The Registry selection of the Decca original cast recording of “Porgy and Bess” honors an album that was made five years after the American Folk Opera had its New York premiere on October 10, 1935, a time lapse that was a breeze compared with the nine years it took from George Gershwin’s first reading of DuBose Heyward’s novel, “Porgy,” until their “Porgy and Bess” opened at Manhattan’s Alvin Theater (now the Neil Simon Theater) where it was reviewed by both theatre and music critics, the latter group’s judgments ranging from generally negative to downright hostile.

Four days after its Broadway premiere, the first “Porgy” recording session began at RCA Studio #1 in Manhattan. It was “recorded under the supervision of the composer” and featured the production’s conductor, Alexander Smallens, the pit orchestra musicians and the Eva Jessye Choir, all of whom were performing in “Porgy” every night at the Alvin. What prevented the RCA recordings from constituting the first-ever original Broadway cast album was the casting of white Metropolitan Opera singers Lawrence Tibbett as Porgy and Helen Jepson as Bess instead of the black Todd Duncan and Anne Brown who performed the title roles on stage. The presence of Tibbett on the records is somewhat ironic: when George Gershwin finally convinced the reluctant Duncan to take on the role of Porgy he made a note that Duncan was “the closest to a colored Tibbett I have ever heard.”

“Porgy” had a Broadway run of just 124 performances, followed by a tour of select major cities that ended at the National Theater in Washington D.C. where the theater’s “whites only” policy was broken when Duncan and Brown refused to perform until the theater was desegregated for the “Porgy” engagement.

Except for recordings and radio performances of “Summertime,” which already was well on its way to becoming a standard, little was heard of “Porgy” until 1938 when a West Coast revival with Duncan, Brown, other original cast principals and Avon Long replacing John Bubbles as Sportin’ Life, caught the attention of Jack Kapp, the innovative founder and president of Decca Records who decided that the time had come for an album of the great Gershwin score. Decca reunited original cast members but with Duncan singing both his title role songs and “Sportin’ Life’s” and Anne Brown doing her Bess songs and a complete “Summertime” instead of just the brief reprise of it she had sung on stage. Original “Porgy” cast members Edward Matthews, Geogette Harvey, Helen Dowdy and the Eva Jessye Choir were hired for the sessions which also had Alexander Smallens conducting the Decca Symphony Orchestra.
The album sold well and generated enough interest that, in 1942, a streamlined version of “P&B” was produced by Cheryl Crawford at the then highly-regarded Maplewood Theater in New Jersey. The new production had a smaller cast and orchestra than the original and substituted dialog for the recitative of the original. It received good reviews, including some raves, from many of the New York drama critics who deigned to cross the Hudson River to see it. The Maplewood production was then transferred to Broadway where it ran for a respectable and profitable 286 performances. It also generated two new Decca “Porgy” albums with performers from the then current cast, including some veterans of the original 1935 production. The new, more authentic album, Volume 2, was later combined with the 1940 album for the 1950 recording that is now in the Registry.

For years the Decca 1943 recording of “Oklahoma” and not the 1940 “Porgy and Bess” was considered, erroneously, to be the very first original Broadway cast album. Some purists, however, contend that neither album is 100% “original Broadway,” mainly because of shorter, re-orchestrated recordings (although the 1940 “Porgy” album consisted of 12” records rather than the 10” discs used then for popular songs). Another perceived shortcoming concerned the re-distribution of songs to cast members who did not perform them on stage. Alfred Drake, in addition to singing his “Curly” songs, also performed the Jud Fry solo “Lonely Room,” which was originally sung by Howard da Silva in the show. Similarly, the numbers “appropriated” for Duncan and Brown were not true original cast performances.

Another commonality of the two shows’s LP and CD issues is that each is a combination of two 78rpm Decca albums, “Selections from George Gershwin’s PORGY AND BESS” Volumes 1 and 2, and “Selections from The Theatre Guild Musical Play OKLAHOMA!” Volumes 1 and 2.

The 1942 Decca-driven Cheryl Crawford “Porgy” flourished on its tour of American cities, revisiting many of them and returning to Broadway for 24 performances in 1943 and 64 performances in 1944.

In 1942, Liberty Music Shop issued a three-record set of “Porgy” with Mabel Mercer and Cy Walter which was one of the first, if not the first, “cover” albums of a musical issued by any label.

World War II precluded all foreign productions except for one which was mounted by the Royal Danish Opera. Although Denmark was occupied by the Germans, the centuries-old theater continued to function and “Porgy” opened there on March 23, 1943, with a star cast performing it in Danish, and in black face. It was an immediate success and after a few weeks of sold-out houses, the Nazis ordered that the “Negro, Jewish, American” work to cease performances. The edict was ignored until its 22nd standing room only performance (32nd or more according to some accounts) when the Gestapo threatened to blow up the theater if “Porgy” was performed there again. The Nazi ultimatum brought the Royal Opera run to an abrupt end but the Danes reportedly continued playing it, moving the show to different clandestine venues for many nights without being caught.

The Danish production also generated the first original foreign language cast recordings from “P&B,” two songs performed by “Porgy” Einar Norby and “Bess” Else Brems, a singer of international repute who also had toured the United States in solo concert performances. Their Tono label 78 rpm of Norby singing “I Got Plenty O’ Nuttin’” and joining Brems for “Bess, You Is My Woman Now”—in Danish—can be heard today on YouTube.

Prior to the ban on performances some European opera impresarios from nations where the Germans allowed them to travel headed to Copenhagen to see “Porgy.” Their visits resulted in many post-war productions of it throughout Europe, including a 1945 Swedish production that
was performed in black face. A great success, it was broadcast, apparently by popular demand, and later issued as a 2-Lp album on the SR Records label.

After peace broke out in 1945, the Danish Royal Opera was quick to revive “P&B,” with the original Porgy, Todd Duncan, acting and singing in Danish, which he learned for the production. During rehearsals, he was amused to look at the blonde-haired, fair-skinned cast members he would be working with. At the first dress rehearsal, however, Duncan was surprised and very moved to see the performers in varied “lovely dark shades from light brown to black” facial makeup, “all kinds of hair texture,” and some of them with “wider noses.”

Duncan and Anne Brown appeared in individual concerts throughout Europe in the Post-war years. Declaring that she was unhappy with racial discrimination in the US, Brown moved to Norway where she appeared in a multiracial production of “Porgy,” continued to concertize, married a Norwegian Olympic skier, raised a family, wrote her autobiography, gave voice lessons and was the prime advocate for “P&B” productions in Europe. When asthma ended her singing career she directed an Oslo production of “Porgy” in 1967, with the white cast in black face. She apparently directed more productions on the Continent and, through that and other levels of involvement, encouraged European music and drama organizations to perform her beloved “Porgy”—in black face.

“Porgy and Bess,” retitled “The Gershwin’s Porgy And Bess” for the last 10 years or so, continues to be the most frequently performed American opera in the world, with full productions, concert versions and very lengthy musical excerpts presented on foreign television networks from the 1950s to the present.

Daniel Langan has written and produced or directed many events for major theatres and performing arts centers with casts that included Tony Randall, Tony Bennett, Gwen Verdon, Margaret Whiting, and many others. He has written liner notes and booklets for RCA, Sony, Vanguard and other labels, with his work on the RCA Vintage Leo Reisman album and the Sony CD’s of “From Gershwin’s Time,” receiving much praise.

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