

JOHN MCWHORTER

# Can White Men Write a Black Opera?

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There was an opera written in the 1950s about rich Black people. The music is so beautiful it makes you ache, but the work was never performed in the United States and has largely been lost to the winds since the Eisenhower administration.

You'd think that amid our racial reckoning, this treasure would get another look. After all, it defies stereotypes, it's splendid, and it never got its shot. And indeed, there are people actively working right now to bring it back to light. (I myself am volunteering my own services to help out.) But I'm afraid a certain influential contingent of our moment may want to keep "Blues Opera" under wraps.

Because, you see, it was created by white men.

**Well, not exactly.** It began as a novel called "God Sends Sunday," based on family stories told to the Harlem Renaissance littérateur Arna Bontemps. Both Black and white people of note liked it, and in 1931, when a book was good you made it into a play. Bontemps duly did so in collaboration with his fellow Harlem Renaissance poet Countee Cullen, as well as Langston Hughes. The play, titled "St. Louis Woman," played here and there but never made it to Broadway. Still, the authors believed in it mightily, and came to think what it really needed was music.

Here, in 1945, was where the white men came in: Harold Arlen — whose genius produced, among other work, "Stormy Weather" and "Somewhere Over the Rainbow" — on music and Johnny Mercer ("Blues in the Night," "Skylark," "Moon River") on lyrics. But the Broadway musical version didn't really work and closed after about 10 minutes.

extinguishing a plot has defeated countless geniuses. “St. Louis Woman” boiled down the plot of “God Sends Sunday,” about a jockey and courtesan falling in love, to a sticky little melodrama decorated with Pearl Bailey as comic relief. But they did do a cast album, and the songs were grand, plangent sung poems, tragically yoked to an unserious script. When I first heard this recording at 24, if I had had hairs on the back of my neck they would have been standing up.

Anyone could hear that this music deserved another chance, and in the late 1950s, Arlen and Mercer transformed “St. Louis Woman” into “Blues Opera.” And I mean “transformed” — we’re talking recitatives, leitmotifs, ensembles and even a murder: *opera*. There are times when you’d almost think you were at Strauss’ “Salome,” the scoring is so rich; there is even an atonal tango, for goodness’ sake. And a sword dance.

Yet all of this is written in the musical language of the blues and jazz. The motifs are ever morphing, as if improvised — Arlen was good at this, writing pop songs like “Right as the Rain,” that feel organic and accessible and yet never repeat a phrase. Black-born music served up with a busy classical orchestra? You first think of “Porgy and Bess.” But this is different: Blacker, frankly. With “Porgy and Bess,” George and Ira Gershwin and DuBose Heyward grafted Black idioms onto the idioms of Debussy and Ravel. Arlen and Mercer let the Blackness flow purely — my synesthetic take on the score is that it’s Maryland blue crab so flavorful it makes you sneeze.

Something else: Say “Black opera” and our first thoughts, let’s face it, go to stories about poor people living off the land somewhere isolated. That, after all, is what “Porgy and Bess” and Scott Joplin’s “Treemonisha” are about. Both are invaluable work, but “Blues Opera” is another world entirely.

After emancipation, Black jockeys were some of the richest Black people in America next to some entertainers. “Blues Opera” is set in their world, which we enter when a courtesan named Della Green returns from visiting France on the centennial of the French Revolution. Della and the star jockey Augie both learn to love with their hearts rather than their eyes. But they wear gorgeous clothes, and have no worries about where their next meal is coming from, or about being dragged into misery by a guy plié-ing around handing people narcotic powders.

In not needing our pity, the “Blues Opera” characters are a bracing change from how we usually see Black characters in popular culture of the first half of the twentieth century.

**But “Blues Opera” never really happened.** Arlen and Mercer got distracted by a Broadway disaster and other issues. Only some Europeans ended up seeing the opera, and even then, only in a slapdash version partly improvised by a jazz ensemble (Quincy Jones was stuck music-directing one rendition of this).

conducted both classical and Broadway material everywhere from the Metropolitan Opera to La Scala to the Hollywood Bowl, and has won a Tony, a Grammy and three Emmys for the trouble, has restored countless masterworks. Sidelined by the pandemic, he and the conductor and researcher Michael Gildin gathered scattered “Blues Opera” materials and partial recordings from all corners, got rights permissions from the Arlen and Mercer estates, and created an official score.

One person after another, shepherded into Mauceri’s study to hear this work, sits asking, “Why haven’t we heard this?” One august musicologist is known to have shed tears. I’m not going to admit whether I did.

So when do you get to see it? Well, it depends.

**This is 2021. We are “reckoning” about race.** And there’s one thing I haven’t mentioned about “Blues Opera” so far. The characters in it, as Black people, written by white people, use a lot of ... Black English.

As in: “Ain’t no man tell me when or where.” “Until that day, Mr. Augie, you in the back row.” And so on. Judging from comments about dialect use in the off-Broadway revival of Oscar Hammerstein’s “Carmen Jones” a few years ago, as well as from none other than James Baldwin when the film version was new, it is possible that one response to Blues Opera will be “discomfort” with this use of the dialect.

As someone who wants “Blues Opera” to see the light of day, a few points: First, these characters would indeed have spoken this way. Black people slide gorgeously between standard and Black English. Where people get tripped up is the assumption that Black English is merely grammatical errors. But Black English is fiercely complex in its ways just as the standard is. Characters like the ones in “Blues Opera” speak more, not less, English than Tucker Carlson.

Some insist that only Black writers can render the dialect “properly,” and there is certainly a history of white people getting it hideously wrong. I own a copy of a resonantly forgettable little novel of 1873 in which an ex-slave is depicted as saying “I’s’e” always where standard English uses just “I”: “I’s’e hope you’ll forgive me,” “I’s’e isn’t,” “I’s’e know ’tis.” This is all wrong, page after page.

But “Blues Opera” got it about 99 percent right, and Mauceri and Gildin have brought someone in to fix the rest (disclosure: that would be me). And then we must also note that much of the lyrics come from Bontemps’ work. How “inauthentic” was he?

On “Blues Opera,” the sarcastic reaction “Oh, good — white men’s version of Blackness” could seem like a due signaling of awareness of authenticity and appropriation. But to view this piece with an impregnable cynical squint would also evidence a certain numbness to the complexities

blackest white man I ever knew,” for example.

I think of how Black people of my mother’s generation adored “Porgy and Bess” (one of the first records my mother pointed me to was the soundtrack album of the film), and how, not long ago, Black people were lined up around the corner to see the Broadway revival. Would these people prefer that “Porgy and Bess” had been written by Black people? Probably. But life isn’t perfect, and “Porgy and Bess” (nearly) is. Who would wish that “Bess, You Is My Woman Now” were known only to musicologists, because the rest of us have no reason to hear “white men’s version of Blackness”?

“Blues Opera” is high art about Black people, devised by people who made a living reaching ordinary people and fashioned an opera designed to do so, rooted in the work of three Black geniuses. It was anticipated by those who knew of its creation as an artistic step beyond “Porgy and Bess,” and it was one. Yes, Black writers would have been much less likely to get it performed in the 1950s — but then, Arlen and Mercer barely managed to get it on the stage either.

**“Porgy and Bess” and “Carmen Jones” have both had** their days in the sun recently, and as the world opens back up, producers, directors, and performers are likely to be on the hunt for other shows that speak to the Black experience. And to be sure, there are operas written by Black people that are also deserving: I recommend H. Lawrence Freeman’s “Voodoo,” William Grant Still and Langston Hughes’s “Troubled Island,” and Anthony Davis’s opera about Malcolm X (yes, in 1986!).

But there’s also “Blues Opera” waiting for us. It deserves — nay, needs — a good look and listen. To experience it as merely something “white” is to deny the roiling essence of what America has been — and is.