

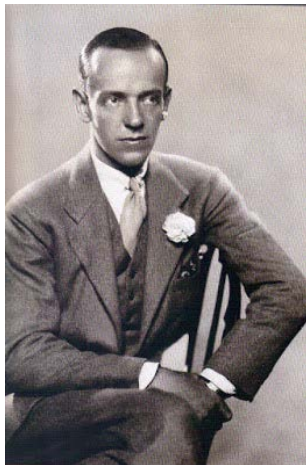
“Fascinating Rhythm”—Fred and Adele Astaire; George Gershwin, piano (1926)

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Essay by Kathleen Riley (guest post)*



George Gershwin



Fred Astaire



Adele Astaire

In 1927 George Gershwin told an interviewer that, in order to achieve truth or authenticity, music “must repeat the thoughts and aspirations of the people and the time.” “My people are Americans,” he said, “My time is today.” In London the previous year, Gershwin and the stars of “Lady, Be Good!,” Fred and Adele Astaire, made a recording of “Fascinating Rhythm,” a song that seemed boldly to proclaim its modernity and its Americanness. Nearly a century after its composition we can still hear the very things playwright S.N. Behrman experienced the moment Gershwin sat down at a party to play the piano: “the newness, the humor, above all the rush of the great heady surf of vitality.” What is also discernible in the 1926 recording--in Gershwin’s opening flourish on the piano and in the 16-bar verse sung by the Astaires--is the gathering momentum of a steam locomotive, a hypnotic, hurtling movement into the future.

Born in 1898 and 1899 respectively, George Gershwin and Fred Astaire were manifestly children of the Machine Age. Astaire was born deep in the Midwest, in Omaha, Nebraska, where his earliest memory was “the rumbling of the locomotives in the distance as engines switched freight cars in the evening when we sat on the front porch and also after I went to bed. That and the railway whistles in the night, going someplace. I used to imagine that I was riding on a train.” When he was just five a train carried him and sister Adele to New York, launching a legendary theatrical partnership. The journey took two days and two nights with a change in Chicago. “Everything about the trip intrigued me,” Fred recalled. “The conductors, brakemen, Pullman porters, upper berths--everything about railroads. They literally sent me.”

In Manhattan, he was fascinated by the elevated trains and the subway, which were so much a part of the musical mosaic of Gershwin’s childhood. For, if the infant Fred fell asleep to the sounds of lonesome transcontinental freight trains, the young George--born in Brooklyn and raised in Harlem--woke to a dizzying cacophony that included the “din of the elevated overhead... The madness of the traffic below...the cracked tones of the hurdy-gurdy... The blatant ballyhoo of the honky-tonk.” These were the elements of a new “acoustic

environment” identified by Bertolt Brecht in his 1938 essay “Über reimlose Lyrik mit unregelmässigen Rhythmen” (“On Rhymeless Verse with Irregular Rhythms”). On seeing the film “Shall We Dance,” in which Astaire tap-danced to Gershwin’s “Slap That Bass” inside the gleaming engine room of an ocean liner, Brecht noted “the astonishingly close relationship between the new noises and the percussive rhythms of jazz.” Crucial to this relationship, and to the formation of Gershwin and Astaire’s rhythmic sensibilities, was the influence of leading African American artists of the Harlem Renaissance. As a teenage vaudevillian, Astaire observed from the wings the great Bill “Bojangles” Robinson, though the dancer he “most liked to watch” was rhythm-tap pioneer John Bubbles (the stage name of John William Sublett), who created the role of Sportin’ Life in Gershwin’s only opera, “Porgy and Bess.” During their Broadway years, Astaire and Gershwin made regular excursions uptown to the Cotton Club, and both men absorbed the stride piano technique of Eubie Blake, James P. Johnson, “Fats” Waller, and Willie “The Lion” Smith.

A decade before “Slap That Bass”, the show-stopping “Fascinating Rhythm”--originally titled “Syncopated City”--synthesized black rhythms and new noises and translated them to Broadway and West End audiences. It became, effectively, an anthem of the Jazz Age. Moreover, it was the song that defined the singular symbiosis between the Gershwins and the Astaires. In the 1920s, the two pairs of siblings were revolutionary interpreters and foremost ambassadors of one of America’s few indigenous art forms. What was so fascinating about the Astaires in particular was their profound impact and appeal at a time when Eliot’s “Waste Land” and Joyce’s “Ulysses,” Vorticism and Dada, were exploding onto the cultural landscape; their New World defiance of the darker aspects of the interwar psyche; their hopefulness and *joie de vivre*; their absolute modernity free of modernist angst. As one rapturous London critic wrote: “Nothing like them since the Flood.”

Adele was a natural dancer who could be graceful and clownish simultaneously, but greater than her dancing genius was the sheer, triumphant force of her personality. George Jean Nathan compared the potent effect of her presence to “a dozen Florestan cocktails filtered through silk,” describing her as “a figure come out of Degas to a galloping ragtime tune.” Perhaps the young reviewer who, in 1919, said Adele danced like a lilac flame put it best, for a lilac flame burns vigorously from the life-giving elements of potassium and oxygen. Fred was the less obviously combustive star but, in his disciplined, unassuming, fretful way, equally magnetic and brilliantly inventive. He had, it was remarked, “not only winged heels, but winged arms and winged back,” and he was cool before the concept was coined. Apart from the fluency, speed, intricacy and eccentric wit of their dancing, the Astaires were masters of rhythm, rhythms that were slick, metropolitan, mercurial, jazzy. But, as in Gershwin’s music, beneath the surface polyrhythms was a kind of frontier quality, a tenderness and yearning that was just as identifiably American. The Astaires in fact exemplified F. Scott Fitzgerald’s fundamentally romantic if elegiac notion of America as “a willingness of the heart.”

With “Lady, Be Good!” in 1924, their first full-scale collaboration, the Astaires and the Gershwins broke new ground. “For with this show,” Gerald Bordman declared, “the rhythms, tensions and color of stage jazz were defined...it introduced a new tone to the American musical stage.” Matching the dazzling rhythms of the Astaires and brother George were Ira Gershwin’s lyrics, which jazz historian Ted Gioia believes “had an even more pervasive influence than, say, F. Scott Fitzgerald or Ernest Hemingway in shaping American diction.” The show, and “Fascinating Rhythm” most of all, represented a shared creative idiom that expressed the mood and style of the mid-1920s, that articulated the Cowardian-

mad jazz patterns and nervous urban energy of this period of unprecedented modernity. There was something else at play too, something that aligns “Fascinating Rhythm” more closely with Gershwin’s concert work than might first appear.

Gershwin’s most famous orchestral piece, “Rhapsody in Blue,” was conceived on a railroad journey to Boston: “It was on the train, with its steely rhythms, its rattle-ty-bang that is so often stimulating to a composer.... And there I suddenly heard--and even saw on paper--the complete construction of the rhapsody, from beginning to end.... I heard it as a sort of musical kaleidoscope of America--of our vast melting pot, of our unduplicated national pep, of our blues, our metropolitan madness.” Yet this railroad-inspired rhapsody, and no less the score of “Lady, Be Good!,” manages to penetrate the metropolitan madness, to reveal a different side of the American character and of Gershwin’s own character, to convey--in the words of British musicologist Donald Mitchell--“the strangest combination of intense vitality and incurable nostalgia, both exuberantly gregarious and intolerably lonely.”

This haunting combination of vitality and nostalgia takes us back to the railroad and to the Astaires’ Midwestern contemporary, Scott Fitzgerald. In his novels, Fitzgerald sometimes uses trains in the manner of an Imagist poet, to encapsulate vividly and precisely the essence of the American soul and its duality. In “Tender is the Night,” he anthropomorphizes American locomotives as “absorbed in an intense destiny of their own, and scornful of people on another world less swift and breathless,” while in “The Great Gatsby,” he evokes, with a palpably American sense of longing, “the thrilling, returning trains of my youth and the street lamps and sleigh bells in the frosty dark.” These images, and their Janus-faced nostalgia, are reminiscent of the formative sounds of Astaire and Gershwin’s childhoods--the lonely whistle of the locomotive across a darkened prairie, the bumptious clatter of the elevated train across a restless cityscape--sounds that were intrinsic to the fascinating rhythms created by the grown-up Gershwin and Astaire.

In common with Fitzgerald’s prose, the music made by the Gershwins and the Astaires--sublimely captured in the 1926 recording of “Fascinating Rhythm”--beat with the heart of a generation that was brash and vulnerable, headlong and wistful, worldly and impossibly young. As conductor Michael Tilson Thomas has said, it “expressed what it was to be alive at that moment as an American.”

Kathleen Riley is a writer and classical scholar. She has published books and articles on a wide variety of subjects, from Euripides and Horace to Oscar Wilde and Seamus Heaney. Her critically acclaimed biography “The Astaires: Fred and Adele” has been optioned for a motion picture.

*The views expressed in the essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.