

## Isaac Goldberg: Assessing Agency in American Music Biography

Isaac Goldberg's foundational account, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music* (Simon and Schuster, 1931), continues to govern both the scholarship and reception of one of our country's most celebrated composers. "Perhaps more than any other single source," note the editors of the recently published Gershwin reader, "[Goldberg's] biography provides a timeless period glimpse of Gershwin during his lifetime, a uniquely valuable document given its dependence on the composer's own thoughts about his life and music that are contained in the letters exchanged between the author and composer."<sup>1</sup> All subsequent biographers—from David Ewen (1943) to Howard Pollack (2007)—have drawn on Goldberg's contemporary account, from its narratives of Gershwin's childhood to the roughly twenty pages of quotations attributed to Gershwin himself. Over the years, Goldberg has been supplemented, but not supplanted.

But who was Isaac Goldberg? In the Gershwin literature, if elements of Goldberg's own biography emerge at all, one finds allusions to his standing as a Harvard professor or his authorship of an earlier book on Tin Pan Alley, but little else. The paucity of knowledge on Goldberg is surprising given current scholarship's continued reliance on his work. Goldberg's correspondence and published writings reveal how the author's childhood, training, and vision for American music affected his narrative construction of Gershwin. Probing Goldberg's biography and musical ideology provide insight into his promotion of Gershwin at the same time as it forces a critical reconsideration of his book's place in the historiography of the composer.

Isaac Goldberg's ultimate vision of American music was directly influenced by his late-nineteenth and early twentieth-century Boston upbringing. The Goldberg family lived on Lowell Street in the city's West End, a now-defunct working-class neighborhood then populated by Jewish and Italian immigrant families. His preference for municipal band concerts and Gilbert and Sullivan highlights the noticeable absence of the Boston Symphony Orchestra and other so-called "highbrow" entertainments during his adolescence. He recalled that "the first music I wrote was inspired immediately by the orchestras at the burlesque houses. I had composed a great deal as an adolescent, mostly for the piano, which in a very crude manner I had taught myself."<sup>2</sup>

In light of his later assessment of Gershwin, it is worth noting that the core of Goldberg's musical training took place outside of formal educational systems. During his second year of high school in 1904, Goldberg played hooky for an entire month having "conceived a violent distaste for [his] studies." He continues:

What was I doing during that month? It was a busman's holiday. I was chiefly at the Public Library, studying harmony and counterpoint in the silences of the music room. Had I been caught at the time, I should have been doubly denounced as a wayward and undisciplined child. In sober fact I was intensely purposive and excessively disciplined, as any one will recognize if he is at all acquainted with the unnecessary rigors of counterpoint.<sup>3</sup>

Goldberg hoped to attend the New England Conservatory of Music upon graduation from high school; however, his Russian-immigrant father forbade his eldest son from becoming a musician. Instead, with the assistance of academic scholarships, Goldberg enrolled at Harvard during the fall of 1907. There he became a comparative literature major, completing a thesis on the theater of Spanish- and Portuguese-America. He graduated *summa cum laude* in 1910 and remained at Harvard where, only two years later, he earned a Ph.D. in romance languages and literature.

While Goldberg would eventually lecture for two semesters at Harvard in the 1930s—which is where his professor status originates—he found public speaking unfulfilling and uncomfortable. Shortly after completing his graduate studies, Goldberg became a freelance writer for the *Boston Evening Transcript*. Throughout WWI, he published bi-weekly essays covering a wide range of cultural topics from abroad including art, architecture, literature, poetry, theater, and music. Since he never left the United States and rarely ventured beyond New England, his coverage of foreign cultural events and figures during this time relied heavily on work appearing in European- and South American-language journals. His staggering facility with foreign languages—he knew at least eight by this point in his life—allowed him to establish an "armchair" working method that he followed for the remainder of this career. Despite the fact that he largely relied on source material provided by others, Goldberg's insightful interpretation of this information made unfamiliar and otherwise inaccessible subjects available and relevant to his readership. This approach continued as his criticism attained national circulation in the mid-1920s, particularly with respect to his writings on musical modernism.

In the debate that surrounded the role of jazz in American classical composition, Goldberg emerged in opposition to critics such as Paul Rosenfeld who famously quipped: "American music is not jazz. Jazz is not music."<sup>4</sup> From Goldberg's point of view, the incorporation of jazz in contemporary composition, "actually educated the public. Educated, that is, in a physical as well as a musical



Isaac Goldberg, 1934

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sense. It has accustomed the popular ear to rhythmic intricacy, to a certain amount of contrapuntal and polyphonic involution, to shifts of key, even to harmonic modernism.”<sup>5</sup> To this end, Goldberg saw popular music as a valuable tool of mediation in helping the American public adjust to modernist innovations. Much in the same way that he interpreted foreign-language culture and texts to WWI-era readers of the *Boston Evening Transcript*, Goldberg used his interwar writings on music to decipher unfamiliar aspects of contemporary composition. At the same time as he educated his readers, Goldberg revealed his own hopes for American Music. He felt strongly that only a musician raised in the vernacular tradition would properly introduce jazz into classical composition.

It is particularly interesting, then, that in 1927 Goldberg initially declared Aaron Copland—and not Gershwin—the “young man who seems to hold out the greatest hopes for a jazz that shall be music as well.”<sup>6</sup> Correspondence in the Goldberg Collection housed at the New York Public Library reveals Goldberg’s preparation for this article. Since Copland remained relatively unknown at the time, Goldberg not only asked the composer for copies of his scores, but also for suggestions on published writings on his music, which remained scarce. Copland obliged both requests in a letter dated 7 February 1927, directing Goldberg to the writings of Paul Rosenfeld in the *Dial*. In particular he drew attention to a February 1926 review of *Music for the Theatre* in which Rosenfeld declared Copland’s use of popular music to be “ironic” and “barbaric,” ultimately reinforcing the close connection Copland maintained with the contemporary European-music scene even as he developed a personal idiom representative of a new American tradition.<sup>7</sup>

Not surprisingly, Goldberg’s subsequent article in *American Mercury* takes a markedly different view. He highlights the ways in which jazz dominates the music of Copland who wrote, “not as an adopted tongue, but in the only language that he knows. ... [He] weaves it into his writing as naturally as one employs the rhythms and accents of one’s childhood.”<sup>8</sup> This nicely aligned with Goldberg’s vision of an American music arising from its vernacular roots. However, upon reading the published article, Copland sent the following, rather gruff response to Goldberg:

If I advanced any criticism it would be that in spite of everything you say I am afraid the general impression is given that you are treating a jazz composer, which we both know is not true. The point is, that from my standpoint, as the first article to be devoted to my work as a whole, it rather overstates the jazz element. It is very possible that (to all outward appearances) I am now finished with jazz, but I can’t consider this a tragedy since I feel I was a composer before jazz and remain a composer without its aid. I’m sure you sense this too. But I’m not so sure about the readers of the Mercury. Not that they matter, of course—but we must be clear on this point.<sup>9</sup>

Copland leaves little doubt that he preferred Rosenfeld’s perspective, which framed the composer as incorporating popular music

sparingly and from the top-down point of view of a classically trained composer. Following this communication, Goldberg decisively backed away from both Copland and his music.

Two years later, in June 1929, Goldberg met Gershwin for the first time backstage at Symphony Hall following the Boston premiere of *An American in Paris*. He reported that it was one of those typical “green-room introductions; the celebrity shakes your hands, murmurs that he is pleased to meet you, and then proceeds at once to forget you. Why shouldn’t he? As for Gershwin, I knew him thoroughly before I met him; knew, that is, his music, from the first days to the present moment.”<sup>10</sup> It was a happy coincidence that Gershwin and Goldberg met when they did. Goldberg needed someone to champion and Gershwin needed a biographer. With a *Rhapsody*, a *Concerto*, a *Tone Poem*, and more than a dozen musicals under his belt, Gershwin’s celebrity and reputation were on the rise. A few months after their introduction in 1929, a series of extensive profile articles on Gershwin was arranged for publication in the *Ladies’ Home Journal*. Appearing in the spring of 1931, these represented the first in-depth consideration of Gershwin and subsequently formed the basis for the biography published later that year. Although we do not know the extent to which the composer was familiar with Goldberg’s writings prior to this time, his selection of Goldberg was particularly judicious. Both in his biography and beyond, Goldberg became an ardent promoter of Gershwin’s music, not only communicating the spirit of his compositions but demonstrating their musical value through analysis.

Gershwin was an appealing subject to Goldberg, and the two appear to have had much in common. Goldberg’s narrative portrayal of Gershwin’s youth emphasizes the intriguing parallels to his own childhood. Like Goldberg, Gershwin was born into a Jewish immigrant family and spent his youth playing in the rough-and-tumble streets of an urban working-class neighborhood; both discovered music on their own while playing hooky from school; both received their musical educations outside a traditional pedagogical setting. The difference, of course, is that while Gershwin was allowed to pursue his musical ambitions, Goldberg was not.

A large part of Goldberg’s assessment of Gershwin in the realm of American composition relies on portraying his musical intuition as natural and his abilities as self-taught. The cumulative effect of these and other biographical tidbits bequeathed longstanding conceptions of the composer—particularly images of Gershwin as naïve and unlearned—that have influenced both reception and scholarship. Although Howard Pollack’s recent biography demonstrates that such views of the composer have somewhat dissipated, other Goldbergian emendations remain unchallenged; namely, the quotations attributed to Gershwin himself.

As mentioned previously, scholars value Goldberg’s book for its reliance on the author’s extended conversations and correspondence with Gershwin—that is, for material that has been treated as primary source. However, evidence of significant direct collaboration between the two men remains scant. Only twelve letters from

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Gershwin to Goldberg survive in Harvard's Houghton library and little of the information provided therein finds its way into the book's twenty pages of quotations.

Goldberg prepared his manuscript for the biography in much the same way as his early *Transcript* articles, collecting information about his subject from the comfort of his home in Boston. Although the two met in person at least twice while the book was in process, much of the interviewing was actually conducted by a New York-based research assistant named John McCauley. We know little about McCauley's role other than Edward Jablonski and Lawrence Stewart's claim that he spoke more with George's brother Ira than with the composer himself. What is more, since technology precluded the recording of these conversations, it seems that McCauley and Goldberg had to reproduce Gershwin's statements either from their own notes or memory.

We may never be able to assess the degree to which the quotations appearing in Goldberg's book reflect what Gershwin actually said; however, there is evidence that Goldberg provided certain modifications, injecting a bit of dramatic license in service of a more compelling narrative. The effect of such alterations becomes apparent when comparing the aforementioned *Ladies Home Journal* articles with Goldberg's published biography. Quotations attributed to Gershwin in the magazine were altered, either slightly or extensively, when they subsequently appeared in the book. Some changes affected biographical data. For example, Gershwin's telling of his discovery of music with little Maxie Rosenzweig (later violinist Max Rosen), expands from a paragraph to a page in the book, introducing new tales of treacherous truancy and torrential downpours. Other alterations had to do with musical-historical issues. These include changes within a frequently quoted passage on the genesis of *Rhapsody in Blue*, which reframe our understanding of Gershwin's compositional process—not a small consideration when regarding the history of the *Rhapsody*.

My intention here is not to undermine Goldberg's efforts, for his book on Gershwin accomplishes its stated goal to "set down... data, even trivialities, that otherwise might be quickly lost to the eventual biographer."<sup>11</sup> Additionally, in Goldberg's own inimitable way, this biography eloquently expresses Gershwin's contributions to American music through insightful and witty criticism, providing a vivid snapshot of a life in progress.

At the same time, this portrait was ultimately Goldberg's. Gershwin may have signed off on the final project—he certainly had nothing to lose in the process—but Goldberg controlled the narrative direction of the book and chose *how* to portray the composer. Goldberg's own biography contains previously unacknowledged aspects of agency which emerge in his book on Gershwin. From his depiction of the composer's childhood to the analysis of his music, all parts are in service to his ground-up vision of American music—even if that meant fudging a quotation here or there. In conclusion, I recast the question posed initially: To what degree has our uncritical acceptance of Isaac Goldberg framed our subsequent understanding and assessment of Gershwin and his music? The answer to that

question requires re-thinking a significant section of scholarship on this foundational American composer.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Robert Wyatt and John Andrew Johnson, eds., *The George Gershwin Reader* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), xiv.

<sup>2</sup> Isaac Goldberg, "A Boston Boyhood," *American Mercury* 17, no. 67 (July 1929): 360.

<sup>3</sup> Isaac Goldberg, "Three Moral Moments" *American Mercury* 19, no. 73 (January 1930): 102.

<sup>4</sup> Paul Rosenfeld, *An Hour With American Music* (Philadelphia: J. B. Lippincott Company, 1929), 11.

<sup>5</sup> Isaac Goldberg, "The Lower Learning" *American Mercury* 5, no. 18 (June 1925): 158.

<sup>6</sup> Carol Oja briefly raises this issue in "Gershwin and American Modernists of the 1920s," *The Musical Quarterly* 78, no. 4 (Winter 1994): 658. Originally in Isaac Goldberg, "Aaron Copland and His Jazz," *American Mercury* 12, no. 45 (September 1927): 63. Emphasis added.

<sup>7</sup> Paul Rosenfeld, "Musical Chronicle" *The Dial* 80, no. 2 (February 1926): 175.

<sup>8</sup> Isaac Goldberg, "Aaron Copland and His Jazz," *American Mercury* 12, no. 45 (September 1927): 64.

<sup>9</sup> Letter from Copland to Isaac Goldberg, 15 September [1927], Isaac Goldberg Papers, MSS. & Archive Section, N.Y.P.L. Underline original. Reprinted by permission of The Aaron Copland Fund for Music, Inc., copyright owner.

<sup>10</sup> Isaac Goldberg, "In the World of Books," *American Freeman*, July 1929.

<sup>11</sup> Isaac Goldberg, *George Gershwin: A Study in American Music* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1931), 1.

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## In a Cold Sweat: *Soul Power*

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None of the above seems to matter in *Soul Power*, however, and when Brown enters the stage in a sequined jumpsuit emblazoned with his initials on the collar and "G.F.O.S." (Godfather of Soul) across the waist, the crowd erupts as he and his band display their legendary precision and the cameras catch it all in painstaking detail. A rare behind-the-scenes backstage shot during the end credits shows as close a look as one will ever see of the man behind the persona. Brown, in the dressing room after the performance and spent from the effort of being the self-billed hardest working man in show business, towels off in relative isolation.

*Soul Power* is an important contribution to the growing body of documented concert footage from the 1970s, including *Soul to Soul*, which covers a similar 1971 concert in Accra, Ghana, and *Wattstax* (both 2004). While there could be more extras to the DVD, what's included is beautifully edited and the sound is impeccably mastered. Perhaps the only criticism one could have is that there isn't more. If we are lucky, even that complaint will soon be remedied.

—Hank Williams  
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