

The Complicated Life of Porgy and Bess

By James Standifer

Porgy and Bess reflects the odyssey of the African American in American culture.

--Lawrence Levine

Porgy and Bess belongs in a museum and no self-respecting African American should want to see it, or be seen in it.

--Harold Cruse

While *Porgy and Bess* has become a cultural artifact, one of the controversies over the opera reflects the complex way the issue of race continues to be played out on the American scene. A new documentary, *Porgy and Bess: An American Voice*, explores the opera's place in contemporary music against the backdrop of the developing history of race over the last sixty years.

The story is a simple one, set in Charleston, South Carolina, at the turn of the century in a small black enclave called Catfish Row. It tells about Porgy, a crippled beggar who travels about in a goat-drawn cart, and who falls in love with Bess, a woman of uncertain reputation who is under the domination of a stevedore named Crown. Crown kills a Catfish Row inhabitant in a craps game and flees. When he returns for Bess, he is killed in a fight with Porgy. Porgy goes to jail, and Bess is enticed to New York by a flashy gambler, Sportin' Life. At the opera's end, Porgy is heading to New York to search for her.

It has had a "triumphant saga for a half century on stage, backstage, on film and around the world," Hollis Alpert writes in *The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess*. It played Vienna's Volksoper and Milan's La Scala to adoring crowds. In World War II, the Danes performed it over the objections of their Nazi occupiers. In the postwar era, it became the first American theatrical venture to play in the Soviet Union. Alpert notes that "It is taken for granted now that *Porgy and Bess* represents an epochal event in American music."

It has involved countless stars: from Todd Duncan and Anne Brown in the original cast to Leontyne Price, William Warfield, Etta Moten, Cab Calloway, Maya Angelou, Brock Peters, Robert Guillaume, Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, Diahann Carroll, Sammy Davis Jr., and Pearl Bailey.

Blacks themselves were not unanimously favorable to the work. African American social historian Harold Cruse, in dismissing it as a museum piece, says: "It portrays the seamiest side of Negro life -- presumably the image of black people that white audiences want to see." He warned that *Porgy and Bess* traveled the same tortured path on which African American culture too often gets to the public: via whites and third parties who give it their own interpretation.

In the case of *Porgy and Bess*, the third party was a triad of talents: composer George Gershwin, his lyricist brother Ira, and playwright DuBose Heyward. Gershwin had long wanted to write a new kind of opera that would fuse classical and jazz idioms. In 1926, he thought he had found the vehicle: a new novel by Heyward titled *Porgy*.

Gershwin said he had tried to read himself to sleep with the book; instead, he "read himself wide awake" and by four in the morning was writing to Heyward to see if he might be interested in a collaboration.

Heyward, a South Carolinian, was part of the primitivism movement that had begun in Paris around 1906 and spread to America. Through the works of Rousseau, Montaigne, Diderot, the movement saw non-Westernized man, the "noble savage," enjoying an innocence that civilized man, despite technological superiority, could not match.

Heyward wrote: "I saw the primitive Negro as the inheritor of a source of delight that I would give much to possess." He chose a setting and a group of characters new to Southern fiction --the Negro underworld of a traditionally Southern city. Their ancestors came from the Sea Islands off the coast of South Carolina and Georgia, and their community retained much of its African heritage.

Even in 1925, the novel evoked an aura of strangeness, of the exotic. Heyward biographer Frank Durham writes: "Catfish Row, a slum courtyard almost touching the life-giving and death-dealing ocean, is a microcosm, a Negro world only rarely invaded by the white man, and its cast of characters, dominated by the "secret law," emerge as a vivid collection of individuals." Heyward stresses his theme of primitivism in modified use of the Gullah dialect and in the use of spirituals. His Porgy is not subhuman or a buffoon, but a human being whose problems are no better or worse than those of whites, merely different.

Heyward was already at work on a stage version. It opened on Broadway in 1927 and ran for 367 performances. A *New York Times* critic termed it "ruder, franker, coarser than it is between book covers," and attributed this to the African American acting, which "expressed those qualities of human nature."

Although the performance was segregated, people in Harlem celebrated the event. Everybody seemed to know someone in the cast. Evelyn Ellis played Bess; Frank Wilson, Porgy; Jack Carter, Crown; and Percy Verwayne, Sportin' Life. By the time Paul Robeson briefly replaced Jack Carter as Crown, many Harlemites knew the characters' lines as well as the understudies did.

In 1930 Gershwin received a commission from the Metropolitan Opera to write a grand opera, one distinctly American. He was free to select the libretto. While Gershwin was impressed with the Met's offer, he knew that the venue would present some formidable problems: He wanted to do *Porgy* and it would require an all-Negro cast. The Met's doors were closed to Negro performers; not one was on its roster. For three years, Gershwin delayed the decision while he searched for another story. Nothing suited his needs like the *Porgy* story, and neither he nor Heyward wanted it done in blackface, as was the practice of that time. The composers of *Show Boat*, Jerome Kern and Oscar Hammerstein, made an attractive offer to Heyward for the musical rights--the famous Al Jolson was to play Porgy. Kern, Hammerstein, and Jolson planned to turn the book into a musical comedy using a cast in blackface. The pressure forced both Gershwin and Heyward, who intuitively knew the potential of *Porgy*, to announce in October of 1933 the composition of a folk opera based on the Heyward book to be performed on Broadway with an all-Negro cast. It would be produced by the Theater Guild, which had produced Heyward's highly successful stage play. Neither Heyward nor Gershwin could imagine fully the challenges and exhilaration the task would provide.

Heyward converted his stage version of *Porgy* into a libretto in late 1933 and early 1934, sending the typescript to Gershwin scene by scene. According to Joseph Swain, Gershwin spent eleven months composing the music, from February 1934 to January 1935, and nine more months orchestrating it. The collaboration between Heyward and George Gershwin (and later Gershwin's brother Ira) was a harmonious one. Heyward provided plot, dialogue, and even some lyrics: "Summertime," "My Man's Gone Now," and "A Woman is a Sometime Thing" have sources in the play text and are copyrighted solely to Heyward. When Heyward eventually had trouble coming up with lyrics that satisfied George, Ira Gershwin became the versifier and polisher. The several musical styles evident in *Porgy and Bess* derive from this two- and three-sided collaboration.

Porgy came at a time of upheaval for African Americans as they moved from south to north for jobs in the "Great Migration." As new northerners, they were adapting themselves and their rural culture to urban ways while endeavoring to keep pieces of their old society's structure.

Radio and movies were moving Americans toward a common culture, although anomalies remained. The Eva Jessye Choir and her Dixie Jubilee Singers pioneered on the Major Bowles radio show and drew huge audiences. At the same time, with his face blacked with cork, Al Jolson debuted in *The Jazz Singer*. "The Negro had arrived in talking pictures -- as a blackface comedian!" commented film historian Peter Noble. "This may be considered ironically significant since the Negro actor's film career for a number of years followed in the same tradition: white men in blackface, or coloured men in inane black masks -- on the screen it amounted to the same thing."

The American cultural scene was infatuated with the new. By the twenties there were the New Poetry, the New Drama, the New Art, the New Music, and the New Negro. Poets and novelists like James Weldon Johnson, Claude McKay, Nella Larsen, Zora Neale Hurston, Wallace Thurman, and Langston Hughes attracted the attention of avant-garde literary circles. From the high-stepping of the black-produced *Shuffle Along* to hot spots like the Cotton Club and the Savoy, the excitement of African American music throbbed through the twenties.

The blues provided rich opportunities for musicians like Gershwin, interested in an authentic American musical voice. *Porgy and Bess* represents Gershwin's most effective mixture of musical elements: folk (blues, spirituals, gospel), popular (blues, jazz, Tin Pan Alley), and classical (the recitatives, the use of the academic fugue and canonic techniques, the aria, the leitmotif). However, since its first appearance, the problem of classifying has remained. Is it an opera, a folk opera, or a musical? What does it owe to black music, to popular music, to European tradition, to Gershwin alone?

Gershwin and his French contemporaries, Darius Milhaud and Maurice Ravel, had strong interests in fusing classical music with American jazz. In 1923, Gershwin accompanied Milhaud to Harlem to hear what Gershwin described to him as "real jazz." In 1928, he took Ravel.

One of the performers they heard was a friend of Gershwin's, African American musician and composer James P. Johnson, who wrote musicals, orchestral works, and even an opera. Gershwin's life paralleled Johnson's; both plugged songs and made piano rolls for Aeolian, and both studied classical music while working as entertainers. Gershwin based rhythms of

the first movement of his *Concerto in F* on Johnson's *Charleston*. In a 1992 *New York Times* article, David Schiff wrote: "Gershwin, like many stylish New Yorkers of the period, would visit Harlem at night. The next day he could turn uptown straw into Broadway gold. Johnson worked and lived in Harlem, and his music came out of the traditions of that community."

An early attempt at an opera, *Blue Monday*, with music by Gershwin, libretto by Buddy De Sylvia, and orchestration by Will Vodery, a Negro arranger and good friend of Gershwin, was an embarrassing failure. One critic called the opera "the most dismal, stupid and incredible black-faced sketch that has probably ever been perpetrated." Another critic, identifying himself using only the initials W.S., said it was a genuine human plot of American life and foreshadowed things to come from Gershwin. However, the reaction to *Porgy and Bess* at its premiere in 1935, was decidedly mixed.

The New York Times had three critics and three views. Music critic Olin Downes wrote: "The style is at one moment of opera, and another of operetta or sheer Broadway entertainment. . . ." "When it came to sheer acting last night, certain operatic functionaries should have been present. If the Metropolitan chorus could even put one half the action into the riot scene in the second act of *Meistersinger* that the Negro cast put into the fight that followed the crap game it would be not merely refreshing but miraculous."

Drama critic Brooks Atkinson commented: "Turning *Porgy* into opera has resulted in a deluge of casual remarks that have to be thoughtfully intoned and that annoyingly impede the action."

Chief music critic Joseph Swain observed that "the drama critics objected to recitative per se and the music critics to 'Summertime,' 'I Got Plenty o' Nuttin' and other tunes which seemed 'too popular' for opera."

Musicologist Charles Hamm notes that opera has "continuous music, dialogue, and recitative whereas, in musical comedy, the plot is advanced by spoken dialogue." One can see clear aspects of a Broadway song style in "Summertime," "Oh, I Can't Sit Down" and "It Ain't Necessarily So," Porgy's "Banjo Song" and "I Got Plenty O' Nuttin'."

Rodney Milnes, author of a review in *Opera*, argued that *Porgy* must be seen as an opera -- both as an inheritor of a long tradition, and as an inspiration for much that followed. "Its influence on *Peter Grimes* grows more obvious as time goes by, and there was never any doubt of its influence on *Street Scene*. In the case of both works, the 'folk opera' or 'Broadway opera' labels were the result of managerial nervousness about potential customers being put off."

Gershwin himself said in the *New York Times* in 1935:

Because *Porgy and Bess* deals with Negro Life in America it brings to the operatic form elements that have never before appeared in the opera and I have adapted my method to utilize the drama, the humor, the superstition, the religious fervor, the dancing and the irrepressible high spirits of the race. If doing this, I have created a new form, which combines opera with theater, this new form has come quite naturally out of the material.

Lehman Engel in *The American Musical Theater* suggests that the debate over whether *Porgy* is an opera or a musical reflects on the division of high art and popular art: "It has always seemed to me that this annoyance with *Porgy* is far more than the product of semantics than of anything Gershwin put into his score. It is as if just calling *Porgy* by the name 'Opera' serves to assail the sensibilities of those who believe that such a classification is a slur on the dignity of Wagner, Verdi, and Mozart."

Wayne Shirley sees *Porgy and Bess* as an opera of a people. It is like *Die Meistersinger* of Wagner, he says, where "There's not just a chorus of mastersingers. Each one of them has a name, a character and all emerge as real people." *Porgy and Bess* is "the American opera" he asserts, just as *Boris Godunov* is the Russian opera and *Tristan* is the German opera, and *Carmen* the French or Spanish opera."

Gershwin found casting difficult. The *Porgy and Bess* score required trained voices that could handle operatic content and jazz rhythms and tones. He invited Todd Duncan to his apartment to audition for the role of Porgy. After Duncan sang exactly twelve bars of *lungi dal caro bene*, Gershwin asked him "Will you be my Porgy?" At a later meeting with Duncan, George and Ira Gershwin went through almost the entire score. Duncan remembers, "I knew it would cause controversy among my people because of its representation of black life and music. But, Gershwin had sold me on it right then and there!"

The premiere performance at the Colonial Theatre in Boston drew a fifteen-minute ovation. The critics were virtually unanimous in their praise. Edwin F. Melvin said, "*Porgy and Bess* has dramatic intensity and power, with songs, dances and racial humor that seem to spring naturally from the place and the people. . . ." As author Robert Rushmore points out: "To the eternal credit of the city of Boston, the audience and critics were not confused by this strange new kind of folk opera and recognized its greatness."

But, at three and a half hours, the opera was too long. After several cuts, the new version moved to New York.

It opened in New York October 10, 1935, at the Alvin Theatre, to mixed reviews. Todd Duncan and Anne Brown were in the leading roles. It played 124 times on Broadway and toured for three months to various large cities around the country, but was a failure commercially.

Brown remembers the last stop, in Washington, D.C., in March of 1936:

As expected we were told that the National Theater would be a segregated house. Todd and I refused to perform and were threatened by the Theater Guild who said we had to sing or there would be reprisals. We cared less. We were adamant. With help from other cast members and political figures like Mary McLeod Bethune and Ralph Bunche, we succeeded and the National Theater admitted African Americans to a desegregated house. But after our performance, it returned to its original policy of segregation.

The Washington performance was the last production Gershwin was to see; by the time it was mounted on the West Coast in 1938, Gershwin had died of a brain tumor. That run, like New York, was brief. It wasn't until World War II that *Porgy* found financial success

in a production by Cheryl Crawford, who brought back Brown and Duncan. Successful as Crawford's version was, some members of the Gershwin family called it "the bargain basement production." Crawford had made drastic changes: The orchestra was cut to twenty-seven musicians, the size of the cast was cut by half, and some recitatives were eliminated in favor of spoken dialogue. Surprisingly no one, including Ira Gershwin, seemed to object to the streamlining, which brought the production nearer to a Broadway musical than the opera George Gershwin originally conceived.

Virgil Thomson and Olin Downes, who had been critical of the 1935 production, changed their views. Downes decided that "in his own way Gershwin has taken a substantial step and advanced the cause of native opera." Thomson attributed much of his change of heart to the diminished instrumentation and the elimination of the recitatives.

In June 1942, Anne Brown left the cast and Etta Moten became Bess. The talented young actress balked at using the word "nigger" as given in the libretto. Eva Jessye recalls:

The word "nigger" occurred many times in the first scripts. Members did not like this but were afraid to object, that being the tenor of the times. But they could not bring themselves to speak it right out, so agreed to drown it out where ever and whenever it occurred in performance, thenceforth, disregarding all score markings or conductor's directions. The total ensemble would bombard the word with an avalanche of sounds, groans, screams . . . fit to raise the dead, to the puzzlement of the helpless conductor.

Moten refused to sing it, and the word was eliminated with the full support of Ira Gershwin, who rewrote parts of the libretto.

A year after the Crawford revival, the opera made its first appearance overseas. The Danish Royal Opera premiered it in Copenhagen in Danish on March 23, 1943, with an all-white cast. The opera was a great success, so much so that the Nazi occupiers warned the opera managers that an American work of any kind was not to their liking and that this one must be immediately withdrawn. Nevertheless, the opera was performed twenty-one more times to sold-out houses and with the theater surrounded by a cordon of Danish police. Finally, the Gestapo lost patience and said that if *Porgy and Bess* were shown one more time, the opera house would be blown up. The opera's managers ended the run. When the war was over, *Porgy and Bess* was reinstalled in the repertory, occasionally with Todd Duncan and Anne Brown recreating their roles.

Porgy was seen sporadically on film. Warner Brothers' 1945 *Rhapsody in Blue* included a portion featuring Anne Brown in her original stage role. Another sequence, originally conceived for black dancers, was performed by whites in blackface.

The street attitude toward *Porgy* changed as attitudes toward civil rights changed in America. What Roosevelt began, President Truman furthered: He created a committee on civil rights, which called for an end to lynch laws, voter testing, Jim Crow laws, and discrimination in the armed forces. Ralph Ellison wrote *Invisible Man*. It was in this growing era of awareness that a new *Porgy and Bess* was undertaken.

In 1952, Blevins Davis and Robert Breen began auditions for a European tour. Cheryl Crawford recommended William Warfield for the role of Porgy. To play Bess, the

directors selected twenty-four-year-old Leontyne Price, who was singing the role of Mistress Ford in Virgil Thomson's *Four Saints in Three Acts*. This revival restored a great deal of the original music that characterized it as opera and added music never before heard. In mid-February, Breen talked to the Metropolitan Opera about playing the house before leaving for Europe. The Metropolitan's Board of Directors was enthusiastic; they changed their minds, however, on the grounds that the Met had a long-standing policy to allow only its own productions to play in its house. After Breen contended race was the issue, the board once again reversed itself, but by that time the production was booked for a brief U.S. tour and then Europe under the aegis of the State Department.

With Warfield, Price, and Cab Calloway as Sportin' Life, *Porgy and Bess* was a theatrical triumph in Vienna, Berlin, and London.

It returned to New York's Ziegfeld Theater, where it was also a hit. The black press launched a furious attack. James Hicks, a reporter with the Baltimore *Afro-American*, reviled the opera as "the most insulting, the most libelous, the most degrading act that could possibly be perpetrated against colored Americans of modern times." William Warfield noted: "In 1952 the black community wasn't listening to anything about plenty of nothing being good enough for me. Blacks began talking about being black and proud."

A second, longer tour began in the fall of 1954 to Latin American, the Middle East, and Europe. In February 1955 *Porgy and Bess* went to Milan's La Scala, the first time an American work and company had been invited there, and played for a full week. La Scala asked for a second week but had to be turned down.

Maya Angelou, who played Ruby, recalls:

This was something unique: famous white American performers had appeared at La Scala, but never blacks, especially not a huge cast of blacks such as *Porgy* provided. Both audience and company were tense. Every member of the cast was coiled tight like a spring, wound taut for a shattering release. The moment the curtain opened, the singers pulled the elegant first-night audience into the harshness of black Southern life. The love story unfolded with such tenderness that the singers wept visible tears. Time and again, the audience came to their feet, yelling and applauding. We had performed *Porgy and Bess* as never before, and if the La Scala patrons loved us, it was only fitting because we certainly performed as if we were in love with one another.

In December of that same year, the opera company became the first American theater group to perform in Russia since the Bolshevik revolution. The U.S. State Department refused to pay for the tour, so the Soviets did. Novelist Truman Capote joined the company and wrote about it in *The Muses are Heard*. Capote, along with many blacks, including some in the cast, were concerned that the struggling, God-fearing, addicted residents of Catfish Row might be taken from the Communist viewpoint as a picture of racial exploitation by southern whites. They were "gratefully" proven wrong.

The director in a pre-curtain speech assured the audience that *Porgy and Bess* was set in the past and no more reflected the present than it did life under czarist rule. That wasn't an issue: the entranced audiences in Leningrad and throughout Europe were there to hear black singers singing opera.

At home the battle was far from won. In 1954, the opera had been scheduled for four performances in Charleston, the play's first performance in the Deep South. Then, trouble arose. South Carolina's law forbade the "mixing of the two races in places of amusement" for what was called "historic reasons of incompatibility." While the Dock Street Theater management and the Stagecrafters, a local African American theater organization, had come to a compromise -- seating whites on one side of the auditorium, African Americans on the other -- local and national pressure for integrated seating led to the theater's decision to cancel.

Through the fifties, *Porgy* fell into eclipse, as the Civil Rights movement grew, with the Montgomery bus boycott and school desegregation. There was a quickly forgotten film version with Sidney Poitier, Dorothy Dandridge, and Sammy Davis Jr. The sixties passed *Porgy* by as well as the decade moved from Martin Luther King to Malcolm X. Nat King Cole became one of the first black TV hosts, and Diahann Carroll the star of her own series, *Julia*.

Porgy was still there, but strangely out of step, out of tune. In 1960, Negroes began quietly asking for their rights; but by 1969 even the racial identification had changed: Blacks were demanding them. They were more outspoken and image conscious, and social conflicts broke out between blacks and whites. When *Porgy and Bess* was revived, Harold Cruse was outraged, calling it "the most incongruous, contradictory cultural symbol ever created in the Western World." Scholar John Hope Franklin saw more to it. In his introduction to *Three Negro Classics*, he wrote: "Sportin' Life clowns but not for white audiences. Porgy's clowning is a deliberate frustration of white power. Porgy also plays Uncle Tom, but he is never servile and lives for no white master."

By 1970, the year of Charleston's tricentennial, *Porgy and Bess* had become a period piece. The opera finally opened in the city that was its home. It was the only amateur production of *Porgy and Bess* the Gershwin family had ever permitted in the United States.

In 1976, *Porgy* was revived again, this time by the Houston Grand Opera. While generally well received, it drew a review from Harold C. Schonberg, music critic of the *New York Times* -- and white -- which curiously echoed black critics of the past. "The libretto is fake," he wrote, "and the music is fake. The libretto invents a never-never land with crap-shooting, watermelon-toting black stereotypes who in moments of stress fall on their knees and start shouting spirituals. It is true that by now *Porgy and Bess* can be regarded as a period piece; still, there is something distasteful about the condescension of librettist and composer to two white men slumming in Charleston."

Schonberg notwithstanding, fifty years after its premiere *Porgy and Bess* made it to the Met in what conductor James Levine saw as an appropriate rounding out of piece and place -- "a great American opera should be in the repertory of the great American opera house." The decades between had seen a number of African American singers perform at the Met, including Simon Estes and Grace Bumbry. Bumbry, however, had to be coaxed to play Bess. "I thought it beneath me, I felt I had worked far too hard, that we had come far too far to have to regress to 1935. My way of dealing with it was to see that it was really a piece of Americana, of American history, whether we liked it or not. Whether I sing it or not, it was still going to be there."

The versions over the years -- in one Porgy trades his goat cart for crutches -- demonstrate

the story's resilience. Along with the ironies and contradictions and even the stereotypes, *Porgy* carries with it universal themes of community and belonging. As critic Rodney Milnes wrote: "If ever a twentieth century opera aspires to make the world a better place, as the *Magic Flute* did in the eighteenth century and perhaps similarly without knowing it, it is *Porgy and Bess*."

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