



GERSHWIN'S RHAPSODY IN BLUE

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George Gershwin, an up-and-coming composer, finds himself in a pickle – he has only a few weeks to write an entire concerto! At first he panics, but then he realizes that all the inspiration he needs is in the great melting pot of immigrant America.

JEWISH CONCEPTS

Whether it's a blessing sung at home or a cantor's melody in synagogue, Jewish life is rich in song. Music is fundamental to Jewish expression – it's even referred to in the earliest chapters of the *Torah*. Fittingly, when the major influx of Eastern European Jews arrived in the United States in the late nineteenth century, they brought their songs with them – especially *klezmer*, a distinctive musical style that soon became a staple in vaudeville revues. Eventually, strains from Jewish music began popping up in mainstream America.

As this story explains, when Gershwin wrote “Rhapsody in Blue” he merged the sounds from his culture and experience -- a fusion of Old World (*klezmer*) and New (jazz). George Gershwin is not the only American musician influenced by the Jewish melodies of his youth. From Irving Berlin to Bob Dylan, the list of influential Jewish musicians is long – and growing. While Jewish immigrants have spiced up the American melting pot, they have also taken care not to melt into it altogether. Rather than submerging his Jewishness, Gershwin infused it into his music. He was both American *and* Jewish, and thus so was his work.

USING THIS BOOK AT HOME

This book comes with a CD of “Rhapsody in Blue.” Give it a listen and see if you can identify the sounds that inspired Gershwin as he was writing this piece. Then listen to some of the music forms that helped shape Gershwin's style -- early jazz, for example, and *klezmer*. (If your own collection doesn't include these genres, you can search online for recorded samples.)

In the story, Gershwin was uncertain that he could finish his composition, but he did his best – and he surprised himself. Have you ever had that experience? How did it make you feel?

Jewish immigrants to the United States were eager to become Americans, but many also wanted to remain true to their backgrounds. This may be part of the reason why Jewish culture has had such an impact on many aspects of American life including food, humor, and movies. Can you think of some examples in popular culture that are both specifically Jewish *and* totally American?