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Easy to Remember: The Great American Songwriters and Their Songs
William Zinsser
David R. Godine
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From 1927 to the mid-1960s American popular songs poured from Broadway and Hollywood. Written by the likes of Porter, Hart, and Berlin, these songs were played on the pianos of thousands of households, and the words and tunes were memorized by millions. Melody writers and lyricists turned out classics like “Summertime,” “Stardust,” and “I’ll Never Smile Again,” creating what would become known as “standards.” Easy to Remember offers an informal, pleasant overview of this rich history of American song.

One play revolutionized American musicals in 1927: Show Boat. Before it, most musicals were a grab bag of songs that had little to do with the plot or characters. Pianist Jerome Kern and lyricist Oscar Hammerstein anchored songs like “Ol’ Man River” and “Make Believe” to the rhythm and development of the play. The material avoided the European musical influences that dominated the typical offerings of the day, and included blues and ragtime. Show Boat inspired a number of younger writers, like the Gershwins and Richard Rodgers.

Another central play was Porgy and Bess, which Zinsser calls “the Mount Everest of American musical theater.” The Gershwins and Du Bose Heyward fashioned an opera about an African-American community in the South called Catfish Row. Beautiful songs like “Summertime,” however, could not save the ambitious social and lengthy musical on its first run. It played for only 124 performances, lost money, and was misunderstood by critics in 1935. It took a revival in 1942 for Porgy and Bess to be recognized as a touchstone of the modern musical theater.

Zinsser declines to take a nostalgic point of view, “I think 40 years is a good run, and I’m grateful for what we got.” He lived through the era, working as an editor on the Sunday entertainment page of the New York Herald Tribune. His writing is lively, and he manages to entertain, whether offering biographical information or technical notes. The book will probably move the reader to watch warmly remembered classics like Show Boat, Oklahoma!, and Easter Parade, and to dust off old LPs by Johnny Mercer and Nat King Cole. Easy to Remember succeeds in recalling and offering praise to the great writers of America’s golden age of song.

(May)

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