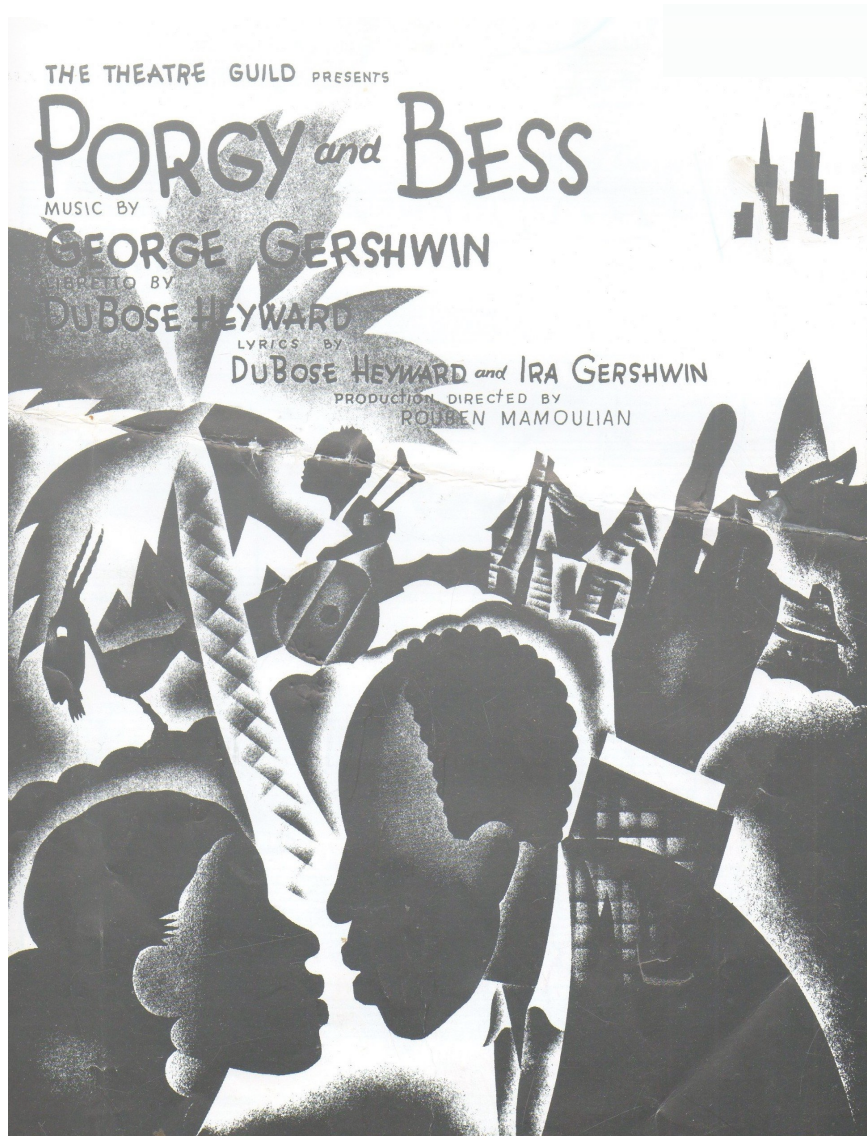


# The Birth of Broadway



## 5. Opera on Broadway

March 18, 2025

## 5. Opera on Broadway

**GEORGE GERSHWIN** DESCRIBED *PORGY AND BESS* AS A FOLK OPERA, meaning that he composed music intended to sound like Black folk tunes, within the context of a traditional opera. But opera or not, *Porgy and Bess* opened in a Broadway theater in 1935 and ran for 124 performances. Since then, it has been presented in both contexts. So it is an opera or a musical? To help investigate that question, we look at **Oscar Hammerstein's** 1943 adaptation of an actual opera, *Carmen*, for the Broadway stage as *Carmen Jones*, before comparing the two approaches to Gershwin's work.

*Porgy* began as a novel by **DuBose Heyward** published in 1925. The next year, he and his wife Dorothy made it into a successful Broadway play. Although Gershwin had approached DuBose Heyward about a collaboration earlier, it was not until 1934 that they began work. Although the publishers currently require that the show be advertised as *The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess*, implying a collaboration between George and his brother **Ira** similar to that in shows like *Of Thee I Sing*, most of the lyrics were actually written by Heyward. Ira's contributions tend to be the Broadway-style numbers that rely on wit rather than plot development; the resultant clash of styles is one of the reasons why *Porgy* is so difficult to pigeonhole. *rb*.

### A. What's The Difference?

**Georges Bizet's** *Carmen* (1875) is the story of a soldier who falls under the spell of a gypsy woman he is required to escort to prison, loses his rank in consequence, and becomes involved in organized crime and murder. Bizet wrote it with spoken dialogue between the musical numbers. In adapting it for the Broadway stage in 1943, Hammerstein

increased the proportion of that dialogue, wrote new lyrics, and switched the locale to an Air Force camp in the South. But there are more fundamental changes that make it a musical; we look at some of them.

**Bizet:** *Carmen*, Act II opening (Elina Garança, Met)

**Hammerstein:** *Carmen Jones*, "Beat out dat rhythm on a drum"  
(Pearl Bailey in the 1954 Otto Preminger movie)

**Bizet:** *Carmen*, Habañera (Marilyn Horne, in concert)

**Hammerstein:** *Carmen Jones*, "Dat's love" (Dorothy Dandridge)

**Bizet:** *Carmen*, Act II quintet, opening (Met)

**Hammerstein:** *Carmen Jones*, quintet (Old Vic, London 1991)

## B. Porgy the Musical

In 2012, director **Diane Paulus** prepared a production of *Porgy and Bess* for the American Repertory Theater in Cambridge MA that made it more unambiguously a musical. Her work won a Tony on Broadway for herself and her star **Audra McDonald**, but aroused controversy too.

**Gershwin:** *Porgy and Bess*, "Bess, you is..." (Willard White)

**Gershwin:** *Porgy and Bess*, "Bess, you is my woman now" (Norm Lewis & Audra McDonald, Broadway cast in concert)

**Gershwin:** *Porgy and Bess*, "What you want wid Bess?" (B'way)

**Gershwin:** *Porgy and Bess*, "A woman is a sometime thing" (B'way)

## C. Porgy the Opera

The second hour consists of two extended scenes from **Francesca Zambello's** 2009 production of *Porgy and Bess* for the San Francisco Opera. They are extended because one of the most operatic aspects of the score is Gershwin's ability to develop a dramatic context through the continuous use of music. At the same time, both scenes contain numbers that are easily extractable, and involve the witty lyrics and/or dance opportunities more often associated with Broadway.

The opera opens on Catfish Row, a fictional African American fishing community near Charleston. One of the women, **Clara**, sings a lullaby to calm her baby; called "Summertime," this will become the most famous number in the score. Her husband **Jake** chimes in with a macho lullaby of his own. Other characters are introduced, including the lame beggar **Porgy**, the bully **Crown**, and his woman **Bess**. When Crown picks a fight after losing in a craps game, tragedy ensues. Crown flees, saying he will come back for Bess. Though others shut their doors to her, Porgy takes her in.

Rather later in the opera, the Catfish Row people set out for a church picnic on Kittiwah Island. Impatient with all the Bible-thumping, the pimp and drug-dealer **Sportin' Life** gives his own sermon in the song "It ain't necessary'ly so" (words by Ira Gershwin). Crown, who has hidden out on the island, corners Bess as the rest are leaving, and she finds she cannot resist him.

[This marks a turning point in the opera. Although Porgy will kill Crown, Bess never entirely recovers, and is vulnerable to the blandishments of Sportin' Life, who gives her "happy dust" and entices her to New York. Returning from a spell in jail to find Bess gone, Porgy determines to go to New York himself to find her.]

**Gershwin:** *Porgy and Bess* (1935), opening and Kittiwah Island scene (San Francisco Opera 2009; d. Francesca Zambello, c. John DeMain; Angel Blue, *Clara*; Eric Greene, *Jake*; Eric Owens, *Porgy*; Laquita Mitchell, *Bess*; Lester Lynch, *Crown*; Chauncey Packer, *Sportin' Life*)

Georges **Bizet** (1838–75, *French composer*), George **Gershwin** (1898–1937, *American composer*), Ira **Gershwin** (1896–1983, *American lyricist*), Oscar **Hammerstein** (1895–1960, *American lyricist*), DuBose **Heyward** (1885–1940, *American writer*)

The course website is [www.brunyate.com/BirthBroadway](http://www.brunyate.com/BirthBroadway)  
I will always respond to mail at [rogerbrunyate@gmail.com](mailto:rogerbrunyate@gmail.com)