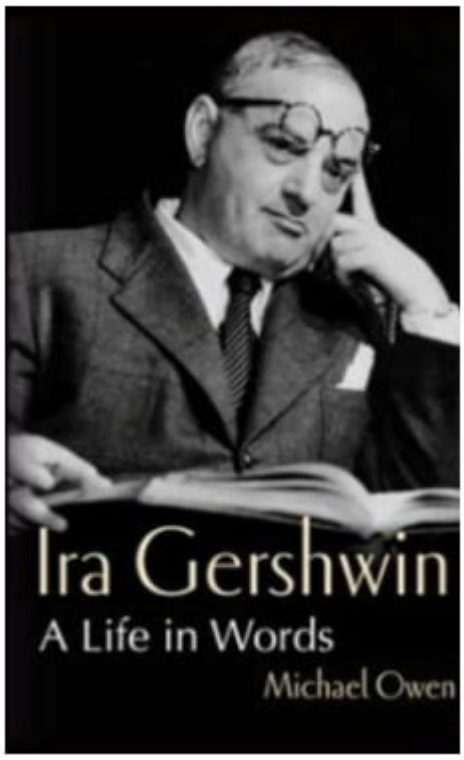
The Other Gershwin

By Bruce Bawer

A new biography of Ira, the man behind the lyrics.



When people hear the name Gershwin, they invariably think, naturally, of George Gershwin (1898-37), the tragic genius who composed *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), the opera *Porgy and Bess* (1935), and the music to a great many immortal songs for Broadway and Hollywood before his untimely death from a brain tumor at the age of 38.

But there was another Gershwin: George's older brother, Ira (1896-1983), who wrote the lyrics for most of George's melodies, and who, surviving him by almost half a century, collaborated with other major composers – but who, as Michael Owen makes clear in his engaging new biography *Ira Gershwin: A Life in Words,* considered it by far his most important role in life to ensure that his brother's *oeuvre* not be forgotten.

Born into a Jewish immigrant family in New York, George – slim and handsome – was a musical prodigy, a ladies' man, an extrovert. The chubby, bespectacled Ira, two years his elder, was his opposite in almost every way. When their parents bought a piano that they wanted Ira to learn to play, it was George who "raced to the piano bench and proceeded to play a popular contemporary melody—fluently and melodically, with an adept left hand in the bass that mightily impressed his older

brother." George grew into a masterly pianist; Ira never learned to read music.

This is a factoid that I'd like to pause and ponder. Why the hell *didn't* he ever learn to read music? It wasn't just Ira. Frank Sinatra couldn't read music. Neither could Ella Fitzgerald. Or the greatest American songwriter of all, Irving Berlin, who futzed around at the keyboard and had to have somebody by his side to write down the wonderful melodies he was inventing. Why? It takes a few hours to learn to read music. It's not Arabic. It's not Chinese. Why did so many brilliant musical artists never take the trouble?

Anyway, back to Ira *vs.* George: "While George had started chasing girls at the age of nine, writes Owen, Ira was reticent when it came to the opposite sex, a late bloomer who was very much a product of a more innocent time." But instead of resenting George both professionally and personally, as one might expect, Ira, as he later confessed, "began to look up to" his younger brother as "a man of the world," especially after George's song "Swanee," with lyrics by Irving Caesar, became a megahit for Al Jolson in 1919.

George had immense ambition, massive energy, incomparable self-assurance. Ira had none of the above. George worked fast, Ira worked slow. Hence George's success with "Swanee" (1919) — after which Ira, who had been cultivating a love affair with words even as his younger sibling was developing his musical talent, stood on the sidelines hoping that George, who was now composing songs for Broadway, would let him write the lyrics to one of his tunes. Under the pen name Arthur Francis (his and George's younger siblings were named Arthur and Frances), Ira worked with other composers, but it took a while before he became George's full-time lyricist.

What resulted from this partnership were some of the most enduring titles in the Great American Songbook. In 1924 the Gershwins wrote, among many other songs "Oh, Lady Be Good"; in

1925, “Sweet and Lowdown”; in 1926, “Someone to Watch over Me”; in 1927, “’S Wonderful”; in 1928, “How Long Has This Been Going On?”; in 1930, “Embraceable You”; in 1931, “Who Cares?”; in 1933, “Isn’t It a Pity?”; in 1937, “They All Laughed.”

And then, on July 11, 1937, after several weeks of headaches that his doctors took too long to diagnose, George died unexpectedly – still extremely young and packed with promise. The world was shocked; Ira was devastated. I’ve read several books about George, but I think Owen’s account of his final illness, death, and the aftermath thereof is the most detailed, and the most moving, that I’ve ever encountered. I don’t believe I ever was aware, moreover, that George and Ira’s mother, who had been a cold fish after her husband died, was equally insensitive in the wake of George’s death: lawyering up with indecent haste, she sought to grab as much of her late son’s estate as possible, a move that led to unfair financial consequences for Ira even as it deepened his grief.

It’s not much of an exaggeration to say that Ira spent the rest of his life in mourning, trying to do everything he could to promote his brother’s legacy, which he cared for far more than his own. Yes, he continued to work. He collaborated with Kurt Weill on the 1940 Broadway show *Lady in the Dark,* which included the song “My Ship”; he and Harry Warren collaborated on the score of the 1949 Fred Astaire movie *The Barkleys of Broadway*; and he and Harold Arlen wrote the songs for for the Judy Garland version of *A Star Is Born* (1954). Ira and George were nominated for one Academy Award for Best Song (“They Can’t Take That Away from Me” in 1937); after George’s death, Ira was nominated for two more, for “Long Ago (and Far Away)” in 1944 and “The Man That Got Away” in 1954. (After losing for all three songs, he joked that it was time to do away with “away.”)

How good was Ira? Many would contend that the very best lyricist of the Golden Age was Johnny Mercer (“This Time the

Dream's on Me," "I'm Old Fashioned," "My Shining Hour"), and I'm inclined to agree, all in all, although Ira's lyric for the torch song "The Man that Got Away" (music by Harold Arlen) is far superior to the peppy but forgettable (and unpublished) lyric by Mercer that had previously been put to the same melody – and that would surely have doomed the tune to obscurity.

Ira has his critics. Among them is Stephen Sondheim, who in his book *Finishing the Hat* (2010) considers Ira's lyrics inferior to Irving Berlin's because they're too often "convoluted" and "strenuous," sacrificing "gracefulness" for cleverness – an offense of which he also accuses Lorenz Hart. I see Sondheim's point, but I'd add that the lyrics of the later Gershwin ballads ("A Foggy Day," "Love Is Here to Stay") and of the songs written with Weill and Arlen are as fine as anybody's.

That being the case, it's a shame that even though Ira lived until 1983, *A Star Is Born* effectively marked the end of Ira's career as a lyricist. During his remaining decades, he was, mainly, the keeper of his brother's flame, facilitating new productions of *Porgy and Bess,* arranging new recordings of *Rhapsody in Blue,* and approving or denying the use of Gershwin tunes in TV commercials and the like. When people showed interest in Ira's own work, he modestly insisted that it was George who deserved their attention, not him.

If Ira was retiring and modest, however, his wife, the high-maintenance Leonore (Lee), *née* Strunsky, whom he married in 1926 and stayed with until his death, was anything but. A lover of jewels and furs who in many ways resembled his mother, Lee was famously hard to get along with and struck terror into the hearts of anyone whom she perceived as having crossed her or her husband. While Ira, after relocating in the 1930s from New York to Beverly Hills, was a homebody, content to spend his days relaxing by the pool, going to horse races at Santa Anita, or playing cards with friends, Lee was a

restless soul who, like George, preferred Manhattan to L.A. and who traveled the world – always first-class – while Ira sat at home. (There's no indication from Owen's book, by the way, that Ira ever cheated on his wife, as so many of his fellow songwriters did.)

Lee wasn't just a run-of-the-mill termagant. As Owen puts it, she "had grown up in the boiling pot of New York left-wing politics" and, in Hollywood, soon became "the uncrowned queen" of the local "intelligentsia." In response to her prodding, Ira, too, began in the mid 1930s "to ever-so-gently dip his toe into liberal causes." Allow me to suggest that "liberal" is not exactly the *mot juste* here. Recently, reviewing a new biography of Dorothy Parker, I mentioned her role in the founding of a Kremlin front called the Hollywood Anti-Nazi League; I was dismayed to learn from Owen's book that Ira donated money to the group, perhaps out of naiveté.

But if it *was* naiveté, this wasn't Ira's sole demonstration of it. For one thing, he wrote several pro-Soviet songs for the 1943 film *The North Star,* a notorious piece of heavy-handed propaganda written by Lillian Hellman, a rabid Communist. After the war he contributed to another front group, the Progressive Citizens of America, and in 1947, along with other naive Hollywood celebrities who called themselves the Committee for the First Amendment, he flew to Washington, D.C., to lend support to the Hollywood Ten, a group of screenwriters all of whom had been called before the House Un-American Activities Committee and all of whom were later shown to be Communist Party members. One suspects that Ira, who was by nature anything but an activist type, was pushed by Lee into involving himself in all of these activities.

To be fair, if Ira was naive – or misinformed? – about Communism, so, it appears, is Owen. He refers to Robert Rossen, who was hired to write the script of *Rhapsody in Blue,* the 1945 George Gershwin biopic, as "a well-known liberal who was later blacklisted after testifying before the

House Un-American Activities Committee"; in fact, Rossen was a Stalinist. Owen also tells us that Ira ended up writing the lyrics for *A Star Is Born* because Warner Bros. refused to hire Yip Harburg – Ira's friend since they were schoolboys together – because of "his liberal politics." Again, Harburg was, at that time, not a liberal; he was a member of the Socialist Party. (Yip would later turn conservative, which Ira – or Lee? – viewed as reason enough to break off relations with him.)

Oh well. Nowadays, alas, the politics of *Ira Gershwin: A Life in Words* are to be expected. Nonetheless, especially for the specifics it offers about George's death and Lee's personality, Owen's book is a welcome addition to the burgeoning library of Gershwiniana. I did hope that he would have more about Michael Feinstein, a consummate fan of the Great American Songbook who at 20 moved from his native Ohio to Los Angeles, where he knocked on the Gershwins' door and ended up as a veritable member of the family, helping Ira catalog his archives and, perhaps more important, giving new life to a man who had been ready to die. Feinstein recounts his six years with the Gershwins in his book *The Gershwins and Me,* but Owen, for whatever reason, has chosen to give this period, and Feinstein's recollections, short shrift.

In any event, my favorite Ira-related publication remains his own wonderful 1959 book *Lyrics on Several Occasions,* in which he reprints about a hundred of his best-known lyrics, each accompanied by charming, witty, and informative commentaries in which he discusses how and why they came to be written. I acquired my own now-tattered copy of it when I was in high school (and when it had, at last, finally been issued in paperback), and the first thing I did after reading Michael Owen's book was to turn once again to Ira's. My advice: get yourself a copy. It's sheer delight: you feel as if you're sitting at the Master's feet, listening to him reminisce and being swept back into the long-lost glory days of his youthful

friendship and collaboration with the brilliant brother from whose sudden and terrible loss he never really recovered.

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