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George Gershwin's "Summertime" (1935):  
A Cultural Anthem of Twentieth-Century America

ABSTRACT: This article discusses the origins and twentieth-century legacy of George Gershwin's "Summertime" from his Opera *Porgy and Bess*. On the basis of newspaper articles and essays on Gershwin, as well as several renditions of "Summertime" by American artists, the author argues that the lullaby is a cultural anthem because it reflects American society as it adapts to cultural change via different musical genres.

KEYWORDS: twentieth century; New York; California; George Gershwin; DuBose Heyward; *Porgy and Bess*; Billie Holiday; *Summertime*; *American Dream*; Blues

*Introduction*

From New York City's Alvin Theater with its dusty curtains to a garage in Long Beach, California, American artists have sung the lullaby "Summertime."<sup>1</sup> The Jewish composer George Gershwin (1898-1937) wrote the music, while the American writer DuBose Heyward (1885-1940) penned the lyrics. It was originally a number in Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess*, America's first opera, which opened at the Alvin Theater on October 10, 1935. Abbie Mitchell (1884-1960), a soprano of both African American and Jewish German heritage, was the first performer to play the part of Clara and to sing "Summertime," while the second performer to sing it was Anne Brown (1912-2009) who played Bess in the same opera. The characters of Clara and Bess stand in contrast to each other. Clara is a kind, loving wife and mother who sings "Summertime" to her baby, while Bess is a drug addict who prostitutes herself for her addiction. The main character, Porgy, is a crippled man who falls in love with Bess, and he realizes her complex vices. Gershwin himself identified with the characters from his opera. In 1926, he had read Heyward's *Porgy*, a novel about an imagined black community called Catfish Row, and it became his inspiration for an all-black-cast opera. However, the public did not receive Gershwin's opera well: it saw the all-black cast as a "racist" gesture. In reality, Gershwin's idea was remarkably progressive for its time. In the late nineteenth century, Jews from eastern Europe were migrating to the northern American states, as were African Americans from the South because of issues pertaining to Reconstruction. Black migration occurred partly due to economic and political causes that were beyond the control of the migrants. Moreover, African Americans and Jews began to develop a special relationship because popular belief saw them as "others" in American society.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Abbie Mitchell [soprano], original opera vocal performance/rehearsal recording of "Summertime," by George Gershwin, Ira Gershwin, and DuBose Heyward, recorded July 19, 1935/released 1974; Sublime [ska group], "Doin' Time," vocal and cover performance of "Summertime" (album: *Sublime*), recorded 1996/released November 25, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> Frank Durham, *DuBose Heyward: The Man Who Wrote Porgy* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 1956), 119-128; Farah Jasmine Griffin, "Who Set you Flowin'?: The African-

An early document for the topic of this article is a newspaper article from *The New York Times*, a review of *Porgy and Bess* written by music critic Olin Downes (1886-1955) the day after the 1935 preview. His review underscores the basic intent of this article that "Summertime" has a characterization quality to it. According to Downes, "Clara's lullaby 'Summer Time' sets early a melodic pace that is fairly maintained in the lyrical moments of the [music] score."<sup>3</sup> The vocal score of *Porgy and Bess* acts as a reference point because it harbors both Heyward's and Gershwin's original ideas of the lyrics and the music.<sup>4</sup> Furthermore, the score is used as a source here to understand how different artists have changed "Summertime" in their performances. For this article, I have selected renditions that underscore the song's historical significance, primarily by jazz and rock artists. Abbie Mitchell's original version (1935) and the cover of it by the ska group Sublime from Long Beach, California (1996), serve as bookends. Renditions by Billie Holiday (1936), Miles Davis (1959), Nina Simone (1959), Janis Joplin (1968), as well as Jim Morrison and The Doors (1970) mirror the song's chronological development. The versions of these artists return to the characters – Clara, Bess, or Porgy – and in some cases to Heyward or Gershwin.<sup>5</sup>

Scholarship used in this article discusses the lives of the creators of "Summertime," such as Frank Durham's book on the origins of *Porgy* (1956) and a biography of Gershwin by Howard Pollack (2006).<sup>6</sup> The monograph, *On My*

*American Migration Narrative* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 18; Jeffrey Melnick, *A Right to Sing the Blues: African Americans, Jews, and America Popular Song* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999) 30, 62; Ray Allen, "An American Folk Opera? Triangulating Folkness, Blackness, and Americanness in Gershwin and Heyward's 'Porgy and Bess,'" *Journal of American Folklore* 117, no. 465 (Summer 2004): 243-261, here 246; Larry Starr, *George Gershwin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2011), 123, 143-144.

<sup>3</sup> Olin Downes, "Exotic Richness of Negro Music and Color of Charleston, S.C., Admirably Conveyed in Score of Catfish Row Tragedy," *New York Times*, October 11, 1935.

<sup>4</sup> George and Ira Gershwin, DuBose and Dorothy Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score* (New York: Gershwin Publishing Corp., 1935; multiple reprints).

<sup>5</sup> Abbie Mitchell, "Summertime," recorded July 19, 1935/released 1974; Sublime, "Doin' Time," recorded 1996/released November 25, 1997; Billie Holiday [singer], vocal performance/studio recording of "Summertime" (single), recorded July 10, 1936/released 1936 on Vocalion Records 3288; Miles Davis [trumpeter], trumpet solo and ensemble performance/studio recording of "Summertime" (album: *Porgy and Bess*), arrangement by Gil Evans, recorded between July 22 and August 18, 1958/released March 9, 1959, on Columbia Records CL 1274; Nina Simone [singer], vocal performance/live recording of "Summertime" (album: *Nina Simone at Town Hall*), recorded September 15, 1959/released 1959 on Colpix Records SCP 409; Janis Joplin [singer], vocal performance/live recording of "Summertime" (album: *Live at Winterland '68*), recorded April 12-13, 1968/released June 2, 1998, on Columbia Legacy Records CK 64869; The Doors [rock band], vocal performance/live recording of "Summertime" (album: *Live in Boston*), recorded April 10, 1970/released July 24, 2007, on Bright Midnight Records 8122799790.

<sup>6</sup> Durham, *DuBose Heyward*; Howard Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2006).

*Way*' by Joseph Horowitz (2013) recalls the backstory to Gershwin's opera.<sup>7</sup> Ted Gioia's *The Jazz Standards* (2012) follows the lullaby's key reinterpretations in the genre of jazz (2012).<sup>8</sup> Biographies of the artists who sang it offer a deeper interpretation of the lullaby because they explain who the artists were in a contextual sense.<sup>9</sup> Cultural histories, including *The Cultural Front* by Michael Denning (1996) and *Dancing in the Dark* by Morris Dickstein (2009), emphasize the significance of *Porgy and Bess* and the career of Billie Holiday.<sup>10</sup> More specific studies used here include three monographs: Farah Jasmine Griffin's *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Myth* (2001) proposes different views on the American perceptions of Billie Holiday, Nadya Zimmerman's *Counterculture Kaleidoscope* (2008) offers an analysis of the American singer Janis Joplin's interpretation of "Summertime," and Larry Starr's *George Gershwin* (2011) provides an analysis of Gershwin's style and the opera's deeper implications.<sup>11</sup> This article draws from Durham's and Horowitz's books for their insight on the opera's origin. Zimmerman's and Starr's analyses offer a basis to discuss the characterization of "Summertime" by other artists, but this article differs from their approach as it focuses more on the cultural significance of "Summertime" in the twentieth century.

This article's approach is interdisciplinary because of the lyrics, music, and the argumentative disposition of psychohistory and cultural history.<sup>12</sup> I argue that, in the process of historical difference, "Summertime" is more than a lullaby.

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<sup>7</sup> Joseph Horowitz, *"On My Way": The Untold Story of Rouben Mamoulian, George Gershwin, and Porgy and Bess* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2013).

<sup>8</sup> Ted Gioia, *The Jazz Standards: A Guide to the Repertoire* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

<sup>9</sup> Ian Carr, *Miles Davis: The Definitive Biography* (New York: Thunder's Mouth Press, 1998; first published 1982); Leslie Gourse, *Sassy: The Life of Sarah Vaughan* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1993); Stuart Nicholson, *Ella Fitzgerald: The Complete Biography* (New York: Routledge, 2004); Elizabeth Nash, *Autobiographical Reminiscences of African-American Classical Singers 1853-Present: Introducing Their Spiritual Heritage into the Concert Repertoire* (New York: Edwin Mellen Press, 2007); David Brun-Lambert, *Nina Simone: The Biography* (London: Aurum Press, 2009); Ann Angel, *Janis Joplin: Rise Up Singing* (New York: Amulet Books, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Michael Denning, *The Cultural Front: The Laboring of American Culture in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Verso, 1996); Morris Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark: A Cultural History of the Great Depression* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); Nadya Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspectives on Late Sixties San Francisco* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Starr, *George Gershwin*.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Leland Clarke, "Toward a Musical Periodization of Music," *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 9, no. 1 (1956): 25-30, here 29-30 and 25 (for the quote below), asserts that if one wants to study music's periodization, it ought to be done in an interdisciplinary approach, especially with social studies: "No detail of melody, rhythm, harmony, cadence, or medium applies to a complete period, or indeed to the complete works of any great composer. Nothing is constant. All art is in flux, full of contradictions and interpenetration." His claim demonstrates why "Summertime" is an example of this "flux," especially in American society.

It became a cultural anthem because of Gershwin's and Heyward's influences, Holiday's version (which birthed it as a cultural anthem), and the various reinterpretations of and identifications with "Summertime" in American history. "Cultural anthem" means a song that comes from a legacy, such as that of *Porgy and Bess*; and has been socially anthologized by various performers who have some sense of identity pertaining to the characters from or authors of that legacy. Musically, a cultural anthem features multiple renditions that adapt to different genres and styles. The method implemented here serves to exemplify "Summertime" as a cultural anthem because many of the artists who performed it showed human behavior or complexities that resembled Clara, Bess, or Porgy and, in some instances, Heyward or Gershwin. This article takes into consideration the obvious race-and-gender themes of twentieth-century American society. Moreover, though, this cultural anthem's development showcases an intergenerational element that transcendently breaks those social bounds. "Summertime" originated in *Porgy and Bess* and exemplifies the diversity of American society in 1935, yet the lullaby continues to remind American society of its diversity from generation to generation. "Summertime" is a cultural anthem of hope.

#### I. "Summertime" in 1935

The music and lyrics of "Summertime" were not written at the same time. Gershwin wrote the music in 1933, and Heyward wrote the words later, in 1934-1935,<sup>13</sup> and subsequently adapted them to the Gullah dialect (i.e., the language of African Americans in the Southern Lowcountry). This accentuates the "otherness" of "Summertime," and Gershwin remarked that this dialect resembled the Yiddish language which he and his brother Ira spoke.<sup>14</sup> According to Dickstein, *Porgy and Bess* received mixed views in 1935: "[f]ew would have predicted that a far less typical Broadway musical, the Gershwins' 'folk opera' *Porgy and Bess*, would eventually become one of the most beloved and durable works of the century."<sup>15</sup> Therefore, the lullaby's origin became timeless, yet it would take on a life of its own after its first performances.

Heyward's personal life offers a clue as to the origins of the lyrics. He was born on April 31, 1885, in Charleston, South Carolina, where the summers were hot and humid, to a plantation family during the Reconstruction era. He received a private education and began writing poetry as a young child. In fact, his grandmother read to him the works of James Fenimore Cooper and Charles Dickens. More importantly, he grew up in a household that had black servants, and he admired their folk humor. Of even greater significance was the black

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<sup>13</sup> Durham, *DuBose Heyward*, 123; William G. Hyland, *George Gershwin: A New Biography* (Westport: Praeger, 2003), 164.

<sup>14</sup> Horowitz, *On My Way*, 162.

<sup>15</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 465.

"Mauma" who was a loved and feared mother figure in his household. As a young boy, Heyward developed a taste for making money, working for Charleston's *Evening Post*. In 1917, due to health issues, he traveled to Tryon, North Carolina, where the artist Louis Rowell (1873-1928) encouraged him to paint, and he embraced the state's landscape of mountains and trees, yet he learned that painting was not his choice of art. He would rather write.<sup>16</sup>

Heyward's childhood and personal life give insight into the lyrics of "Summertime." He had a rather pleasant childhood, and his family noticed his natural talent. Both aspects are evident in the lyrics of the lullaby. For example, the opening lines, "Summertime an' the livin' is easy, / Fish are jumpin' an' the cotton is high," underscore that he grew up in an affluent household.<sup>17</sup> The next lines reinforce this image: "Oh yo' daddy's rich, an' yo' ma is good lookin, so hush, little baby, don' yo' cry."<sup>18</sup> They reflect many aspects of his life: his desire to make money as a young boy, his love and respect for his various mother figures, and his need as a young child for affection. The final lines reflect a sense of hope: "One of the mornin's / you goin' to rise up singin' / Then you'll spread yo' wings / an' you'll take the sky. / But till that mornin' there's a nothin' can harm you / With Daddy an' Mammy standin' by."<sup>19</sup> The interesting point here is that these words, in different settings, can take on new cultural meanings.

The lyrics reflect more than just Heyward's personal life: their imagery paints a vivid picture of the American Dream. Reconsider, the opening lines: "Summertime an' the living is easy. / Fish are jumpin' an' the cotton is high. / Yo' daddy's rich an yo' ma is good lookin' / So hush, little baby, don' yo' cry."<sup>20</sup> Firstly, Heyward depicts the imagery that America is a land of plenty, hence the references to cotton, fish, and rich father. One could also argue that he was nostalgic for his black mother figure, but the role of mother fixates more on gender. Further, he mentions both father and mother, so his lyrics suggest that he was fixating on the past generation which would raise the next one. Secondly, Hayward continues the idea that life in America is one of leisure and a place where the women are beautiful. Thirdly, he distinguishes both genders according to their roles in society: a man who can provide for his family and a woman who is worthy of that man because of her looks. Lastly, the combination of imagery and lyrics do more than merely stress America's ideal of family life. Dickstein notes that the Great Depression was a "betrayal" of the American Dream and life and hindered these ideals because it compromised the economic situation. He asserts, too, that during the 1930s, the populace was challenging the idea of the "American Dream" because the Great Depression was much worse

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<sup>16</sup> Durham, *DuBose Heyward*, 3-25.

<sup>17</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 15.

<sup>18</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 15.

<sup>19</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 16-17.

<sup>20</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 15.

and had a "psychological impact."<sup>21</sup> In other words, the lyrics speak of a time to which one cannot return. More importantly, the original context of these lyrics is Clara singing to her child. In one sense, she insists that her child can hope and long for this American Dream. However, American artists have made their changes to the song, and that has significantly altered the cultural meaning of "Summertime," even though Gershwin had intended it to be an operatic lullaby.

Many European music composers, among them Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, Franz Schubert, and Igor Stravinsky, had an impact on Gershwin. On January 6, 1927, in the *Montreal Daily Star*, Gershwin stated: "My idea of music is [Johann Sebastian] Bach, [Richard] Wagner, [Ludwig van] Beethoven, and [Claude] Debussy."<sup>22</sup> Concerning "Summertime," the three most "relevant" composers from his statement are Bach, Wagner, and Debussy. Wagner is known for his operas, and "opera" is the original context of "Summertime."<sup>23</sup> The song also emulates Debussy's impressionistic and romantic composition style: one piece that has a similar dreamlike and lullaby quality is Debussy's "Reverie," written in 1890.<sup>24</sup> Bach's influence would reveal itself in later versions of "Summertime." Thus, "Summertime" is like a fragmented thought because these three composers influenced its genesis. Musicologist Larry Starr has emphasized that Gershwin was a composer of both the theater and the concert hall, and his unique style included the use of blue notes, melodies, harmonies, and syncopated rhythms.<sup>25</sup>

On the performance level, the rhythms and harmonies of "Summertime" are elementary. The first chord progression (harmony) consists of two chords that, in the rhythm, move back and forth. With this, Gershwin built a swaying motion effect, like a meandering river. The progression and rhythm capture more than a meandering river, though: they create a texture of humidity and heat. The blue notes are in the chords of this song, not its melody; hence, without the chords and their placement in the rhythm there would be no blue feel or style to "Summertime." The melody's notes move in two simple ways, namely in small leaps and stepwise motions.<sup>26</sup> The significance of this progression and rhythm is that they give "Summertime" its lullaby and dreamlike feel. The blue notes in the chords and the melody's simplicity are why jazz musicians are drawn to this

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<sup>21</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 7, 219.

<sup>22</sup> George Gershwin, "Jazz to Survive Says Gershwin," *Montreal Daily Star*, January 6, 1927, quoted in Pollack, *George Gershwin*, 136, 731.

<sup>23</sup> Gioia, *Jazz Standards*, 411, notes that the main chords in "Summertime" are from Richard Wagner's "Tristan Chord" (F, B, D# and G#).

<sup>24</sup> Claude Debussy, "Reverie," in *Claude Debussy: Selected Works for the Piano*, ed. Joseph Probstakoff, vol. 1813 (New York: G. Schirmer, 1962), 13-17.

<sup>25</sup> Farah Jasmine Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery: In Search of Billie Holiday* (New York: The Free Press, 2001); Nadya Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope: Musical and Cultural Perspectives on Late Sixties San Francisco* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2008); Starr, *George Gershwin*.

<sup>26</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 15-17.

song: they allow them to improvise freely and build their own characterization of this lullaby. The blue notes are the binding factor that led to the cultural anthem's later versions because many of its artists employ styles that use them.

In the opera, the character Clara sings "Summertime" to lull her baby to sleep. Abbie Mitchell was the first performer to sing the song. Mitchell grew up in New York, and she was a talented soprano. In 1897, she began taking voice lessons with the African American baritone and composer Harry Burleigh (1866-1949), and before the outbreak of World War I she studied in Paris.<sup>27</sup> Mitchell's performance is the original, and it captures Gershwin's idea of "folk opera." Her performance begins in a fast tempo, with troublesome clarinet arpeggios, then, the strings come in and transition to a slower tempo that captures the meandering-river motion. As she begins to sing, her voice instantly contrasts with the strings because they have a dark tonality from the chords, while her voice brightly hovers above them, as if she is setting the sun for her baby. Mitchell's classical background and Gershwin's intention of "folk opera" combine to create a vocal tonality that has a haunting quality and drifts away as the song ends.<sup>28</sup> The vibrato technique she used is questionable, and Horowitz has commented that she rolled her "r" because of her training in Paris.<sup>29</sup> However, all this may have been a combination of her technique and Gershwin's compositional intentions. Unlike subsequent performers of "Summertime," Mitchell was constrained by the style Gershwin wanted for the opera's scene.

Initially, "Summertime" was a simple lullaby that created a dreamlike aura in both its lyrical and musical expression. The question then arises why it turned into a jazz standard, a rock song, and ultimately a cultural anthem. Dickstein indicates that reviewers were critical of Gershwin's opera because of its racial implications, noting that one critic, Virgil Thomson, saw the opera as "lowbrow," meaning beneath true opera.<sup>30</sup> Thomson had stated: "Gershwin does not even know what an opera is [...] and yet *Porgy and Bess* is opera, and it has power and vigor [...] With a libretto that should never have been accepted on a subject that should have never been chosen, a man who should have never attempted it has written a work that has considerable power."<sup>31</sup> Thus, Thomson suggests partly why "Summertime" became a cultural anthem, namely because it came from a man and an opera that had power—something that is underscored by the

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<sup>27</sup> Nash, *Autobiographical Reminiscences*, 132.

<sup>28</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 15-17; Abbie Mitchell, "Summertime," recorded July 19, 1935/released 1974.

<sup>29</sup> Horowitz, *On My Way*, 126-127.

<sup>30</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 465.

<sup>31</sup> Virgil Thomson, "George Gershwin," in *A Virgil Thomson Reader*, ed. Richard Kostelanetz (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1981), 25.

lullaby's lyrics: "One of the mornin's / you goin' to rise up singin' / Then you'll spread yo' wings / an' you'll take the sky."<sup>32</sup>

Dickstein writes that Gershwin was a multicultural composer who created an "American idiom" because music is a language.<sup>33</sup> Hence, his opera reminded American society of its diversity in 1935. Another aspect of this can be seen in Olin Downes's comment that "Clara's lullaby 'Summer Time,' sets early a melodic pace that is fairly maintained in the lyrical moments of the [music] score."<sup>34</sup> In this sense, "Summertime" remained tied to Clara, not Mitchell, because Downes did not mention Mitchell's name as a performer in the opera. Downes's comment explains why the song has allowed artists throughout time to establish their character in the song from one generation to the next. His early review facilitated the lullaby's removal from its historical context and set it on a trajectory of historical difference.

## II. *The Birth of a Cultural Anthem: Billie Holiday's 1936 Recording*

Critics like Thomson had taken offense at the racial implication of *Porgy and Bess*. The African American composer Duke Ellington (1899-1974) had his own opinion of Gershwin's opera. According to William Hyland, Ellington stated in an interview in 1935 that *Porgy and Bess* and its fictitious community of Catfish Row lacked the "Negro Idiom" due to Gershwin's musical influences.<sup>35</sup> This may very well be the reason, though, why both black and white artists began to record the opera's music. Jazz singer Billie Holiday (1915-1959) had worked with Ellington on his 1935 musical short *Symphony in Black*, and she had been influenced by Louis Armstrong and Bessie Smith who belonged to an earlier generation of African American music artists. During the Great Depression, the radio offered an emotional escape, and Holiday recorded "Summertime" on July 10, 1936, making it one of her first blue numbers. Incidentally, one year and one day later, on July 11, 1937, Gershwin passed away. Griffin suggests that Ellington is one of the reasons why Holiday has been portrayed as an abused woman.<sup>36</sup> In the history of the lullaby, Holiday's gender identity is the prevalent aspect that illustrates "Summertime" as a cultural anthem because her version is the starting point of it becoming socially anthologized. If anything, Holiday—as a female character of American culture—reinforced the significance of the blue notes that the next generation would sing.

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<sup>32</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 16-17.

<sup>33</sup> Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 467.

<sup>34</sup> Downes, "Exotic Richness of Negro Music."

<sup>35</sup> Hyland, *George Gershwin*, 173.

<sup>36</sup> Denning, *Cultural Front*, 323; Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 17, 29; Pollack, *George Gershwin*, 19, 215; Dickstein, *Dancing in the Dark*, 233; Ece Goksu, "An Analytical Look at Selected Billie Holiday Compositions and Their Lyrics" (M.M. thesis, William Paterson University of New Jersey, 2009), 23.



Like Mitchell, Holiday did not change any of the lyrics. She merely sang them as Heyward had written them; in fact, she sang them as if hinting at the Gullah dialect. Her style and music are the two notable aspects of her interpretation. Her arrangement includes woodwinds, brass instruments, a drum set, the piano, and the double bass. Her tempo is a slightly faster pace than "andante."<sup>37</sup> This pace allowed her rhythm to build more anticipation, and it enabled her drummer to build a rumbling effect to the beat, which was important for Holiday's improvising style as she usually sang the melody one-sixteenth of a beat behind the band.<sup>38</sup> From the first downbeat of her version, the clarinet begins with a blue shrill that cues in the drums, and then her voice enters with its blue, rural, and chromatic passing notes.<sup>39</sup> She reveals "Summertime" as she carries the operatic feel from the long notes, and the woodwinds and the brass are a contrast to her long notes as they arpeggiate the chords. The drums, double bass, and piano combine to give the song a feel as if Holiday is following train tracks that take her away – from the imagined community of Catfish Row, leaving the folk world behind – to the "Empire State."<sup>40</sup> She captures a mood of nostalgia, yet of hope when she sings "With daddy and mammy standin' by."<sup>41</sup> Then the clarinet gives a blue solo that has a questioning phrasing, and the brass answers its question. Holiday's version of "Summertime" would become essential to her career.

American society associates Holiday with a much different song than "Summertime." Typically, Americans identify her with "Strange Fruit."<sup>42</sup> This song's lyrics describe America's issue of racial lynching during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. According to Dawn Bates, Holiday was politically conscious and socially aware, which suggests that she was a symbol of changing values.<sup>43</sup> Bates demonstrates that the genre of jazz was important to American listeners: "With its beautiful phrasing, rhythmic tensions, tonal complexities, and compelling vocal, the music of Jazz can express passion, anger, love, longing, and protest."<sup>44</sup> Bates argues that one of Holiday's most significant contributions to black society and the nation "was her ability to innovatively link jazz music to social and political protest in America."<sup>45</sup> Bates's argument refers to

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<sup>37</sup> "Andante" means "at a walking pace."

<sup>38</sup> Goksu, "Analytical Look at Selected Billie Holiday Compositions," 23.

<sup>39</sup> Goksu, "Analytical Look at Selected Billie Holiday Compositions," 22.

<sup>40</sup> "Empire State" refers to New York.

<sup>41</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 15-17; Billie Holiday, "Summertime," recorded July 10, 1936/released 1936 on Vocalion Records 3288.

<sup>42</sup> Billie Holiday, vocal performance/studio recording of "Strange Fruit" (single), by Abel Meeropol, recorded April 20, 1939/released 1939 on Commodore Records C-526.

<sup>43</sup> Dawn-Wisteria Bates, "Race Woman: The Political Consciousness Billie Holiday" (M.A. thesis, Sarah Lawrence College, 2001), 30-39.

<sup>44</sup> Bates, "Race Woman," 27.

<sup>45</sup> Bates, "Race Woman," 40.

Billie Holiday, not Elenora Fagan (her legal name), who developed the character Billie Holiday.<sup>46</sup> Historian Michael Denning suggests that "Strange Fruit" was a torch song, in other words, during the performance the light would be centered on Holiday.<sup>47</sup> The relationship between the two songs is that both have cultural imagery of the twentieth-century American South, be it cotton or lynching. Therefore, "Summertime" allowed Holiday to set her stage for her cultural contribution of "Strange Fruit" because both songs lived in this political artist. After all, what good is a torch song without cotton to burn?

Holiday's identity includes both Bess and Clara. Her representation in American media is that of an abused drug-addict woman, arrested for this behavior in 1947, who served over nine months of her sentence. Further, her use of drugs took her life in July 1959.<sup>48</sup> In this sense, Holiday's identity returned to Bess who was similar in nature, but Holiday was a real woman and Bess merely a character. Ted Gioia states that Holiday's rendition of "Summertime" was one of the memorable versions from the 1930s. After the American Federation of Musicians' strike from 1942 to 1944, Holiday's clarinetist Artie Shaw, who had played on the 1936 recording, "revived" the lullaby.<sup>49</sup> So, in this sense, Holiday is the mother of a cultural anthem because she and Gershwin left later generations a song of hope. Her identity and behavior resemble Clara who sang to her child; hence, Holiday birthed a cultural anthem of hope.

On July 14, 1940, a concert featuring various performers honored the late George Gershwin who had passed three years earlier. There was an audience of more than 20,000. From the cast of *Porgy and Bess*, Ash Duncan (Porgy) and Anne Brown (Bess) performed excerpts from the opera, and *New York Times* critic Olin Downes reported that "Miss Brown was interrupted by a burst of applause after [the] singing of 'Summertime'."<sup>50</sup> This event demonstrates that Brown carried on the portrayal of Bess in the lullaby's social anthology. Three years later, in 1943, Duke Ellington performed "Summertime" at Carnegie Hall, and it became part of his repertoire.<sup>51</sup> Nonetheless, the credit for launching the lullaby's social anthology belongs to Billie Holiday because she did not just cover the song: she was artistically innovative among her contemporaries, and—in keeping with the principle of historical difference—many of them followed their cultural mother to reprise the lullaby yet again. Holiday and Gershwin together, the black

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<sup>46</sup> Billie Holiday and William Duffy, *Lady Sings the Blues: 50th Anniversary Edition* (New York: Harlem Moon, 2006; first published 1956), 120-121.

<sup>47</sup> Denning, *Cultural Front*, 324, 327-328.

<sup>48</sup> Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 26-27.

<sup>49</sup> Gioia, *Jazz Standards*, 411-412.

<sup>50</sup> Olin Downes, "Stadium Concert Honors Gershwin: Oscar Levant, Pianist, Plays Concerto in F at Annual Memorial Program, Eva Jessye Choir sings, 'Porgy and Bess' Selections Are Presented by Ann Brown and Todd Duncan, Interpretation Praised, 'Porgy and Bess' Excerpts," *New York Times*, July 14, 1940.

<sup>51</sup> Gioia, *Jazz Standards*, 412.

woman and the Jewish composer, would remind American society for generations of its diversity because of the blue notes.

### III. Jazz and Nina Simone: The Hurricane of "Summertime"

After World War II, the rise of suburbia began to blur the notion of "folk opera." During the 1950s and 1960s, rural and urban cultures began to blend. According to Iain Anderson and Ruth Feldstein, this was the starting point of the "resurgence" of jazz, partly because of television and suburban culture; the civil rights movement got traction, especially after the case of *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) in which the Supreme Court ruled racial segregation in public schools unconstitutional; and, between 1956 to 1959, black women began a "new generation" of entertainment which facilitated both individual and collective consciousness.<sup>52</sup> Ted Gioia points out that, during the 1950s and 1960s, "more than 400 jazz cover versions of 'Summertime' were recorded."<sup>53</sup> Hence, this decade reveals the black jazz artists who socially anthologized the cultural anthem again, but in the context of the rise of the civil rights movement. The renditions of Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong, Miles Davis, and Nina Simone are representative examples of this "hurricane," because they transcend generations and identity complexities.

In 1950, the double bass plucked away with an eighth-beat drive, setting the tempo for Sarah Vaughan (1924-1990) to wistfully launch into the long notes of "Summertime." Vaughan did not change Heyward's lyrics. Singing them as they are, her alto voice is chthonic and powerful as if it represents the deep roots of the cotton. The woodwinds, strings, and trumpets create a textural contrast to one another as the harmony ascends and descends. Together, they create the blue hue of the Southern sky during the last days of August. The drums resemble the rise of suburban houses as they are planted row by row like a vast array of cotton fields. As she sings the lines "With Daddy an' Mammy standin' by / [pauses, deep breath] stand' by," her voice stretches and leaps as if it would break.<sup>54</sup> Vaughan's interpretation of "Summertime" in its essence invokes the hope that housing segregation would end. The irony of her singing of "Summertime" is that she was a heavy smoker, and lung cancer ended her career as a vocalist in the 1980s.<sup>55</sup> In this sense, her human behavior returned to the complex Bess, but Vaughan set the stage for the next generation of jazz performers in the 1950s.

On to 1957/1958. A French horn picks up the beat and buzzes the melodic notes of "Summertime," while the strings enter, resembling the "folk opera" that

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<sup>52</sup> Iain Anderson, *This Is Our Music: Free Jazz, the Sixties, and American Culture* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2007), 12-13; Ruth Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free: Black Women Entertainers and the Civil Rights Movement* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 22-23.

<sup>53</sup> Gioia, *Jazz Standards*, 412.

<sup>54</sup> Sarah Vaughan [singer], vocal performance/studio recording of "Summertime" (album: *After Hours*), recorded 1950, released 1955 on Columbia Records CL 660.

<sup>55</sup> Gourse, *Sassy: The Life of Sarah Vaughan*, 231-232.

Gershwin had intended, almost setting the mood for Mitchell or Brown to perform. However, instead of hearing an operatic voice, Louis Armstrong (1901-1971) improvises the first verse on his trumpet, so melodic and free that the listener does not need the lyrics to recognize the tune. After his introduction, "the first lady of song," Ella Fitzgerald (1917-1996), sings the first verse, and her voice is a striking contrast to Armstrong's freestyle. At steady moving tempo, the strings begin to rise and capture the setting sun. His voice enters to sing the second verse, while a piano plays as small blue drift. Fitzgerald and Armstrong begin to take turns, echoing one another, with Fitzgerald taking the lead. As the song ends, singers and instrumentalists end on a very dark minor chord.<sup>56</sup> To a degree, Fitzgerald and Armstrong themselves represent the line "With Daddy an' Mammy standin' by," not just because of their gender and racial identities, but because of their action to "rise up singin'" together. Therefore, their version of "Summertime" is an illustration of a generation socially anthologizing the cultural anthem. Ironically, they both suffered from diseases that took their lives, so their complexity returns to Porgy the crippled.<sup>57</sup>

With a year of Armstrong's and Fitzgerald's rendition, Miles Davis (1926-1991) and arranger Gil Evans (1912-1988) recorded one of the most artistically rich versions of the lullaby. Davis opens with the melodic line of "Summertime" on his trumpet; he does not need the lyrics, because the blue notes and his improvisation are the driving force to this rendition. Flutes chromatically move between two chords that resemble the meandering river. The brush sticks on the drums resemble the sound of wind passing through the cotton. The tempo is a slow but warm pace that suggests the mood of driving along suburban streets. Davis's trumpet solo is rhythmically driven, with many long notes that invoke the operatic notion.<sup>58</sup> Anderson notes that Davis was "impressionistically" influenced as a jazz artist, so, to a degree, the complexity of this source returns to Gershwin's influence by Debussy.<sup>59</sup> In terms of identity, Davis's real-life human behavior resembled that of the fictional drug addict Bess because Davis, too, suffered from addiction for some time in his life.<sup>60</sup>

Of the jazz artists mentioned above, Nina Simone (1933-2003) appears to be the most complex, at least in style. She was both a pianist and a vocalist, and musically her 1959 rendition of "Summertime" is a much different lullaby. With

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<sup>56</sup> Ella Fitzgerald [singer] and Louis Armstrong [trumpeter], vocal and trumpet performance of "Summertime" (album: *Porgy and Bess*), recorded August 18-19 and October 14, 1957/released August 1958 on Verve Records MGV 4011-2.

<sup>57</sup> Robert Hoskins, *Louis Armstrong: Biography of A Musician* (Los Angeles: Holloway House Publishing Company, 1979), 14-15; Nicholson, *Ella Fitzgerald*, 244-245.

<sup>58</sup> Miles Davis, "Summertime," recorded between July 22 and August 18, 1958/released March 9, 1959, on Columbia Records CL 1274.

<sup>59</sup> Anderson, *This Is Our Music*, 28-29; George Gershwin, "Jazz to Survive Says Gershwin," *Montreal Daily Star*, January 6, 1927, quoted in Pollack, *George Gershwin*, 136, 731.

<sup>60</sup> Carr, *Miles Davis*, 34, 40, 60.

brush sticks on the snare and a double bass downbeat, she quietly hums a gospel melody while her right hand improvises the melody of "Summertime" on the piano. Her trio of instruments builds anticipation, and she pulls her power and hopes through her blue style of notes and rhythms. Then she begins to sing the lyrics, and her piano playing becomes more intense as she vocalizes the anguish when hope is lost. Her version has a drifting tempo that portrays the Atlantic sea and imagery of North Carolina. Deeply and softly, she ends the song with a very slight change in lyrics as she sings: "I've got my Porgy / I've got my Porgy."<sup>61</sup> Therefore, Simone embraced Bess's loving side rather than the character's drug-addict behavior. Further, this lyrical change demonstrates that her complexity is related to Heyward because she added a line that reveals a much "deeper" Bess. Simone had been raised in Tyron, North Carolina, where Heyward had become inspired to write.<sup>62</sup> Musically, she had the same influence as Gershwin: both pianists were heavily inspired by Bach, and thus her identity associates with Gershwin as well.<sup>63</sup>

Simone was not just an entertainer with talent and technique. She, to a degree, was also politically aware. Much like Billie Holiday, the anthem's cultural mother, Simone allowed her career in music to be a vehicle for her activism during the civil rights era. As the 1960s ended, Simone had a large repertoire of music that dealt with American cultural consequences such as racial violence, the assassination of Martin Luther King, Jr., gender discrimination, and the impact of segregation on children.<sup>64</sup> Therefore, Simone was more than a complex singer of the cultural anthem. Her version of the lullaby reflects the hope that the civil rights movement was not in vain, especially if the generational aspect is considered, because Simone and her contemporaries all had faced racial discrimination during their own childhoods.<sup>65</sup> Yet, they hoped for so much more, and their social anthology reminded America of its diversity.

#### IV. Janis Joplin's Reprisal of "Summertime" and Counterculture

There are literally thousands of recordings of "Summertime." The interpretations discussed here have been chosen for their unique lyrical changes, musicality, and their performers' characterizations of the song. They exemplify the persistence of the lullaby as a cultural anthem. Janis Joplin (1943-1970) and The Doors' Jim Morrison (1943-1971) had grown up in suburban developments during the 1950s,

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<sup>61</sup> Nina Simone, "Summertime," recorded September 15, 1959/released 1959 on Colpix Records SCP 409.

<sup>62</sup> Durham, *DuBose Heyward*, 12; Brun-Lambert, *Nina Simone*, 8-9.

<sup>63</sup> George Gershwin, "Jazz to Survive Says Gershwin," *Montreal Daily Star*, January 6, 1927, quoted in Pollack, *George Gershwin*, 136, 731; Brun-Lambert, *Nina Simone*, 15-16.

<sup>64</sup> Feldstein, *How It Feels to Be Free*, 84-86.

<sup>65</sup> Carr, *Miles Davis*, 6; Gourse, *Sassy: The Life of Sarah Vaughan*, 6-7; Nicholson, *Ella Fitzgerald*, 4-5; Brun-Lambert, *Nina Simone*, 18-19.

when racial segregation was still in place.<sup>66</sup> Joplin was the Texan girl who spoke out against this social practice in her teen years and was rebuked for it.<sup>67</sup> So, why did these "white" artists produce renditions of "Summertime"? The explanation can be found in Duke Ellington's words that "Summertime" lacks the "Negro Idiom," and the lyrics were written by Heyward who was of European descent.<sup>68</sup> Thus, the racial factor is only part of this cultural anthem's significance. Joplin and Morrison illustrate that the American Dream of the 1950s and suburban culture with its strict gender roles led to a banal life. In other words, this generation sought out a hope that was more than just an end of racial segregation, but an end to the mundane life of suburban culture.

Joplin's version of "Summertime" (1968) has a profound cultural significance that would become the basis for The Doors' and Sublime's later versions. Her version is rough, slow in its melodic line, and has a blue style. She drastically changed the lyrics, melody, and chords to fit her character. Her arrangement features woodwinds (like the saxophone), trumpet, bass and electric guitars, drums, and a jazzy, gospel organ. Joplin's lyrical changes are more subtle as she used the melody in a more rhythmic fashion and operatic manner (like Mitchell), but her interpretation's tempo and rhythmic phrasing have a sixth-eighth drive to it.<sup>69</sup> Joplin's version is one of the most improvisational ones in terms of the melody. Her most important lyrical change is from "So hush, little baby, don' yo cry" to "Baby, baby, baby, baby, baby, baby, baby, baby, / no, no, no, no, no, no, no, no, don't you cry."<sup>70</sup> Yet, in the last vocalization of the original verse, Joplin sings the lyrics almost completely as Heyward had written them. Nayda Zimmerman indicates that Joplin's lead guitarist's classical influence drew from Bach's *Well-Tempered Clavier* ("Prelude in C Minor"). Hence, in terms of complexity, Joplin's version is reminiscent of Simone's.<sup>71</sup>

Americans associate Joplin with the counterculture movement of the 1960s and 1970s. In other words, in social memory, she is a symbol of the movement and identified with the diversity of California's music industry.<sup>72</sup> More importantly, both Billie Holiday and Janis Joplin had studied the way in which

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<sup>66</sup> David Dalton, *Mr. Mojo Risin': Jim Morrison, the Last Holy Fool* (New York: Spade & Archer Inc., 1991), 22; Angel, *Janis Joplin*, 6-7.

<sup>67</sup> Angel, *Janis Joplin*, 5.

<sup>68</sup> Durham, *DuBose Heyward*, 3; Gioia, *Jazz Standards*, 412.

<sup>69</sup> Sixth-eighth was not the time signature or meter, it was the rhythmic beat that Joplin used.

<sup>70</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 15-17; Janis Joplin, "Summertime," recorded April 12-13, 1968/released June 2, 1998 on Columbia Legacy Records CK 64869.

<sup>71</sup> Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope*, 46-47; Brun-Lambert, *Nina Simone*, 15-16.

<sup>72</sup> George Lipsitz, "Music, Migration, and Myth: The California Connection," in *Reading California: Art, Image, and Identity, 1900-2000*, ed. Stephanie Barron, Sheri Bernstein, and Ilene Susan Fort (Los Angeles: Los Angeles County Museum of Art and University of California Press, 2000), 153-170, here 154.

African American singers like Bessie Smith (1894-1937) had sung.<sup>73</sup> Upon her arrival in San Francisco in 1963, Joplin began to redevelop her style as a folksinger. From a racial perspective, Joplin identified with a blues persona and black female sexuality. According to Zimmerman, historians have argued that Joplin's blues persona reinforced the stereotypes of black women's "hypersexuality" and "stoicism." Moreover, both scholars and some of Joplin's close associates deemed her a "racial impersonator" for attempting to be black.<sup>74</sup> Zimmerman's analysis of "Summertime" recognizes that Gershwin's version is simple, almost impressionistic, and that the song's minor mode (blue notes) is like that of Debussy's works and other impressionistic composers that depict the Orient. Thus, Gershwin's use of the minor mode depicts white Americans' view of black America and its "otherness."<sup>75</sup> In this sense, Zimmerman acknowledges that because Joplin sang "Summertime," she reinforced black stereotyping.

Zimmerman suggests that the lyrical changes that Joplin made are connected to the counterculture movement. For example, Zimmerman comments on the change from "So hush little baby, don' yo cry" to "No no no, no no no, no no no, no don't you cry," asserting that Joplin and counterculture refused parental figures because Joplin's lyrical changes hide the line "With daddy and mammy standin' by."<sup>76</sup> Zimmerman notes that Joplin was oblivious of Gershwin's version and her own ensemble players because her persona was so powerful in live performances. Zimmerman claims that Joplin's interpretation of "Summertime" "is her lullaby to the culture of which she was a member."<sup>77</sup> In this rare instance, Joplin's characterization of "Summertime" returns to Clara. However, Joplin's personal life related more to the character Bess because of their drug abuse, and Joplin's life ended because of it. In this sense, Joplin's characterization reflects a dichotomy: a loving mother to counterculture, but also an addict.<sup>78</sup>

The rock band The Doors performed "Summertime" live in Boston in 1970. Their interpretation is rough in its musicality, because of the instrumental arrangement of the bass guitar, electric guitar, drum set, keyboard, and voice. The group chose a more downbeat-centered tempo due to the genre of rock. They also changed many of the chords to give the song a lively feel. These combined changes make the song seem less like a dream and more like a

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<sup>73</sup> Griffin, *If You Can't Be Free, Be a Mystery*, 28-29; Wendy Smith, "Rock of Ages: Forty Years after Their Deaths, Jimi Hendrix and Janis Joplin Now Seem Part of the Mainstream Culture They Rebelled Against," *American Scholar* 79, no. 4 (2010): 89-92, here 89; Angel, *Janis Joplin*, 10.

<sup>74</sup> Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope*, 43.

<sup>75</sup> Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope*, 48.

<sup>76</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 15-17; Janis Joplin, "Summertime," recorded April 12-13, 1968/released June 2, 1998 on Columbia Legacy Records CK 64869; Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope*, 49.

<sup>77</sup> Zimmerman, *Counterculture Kaleidoscope*, 49.

<sup>78</sup> Smith, "Rock of Ages," 89.

disillusion in its musicality, but the lead vocalist, Jim Morrison, also changed one line of the lyrics that brought a different dream and character to the song: he switched the genders in the line "Yo' daddy's rich, an yo' ma is good lookin'," to "Yeah, your Momma's rich, and your Daddy's good lookin'."<sup>79</sup> He expresses his male persona in the song, but asserts that his character's woman (" Momma") is the provider in his dream. During the 1970s, America was experiencing the Women's Liberation Movement. Hence, the cultural irony is that The Doors' version of "Summertime" exemplifies that men, during this time, should have started to think of themselves as equals in the role of parenting. However, Morrison's personal life, too, identifies more with the complex and drug-addict character Bess: his life ended in Paris due to intense alcoholism on July 3, 1971.<sup>80</sup>

Sublime's cover is rather different from Mitchell's original. The group did not perform it in the same context, but in one of urban culture and to a much later generation (millennials). In 1996, they recorded their version on the album *Sublime*, though they titled the song "Doin' Time" instead of "Summertime."<sup>81</sup> The change of title is significant because "doin' time" is a reference to a person spending time in prison. Not only did they change the title drastically, they also changed many of the lyrics to fit this notion. For example, "Me and my girl we got this relationship / I love her so bad but she treats me like / On lock down like a penitentiary."<sup>82</sup> These lyrics imply that the singer, Bradley Nowell (1968-1996), is trapped in his relationship. In the broader sense, the changes indicate that the American Dream is lost, because Nowell's woman does not reflect the loving wife Clara; rather, his woman represents the complex Bess. In this sense, his own characterization relates to Porgy, the crippled man, who accepts Bess's complexities. Moreover, Sublime's cover demonstrates Porgy's perspective, and Nowell identifies with him, though Nowell may have identified with Bess more because she was a drug addict. Sadly, his life ended due to drug abuse.<sup>83</sup>

These artists appeared to hope for an escape from the mundane life of modernity. They implemented the cultural anthem as a recognition that the American Dream is a disillusion. The association of Joplin with counterculture demonstrates that the lullaby broke many racial and gender implications. She may have borrowed from black culture, but it was her blue persona and music that became a vehicle for her to project that "otherness" is also linked to an individual's behavior. In this light, "Summertime" proves itself as a powerful

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<sup>79</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 15-17; The Doors, "Summertime," recorded April 10, 1970/released July 24, 2007, on Bright Midnight Records 8122799790.

<sup>80</sup> Dalton, *Mr. Mojo Risin'*, 155-157.

<sup>81</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 15-17; Sublime, "Doin' Time," recorded 1996/released November 25, 1997.

<sup>82</sup> Gershwin and Heyward, *Porgy and Bess: Vocal Score*, 15-17; Sublime, "Doin' Time," recorded 1996/released November 25, 1997.

<sup>83</sup> Rob Kemp, "Boys of Summer," *Rolling Stone*, no. 1008, September 7, 2006, 110.



American idiom, because Joplin's persona also had a great sense of power. Further, The Doors' version of the lullaby establishes that either a white or black artist can perform the song, regardless of an individual's gender identity. Lastly, Sublime's cover demonstrates that this cultural anthem is capable of adaptation to more than the genres of opera, jazz, and rock. Instead, it surpasses those genres and, consequently, transcends to another generation.

### *Conclusion*

As we have seen, "Summertime" moved past its own origins of 1935. The lullaby developed over a sixty-year period. George Gershwin's *Porgy and Bess* left a legacy for many generations of Americans who had lost their dreams during the Great Depression. He and DuBose Heyward created a song for an opera that Billie Holiday covered because of its lyrics and musicality, allowing her to take on a greater persona and cultural influence in her career. Holiday was the starting point of the social anthology of "Summertime," and her version demonstrates that it did not matter how many times the song was covered but, rather, who was covering it. In this sense, Holiday is the mother of the cultural anthem. The later renditions of Sarah Vaughan, Miles Davis, and Nina Simone suggest that "Summertime" moved to another generation of artists who experienced the beginning traction of the civil rights movement during the 1950s, hoping their next generation would face less racial discrimination. Janis Joplin, among jazz artists and her contemporaries, illustrates that the lullaby is an example of the American idiom because she served as a link to the influence of Bessie Smith and gender. Joplin was of a later generation than the jazz artists, and she hoped to escape the suburban lifestyle of the 1950s. For generations, Gershwin's "Summertime" – as a cultural anthem – has reminded Americans of their diversity. Perhaps it also reminds Americans that they are diverse in their expression of music through styles and genres because of blue notes.

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