



# The Gershwins and Me: A Personal History in Twelve Songs

*Michael Feinstein*

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**From celebrated entertainer Michael Feinstein comes a beautifully illustrated account of the lives and legacies of the Gershwins—told through stories of twelve of their greatest songs and accompanied by an original CD of those songs, performed by the author.**

The “Ambassador of the Great American Songbook” Michael Feinstein was just twenty years old when he got the chance of a lifetime: a job with his hero, Ira Gershwin. During their six-year partnership, the two became close friends. Feinstein blossomed under Gershwin’s mentorship and Gershwin was reinvigorated by the younger man’s zeal for his and his brother George’s legacy. Now, in *The Gershwins and Me*, the only book of its kind, Michael Feinstein shares unforgettable stories and reminiscences from the music that defined American popular song, along with rare Gershwin memorabilia he’s collected through the years.

From “Strike Up the Band” to “Love Is Here to Stay,” each of the twelve chapters highlights one of the Gershwins’ classic songs, exploring the brothers’ lives, illuminating what the music meant to them, and telling the stories of how their iconic tunes came to life. Throughout the star-studded narrative, Feinstein unfolds the moving chronicle of his own life with the Gershwins, describing his vision for their enduring presence today. No other writer could give us such an authoritative inside perspective on these titans of American culture—and no other writer could include such a soulful collection of music as the accompanying CD packed with Feinstein’s original recordings of the twelve songs.

A timeless classic and the definitive account of the Gershwins and their legacy, *The Gershwins and Me* will have you humming with every turn of the page.

## The Gershwins and Me: A Personal History in Twelve Songs Details

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## From Reader Review The Gershwins and Me: A Personal History in Twelve Songs for online ebook

### Beverly Hollandbeck says

Don't read this review if you don't want to hear me gush. This book is simply a sensual luxury. Not only is there the text of this love fest from Feinstein to the Gershwin brothers, there are also enough photos and copies of documents to fill a scrapbook, AND a CD of Feinstein singing 12 of the Gershwin songs. Rich, rich, rich. And since I am familiar with the Gershwin contemporaries, who are also characters in this story (Irving Berlin, Maurice Ravel, Jerome Kern, Cole Porter, Oscar Hammerstein, Richard Rodgers, et al.), every time a song title is mentioned, it begins to play in my head. Like a said, a sensual experience.

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### Stewart Summers says

It is an amazing story how the ultimate Gershwin fan ends up working for Ira Gershwin for 6 years. First he meets Oscar Levant's widow who then introduces him to Lee Gershwin...Ira's wife.

Michael Feinstein was not just an employee of Ira's. They became very close...I believe Ira looked upon Michael as the son he never had.

I loved the book, could not put it down. Very well put together, loved the rare color photographs of George Gershwin.

My one beef...the chapter on vocalists. Michael takes Sinatra to task for taking liberties with George and Ira's tempos and lyrics. And...Feinstein denies emulating Johnny Mathis as a vocalist. I beg to differ.

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### Dale says

S'wonderful! S'marvelous That you should care for me!

Any book that tells stories of George and Ira Gershwin gets my vote. But Michael does an excellent job reminding us what the Gershwin's represented to each of us and to all the world of music. It definitely is Mozart, Bach, Beethoven, and Gershwin.

One of my favorite books for 2012 and 2013. I love it when I hate to see a book comes to an end. All I can further say "our love is here to stay".

READ IT!!! Remember what we had and remember what we have loss in our culture. It is always sad to think and yet be excited to wonder what life would have been like if George would have died at 80 years not 38 years. We all loss so much. But we all got so much!

Have fun and read this!

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## **Marc Davis says**

What a wonderful book, filled with hundreds of anecdotes and personal observations about the Gershwins, their contemporaries, the Great American Songbook, the popular music scene, Broadway and Hollywood of the 1920s, '30s and '40s.

The subtitle is half right: "A Personal History in Twelve Songs." Personal it is. Feinstein worked for Ira Gershwin for 6 years. His observations of musicians and their quirks are highly personal. His analyses of songs and shows are informed and idiosyncratic. But while the book is arranged in 12 chapters, each with its own associated Gershwin song, the songs really have little to do with the contents of each chapter.

The discussion of each song usually goes on for a page or two or three. The book is less about analyzing music than discussing the who, what, when and why of each phase of George and Ira's careers. And that's just fine. I can't think of anyone more qualified to do so. Feinstein's is both performer and historian. His writing is very entertaining. Clearly he knows his subject – the people and their music.

One small pet peeve: While it's OK to idolize the Gershwins and their contemporaries, it's not OK to dismiss all current music out of hand, as Feinstein does. At one point, he writes about how much he enjoys going through old sheet music. "I have a better chance of finding an unknown gem by Kurt Weill or Cole Porter or Johnny Green than I have of loving anything on the radio today." That's just close-minded and unnecessary.

The bonus CD is a good addition. While it's not the best version of the 12 songs – Cyrus Chestnut's piano playing is light and creative, but Feinstein's singing is relatively flat and straightforward – it's a good primer and reference, even for readers who know the Gershwin canon well.

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## **Pamela Okano says**

Entertaining if a bit too detailed account of George and Ira Gershwin by the singer Michael Feinstein, who-- at the age of 20--was hired by Ira to catalogue the Gershwins' collection. Much better than the The Hammersteins, this book includes a CD of Feinstein singing the title songs of each chapter, most of which are songs every American should know: Strike Up the Band, The Man I Love, 'S Wonderful, I've Got a Crush on You, They All Laughed, Someone to Watch over Me, Embraceable You, I Got Plenty of Nuttin', They Can't Take that Away from Me, I Got Rhythm, Love Is Here to Stay. Lots of interesting photos as well. Probably the book rates a 3.5. It occasionally gets bogged down in Broadway minutiae, but there are plenty of interesting tidbits about the Gershwins, Fred Astaire (who knew his sister Adele was the big draw?), Ethel Merman, Frank Sinatra, etc. If you don't like Feinstein's assessments, you won't like this book. But otherwise, it was a good and easy read and wonderful reminder of all the great music the Gershwins wrote.

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## **Barbara Black says**

### **Musical history**

I really found this a fascinating book. I really think Michael Feinstein is one of the most talented performers

in this country besides being a great historian

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## Don says

Who did you idolize when you were growing up? Perhaps you stayed up until 1 in the morning so that you could catch every single game in which Mickey Mantle played. Maybe you watched Jimmy Stewart movies so often that you could just about recite the entire script. I suspect that most of us can think of a performer of some sort whose work touched us so deeply that it became a part of the fabric of our lives.

Well, for Michael Feinstein, George and Ira Gershwin filled that role. From an early age, Feinstein was completely captivated and mesmerized by what we now call the Great American Songbook and, especially, by the work of the Gershwin's.

There's one difference, however, between Feinstein's experience and ours. Through a serendipitous series of events, Michael not only met Ira Gershwin, but worked for the great lyricist for six mostly wonderful years. "The Gershwin's and Me," is, in part, a chronicle of their relationship, but it is oh so much more.

Since I have a strong passion for the American musical theater, I was thrilled beyond words to read Feinstein's reminiscences of the time he spent with Ira. Because they knew each other so well and spent so many hours together, this book goes way beyond the usual tell-all nonsense and gives the reader a very clear picture of exactly who Ira Gershwin was. Through Michael and Ira, we also gain a deep insight into George. By book's end, we really feel like we know all three of them and are the better for it.

If that's all that this book accomplished, it would be an incredible feat. But it does so much more.

The print book is accompanied by a CD which contains the twelve songs which form the framework of this memoir. Kudos to the National Library Service for the Blind and Physically Handicapped for incorporating those musical gems into their recording; hearing the music adds immeasurably to the pleasure you'll derive from this literary adventure. Each chapter begins with NLS narrator Michael Russotto reading the lyrics to the song followed by Feinstein's rendition of it. Feinstein then briefly comments on the song and then we're back to Mr. Russotto who reads the chapter to which the song connects.

While each chapter has a theme of sorts -- musical theater, movie musicals, what makes a great song -- the writing is quite free flowing. In fact, some might criticize Feinstein for his casual writing. For me, though, that's one reason I loved this so much. I felt like I was sitting in Michael's living room discussing with great fervor a passion we both shared. I kept wanting to interject a comment, argue a point, ask a question. By book's end, I felt like Michael and I knew each other pretty darn well and I only wish we could have spent more time together.

Will this book interest the casual reader? I believe it will. Even if you have absolutely no interest in the Gershwin's, I suspect you'll be intrigued by Feinstein's discussion of why some songs achieve immortality while other, equally good ones disappear from our memories. although I'm not a great musician, I was fascinated by the discussion of why Feinstein makes the decisions he does when performing a song or why he loves certain arrangements while others leave him bored to tears. Feinstein's sense of humor shines through on almost every page and I found myself laughing out loud at his agile wit and clever use of words.

So should you read this? Absolutely. You'll hear some amazing music, you'll learn a great deal about Gershwin and about music in general, you'll make a new friend named Feinstein, and you'll be the better for it. to quote an Ira Gershwin lyric, "who could ask for anything more?"

## Ellie says

This book is a combination Feinstein memoir/history of the Gershwins/and discussion and comparison of many other composers of the Great American Songbook. The book is full of eye-poppingly wonderful reproductions of Gershwin ephemera, photos, hand-written music notations and lyrics. Five stars for that, and for the lovely design! The book is organized into 12 chapters, each named after a Gershwin standard, and with the lyrics to that song appearing as the chapter heading. A CD is included, which has Feinstein singing those 12 standards along with the marvelous piano stylings of Cyrus Chestnut. (4-1/2 stars for the CD, being marked down only for the ploddingly slow tempo on "I Got Plenty O'Nuthin' "). So far, so good, and many of the stories Feinstein tells are fascinating. I had a few minor complaints, though. He does ramble at times, repeats himself in several instances, name-drops to an annoying degree, and his tone switches from high-brow to casual suddenly. He can't resist throwing in a lame joke here and there. He complains about singers altering the lyrics, notes or rhythms on some of Gershwin's tunes, (which he himself does on the CD in a couple of places), then turns around and praises artists for doing just that, because it "keeps the material fresh." Overall though, this is a book I would recommend to any Gershwin fan, and it made me eager to listen to the music mentioned that I haven't heard, as well as read more biographies of George and Ira Gershwin to fill in the blanks. I wish Feinstein had saved the discussion of other song-writers for another book, except for when those song-writers' paths cross directly with the Gershwins (one example, Irving Berlin).

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## Lisa-Michele says

This is a very uplifting book about how a guy meets his idol, Ira Gershwin, and then becomes obsessed with the Gershwins' musical legacy. Oh my gosh, I fell in love with the Gershwin music. The book started with a focus on Ira, the lyricist, but it quickly moved to George, the composer, and I was captivated. George wrote more than 800 songs in his short life, and at least 24 of them are enduring familiar hits. George says, "I write 13 songs a day to get the bad ones out of my head." His productivity was incredible. Kind of like Bruce Springsteen is today. After reading the book, I had to methodically listen to all the Gershwin music on iTunes and all the versions of each familiar song and assemble elaborate playlists with the best of the best. Some surprises: Cher sings a wonderful version of "Ain't Necessarily So" although so does Frank Sinatra; Elton John really scores with "Someone To Watch Over Me" but so does Linda Ronstadt. You get the idea. I have everything from Billie Holiday to Bon Jovi. Don't forget Gershwin playing Gershwin. The writing in the book is jumbled because the author, Michael Feinstein, is also a musician and so the "And Me" part of the title is literal. There is a lot of Feinstein philosophy along the way. Ignore that, and focus on the amazing life of the Gershwin brothers, how American musical theater was born, how music and lyrics work together, how Hollywood might have ruined Broadway, etc. Now I need to read books about Jerome Kern, Harold Arlen, Irving Berlin, and on and on.

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## Julie Capell says

A combination love letter to and history of the American Songbook as personified by the brothers Ira and George Gershwin, this book would make a great present for anyone with a love of show tunes, American popular music or the music of the twenties and thirties.

Our guide on this journey is Michael Feinstein, an accomplished performer of the music he is writing about, who also just happens to have worked for Ira Gershwin during the last years of that great lyricist's life. With utmost respect—worship would not be too strong a word—Feinstein allows the reader a glimpse inside the lives of the Gershwin brothers, illuminating their milieu and the songs that are their lasting legacy. Deconstructing certain songs, Feinstein is able to convey just how ahead of their times the brothers were, and explain the reasons why so many of their songs continue to be recorded and adored worldwide. I particularly enjoyed the passages where he explained the decisions he makes when performing these songs and how small changes can make or break a performance.

There are also plenty of anecdotes about all the famous artists and performers who worked with the Gershwins, people like Al Jolson, Harold Arlen, Gene Kelly, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Jerome Kern, Oscar Levant, Ethel Merman, et al. For readers who don't want to exit this heady company, the book is packaged with a CD of Mr. Feinstein performing many of the songs and accompanying himself at the piano, much as Gershwin did hundreds of times at the parties of the rich and famous of his era.

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### **Philip says**

I liked the book a lot, although it dragged a little towards the end. It is a great story--about the Gershwins (George, the composer, and Ira, the lyricist), told by Michael Feinstein, who met and became friends, and later, a kind of partner--with Ira. Feinstein is in love with the "Great American Songbook" (popular songs written from 1920-1960, those written by Gershwin, Porter, Berlin, etc.), although he believes that George Gershwin was by far the greatest composer of all. In fact, sometimes the book borders a little on being a hagiography, although it offers a lot of fascinating history and anecdotes for anyone who is interested in popular music of this era and/or the Gershwins.

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### **Sandy Mitchell says**

I went to high school with Michael and, I confess, have always had an interest in his success. However, even given my slight bias, Feinstein has crafted a very readable biography of Ira and George Gershwin that has something for both the long-time Gershwin fan and those just discovering the brothers who wrote some of America's most singable tunes, like "Embraceable You," "Strike Up the Band," and "Love Is Here to Stay."

Feinstein is the self-proclaimed "Ambassador of the American Songbook," and his passion for the subject leaps from the page. He has devoted more than just his career to preserving the memorabilia from this era as well as the songs. He is even building a hall of fame dedicated to American standards.

"The Gershwins and Me" is part biography, part auto-biography and often the line blurs. What he manages very successfully is to bring new information and new life into the stories of two men that have been told repeatedly.

If the story and the personal anecdotes aren't enough to make you pick up this book (or give it as a gift), Feinstein includes a CD of 12 songs that help to bring the chapters to life.

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## **Drew Lewis says**

Fascinating book about the life and musical contributions of George and Ira Gershwin. It also includes so many great anecdotes and insights into the history of musical theater, movie musicals, and those involved in the evolution of the Great American Songbook.

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## **Gloria Feit says**

Perusing this book is much like attending a cabaret performance by Michael Feinstein: It is replete with personal anecdotes and examples of the Great American Songbook. It is accompanied by a CD of 12 of the best Gershwin tunes. And the illustrations, many of which are from the author's personal collection amassed over decades, are not only impressive but a rare addition to an informative work.

At the age of 20, Feinstein became the personal assistant to Ira Gershwin, helping to catalog the work of perhaps the greatest songwriting team in American history [Ira with his brother, George, of course]. He spent six years at the task, which certainly qualifies him as one of the foremost authorities on his subject. The book not only addresses the Gershwins' impressive output, but the whole genre, which he dates back to the writing of Swanee. He suggests the tunes of George and lyrics of Ira, fresh and vital, helped to shape the attitudes, morals and beliefs of the 1920s, '30s and '40s. And beyond the Gershwins, he looks at the whole genre: Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, Rogers and Hart, Harry Warren and Harold Arlen, and how they were influenced by the brothers Gershwin.

In case you're wondering, the twelve songs are: "Strike Up the Band," "S Wonderful," "I've Got a Crush on You," "They All Laughed," "Someone to Watch Over Me," "Embraceable You," "Who Cares?," "I Got Plenty of Nuthin'," "They Can't Take That Away from Me," "I Got Rhythm," and "Love Is Here to Stay."

Not only are the Gershwins memorable, but this book will be as well: for its information and art. It certainly should, and will be, I am certain, a lot more than just a display on a coffee table. Highly recommended.

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## **Elizabeth says**

Michael Feinstein may be an entertaining storyteller in person, but at least you could walk out of a live show. It's great that he worked for Ira Gershwin for so many years and knew intimate details of his life and George's. But do I care that he fought with Ira's widow? Or what random Gershwin paraphernalia he's spent his life collecting? There were some good stories mixed in with the bad ones, but with the story changing every paragraph they were hard to follow or focus on.

This book was easy to put down. Physically. It's coffee table sized. A better format would have been full sized photos with salient quotes or long captions. No attempt at a narrative was necessary here.

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