

The Slavic Influence on American Music

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Text	“Slavic Influences on American Music”
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Audio	Natural speed

Pre-Text Activity

1. Quick Brainstorm

What famous Russian songwriters were born outside of Russia, in the former Republics or in other countries?

Slavic Influences on American Music

Written by Kevin McCaughey

About 400 words. [Listen to natural speed audio](#) (3:59)

There are American songs that nearly everyone in Russia seems to know, songs like “Summertime,” and “Puttin’ on the Ritz.” But the composers of these very American-sounding songs had Russian or Ukrainian roots.

Some were born in Russia, and some in New York to immigrant parents. Most were Jews. One thing is certain: 20th-century American music would be a mere shadow of itself—and somehow less *American*—without the contributions of these Eastern Europeans.



Irving Berlin. Photo: Voice of America

First, take **Irving Berlin**. He was born Israel Baline, probably in Tyumen, Siberia. Berlin had more than 200 hits on the Top 40 charts. He even wrote “God Bless America,” which, though not the official national anthem, is just as popular—or more so. In fact, on September 11, 2001, after the terrorist attacks, it was this song that members of congress began singing on the steps of the US Capital Building. ([Click this link if you’d like to hear them](#)).

Jerome Kern, another American songwriter, said of Berlin: “He *is* American music.” Some praise for a man born in Siberia!

[Click here to listen to Irving Berlin’s “Russian Lullaby” by Kevin McCaughey](#)

George and Ira Gershwin were born in New York to parents who had immigrated from the east: whether from Russia, Ukraine, or Lithuania isn’t absolutely clear. George Gershwin wrote music usually, and Ira lyrics. They teamed up with Dubose Heywood for “Summertime,” one of the most frequently recorded songs of all time. The music, written by George, may even have been inspired by the Ukrainian folk lullaby “Oy Khodyt Son” which Gershwin heard at New York’s Carnegie Hall in 1929.



George and Ira Gershwin with Fred Astair. Photo: VOA



George Gershwin. Photo: VOA

One of the most famous American musical plays is *Fiddler on the Roof*, based on the stories of Shalom Aleichem, who lived and wrote in Ukraine.

Lyricist Yip Harburg was born to Russian immigrant parents. He would later write the words to “Somewhere Over the Rainbow” from the film *The Wizard of Oz*. [clip plays].

Vernon Duke, born Vladimir Dukelsky (on a moving train near Penza!) wrote jazz songs later sung by Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald, like “April in Paris” and “Autumn in New York.”

These are some of the names, but they are not all the names. The influence of these Eastern European composers on American music has been enormous.

Post-Text Activities

2. Further Investigation

Below you’ll find a list of more Russian or Slavic links to American popular music. In the left column you’ll see a name or song, in the write column is what you need to find out: the key to the Slavic-American connection. Some of these people were born in the US, some immigrated, and some just spent time in America.

How many answers can you find?

Who or What	Find Out
“Where Have all the Flowers Gone” by Pete Seger	What does the song have to do with ‘s novel <i>And Quiet Flows the Don (Тихий Дон)</i> ”
“Those Were the Days” by Mary Hopkins spent six weeks on the charts as a number one hit.	What’s the connection with the old song “Дорогой длинною”?
Waron Zevon. His biggest hit was “Werewolves of London”	Who was he?
Igor Stravinsky	Where did he die?
Sergei Rachmaninoff	When did he come to America? Where did he die?
Bering Strait	What kind of music does this group from Obninsk play? Where do they live?
	Who is this writing pair?
Vladimir Horowitz	Who was he? When did he come to the States?
The Russian Tea Room, NY	Where was it? Who started it? Who frequented the place? What happened to it?
Lev Termen (In English: Leon Theremin)	What did he invent? What’s his American connection?
http://www.rcny.org/	Find out what this URL is.

3. Creating Your Own Listening Activity

Why not create a language learning activity using one of the above songs, or any other song that you find with a Slavic-American connection? Then everyone in the class can take part and actually *do* the activity.

Find the words to the song on the Internet. That's very easy nowadays. If you can, find a recording (an mp3 or WAV file). If you do so you can create a listening activity such as a gap-fill. This is where you print the lyrics but you have removed some words or phrases. For an example of a simple gap-fill listening activity, go to Irving Berlin's song "[Oh, How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning.](#)"

Creating an activity yourself will help you and your classmates practice English.