

1 The Unlikely Patriarch

MICHAEL OWEN

Shortly before the death of his father, George Gershwin told his friend and biographer Isaac Goldberg that the saddest part of knowing that the end was near was the realization “that there is nothing we can do to really help him.”¹ One year later, in the spring of 1933, in accordance with Jewish burial traditions, the *Jahrzeit* of Morris Gershwin’s death was commemorated with the unveiling of his tombstone at the Westchester Hills Cemetery, a Jewish reform cemetery in Hastings-on-Hudson, New York. Although the Gershwins were not observant Jews, they did participate in certain traditions of their faith.

As his automobile passed through the gates of the cemetery, George peered out of the window and saw members of his family awaiting his arrival. After walking up the gentle, grass-covered slope toward Morris’s tombstone, he was warmly greeted by his mother Rose, his brothers Ira and Arthur and sister Frances, his aunt Kate Wolpin, his uncle Aaron Gershwin, his cousin Gertrude Geller, and his maternal grandmother.

As the ceremony of laying the wreath and placing flowers took place, and reminiscences of the humorous, gentle Morris were exchanged, each person in attendance that day surely took a moment to glance over at George, recognizing this moment as the culmination of more than a decade of events that had not only brought him from the obscurity of New York’s Lower East Side to a penthouse apartment on the Upper West Side, but also touched each of them with a dusting of his celebrity.

More than eighty years later, we remain fortunate that someone brought a camera to the cemetery; two images among the thirty-one photographs captured that day illustrate the transformation of the Gershwin family and the moment George Gershwin became its unlikely patriarch. The first photograph (Figure 1.1) is the only known image of George Gershwin together with his three siblings when they were adults. The quartet is grouped tightly together, with George’s older brother Ira on the far left, hands in pockets and pipe in mouth, leaning awkwardly toward his sister, as if the photographer had just

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Figure 1.1 Ira Gershwin, Frances Gershwin, George Gershwin, Arthur Gershwin, Westchester Hills Cemetery, Hastings-on-Hudson, New York (1933). Courtesy of the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts

asked him to move closer before clicking the camera. Frances is sandwiched between Ira and George, her left hand reaching across her body to clutch her right hand in a protective stance, while Arthur – looking remarkably like George’s double – stands to the far right, holding a cigarette while his fingers fiddle nervously. By contrast, George looks composed and in control of the moment. Although the receding hairlines of all three brothers give the impression of additional years, the composer is just four months shy of his thirty-fifth birthday. Gazing steadily into the camera as he stands behind his siblings, George, wearing a flower in his lapel, stretches out his arms to place his hands comfortingly on their shoulders.

The second photograph (Figure 1.2) shows George and Ira on either side of their mother. Again, Ira appears uncomfortable, while George calmly puts his left hand on Rose’s shoulder. What is most notable about this image is Rose’s deferential attitude toward George; rather than leaning toward her oldest son, which would be the typical position, she clearly recognizes George as her protector. If this change in family dynamics had been unspoken since the success of “Swanee” thirteen years earlier, it was now clear: Morris and Rose Gershwin’s second son was the rock that the disparate members of his family clung to for stability.

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Figure 1.2 George Gershwin, Rose Gershwin, Ira Gershwin, Westchester Hills Cemetery, Hastings-on-Hudson, New York (1933). Courtesy of the Ira and Leonore Gershwin Trusts

The Gershwin Family

The personalities of George Gershwin’s parents have, over the course of eighty years of Gershwin biographies, typically been encapsulated in anecdotes. The father, Morris, was saddled with adjectives such as “easy-going” and “humorous,” yet he also displayed a restlessness that led him on a constant search for the American dream of financial security. The mother, Rose, was characterized as having the more dominant personality: a tough, unsentimental woman “who steered the family through the early years” with steely determination.²

The Gershwin line, said the composer’s first biographer, was one of “commercial acumen [rather] than artistic dedication.”³ Born in the Russian city of St. Petersburg in 1872, Morris Gershovitz was the son of a successful mechanic and the grandson of a rabbi from a small town near Vilna, in what is now Lithuania. At the age of eighteen, Morris – who apprenticed as a maker of ladies’ shoe uppers (a sought-after specialty wherever he might choose to live) – opted to avoid the mandatory military draft instituted by Czar Alexander III and left his family as he journeyed to create a new life for himself in the United States.

The daughter of a furrier, Rosa Bruskin was born around 1875 and, like Morris, was a native of St. Petersburg. She arrived in New York with her

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parents and two siblings within a few years of Morris's immigration. The couple, who had already known each other in St. Petersburg, soon reunited and were married in July 1895.

Included among Morris's many business ventures after leaving shoemaking were periods as an owner of restaurants and bakeries; a proprietor of Turkish baths, a rooming house, and a summer hotel in Spring Valley; an operator of a cigar and pool room near Grand Central Station and an automobile garage in the Bronx; and a memorable summer as a licensed bookie at Belmont Park racetrack. His preference for living within walking distance of his job led his family to twenty-eight different residences by the time George reached the age of eighteen. The financial instability of Morris's businesses often left his family in need of ready cash, moments that would send Ira off to the pawnshop with his mother's diamond ring.

The economic status of the Gershwin family was hardly that of the poor immigrant Jews who lived in the squalid tenements of New York's Lower East Side. E. Y. (Yip) Harburg, Ira's schoolfriend and fellow-lyricist, knew poverty firsthand, and the life of the Gershwins, exemplified by their "swank" apartment on Second Avenue and East Fifth Street, was not one of need. He recalled that Ira even "had an allowance and money to buy magazines, books and records" and that Morris and Rose were usually comfortable enough to employ a maid.⁴ After George's death, his mother took pains to refute the portrayal of the family's financial poverty in the fanciful 1945 Warner Bros. biopic of the composer, *Rhapsody in Blue*. Morris, she averred, "always made enough to take care of the family."⁵

Whether or not the Gershwins had money, Rose "was never the doting type," George wrote in a letter to his biographer. "Although very loving, she never watched every move we made. She was set on having us completely educated, the idea being that if everything else failed we could always become school-teachers." As children, the three brothers were largely left to their own devices, and George admitted that he could usually be found "with the boys on the street, skating and, in general, making a nuisance of myself."⁶

Music was not a part of his world. Any expression of musicality was restricted to Morris's knack of playing melodies on an improvised instrument of paper and comb, and in listening to the Enrico Caruso records that Morris favored, played on the Victrola that Ira was content to crank rather than pursue the piano lessons his aunt Kate briefly gave him. But from that now-fabled moment in 1910 when a used, upright piano was hoisted through the window of their second-floor flat on Second Avenue, life changed for the Gershwin family. George's inherent musical talent

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blossomed, first as a piano player and song plugger, then as a songwriter. By the end of the decade, George's income provided financial security.

Rise of the Patriarch

The doors of the majestic Capitol Theatre opened on October 24, 1919 with a lavish production that included two songs composed by twenty-one-year-old George Gershwin. One of these, an "American one-step" written with lyricist Irving Caesar to capitalize on the faux-exoticism of popular songs like "Hindustan," was called "Swanee." Sung to little effect and notice in its original setting, when George played "Swanee" at a party for Al Jolson (one of Broadway's most popular performers, whose hit show *Sinbad* was playing across the street at the Winter Garden), the combination of song and artist gave off sparks. Jolson's exuberant performance of "Swanee," on stage and on a Columbia Records disc, became the launching pad for George's career as a popular songwriter.

Jolson's recording, as well as George's piano roll of the song and the published sheet music, each sold in the millions and reportedly garnered the composer ten thousand dollars in royalties in the first year alone. This sudden flush of money transformed Morris's second son from the boy whom his father predicted might become a vagabond into the family's primary breadwinner. Thus began the gradual process of the next decade that relegated Morris to the role of nominal patriarch.

While his father continued to maintain a series of businesses, it was George's fame that pushed the family onto an upwardly mobile path. Only a year after the success of "Swanee," the Gershwins' uptown apartment was abandoned for a significantly better dwelling on East 12th Street in Greenwich Village, and by an even more spacious property on West 110th Street in Morningside Heights in 1922. By the following spring, George had established himself as a Broadway songwriter, with a series of scores for producer George White's popular *Scandals* revues, as well as *Stop Flirting*, a successful show in London starring Fred and Adele Astaire, which its producer, Alex Aarons, hoped would lead to "just the kind of thing we have been wanting for a long time to do."⁷ The result was 1924's *Lady, Be Good!*, the first full-length Broadway collaboration of George and Ira Gershwin. George also had larger ambitions that he was convinced could take him beyond the formulaic thirty-two-bar tunes of Tin Pan Alley. These were realized on the evening of February 12, 1924, when the final notes of the first performance of *Rhapsody in Blue* rang out in New York's Aeolian Hall. Representatives of the worlds of music and letters, including conductor Walter Damrosch, violinist Fritz Kreisler,

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pianist Leopold Godowsky, and writer Carl Van Vechten, were dazzled by a new voice that critic and composer Deems Taylor quickly labeled as “a link between the jazz camp and the intellectuals.”⁸

George’s blurring of the lines between popular songwriter, classical composer, concert pianist, and celebrity gave him an entrée to high society in the United States and Europe. In the years that followed, he took on many roles, although his position as the financial backbone of his family was, in some ways, the closest to his heart. George’s fame provided financial independence for his entire family. Not only did he support them directly, but he also became a financial conduit by facilitating stock market recommendations from newly minted friends on Wall Street. He supplied loans to Morris and Ira for their investments in some of his Broadway shows (productions in which he himself was often an investor). Ira gratefully acknowledged the assistance: “I told him I didn’t have \$2,500.00 [to invest in *Of Thee I Sing*] . . . but maybe I could borrow it. The next day my brother loaned me the money and happily I was able to repay the loan a few months later. My \$2,500.00 investment brought me besides the repayment some \$11,000.00.”⁹

In July 1925, George became the first composer to grace the cover of *Time* magazine, and shortly thereafter he purchased a five-story white granite house on West 103rd Street, a property spacious enough that he could occupy the entire top floor, while his parents and siblings inhabited distinctive lodgings of their own on the lower levels.

Morris, naturally, was proud of George’s accomplishments. Rather than being troubled by his son having taken over his role as patriarch, he discovered joy and freedom in his new position as the life of the party when his son entertained friends. Morris’s antics were ready-made fodder for the press: “Besides telling stories that amuse the guests because of their unconscious humor,” wrote one New York newspaper columnist, “his father entertains by imitating a trumpet.” Morris even reportedly stood guard outside his son’s door while he was composing. “If Gershwin should stop playing the piano for a few minutes, Papa Gershwin will enter the room, whistle a bit and then say: ‘Perhaps that will help you, George?’”¹⁰

George and Ira loved to relate their father’s po-faced comments to anyone within earshot. The song “Embraceable You” from *Girl Crazy* was one of Morris’s favorites, said its lyricist: “Whenever possible, with company present, his request to George was: ‘Play that song about me.’ And when the line ‘Come to papa – come to papa – do!’ was sung, he would thump his chest, look around the room, and beam.”¹¹ The composer wrote to a friend that, during the composition of the *Second Rhapsody* in 1931, his father “came out with the brilliant suggestion that I should call it

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‘RHAPSODY IN BLUE #2.’ Then, he says, ‘You can write #3 and #4, just like Beethoven.’”¹²

Rose, relieved to see her “Georgie” move from a twenty-five-dollar-a-week piano player on Tin Pan Alley to a Broadway and concert hall success, reveled in her son’s fame in a distinctive style.¹³ George never failed to make sure that his mother dressed in elegant furs and jewels and that she occupied a prominent seat at the premieres of his concert works and Broadway musicals. “At his cocktail parties or midnight affairs at his apartment, she was often an honored guest, moving with dignity and respect (Yiddish accent and all) among the celebrities.”¹⁴ He also subsidized her vacations, joking to a friend that he made at least one trip to Miami Beach just “to give mother a whirl. Four people last night thought she was my wife.”¹⁵

After his father’s death in 1932, George – between artistic commitments and his ongoing relationship with the composer Kay Swift – focused much of his attention on his mother’s health. Rose had suffered from bouts of respiratory ailments since the late 1920s, and she had undergone at least one serious nasal operation. George sent her to Arizona in the hope that the dry air of the southwest would bring her relief, and he accompanied her to a Pennsylvania sanitarium where she sought treatment.¹⁶ Yet nothing seemed to help, he said. “It all seems very hopeless and sad.”¹⁷

George’s younger brother and sister, Arthur and Frances, spent most of their lives out of the public eye. Consequently, their relationships with him remain somewhat opaque. At the height of the composer’s fame in the mid-1930s, Arthur had yet to find a similar level of professional or personal success. Two years younger than George, Arthur had ambitions to join his brothers in the family songwriting business. After abandoning his musical training not long after George began studying piano (“His principal complaint,” wrote Ira, “was that George, when taking a lesson, sat down – whereas he, taking one, had to stand up”), Arthur became a salesman – first of men’s clothing, then for a variety of motion picture companies, including Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, before settling into work as a stockbroker – all the while continuing to dabble at the piano.¹⁸

When presented with the opportunity, George never failed to offer Arthur a helping hand. In the spring of 1934, when the composer was hosting *Music by Gershwin*, a successful half-hour radio show broadcast over the NBC network, he featured the work of many up-and-coming songwriters (including Harold Arlen, Vernon Duke, and Dana Suesse). On one episode, he extended that generosity to Arthur. He also facilitated the publication of one of his brother’s tunes, “Slowly but Surely” (lyrics by Edward Heyman), which appeared shortly after its radio broadcast under the imprint of New World Music, the company that had published

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George's own songs since the late 1920s. There was even a story George told one friend – perhaps in jest – that since his current producers were so slow to provide a good story for his next show, he would have to train Arthur to write the books¹⁹ and suggested to his mother that perhaps his brother could oversee the entire production.²⁰ Toward the end of his life, George continued to express concern over Arthur's future, telling Rose that he hoped a market could be found for his music.

George's youngest sibling, his sister Frances – born in 1906, a decade to the day after Ira, and usually known as “Frankie” – was only a teenager when “Swanee” became a national hit. Nonetheless, she had already acquired her own taste of the theatrical life when, at age ten, she joined the cast of a touring vaudeville act called Daintyland.

George was extremely protective of his sister, even as she grew into a “chestnut-haired flapper.”²¹ He often reminded her to mind her language in public, and he suggested she would be more lady-like if she kept her skirts below her knees. That said, he actively encouraged her theatrical ambitions and acted as her accompanist at parties and at auditions for roles in musicals, moments when she would interpret his songs “with convincing abandon.”²² Frances had small parts in two Broadway revues (*Merry-Go-Round* 1927 and *Americana* 1928), but her most prominent moment in the Gershwin story came in the spring and summer of 1928, when she took an extended trip to Europe with George and Ira.

George was feted by European society; so too was his sister, who, after being spotted by Cole Porter at a party, was asked to join the cast of his new Paris production, *Les Revue Des Ambassadors*. On the opening night, George played the piano while Frances warbled a medley of Gershwin songs, prefaced by Porter's own specialty number that predicted “an orgy of music written by Georgie.”²³

Although her career as an actress eventually faltered, Frances continued to benefit from her brother's generosity, both artistically and financially. A year after the European journey, George accompanied her performance of his rarely heard art song “In the Mandarin's Orchid Garden” on a CBS radio broadcast. More personally, George acted as chief serenader when his sister married Leopold Godowsky, Jr., in November 1930. Decades later, Frances recalled that her father was more concerned that he and Rose would miss their train to Florida than he was with the details of his daughter's wedding. On the other hand, she continued, “George came in from his apartment; he just walked across with his bathrobe on, his pajamas, and a long cigar in his mouth, and he sat down and was fooling around on the piano . . . When the ceremony was over George played the ‘Wedding March.’”²⁴

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George appears to have had the closest relationship with his older brother, Ira. Morris and Rose Gershwin's first child was born in 1896 in the couple's home above Simpson's Pawnshop at the corner of Hester and Eldridge Streets in New York. Ira's scholarly mien was a distinct contrast to that of his scrappy kid brother. While George played in the streets, Ira pursued literature, devoured books and magazines, and kept hand-written journals in which he set down his thoughts about the world around him and his nascent dreams of a career as a writer. Ira's parents – somewhat hampered by their imprecise grasp of the English language – acknowledged their son's easy facility with words, and during George's school days, deputized Ira to visit his brother's teachers to explain his frequent absences.

Once George began to display a facility at the piano, Ira became his ardent admirer and champion. It was Ira who was responsible for his brother's first public appearance as a performer and composer in 1914, in his role as a member of the committee tasked with hiring the entertainment for a function at the Finlay Club, an organization affiliated with the City College of New York. After George was hired as a Tin Pan Alley song plugger, the brothers' shared interest in musical theater was magnified exponentially. Not only did they attend the latest shows together – George avidly studying the music, Ira the lyrics, and both the form itself – but George often brought home copies of the newest published songs and would sit at the piano, Ira standing by him rapt in wonder at his brother's technique.

George, sensing that Ira might be ready to find his own place in the musical theater world, introduced his brother to another rising composer, Vincent Youmans, with whom the “scared stiff” lyricist wrote his first full Broadway score, the successful musical comedy *Two Little Girls in Blue* (1921).²⁵ Rather than use his own name, George's self-effacing sibling cast himself as one Arthur Francis, whom George described to a producer as “a clever college boy with lots of talent.”²⁶ The pseudonym, which made its first appearance on the sheet music to “Waiting for the Sun to Come Out” in 1920 – the initial published song credited jointly to the brothers – was derived from the given names of his younger brother and sister; thus the fortunes of Arthur and Frances – unbeknownst to the world at large – also became part of the Gershwin story.

After the brothers' partnership was cemented by *Lady, Be Good!*, Ira became George's most trusted collaborator, their push-and-pull method of working highlighting their very dissimilar personalities. If George was lightning in a bottle, Ira was the quiet scholar whose erudite and jewel-like lyrics provided the counterpoint to the composer's unstoppable fount of melodies. The brothers' working relationship was not so much dependent on their being brothers, as it was on an undying mutual respect for each other's abilities.

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The Death of a Patriarch

A little more than four years after the unveiling of Morris's tombstone, the Gershwin family returned to the Westchester Hills Cemetery to bury George. The tragedy of George Gershwin's unexpected death on July 11, 1937 was felt around the world; the effect of that loss on the members of his immediate family was multiplied by his status as their lodestone. Now as their automobiles left the cemetery once again, the mourners became lost in their thoughts of the impact George had made on their lives as son, brother, and artistic collaborator. As Ira later explained, his brother "had a great admiration for family," and since his meteoric rise to fame and fortune, he had been the literal glue that bonded his parents and siblings together.²⁷ With his death, that bond began to fracture as the individual members of the Gershwin family drifted apart, never to fully heal or unite again.

Seven months before George's death, Rose, Frances, and her husband Leo left the chilly climes of New York for a stay with George and Ira at their rented house in sunny Beverly Hills, California. Their visit, George informed a correspondent, "cheered me up immeasurably . . . I am myself again."²⁸ Home movies taken during this time show the visitors gathered around the swimming pool, laughing and joking for the camera, clearly enjoying these moments of familial togetherness. George, eschewing the Hollywood starlets he had been squiring, even took Rose as his date to a dinner hosted by the actor Edward G. Robinson for composer Igor Stravinsky. When Frances and Leo left for Mexico in January, and Rose departed for New York three months later, they could not have suspected it would be the last time they would see George alive.

Life after George

Rose Gershwin outlived her husband by sixteen years; her second son by eleven. As George's sole heir, she became a wealthy woman; she also became a somewhat awkward representative of her late son's legacy. When she passed away in December of 1948, her estate, which included George's, was left to her three surviving children.

Arthur's place in the story of his brother remained that of an enigma. "I'm the Gershwin nobody ever hears about," he once mused regretfully.²⁹ In the spring of 1938, he gave up his career as a Wall Street stockbroker to make another attempt as a songwriter, hoping in vain that Ira would agree to become the lyrical half of a new Gershwin partnership. That was not to be, and without George's guidance, he floundered. His one moderate