

“Carousel of American Music”--George M. Cohan, Irving Berlin, Johnny Mercer, Arthur Freed, Shelton Brooks, Hoagy Carmichael, others (September 24, 1940)

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Essay by David A. Banks (guest post)*



Ann Ronell



Gene Buck William



William Grant Still

I

In September 1939, New York's Mayor Fiorello La Guardia ran into Gene Buck, President of the American Society of Composers, Authors and Publishers (ASCAP). Buck and La Guardia talked about the war in Europe, which was adversely affecting the New York World's Fair (1939-1940), with many nations dismantling their pavilions. The Mayor wondered if something could be done to take New Yorkers' minds off the war news.

Buck mentioned that ASCAP was observing its 25th anniversary. ASCAP was founded to collect royalties for its membership by licensing their works for public performances. ASCAP's membership includes the greatest names in popular and classical music. La Guardia suggested a series of concerts to celebrate the anniversary. Buck agreed saying, "We will put on a show for you the likes of which has never been seen anywhere." The "New York Times" ran a frontpage story, "Gala Week of Free Music in City to Be Held to Allay Gloom of War." "We'll having everything from ballads to opera," said the mayor, "from symphony to swing, and the program will be a monument dedicated to art and to peace." The Gala Week was a hit, with ASCAP members continuing to give concerts until the end of the Fair.

Concurrently, the Golden Gate International Exposition was being held in San Francisco on

Treasure Island. ASCAP capped its 25th Anniversary celebrations with two music festivals. The first was in September 1940, the final week of the San Francisco Fair, and the second was in October, the final week of the New York Fair. We are fortunate that the San Francisco concerts were transcribed for radio even though they were apparently never broadcast. As one reporter wrote, "Thereby hangs a tale."

Until 1940, ASCAP had contracted with radio networks to broadcast the music of ASCAP's membership. The Society now wanted to license each network station separately (thus increasing revenues), but contract renewal negotiations were deadlocked. Meeting in San Francisco in September 1940, the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) agreed to boycott ASCAP by airing only music in the public domain when the licensing contract expired in January. NAB also established the rival Broadcast Music Inc. (BMI) to provide music for the networks.

The dispute raised a question. What makes a popular song popular? The networks said they could make any song popular by broadcasting it often enough. ASCAP said it took talent. A "San Francisco Chronicle" article reviewed the ASCAP concerts in light of the NAB meeting under the headline "ASCAP Brings Its Radio War Right to Enemy." Against this backdrop, ASCAP may have recorded the San Francisco Festival to prove a point. They would be broadcast over a station that had signed a contract. Most of the big names in popular music were ASCAP members, and the recordings would effectively pit their talents against the small roster of BMI composers.

The size and celebrity of the ASCAP membership was noted by NAB President, Neville Miller. He said ASCAP was a monopoly. The US Department of Justice was already taking action against ASCAP under anti-trust legislation. The charges were not proved but ASCAP submitted to a consent decree. In May 1941, ASCAP music was back on the air under a single license. The San Francisco Music Festival recordings were not broadcast but served as mementos of a grand occasion.

II

The Music Festival was in two parts with an afternoon and an evening concert. On Tuesday, at 2:00 p.m., September 24, 1940, 25,000 people gathered in the Golden Gate International Exposition Federal Plaza on Treasure Island. To quote a reporter, "They sat in the warm sun under mischievous breezes," to hear the San Francisco Symphony Orchestra in a "Symphonic Concert" of American works by ASCAP members. Marshall Dill, President of the Exposition, gave the introductory speech (omitted from this recording), Gene Buck, President of ASCAP, then introduced the Master of Ceremonies for the afternoon program, Deems Taylor.

Composer Deems Taylor (1885-1966) was well known to the public. He wrote music articles and reviews and was often heard on the radio as a music commentator. November would see his film debut narrating Walt Disney's "Fantasia." He composed songs, cantatas, orchestral suites and two operas. He succeeded Buck as President of ASCAP (1942-1948).

The first work on the program was by Roy Harris (1898-1949). The prolific composer (15

symphonies) was not present. Dr. Howard Hanson, Director of the Eastman School of Music in Rochester, New York, conducted. Described as a Symphonic Overture, "When Johnny Comes Marching Home" (1935) is known to Americans as a Civil War song. However, the tune is probably Irish and was not new when the song was published in 1863 as the work of Lewis Lambert. Lambert may be a pseudonym for Patrick Gilmore (1829-1892), the greatest band master before Sousa.

Following the Roy Harris work, Howard Hanson (1896-1981) conducted his 3rd Symphony (1938). It has been omitted from this album because of its length. Fortunately, Hanson recorded it commercially in a superior performance. At this point there was an intermission.

The program resumed with music by Richard Hageman (1882-1966), who was best known for his concert songs and film scores. He shared an Academy Award with three other composers for his work on the score for John Ford's "Stagecoach" (1939). A misprint in the concert program led to confusion regarding the music to be performed. Taylor's attempt to correct the error was only partially successful. Hageman's opera "Caponisacchi" (1932) was based on Robert Browning's "The Ring and the Book." Following a prologue, Act I begins with a brief introduction. The curtain rises on a carnival scene featuring a ballet of masqueraders. Hageman, who had conducted the opera's American premier at the Metropolitan in 1937, now conducted the Act I introduction and ballet music.

Charles Wakefield Cadman (1881-1946) was known for his songs, including "A Dawning," and "From the Land of Sky Blue Water." He wrote cantatas, symphonic poems, suites, violin pieces, a piano sonata, and four operas. He was a founder of the Hollywood Bowl. Cadman was an organist and a pianist. The performance of "Dark Dancers of the Mardi Gras" (1933) is a rare recording of him at the piano. The orchestra is conducted by Edwin McArthur who was also a famed accompanist for singers.

William Grant Still (1895-1975), was the first Afro-American composer to have his works conducted by major orchestras. Initially self-taught, he became proficient on several instruments. He played in various bands including W.C. Handy's. Still taught himself to arrange band scores and was soon working in this capacity for Handy, Paul Whiteman and others. He was in charge of the arranging department for Handy's music publishing firm and Black Swan phonograph company. He played oboe in the pit for Eubie Blake and Noble Sissle's musical "Shuffle Along" (1921). At this point in his career, Still decided to pursue his primary goal which was to become a composer. He studied at the Boston Conservatory with George W. Chadwick and later in New York with Edgar Varese. Still composed songs, cantatas, ballets, seven operas and four symphonies including his best known work "The Afro-American Symphony."

From his 1933 ballet "La Guibalesse" ("She Devil") which was based on a Martinique legend, Still conducts the dance, "Entrances of the Carriers." He then conducts the 2d and 3d movement from his G Minor Symphony "Song of a New Race" (1937). It was premiered by Leopold Stokowski (who said Still was America's greatest composer). Before he begins the 2d movement, a carillon is heard in the distance. It rang out from the exposition's 450-foot Tower of the Sun which dominated the Fair's landscape. Today, the 44-bell carillon is in San

Francisco's Grace Cathedral.

Deems Taylor's "Circus Day" (1933), the final work on the Symphonic Concert program, was originally conceived for a jazz orchestra. Edwin McArthur conducts. W.C. Handy, Irving Berlin, Harold Arlen and Shelton Brooks were sitting together in the first row. When the orchestra imitated elephants, Brooks couldn't contain himself and his laughter was heard over the music. A newspaper critic noted the selection was interrupted when a real parade band marched by in full blast.

III

The evening concert was held indoors at the California Coliseum in deference to the guest soloist, Metropolitan Opera star John Charles Thomas, who didn't want to expose his voice to Golden Gate fog. One reporter wrote, "The walls of the Coliseum bulged with an estimated 15,000 persons who were practically hanging from the rafters and clinging like flies to the walls." The seating capacity was 12,000! The fire department finally barricaded the doors and 10,000 people were redirected to Festival Hall to hear the program over loud speakers. Thousands more stood around outside.

The program was called "A Cavalcade of American Music by Those Who Make America's Music." The orchestra, composed of San Francisco Symphony members, was conducted by Eugene Hayes and Howard Hanson. Marshall Dill, Exposition President, introduced the emcee, Gene Buck, Charter member and President of ASCAP (1924-1941). Buck (1885-1957) began his career designing sheet music covers. He went on to design, write and direct for Ziegfeld Follies and Ziegfeld Midnight Frolics. Buck was also a lyricist, writing hits like "Hello, Frisco, Hello" (Louis Hirsch), "The Love Boat" (Victor Herbert) and one heard on this program, Dave Stamper's "Sally Won't You Please Come Back?"

The program was scheduled to begin at 8:00 p.m. but the seating problem created a delay. Half the performers, including Buck, had been locked out. Hanson did not mount the podium until 8:45 to conduct the opening piece, John Philip Sousa's "Stars and Stripes Forever" (1896). Sousa (1854-1932) had been a charter member of ASCAP and served as Director and Vice President from 1924-1932.

Victor Herbert (1859-1924) was the most prominent member of the group that had founded ASCAP. He composed over 40 operettas, two concertos, two operas and many concert works. He was the first American to compose an original film score. Publisher George Maxwell was the first President of ASCAP. Herbert had refused the office but served as Director and Vice President, 1914-1924. His zeal, organizational skills and financial backing earned him the reputation of being the true founder. The orchestra, conducted by Hayes, played three Herbert tunes described in the program as a "Tribute to Our Founder."

The concert proceeded with a cavalcade of popular music. The performers embodied the most important half century in the history of American music. From heart song to jitterbug, the era saw the creation of ragtime, jazz and blues. In those days there were songs for everyone, young or old, and a song in any style could be a hit. The music had mass appeal and time and again

the concert audience spontaneously joined in to sing the songs they knew and loved. Buck says, "I know nothing in the world you can hang a memory on more than a tune."

Lee Roberts (1884-1949) was the Artist and Repertoire man for QRS Piano Roll Company. His many hits included "Lonesome That's All," and "A Little Birch Canoe and You." "Smiles" came out in 1917. In 1934, Leo Robin (1900-?) and Ralph Rainger (1900-1965) wrote "Love in Bloom" which became Jack Benny's theme song. They won an Academy Award for "Thanks for the Memories" which Bob Hope sang in "The Big Broadcast of 1938" and which became his theme song. Albert (1878-1956) was Harry von Tilzer's younger brother, and both wrote many hits. The lyrics for "Take Me Out to the Ball Game" (1908) were written by another great song writer and vaudevillian, Jack Norworth, who confessed he never saw a ball game until 1948! Buck often calls a Tin Pan Alley hit a folk tune. As he says, we often forget someone sat down and created a song. It just seems to have been around for ages. We don't know who wrote it, just know it. In that respect, it's like a folk song. "The Last Round Up" (1933) is such a song. For Billy Hill (1899-1940), it was tragically prophetic. Three months to the day after this performance he was dead. Shelton Brooks (1886-1975) received a big career boost from Sophie Tucker who introduced "Some of These Days" in 1910. A few months before "The Wizard of Oz" was released, Judy Garland first sang "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" on the "Maxwell House Good News" radio show and flubbed the lyrics! The song won composer Harold Arlen (1905-1986) an Academy Award for 1939.

Like many popular composers, Ernie Burnett (1884-1959) had classical training. He led dance bands, appeared in vaudeville and had his own publisher company. "My Melancholy Baby" was a hit for 1912 and always. When L. Wolfe Gilbert (1886-1974) wrote "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee" in 1912, he had no idea what a levee was. He heard someone say, "Let's go down to the levee and watch the boats come in." That was all he needed. Bert Kalmar (1884-1947) and Harry Ruby (1895-1974) wrote hits like "I Wanna Be Loved By You" and "Who's Sorry Now?" They also wrote the Groucho Marx theme song, "Hurray for Captain Spaulding." "Three Little Words" dates from 1930. They wrote another song for Groucho that could be a theme for some politicians, "What Ever It Is, I'm Against It!"

Walter Donaldson (1893-1947) wrote two hit that will always be associated with Al Jolson: "My Mammy" and "Caroline in the Morning." He also wrote "Makin' Whoopie" for Eddie Cantor. "My Blue Heaven" was written in 1924 but Donaldson did not publish it until 1927. It became one of his biggest hits. Gene Austin's 1927 Victor Record of the song sold over five million copies. "My Buddy" (1922) was popular with many singers and Henry Burr's Victor Record of the song was the number one top selling record for ten weeks.

Carrie Jacobs-Bond (1862-1946) had been widowed at an early age and was left with a son, her husband's business debts and a natural gift for melody. She wrote songs like "I Love You Truly" and "Just A-Wearyin' for You," winning fame and fortune. "The End of a Perfect Day" (1909) was used as a radio station sign-off tune. Frank Churchill wrote the music and words for the chorus of "Who's Afraid of the Big Bad Wolf?" (1933). Ann Ronell wrote the verse. The song, a Depression hit when many were trying to keep the wolf from their door, was sung in Disney's "The Three Little Pigs." The cartoon won an Academy Award. Ronell scored films including "Algiers," "The Story of GI Joe," and Kurt Weill's "One Touch of Venus." Arthur

Freed (1894-1973) wrote "Singin' in the Rain" for Cliff (Ukulele Ike) Edwards who sang it in the film "Hollywood Review of 1929." Freed's many hits include "All I Do Is Dream of You," "You Are My Lucky Star," "Pagan Love Song," and "You Were Meant for Me."

James Monaco (1885-1945) wrote "You Made Me Love You" in 1913. Al Jolson popularized the song when he interpolated it into a musical, "The Honeymoon Express" by Jean Schwartz. "Six Lesson's From Madame La Zonga" (1939) benefitted from the latest dance craze and became a popular "Jitterbug" tune. In 1947, Harold Orlob claimed he wrote and sold "I Wonder Who's Kissing Her Now" (1909) to Joe E. Howard (1867?-1961). He sued and won but the song will always be considered Howard's. "Goodbye My Lady Love" (1904) was sung by Eva Puck and Sammy White in Kern's "Show Boat." Kern used the song to evoke the past. White sang it in the 1936 film version of the musical.

This is a rare recording of Jerome Kern (1885-1945) at the piano. He plays "Smoke Gets In Your Eyes" from "Roberta" (1933) followed by the beautiful, "All the Things You Are" (1939) with lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II. Kern said this was his favorite song and who would argue? Tony Martin does it justice. The audience demanded and received an encore. Harry Armstrong's (1879-1951) publisher liked the song but not the title. Armstrong was stuck until he saw an opera poster for soprano, Adeline Patti. He resubmitted the song with a new title, "Sweet Adeline" (1903). The publisher accepted the song and, as we know, the public did also. The girl's name in the original title didn't go to waste--we just had to wait 34 years for Cole Porter's "Rosalie."

Sigmund Romberg's (1887-1951) "Lover Come Back to Me" is from his operetta "The New Moon" (1928). Buck says, "Will You Remember?" is from "Blossom Time" but it's really from "May Time" (1917). "One Alone" from "The Desert Song" (1926), like the previous piece, is an encore not originally scheduled according to the printed program. Romberg made commercial recordings conducting his music but these recordings are rarities. George Gershwin's (1898-1937) death at the age of 39 stunned the music world. His active career had spanned less than 20 years. In that time he had written dozens of great songs. He had taken the rhythms and harmonies of popular music and wed them to classical styles to give us masterpieces like "Rhapsody in Blue." Many people thought his folk opera "Porgy and Bess" might serve as the foundation for a truly American operatic tradition. Edwin McArthur conducted the orchestral tribute beginning with "Summertime" from "Porgy and Bess" (1935). Gershwin called "I Got Rhythm" from his musical comedy "Girl Crazy" (1930) his favorite song.

Harry Warren (1893-1981) wrote "42nd Street," "You're Getting to Be a Habit With Me," "Shuffle Off to Buffalo," "Lullaby of Broadway," "Chattanooga Choo Choo," "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby," and "I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo." He won an Academy Award for "On the Atcheson, Topeka and the Santa Fe" from "The Harvey Girls" (1946). Johnny Mercer (1909-1976) wrote the lyrics for the last three songs mentioned as he did for "Jeepers Creepers" (1938).

Jimmy McHugh (1894-1969) polished his skills writing songs for the Cotton Club Reviews. His hits include "On the Sunny Side of the Street" and "I'm in the Mood for Love." According

to legend "I Can't Give You Anything But Love" (1928) was inspired by a remark a young man made to his girlfriend as she gazed admiringly into a display window at Tiffany's. Hoagy Carmichael's (1894-1969) "Stardust" (1929) made the 1963 ASCAP top ten list of the best songs of the first half century.

Most of the performers in this concert had only arrived in San Francisco a day or two earlier and had little time to rehearse. The size, scope, variety and balance of the program attest to Buck's directorial skills. Comparing the printed program with the actual concert we know a lot of improvisation occurred. Carmichael is truly surprised when asked to sing "Little Old Lady" (1936). Luckily, he remembers the words even with a distraction of the fireworks heard in the background.

Peter DeRose (1900-1953) composed "Deep Purple" as an instrumental piece. It became a song classic in 1939 when Mitchell Parish added lyrics. The "Breen and DeRose" radio show featured Peter and his wife May (the Ukulele Lady) Singhi Breen.

Mack Gordon (1904-1959) was one of the great lyricists of the era. Among many others, he collaborated with two people on this program, Monaco and Warren, and wrote many hits with Harry Revel. This melody of 1933-34 hits concludes with a Gordon-Revel classic, "Did You Ever See a Dream Walking?"

Jean Schwartz (1878-1956) and lyricist William Jerome were the biggest comedy writing team on Broadway in the first decade of this century. They wrote hits like "Piff! Paff! Pouf!" and "The Ham Tree." This 1905 show featured a juggler named Claude Dukenfield (W.C. Fields). "Chinatown My Chinatown" (1909) was not written for a show but they interpolated it into their 1910 musical "Up and Down Broadway." Ernie Hare sang it in this show and it became a sensation. Schwartz also wrote the Jolson hit, "Rock-a-Bye Your Baby With a Dixie Melody."

W.C. Handy (1873-1958) gives a detailed account of this ASCAP concert in his autobiography, "Father of the Blues" (1941). He mentions owning a set of these concert recordings although it is not known how many were pressed. When Buck speaks of a folk tune in the modern manner, he is not far off the track. "St. Louis Blues" was published in 1914 but the tune is timeless.

John Charles Thomas began his career in musical comedy and operetta. He went on to grand opera and the Metropolitan. The antecedents of "Home on the Range" are so obscure it may be a true folk tune. David Guion (1892-1981) made the arrangement Thomas sings. "Mighty Lak' A Rose" (1901) was written by Ethelbert Nevin (1862-1901). His music was placed under ASCAP protection by his estate in 1925. "Old Man River" from Kern's "Show Boat" (1927) is one of those modern folk songs. "Sally Won't You Please Come Back?" (1921) had words by Buck and was a tribute to Marilyn Miller who charmed Broadway in Kern's "Sally." Composer David Stamper (1883-1963) accompanies.

Albert Hay Malotte (1895-1964) was an organist. His setting (1935) of "The Lord's Prayer" sold sheet music in the millions and the RCA Victor record by John Charles Thomas was one of his most celebrated.

In 1911, George M. Cohan (1878-1942) made his only commercial recordings. They don't do him justice and he didn't record any of his big hits. With this medley, we hear him singing his greatest song, "Give My Regards to Broadway" and "Yankee Doodle Boy" from "Little Johnny Jones" (1904). "You're a Grand Old Flag" from "George Washington, Jr." (1906) and, as an encore, "Over There" (1917). Cohan received a special Congressional Medal for writing the last two songs which had inspired the American troops during World War I.

The concert was now about to end on another patriotic high note. Irving Berlin (1888-1989) was going to sing America's second national anthem, "God Bless America" (1939). Kate Smith had asked him for a patriotic song. He pulled the song out of a trunk. He had written it in 1918 and set it aside. As Berlin began to sing, the entire audience stood up and soon everyone was singing. With the tremendous applause of thousands, this selection concluded with what W.C. Handy described as "...a program that was never before nor can ever again be duplicated this side of kingdom come."

The live concert was over but there was an encore recorded later to commemorate the official closing of the Fair. On Sunday, September 29, 1940, just before midnight, Carrie Jacobs-Bond sat down at the piano in the Treasure Island Radio Studio. With orchestral accompaniment, she played while a chorus sang "The End of A Perfect Day." Dimmers slowly extinguished the Fair lights. Fifteen months later, America was at war.

David A. Banks (1941-2019) was a native of the San Francisco Bay Area. A longtime collector and enthusiast of vintage and antique recorded sound, his knowledge of classical vocals and pre-WWII American popular music was extensive. Thanks to his dedication and generosity, David was able to share these historic ASCAP concerts with all of us.

NOTE: The above essay originally appeared as the part of package insert of Music & Arts' 1997 CD release of "Carousel of American Music."

*The opinions expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect those of the Library of Congress.