



EDUCATION @ MESA ARTS CENTER



**MESA ARTS CENTER PRESENTS**

**THE GERSHWIN LEGACY**

**EDUCATOR RESOURCE GUIDE**

**Grades 9-12**



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## THE GERSHWIN LEGACY

George Gershwin was the son of Russian Jewish immigrants, an American composer, painter, pianist, and jazz innovator. Together with his lyricist brother, Ira, the Gershwin brothers created iconic musical works that are still celebrated today.

This Educator Resource Guide invites learners to research Gershwin, walk through Ellis Island, write & analyze poetry, and experience Gershwin’s music.



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## CURRICULUM CONNECTIONS THE GERSHWIN LEGACY

### Arizona History & Social Sciences State Standards

**HS.H4.2** – Explain how artistic, philosophical, and scientific ideas have developed and shaped society and institutions.

**HS.H4.4** – Examine how a diverse society can be a force for unity and/or disunity.

**HS.G3.1** – Analyze the reciprocal nature of how historical events and the diffusion of ideas, technologies, and cultural practices have influenced migration patterns and the distribution of human population.

### Arizona Music Theory & Composition State Standards

**MU.CR.1.MC.HS2a** – Describe and demonstrate how sounds and musical ideas can be used to represent sonic events, memories, visual images, concepts, texts, or storylines.

**MU.CN.11.MC.HS2a** – Analyze how context can inform the expressive intent and meaning of a musical composition.

**MU.CN.11.MC.HS2b** – Analyze how music is affected by one’s knowledge outside the arts.

### Arizona English Language Arts State Standards

**9-12.W.5** – Develop and strengthen writing as needed by planning, revising, editing, rewriting, or trying a new approach, focusing on addressing what is most significant for a specific purpose and audience.

### Arizona Social & Emotional Learning Core Competencies

**Self Awareness** – Involves understanding one’s emotions, personal identity, goals and values. This includes accurately assessing one’s strengths and limitations, having positive mindsets, possessing a well-grounded sense of self-efficacy and optimism. High levels of self-awareness require the ability to understand the links between one’s personal and sociocultural identities and to recognize how thoughts, feelings, and actions are interconnected.

**Social Awareness** – Involves the ability to take the perspective of those with the same and different backgrounds and cultures and to empathize and feel compassion. It also involves understanding social norms for behavior in diverse settings and recognizing family, school, and community resources and supports.



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## CLASSROOM ACTIVITIES

### Questions to Ponder....

Question 1 – How did the migrations in early 1900s shape American music?

Question 2 – How does one’s identity influence the art they create?

### Activities to Explore....

**Background Research:** Have the students review the vocabulary terms (page 5), Gershwin biography (page 6) and the Gershwin timeline at <http://gershwin.com/gershwin-timeline/>. Invite the students to write down three things they would like to learn more about George Gershwin and then practice their research skills to find the answers.

Materials: Page 5, Page 6, <http://gershwin.com/gershwin-timeline/>

**Ellis Island Interactive Experience:** To better understand the social landscape of America in the early 1900s, students will complete The Interactive Tour of Ellis Island and page 7 of this packet.

Materials: Page 7, <http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/immigration/tour/index.htm>

**Migration Poetry Activity:** Students will use pages 8-9 to write a poem and biography. Have students exchange their poem and biography with a partner. With their partner students will discuss any questions and make necessary changes, then write a final draft. Discuss as a class how one’s identity/biography shaped their creative work. Also discussed what it might have been like for Ira Gershwin to create song lyrics.

Materials: Pages 8-9

**Rhapsody in Blue Reflection:** After the students learn about George Gershwin and listen to “Rhapsody in Blue”, have the students answer the reflection questions on page 10. Discuss in small groups what the students wrote.

Materials: Rhapsody in Blue, Page 10



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### VOCABULARY

**Improv** – Spontaneously composing melodies, but in accordance to the rules associated with jazz.

**Ellis Island** – An Immigration Station that welcomed more than 12 million immigrants between 1892-1954. It is estimated that more than 40% of all current American citizens can trace their family back to Ellis Island.

**Song plugger** – A musician employed by a store and song publishers to perform and promote new music in the early 20th century.

**Irving Berlin** – Jewish immigrant, composer and one of George Gershwin’s musical role models. His work includes, “Blue Skies”, “Puttin’ On the Ritz” and “God Bless America”. While 5 years old, Berlin and his family arrived at Ellis Island in 1893.

**Yiddish Theater District** – The center of New York City’s Yiddish theatre scene in the early 20th century and close to where the Gershwin family lived.

**The Great Migration** – From about 1916-1970, more than 6 million African Americans moved to the North, West, and Midwest from the rural South.

**Porgy and Bess** – A controversial “folk opera” by George Gershwin, DuBose Heyward, Dorothy Heyward, and Ira Gershwin about African Americans in Charleston, South Carolina. Porgy and Bess includes the famous song, “Summertime”.

**Jazz** – A style of music which Gershwin described as, “Jazz is a word which has been used for at least five or six different types of music. It is really a conglomeration of many things ... Ragtime, the blues, classicist and spiritual ... An entire composition in jazz could not live.”

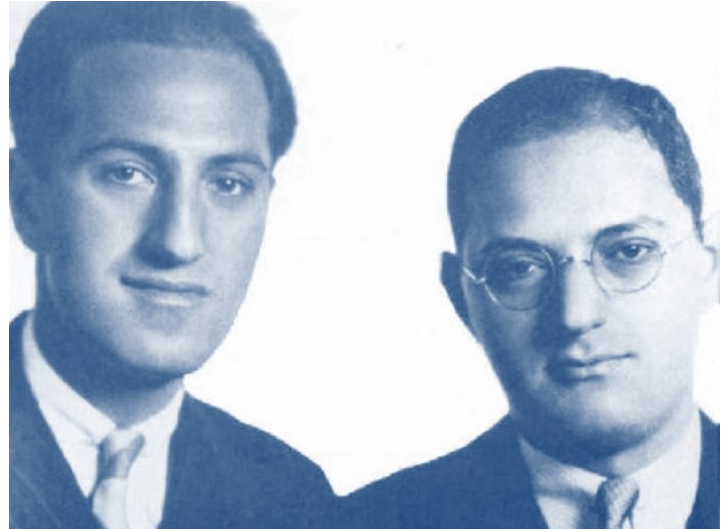
**Rhapsody in Blue** – A musical piece by George Gershwin that premiered in 1924 for solo piano and jazz band which integrated jazz and classical music styles.



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### THE GERSHWIN BROTHERS

George Gershwin was born Yakov Gershin in Brooklyn, NY in 1898 to Russian-Jewish immigrant parents, Morris and Rose Gershin. Morris Gershin (Moishe Gershovitz) migrated to New York City from St. Petersburg, Russia in 1890, perhaps to avoid military service. Rose (Rosa Bruskin), also from St. Petersburg came to New York with her family in 1892. Family members believe they knew each other in St. Petersburg before their migration. They were married in 1895 and had 4 children by 1906: Israel (Ira), Yakov (George), Arthur and Frances.



The Gershin's may have lived in as many as 28 different New York City locations in the first 21 years of their marriage, including Brooklyn, Harlem and the culturally diverse Lower East Side (Irish, Italian, Greek). With Rose as the household manager, Morris eventually became a successful businessman (bakeries and restaurants) able to provide a middle-class life for his family. The Gershin family was an assimilated household. George and his siblings attended public school while the family spoke Russian, Yiddish and English in the home. Rose and Morris did not encourage their children to study music, but often enjoyed an Enrico Caruso recording and attended Yiddish theater. They did purchase a second-hand piano for Ira and eventually provided piano lessons for 11-year old George after discovering George's natural talent for the piano.

Ira (considered the scholar of the family) attended City College as an English major, but quit to work in the family business and was drawn to musical theater. George dropped out of high school, played piano in New York City clubs, and became a "song plugger" for Tin Pan Alley. George's musical education continued as he sought out mentors who would educate and train him in a wide variety of music styles. Perhaps most importantly, the brothers were attentive listeners and observers of the people and music of New York City. These sons of Russian-Jewish immigrants found their American voice. In the late 1910s, Ira and George began collaborating on songs. By the mid-1920s, they had become one of the most celebrated songwriting teams in American music. The Library of Congress Gershin Prize, named for Ira and George Gershin, "celebrates the work of an artist whose career reflects lifetime achievement in promoting song as a vehicle of musical expression and cultural understanding."

Based on: Pollack, Howard. "Gershin and His Family." *George Gershin: His Life and Works*. Los Angeles: U of California, 2006. 3-21. Print

Created by Marcie Hutchinson (Director of K-12 Initiatives for the School of Historical, Philosophical, and Religious Studies at Arizona State University) for Jazz from A to Z



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## ELLIS ISLAND INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCE

**Instructions:** Experience Ellis Island by visiting <http://teacher.scholastic.com/activities/immigration/tour/index.htm> and completing the following questions.

### Stop 1: The Passage

1. Most immigrants who came to Ellis Island were from \_\_\_\_\_.
2. Immigrants were usually arriving escaping \_\_\_\_\_ and \_\_\_\_\_.

### Stop 2: The Arrival

3. How does Lawrence Meinwald describe the passage to America? \_\_\_\_\_

### Stop 3: The Baggage Room

4. The officers passed out \_\_\_\_\_ for the immigrants to wear.

### Stop 4: Stairs to the Registry Room

5. Typically, the immigration process took only a few \_\_\_\_\_.

### Stop 5: The Registry Room

6. Women were not allowed to enter America \_\_\_\_\_ until after World War II.

### Stop 6: The Medical Exam

7. \_\_\_\_\_ total people with diseases or disabilities were sent back to their home countries.

### Stop 7: The Legal Inspection

8. Paul Lauric describes his time as a detainee as a(n) \_\_\_\_\_ & \_\_\_\_\_ atmosphere.

### Stop 8: Detainees

9. Why would Ellis Island have been known as an “Island of Tears”? \_\_\_\_\_
10. \_\_\_\_\_ babies were born on Ellis Island. More than \_\_\_\_\_ immigrants died there.

### Stop 9: The Stairs of Separation

11. Beginning in 1909, you had to have at least \$\_\_\_\_\_ to enter America.

### Stop 10: The Kissing Post

12. What happened when Estelle Belford greeted her father at the Kissing Post?



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## MIGRATION POETRY ACTIVITY

Think of an event or memory from your life or family history related to migration—the journey (for example, a time you moved to a new home or school, your grandparents’ stories about moving to this country, or a new state, meeting someone who moved from a different state).

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What biographical information about you is important or related to this issue?

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What historical context is important to this event or memory—perhaps push or pull factors?

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How does your event relate to migration (reception, reaction, adjustment, assistance, assimilation)?

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List at least 3 emotions that are attached to this event.

1. \_\_\_\_\_
2. \_\_\_\_\_
3. \_\_\_\_\_

Write a brief sentence that describes what caused each of these emotions.

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Why is this event worthwhile for other people to know about? What larger message does this event show/teach?

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### MIGRATION POETRY ACTIVITY (CONT.)

Now, write this memory or event in a poem form. It should be at least 10 lines long. Be sure to include biographical and historical details that help the reader understand the moment. Use emotionally packed words to help the reader understand and “see” the emotions of this memory. It does not need to rhyme!

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Finally, write a brief biography that introduces you to the reader, including relevant historical/biographical details the audience needs to know to understand your poem and message. Jot some ideas here, but use your own paper when you write.

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### RHAPSODY IN BLUE REFLECTION

**Instructions:** Listen to “Rhapsody in Blue”. Then using what you have learned about George Gershwin, answer the following questions.

Describe George Gershwin’s background: (position, nationality, gender, occupation, social class, religion, ethnicity, etc.)

When was the piece written? What events were occurring at the time?

How will you remember this piece so you can identify it when you hear it again?

What questions would you ask of this composer in an interview?

What emotions does this piece provoke?

Imagine yourself to be a music critic at the time the piece was first performed. How would you rate the piece? Why?



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Questions?

Please contact Engagement at:  
[engagement@mesaartscenter.com](mailto:engagement@mesaartscenter.com)

### ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

<http://www.mesaartscenter.com/engagement/jazz-a-to-z/resources>

<https://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/george-gershwin>

<http://gershwin.com/gershwin-timeline/>