author and his wife were already adapting the book into a straight play, but he said, sure, an opera, why not? Then Wall Street crashed and the last thing wanted to do was invest in an expensive all-Negro opera. For a while, Heyward was on the verge of agreeing to a musical version starring Al Jolson in blackface. But then George contacted him again, and this time the opera was on.

Having worked on a novel, a play and now a musical version, DuBose Heyward had lived with these characters and their world a long time. "Summertime" has its roots in the 1927 Broadway adaptation of *Porgy*. This was, formally, a "straight" play but it had a lot of traditional Negro choral music in it, and at one point Bess sings a somewhat gloomy folk lullaby:

*Hush, little baby, don't you cry  
Mudder and fadder born to die...*

Eight years later, adapting the story with the Gershwins, DuBose Heyward reworked the thought:

*Your daddy's rich  
And your mamma's good lookin'  
So hush little baby  
Don't you cry...*

In the summer of 1934, Heyward brought George Gershwin down from New York to Folly Island, a small barrier island ten miles from Charleston, in order that, as he put it, a composer from "the most sophisticated city in America" could immerse himself in "the music and bodily rhythms of the simple Negro peasant of the South". As things turned out, after Heyward gave him the lyric for "Summertime", George wound up composing the tune back in New York. His socialite pal Kay Halle recalled:

*George and I had an arrangement with the man at the desk of the Elysee, where I lived, if I was out and George wanted to come in, he could always have the key to my room. One night I came in after a dinner about 11 o'clock, and as I walked up the stairway to my apartment, I heard the piano. I tiptoed in, George turned and saw me and said, 'Sit down, I think I have the lullaby.' I knew he had been working hard to get the lullaby and that he had done several versions that didn't suit him. And so he sang in this high-wailing voice 'Summertime', and it was exquisite. We looked at each other and the tears were just coursing down my cheeks and I just knew that this was going to be beloved by the world.*

It wasn't intended to be the opening number. Originally, the opera was going to start with an instrumental piece called "Jasbo Brown" set in a café. It was cut on cost grounds: it would have involved a special set just for that scene, and the Theatre Guild balked at the expense. So the second song got promoted to first: "Okay," said George, "that means we start with the lullaby – and that's some lullaby."

He's right. Sung by Clara to the baby cradled in her lap, it's nothing to do with storyline or dramatis personae but in its sheer sultry languor it transports us immediately to Catfish Row in Charleston: it's a perfect opening. And, by the time the chorus joins in, the song has infused the setting with a spiritual dimension: because *Porgy And Bess* is a "folk opera", Catfish Row is in its way a character in the drama, and the authors use this song as the community's leitmotif.

In the 70 years since, it's been done every which way from a classical recital staple (Leontyne Price) to Eighties bubblegum pop (Fun Boy Three). Down the more operatic end, I very much like Barbara Hendricks' vocal accompanied by two wonderful pianists, Katia and Marielle Labèque (whom Ira Gershwin adored, as the sisters proudly told me some years back). Up the goofy pop end, Billy Stewart's 1966 Billboard Top Ten hit works a lot

better than Janis Joplin's or Peter Gabriel's versions. And somewhere in between, Lena Horne gets the best of all worlds. But even the lousy versions can't get that lousy. When it comes to skewering a season in song, this opening quatrain has never been bettered:

*Summertime  
And the livin' is easy  
Fish are jumpin'  
And the cotton is high...*

So your dad isn't rich and your ma ain't that good-looking? Hey, it's summer, and the fish are jumpin'...

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