

Hello, and welcome to Busy Kids Love Music, the podcast for curious kids who love learning about the great composers and the incredible music they created! I'm Carly, the creator of Busy Kids Do Piano, and I'm so excited to kick off the new year with a brand-new composer series. This time, we're diving into the life and music of one of America's most famous composers: George Gershwin.

Today, we'll explore Gershwin's fascinating life story, his unique musical style, and the important people and places that shaped him. So, let's get started!

George Gershwin was born on September 26, 1898, in Brooklyn, New York. His parents, Morris and Rose Gershovitz, were Jewish immigrants from Russia. George was the second of four children, and music wasn't something his family thought much about—at first.

That all changed when George was around 10 years old. His older brother, Ira, had been given a piano, but it was George who immediately fell in love with the instrument. He'd race home from school just to practice, and soon his natural talent was obvious. Gershwin began studying with Charles Hambitzer, a piano teacher who recognized his potential and introduced him to classical composers like Chopin, Liszt, and Debussy. George's love for both classical music and the vibrant rhythms of the jazz-filled streets of New York became the foundation of his unique style.

By the time he was a teenager, George knew he wanted to make a career in music. He left high school at just 15 to work as a "song plugger" in Tin Pan Alley. Song pluggers were pianists who played new songs for publishers and potential buyers. This job helped George develop his incredible ear for catchy melodies.

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Soon, George wasn't just playing other people's music—he was writing his own. In 1919, when Gershwin was only 20 years old, he had his first big hit with a song called "Swanee". It was made famous by the entertainer Al Jolson and sold over a million copies of sheet music, launching Gershwin's career as a composer. You're currently listening to a recording of George Gershwin himself playing his first hit single.

What made George Gershwin's music so special? He was a master at blending two very different styles: classical music and jazz. Classical music has a long history of structure and form, while jazz is often freer and full of improvisation. Gershwin combined the two, creating music that was both sophisticated and fun to listen to.

His music feels like the heartbeat of 1920s and 1930s America—full of energy, optimism, and the excitement of big cities like New York.

Gershwin's life wasn't just about music, though. He was known for his playful and curious personality. He loved painting, playing tennis, and even taking boxing lessons. Gershwin had many friendships with other famous musicians, including composer Maurice Ravel, who once refused to teach Gershwin, saying, "Why be a second-rate Ravel when you can be a first-rate Gershwin?"

His most important relationship was with his older brother, Ira Gershwin. The two were a dynamic duo, with George writing the music and Ira penning the clever, catchy lyrics. Together, they created some of the most memorable songs in American history, like "I Got Rhythm" and "Embraceable You."

George Gershwin's partnership with his older brother, Ira, was one of the most successful collaborations in music history. Their teamwork was seamless—George would sketch out a melody, and Ira would find the perfect words to match, using plenty of slang, puns and wordplay.. This partnership wasn't just about talent; it was built on mutual respect and a deep understanding of each other's creative strengths.

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Their songs often found homes in Broadway musicals and Hollywood films, becoming instant classics that people still sing today. While George loved the spotlight and thrived on the energy of performing and composing, Ira was more reserved, preferring to work quietly behind the scenes. Despite their different personalities, the Gershwin brothers shared a common goal: to create music that was both sophisticated and accessible. Their collaborations weren't just about making hits—they redefined American popular music by blending wit, emotion, and the lively rhythms of jazz. Their musical *Of Thee I Sing*, was the first musical to win a Pulitzer Prize.

George Gershwin was incredibly versatile, composing music in a wide variety of styles that showcased his creativity and talent. In addition to writing popular Broadway show tunes with his brother, he also ventured into classical music, creating groundbreaking works like “Rhapsody in Blue” and “An American in Paris” which is the piece you’re listening to now. These works blended jazz and orchestral elements in ways that had never been done before. Gershwin even wrote operas, the most famous being “Porgy and Bess,” a powerful story set in an African American community in the South that includes the iconic song “Summertime.” From toe-tapping musical numbers to emotionally rich classical pieces, Gershwin’s music broke boundaries and brought different audiences together.

George Gershwin’s life was tragically short. He passed away at just 38 years old in 1937 from a brain tumor. Despite his short life, his influence on music was enormous. Gershwin’s ability to unite classical traditions with the rhythms and harmonies of jazz created a sound that was uniquely American.

In our next episode, we’ll take a deep dive into one of Gershwin’s most famous works, “Rhapsody in Blue.” This piece is often described as the sound of 1920s America, and we’ll explore how Gershwin brought it to life. Be sure to tune in!

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I've created a playlist of some of Gershwin's most famous works, including ones you heard in today's episode, in the show notes at [busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/141](https://busykidsdopiano.com/podcast/141).

Thanks so much for joining me today on Busy Kids Love Music. If you enjoyed this episode, be sure to subscribe so you don't miss the rest of our George Gershwin series. You can also find more resources, including listening guides and fun activities, on our website at [busykidsdopiano.com](https://busykidsdopiano.com).

Until next time, keep listening and keep learning, and I look forward to connecting with you again in 2 weeks when our next brand new episode airs.