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Ol' man author

by [Mark Steyn](#)

On *The Complete Lyrics of Oscar Hammerstein*, edited by Amy Asch.

The famous Hammerstein story is the one where Mrs. Jerome Kern and Mrs. Oscar Hammerstein are attending a luncheon party. Making the introductions, the hostess says, “Mrs. Kern’s husband wrote ‘Ol’ Man River,’” at which point Mrs. Hammerstein interjects: “My husband wrote ‘Ol’ Man River.’ Mrs. Kern’s husband wrote ‘Da-da dee-da.’”

Technically correct. But, in fairness to Jerome Kern, he wrote the tune first. In that sense, at least, he enabled the text of “Ol’ Man River”—for without those four notes the phrase would not exist. Mrs. Hammerstein’s somewhat touchy correction of her hostess applies more to his later work with Richard Rodgers. For score after score after score, Oscar Hammerstein sat down at his desk and produced some of the most effervescent song ideas in the American language without a bar of music to inspire him^[1] I love this couplet:

Shall We Dance?
On a bright cloud of music shall we fly?

Rodgers is ingenious. The melody is itself a bright cloud of music and on the word “fly” it seems to lift off and do just that. But imagine being in your study and writing those words and producing that marvelous musical image, cold. Whether or not he wrote “Ol’ Man River,” he certainly wrote “Shall We Dance?”

Oscar Hammerstein flew on a bright cloud of music for his entire career. In the latter half, from *Oklahoma!* (1943) to *The Sound of Music* (1959), the bright cloud was exclusively Rodgers; in the couple of decades before that, the cumulus was more varied—Kern (for *Show Boat* and much else), and the veteran Tin Pan Alley men Kalmar and Ruby (“(Give Me) A Kiss To Build A Dream On”), and Georges Bizet (his conscripted collaborator on *Carmen Jones*), and a two-hit wonder of a journeyman film composer Benny Oakland, with whom he wrote one beautifully lyrical waltz, “I’ll Take Romance.” (Mr. Oakland’s other hit was the catchily caffeinated “Java Jive.”)

Everyone has a line of Hammerstein’s washing around the back of his brain: I’m as corny as Kansas in August... Oh, what a beautiful mornin’... June is bustin’ out all over... You may see a stranger across a crowded room... High on a hill was a lonely goatherd, layee odl layee odl layee ooooooooooooooooooklahoma, where the wind comes sweepin’ down the plain.

Unlike most of the star lyricists, he was also a playwright: that’s to say, he also wrote the books—the scripts, the dialogue—of his musicals. As a dramatist, he made *Show Boat* (1927) the first and only Broadway epic, and then, after a decade and a half of flop operettas and jobbing film

work, he teamed up with Rodgers for *Oklahoma!* and inaugurated the two-decade golden age of the “musical play,” from whose intimidating shadow the Great White Way can never quite escape. As a lyric writer, Hammerstein doesn’t have the cachet of Lorenz Hart or Cole Porter or Ira Gershwin, all of whom got their handsome, exhaustive, lavishly illustrated coffee-table *Complete Lyrics* some two decades before Knopf belatedly decided to add *The Complete Lyrics of Oscar Hammerstein II* (edited by Amy Asch) to the series. John Updike provided the foreword to the Porter edition. It’s doubtful if he or any other eminent novelist would have been willing to do the honors for the Hammerstein edition.

What do we value in our Completed Lyricists? Wit. Flashy rhymes. Sex. And, unlike his predecessors in the series, Hammerstein is not associated with any of the above. In “Well, Did You Evah!,” Cole Porter wrote:

It’s smooth!
It’s smart!
It’s Rodgers!
It’s Hart!

Nobody ever said that about Rodgers and Hammerstein. On his BBC show, the late Benny Green frequently observed that the difference between Rodgers & Hart and Rodgers & Hammerstein is that you could go into any record store, riffle through the bins, and find endless albums of *So-and-so Sings Rodgers and Hart*, but that nobody ever made any albums of Rodgers and Hammerstein. Which isn’t quite true, but you take his point. One would be unlikely to wander into the Oak Room at the Algonquin and find a tremulous chantoosie midway through an overwrought version of “The Farmer And The Cowman Should Be Friends.”

In a nutshell, these are not the kind of lyrics that people in the lyric-admiring business generally admire. Or as Hammerstein himself put it, when asked why he didn’t write more “sophisticated” stuff: “People in penthouses, you mean?” he said. “I’m just not really interested in them.”

As it happens, the *Complete Lyrics* provides some evidence to the contrary. In a forgotten flop from 1939—*Very Warm for May*—you will find a verse that begins:

We are seen around New York
El Morocco and the Stork
And all the other stay-up-late cafés
I am on the town with you these days.

When I was a teenager, living far from the bright lights, I chanced to hear it on the radio. I’d never been to El Morocco or the Stork—they were merely words heady with allure, familiar from films, novels, and songs. And, although it has a sting in the tail, the number seemed to embody all the blithe sophistication of “people in penthouses.”

Kern’s chorus glides across the floor, and Hammerstein matches it with a lyric of deceptive insouciance:

All In Fun
This thing is All In Fun
When all is said and done
How far can it go?
Some cocktails
Some orchids
A show or two
A line in a column that links me with you.

Isn't that a terrific Manhattan image? A bit too special for a universal love song, it's nevertheless a perfect distillation of an entire sensibility—and it's the work not of Porter nor Hart, but of Hammerstein. He could write “sophisticated,” but it wasn't his default mode. He could also rhyme, when he was so inclined. For a driving rhythm number in the show *Sunny* (1925), Hammerstein wrote:

Who stole my heart away?
Who makes me dream all day?
Dreams I know can never be true
Seems as though I'll ever be blue.

Can't see why I'm so impressed by the rhymes? Here—let me hit the italics key:

*Dreams I know can never be true
Seems as though I'll ever be blue.*

That's quite a rhyme scheme. To be sure, the Harts and Porters, the wits and rhymesters are better suited to the *Collected Lyrics* format: Even if you don't know the tune, there'll be some eye-catching couplet or pun. For example, upon opening the Lorenz Hart volume at random, I find “a playwright who does very well in Budapest” complaining that “Shakespeare was so crude a pest”—a lyric that reads as well it sings, if not better. It rhymes, but it doesn't do anything else. It's not even particularly funny. And picking a three-syllable proper noun and then contriving a mate for it is a kind of postmodern exercise in songwriting: like the Pompidou Centre in Paris, the plumbing is all on the outside. Rhyme as a reason unto itself shows off the author, but not much else.

A contemporary of Hart, Porter, and Gershwin, even as a young man about Broadway, Hammerstein was never one of the lyrically smart set. His mentor was Otto Harbach, an old operetta author with whom he co-wrote his earliest hits. *The Desert Song* is basically *Zorro on Sand*: As Amy Asch explains, “Very few characters know that the virile Red Shadow is the alter ego of Pierre Birabeau's son, who is generally dismissed as bookish and feeble.” *The Desert Song's* book is feeble, but the lushly overripe songs made it a staple of light opera and summer stock for half a century:

Oh, give me that night divine
And let my arms in yours entwine!
The Desert Song calling
Its voice enthralling
Will make you mine!

There were, broadly, two types of Broadway lyrics in the 1920s. Hart and Gershwin took their cue from P. G. Wodehouse's Princess Theatre songs: droll, human, colloquial, in the American vernacular. Harbach and Hammerstein wrote original New York operettas that harked back to Mitteleuropa: earnest, stilted, ornate, translated from the original gibberish. For *Rose-Marie*—which is more or less *The Desert Song* in the Rockies—the big song was the ululatory love duet:

When I'm calling you-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo
Will you answer too-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo-oo?

Oddly, Hammerstein's text, as printed here, renders “you” not as a seven-syllable word but merely a restrained six. Perhaps they decided in rehearsals they needed an extra melisma. The story of the young lady auditioning for the London production and warbling “When I'm calling you, double-o, double-o” is surely apocryphal, but in the 1950s Keely Smith was happy to swing it as “When I'm calling you shooby-doo shooby-doo-doo.”

Hammerstein was a young man at odds with the times. When he attempted to get to grips with the Jazz Age, the results were not entirely persuasive:

Come On And Pet Me
Why don't you pet me?
Why don't you get me
To let you pet me?

Which is a tad relentless even for the most neurotic flapper. His composer, Vincent Youmans, put that back in the trunk and recycled it, with new lyrics by Irving Caesar, as "Sometimes I'm Happy." Eventually Hammerstein came to understand that he didn't need to rhyme. Consider:

Ol' Man River
Dat Ol' Man River
He mus' know sumpin'
But don't say nuthin'
He jes' keeps rollin'
He keeps on rollin' along
He don' plant taters
He don' plant cotton
An' dem dat plants 'em
Is soon forgotten.

Bingo! Line ten, and we finally get our first rhyme: "cotton/forgotten." Whether or not *Show Boat* is (as his daughter Alice argues in her foreword to these lyrics) Broadway's "first protest show," "Ol' Man River" is certainly a song bearing more weight than anything previously written for the American musical stage. "If a listener is made rhyme-conscious," said Hammerstein, "his interest may be diverted from the story of the song." His pupil, Stephen Sondheim, too often forgets that. In *Pacific Overtures*, Sondheim briefly wades into "Ol' Man River" depths and meets a watery grave:

Streams are dying
Mix a potion
Streams are dying
Try the ocean
Brilliant notion
Next!

This is too neat, too organized for what he's trying to say. The form trivializes the content. Hammerstein's genius in "Ol' Man River" is to understand the power of the thought and not to diminish it by shoehorning it into conventional rhyme structure.

What couldn't he do? Lots. The very first song in the book is called "Shakespeare Up-To-Date," from a Columbia University Players production of 1916. It's a viable conceit: what would the Bard be like if rewritten by George Bernard Shaw and George M. Cohan? Lorenz Hart, who also contributed some lyrics to the show, would have rolled with the joke for chorus after chorus. But Hammerstein can't seem to get the gag off the ground. He was not a natural wit: Alone among the greats, he has no "catalogue songs," those musical laundry lists whose accumulation of surprise images and dazzling rhymes all go to prove a particular point—that "You're The Top" or "These Foolish Things remind me of you." His comedy songs aren't really funny but they are charming:

I'm jist a girl who cain't say no
I'm in a turrible fix
I always say, "Come on, let's go!"
Jist when I orta say nix!

One thinks of how Hart and Porter would have pursued the theme ever more raunchily with the

double-entendres ever more single-minded. Hammerstein respected his characters too much for that. He never wrote as sensuously as Porter—there is no “Night And Day” or “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” or “In The Still Of The Night,” where the words match the passion of the tune, as they never do in Ira Gershwin’s dopey lyric to his brother’s extraordinary music for “The Man I Love.”

In his and-then-I-wrote show, Hammerstein’s fellow lyricist Sammy Cahn could always rely on this parody to get a big laugh:

Hello, Young Lovers
Whoever you are
Can we come over and watch?

Which is, at least implicitly, a rebuke to the sexlessness of the original. When it came to romance, Hammerstein preferred diffident characters who could only express love by denying it: “Only Make Believe I love you,” “If I Loved You,” “Your hand feels so grand in mine/ People Will Say We’re In Love”—and we wouldn’t want that, would we?

Yet passion is not the only setting on the amatory thermostat. For *Carousel*, Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote:

When The Children Are Asleep we’ll sit and dream
The things that ev’ry other dad and mother dream.

The song became so familiar that we forget how rare it is to make memorable musical material out of contentment and routine. Yet it was another genre Hammerstein more or less invented, exploring the love that, in Tin Pan Alley at least, dare not speak its name: domestic tranquility—the love that comes after the love songs. As he wrote a decade earlier in “The Folks Who Live On The Hill” (1937):

And when the kids grow up and leave us
We’ll sit and look at the same old view
Just we two
Darby and Joan, who used to be Jack and Jill
The folks who like to be called
What they have always been called
The Folks Who Live On The Hill.

A couple of years later, Hammerstein was in California working with Jerome Kern, and pacing the beach alone one night trying to come up with a song. “My attention was diverted by a pair of lovers,” he wrote. “They both had white hair. His arm lay gently around her shoulder and they gazed out at the silver Pacific.” He went back inside and wrote:

I have seen a line of snow-white birds
Drawn across an evening sky
I have seen divine, unspoken words
Shining in a lover’s eye.

Etc., etc. (as the King of Siam would say) until finally:

Here’s The Sweetest Sight That I Have Seen
One old couple walking hand in hand.

That’s Hammerstein, and no one else. And, when he did address that “sly biological urge” (in Noël Coward’s words), he found angles the byplay boys steered well clear of. In *Oklahoma!*, Jud, the hired hand with the dirty pictures fueling his frustration, sits in his “Lonely Room” and fantasizes

about Laurey:

And the girl that I want
Ain't afraid of my arms
And her own soft arms keep me warm
And her long yeller hair
Falls acrost my face.

Lynn Riggs, the author of the play on which *Oklahoma!* was based, loved that song the moment he heard it: “It will scare the hell out of the audience.” Not everything in Rodgers & Hammerstein is corny as Kansas in August. Sometimes they’d lift the gingham check, and give you a flesh-creepingly vivid glimpse of something darker.

Alas, the wholesale transformation of the American musical wrought by R & H was so spectacularly successful that critics came to find it yawnsville. In his recent book *The House That George Built*, Wilfrid Sheed sighs that you could transfer *State Fair* from Iowa to Oklahoma or Maine, the South Pacific or Siam or the Tyrol, and it makes no difference: “It would still be the same old place—Broadway in the Scarsdale years.”

Ah, well. *Pace* Benny Green, the real difference between Rodgers & Hart and Rodgers & Hammerstein is that, while singers may love to sing the former, regular folks—from Scarsdale and beyond—love to sing the latter. Years ago, a colleague and I found ourselves dining in a London restaurant, the remaining tables of which had been booked for a hen night by the ladies of the typing pool. By the end of the soup, they were roaring out “I’m Jist A Girl Who Cain’t Say No,” and given that our table was stuck at the back and we had no clear line of escape to the door it was pretty dicey for a few choruses. A couple of years later, a London producer hit on an ingenious notion: *The Singalong Sound of Music*. It’s just what it says: They show the film and you bellow along. The hills are alive. How do you solve a problem like. So long, farewell, auf wiedersehen, adieu. It ran for years, and everyone knew all the words.

There are plenty here no one will know, draft lyrics for films never made, Second Act ballads cut in New Haven. Amy Asch is an admirable and exhaustive scholar who has produced an important and definitive volume, but I did get irked occasionally by the layout of the text. If you recall “Who?,” cited above, the fact is that, *musically*, those first two lines are incorrectly printed:

Who stole my heart away?
Who makes me dream all day?

The entire trick of the song is that the first note is held for two-and-a-quarter bars, and then reprised as such another four times. Miss Asch precedes the lyric with Hugh Fordin’s account of Hammerstein’s dismay when first he saw that long sustained B natural of Kern’s. Immediately all your options shrivel. Obviously, you need a monosyllable. But the thrill of that sustained note would rapidly outstay its welcome if you were to attempt to rhyme it:

Toooooast
Is my fav’rite snack
Mooooost
Days I burn it black.

So you need one monosyllabic word that can be reprised multiple times without seeming ludicrous. Furthermore, because of the length of the note, it has to be an open-voweled sound with as few consonants as possible. Hammerstein’s solution was “who.” And, if that seems obvious, you try to come up with an alternative. As Hugh Fordin notes, “Even ‘why’ would have killed the song because ‘why’ sounded too nasal and whiny when a singer tried to hold it.” Kern credited

Hammerstein's word with saving his tune. Why then does Miss Asch lay out the text to give no sense of what he accomplished? In his own book of selected lyrics (published in 1949), Hammerstein put the text on the page in a way that approximates the way the ear hears it:

Who ...
 stole my heart away?
Who ...
 makes me dream all day?

Miss Asch should have followed the same principle.

Despite his belated addition to the series, Oscar Hammerstein will never be as loved by the lyric-lovers as Porter or Hart. There are times when the “g”-droppin’ folksy vernacular can seem awfully generic—jes’ right for Ioway, Oklahoma, Down East, pretty much anywhere but Scarsdale. But such is the shorthand of a busy writer. As he once self-parodied:

Ol’ Man Author
Dat Ol’ Man Author
He may know somethin’
He may know nothin’
But he keeps writin’
He keeps on writin’ along!
IRISHMAN: I like taters
NEGRO: And Ah loves cotton
JEW: And I like blintzes
ITALIAN: I don’t like nottin’!
ALL: The worn-out bromides
They just keep rollin’ along!

Indeed. But Hammerstein rolled further. He expanded the boundaries of the American theater song, past the narrow urban wit of the rhymesters. When he worked with Sigmund Romberg, the old goulash-peddler would run through the lyric and at the end say only: “It fits.” Hammerstein came to see that that perfunctory acknowledgment was, in fact, high praise—that that was the most important thing about any lyric. It might also be poetry, but first it had to “fit.” Hammerstein’s words always fit.

Years ago, my newspaper in London, during the doldrums of summer, decided to run a lame-o series called “On the Beach”: The art critic wrote about paintings of beaches, the literary critic about book scenes on beaches, and it fell to me to write about songs of beaches. Songofabeach, I thought, trudging dutifully through the assignment. I mostly referenced old novelty numbers like “I Love To Go Swimmin’ With Women” but somewhere in the middle I quoted a quatrain from *Carousel*. My editor read the piece and said, “End with that Hammerstein bit. You’re not going to top that.” And he was right:

You can’t hear a sound, not the turn of a leaf
Nor the fall of a wave hittin’ the sand
The tide’s creepin’ up on the beach like a thief
Afraid to get caught stealin’ the land.

Notes

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1. *The Complete Lyrics of Oscar Hammerstein II*, edited by Amy Asch; Knopf, 448 pages, \$65. [Go back to the text.](#)

Mark Steyn's most recent book is *America Alone: The End of the World As We Know It* (Regnery). His writing on politics, arts and culture can be read around the world. Mark is Senior North American Columnist of Britain's Telegraph Group, and appears in The Daily Telegraph, the United Kingdom's biggest-selling broadsheet daily, and The Sunday Telegraph; he is also North American Editor and Film Critic of The Spectator, the oldest continuously-published magazine in the English language. In Canada, he can be read in The National Post, the country's new national newspaper. In the United States, Mark is theatre critic of The New Criterion and a columnist for The Chicago Sun-Times. His latest book, *Broadway Babies Say Goodnight*, was published to critical acclaim in London and to somewhat sniffier reviews in New York.

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