

Masters of Music

THE WORLD'S GREATEST COMPOSERS

The Life and Times of *George Gershwin*



by Jim Whiting



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The internet sites referenced herein were active as of the publication date. Due to the fleeting nature of some web sites, we cannot guarantee they will all be active when you are reading this book.

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National Pride

As thousands of spectators filed into the Los Angeles Coliseum on July 28, 1984, for the opening ceremonies of the Olympic Games, there was an excited buzz of anticipation. It was the first time that the Summer Olympics had been held on American soil since 1932. The organizers were determined that what was about to be seen by nearly 100,000 people inside the Coliseum and by 2.5 billion more on live television around the world would not only showcase the athletes but also the American way of life.

The Games came at a good time in American history. Following the heavy American involvement in the Vietnam War that began in 1964, the country had been deeply divided. Nearly 60,000 American servicemen and servicewomen were killed before the final withdrawal in 1975. It was the first time that the country had lost a war. The final stages were especially humiliating. A long line of people, waiting to be evacuated, stretched from the roof of the American embassy down through the building. A continual stream of helicopters flew in, snatched up a few people at a time, and flew them to the safety of an aircraft carrier lying offshore. The airlift was the only way out. The communists controlled all the land exits. These images of American helplessness were transmitted all over the world.

With bitterness from the war still lingering, a further shock awaited the country in November 1979. A mob of Iranians poured into the American Embassy in Tehran, Iran's capital. Fifty-two Americans were seized as hostages. The United States protested, but to no avail. The following month, troops from the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. Again the United States protested. Again it did no good. In 1980, eight American soldiers died when a mission to rescue the hostages in Iran ended in a well-publicized failure. To many people, these were more signs that the U.S. was continuing to lose its military power.

Then perceptions began to change. The American hostages were finally released early in 1981. While their freedom came as the result of diplomacy rather than military action, people were relieved that these Americans were no longer in captivity. In 1982, a popular film called *First Blood* appeared on movie screens. It features actor Sylvester Stallone as Vietnam veteran John Rambo. Several previous films had depicted Vietnam veterans as embittered, helpless men. Some were dependent on drugs. Rambo is just the opposite. He is a strong, highly trained soldier who refuses to back down from anyone. When local police officials arrest him just for passing through town, he fights for what he believes in. American audiences appreciated this new perspective on Vietnam vets and looked at Rambo as a hero.

In 1979, a communist government backed by Cuban dictator Fidel Castro had taken control of the Caribbean island nation of Grenada. A military coup in 1983 resulted in more than 100 deaths. The U.S. government, already concerned about Castro's increasing influence in the Caribbean, now feared for the safety of a number of American students in Grenada. President Ronald Reagan ordered an invasion by U.S. troops, who quickly secured a victory. Even though it was an uneven fight, many Americans were elated about the win. After the depressing years when the Vietnam War had dragged on and on, any win was welcome and helped restore American pride in its military.

As a result of these and other developments, the mood of the country was becoming more optimistic by the time the Olympics approached. Americans were proud of their country again. The Los Angeles Olympic

Games would be the ideal way of showing this pride. There was another reason for emphasizing the American way of life. At that time, the United States and the Soviet Union had been locked in a cold war for several decades. Even though the two nations had been allies in their effort to defeat Nazi Germany in World War II, their systems of government were entirely different. Both sides maintained staggering arsenals, including enough nuclear weapons to virtually wipe out the other's population.

These political differences carried over into the Olympics. In 1980, the Games had been held in Moscow, the capital of the Soviet Union. It was the first time that a communist country had hosted the Olympics. Like the Americans, the Soviets wanted the Olympics to serve as a showcase for the advantages of their way of life. They were therefore shocked and disappointed when U.S. President Jimmy Carter refused to allow American athletes to compete in the Olympics. He was protesting the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan. He also urged other countries to boycott the Games. As a result, more than sixty nations stayed away from Moscow.

It wasn't surprising that the Soviets retaliated by boycotting the 1984 Games. Sixteen nations joined them. However, this boycott would not affect the profitability of the Games. Because the 1976 Olympics in Montreal had lost huge sums of money, the organizers of the 1984 Games allowed more than forty companies to purchase the rights to sell "official" Olympic merchandise to cover the costs of producing the Games. The 1984 Games would make a profit of \$150 million.

The opening ceremonies were organized by David L. Wolper, a movie and television producer whose credits included the 1977 television epic *Roots*. *Roots* had been the first blockbuster miniseries. It appeared on eight successive nights and was about a young African man who had been sold into slavery; it followed his story through several generations of his descendents. The miniseries drew huge audiences and won nine Emmy awards.

Wolper organized many spectacular special effects for the three-and-a-half-hour extravaganza. Church bells rang out all over the Los Angeles

area. An airplane flew overhead, spelling *WELCOME* in huge letters. A man wearing a rocket pack flew into the Coliseum and landed in the middle of the field. Thousands of pigeons fluttered up into the air. A huge marching band paraded up and down as its more than 800 members played popular songs. Covered wagons raced across the infield. Even the audience became involved. They were given large colored cards and special instructions so that they could display the national flags of the participating nations.

For many people, the most sensational part came when eighty-four pianists played eighty-four grand pianos. Just getting the pianos ready to go was a major achievement. They had to be trucked into the Coliseum and installed, then each one had to be carefully and painstakingly tuned. They also had to be protected from the sunshine. When all was ready, the pianists—wearing matching blue tuxedos—played *Rhapsody in Blue*.

In many ways, it was an excellent choice of music. Its composer had been born to immigrant parents who had arrived in the United States near the end of the nineteenth century with almost no money. Their son was a high school dropout who began working full-time when he was fifteen. Within a decade, *Rhapsody in Blue* and other works he had composed made him famous around the world. He seemed to be the perfect embodiment of the American Dream—someone who became successful and famous entirely through his own efforts.

His name is George Gershwin. ◆

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