

Kay Swift

KAY SWIFT has two claims to a place in American musical history: first, in the Twenties, she was a rare exception to the rule that songwriters had to be grizzled cigar-chewing Lower East Side men; second, as his girlfriend and a fellow composer, she was George Gershwin's closest musical confidant apart from his brother Ira.

George was the cocky Tin Pan Alley song-plugger with ambitions to cross the tracks; Kay was a socialite, a banker's wife and a conservatory-trained musician who at one point in her life had written a fugue a week. Without her, he would undoubtedly have found his translation to the concert hall more laborious and painful. In turn, it was Gershwin songs which awakened her own interest in popular music, songs first heard when a mutual friend brought George to one of her parties. As always, Gershwin played for most of the evening; then, he stood up from the piano and said to Kay, "Well, I've got to go to Europe now."

On his return, they began a unique personal and professional relationship that lasted till George's sudden death from a brain tumour in 1937 — and beyond. Kay, no matter how you pushed her, refused to voice any criticism of George, beyond an expression of regret that he never married her. They saw each other constantly, but, despite her divorce, those who knew the mercurial Gershwin doubted he would ever wed. One evening, entering a night-club, they were spotted by Oscar Levant: "Ah, here comes George Gershwin with the future Miss Kay Swift."

Marriage aside, there was no question of Kay's importance to the composer. At the first night of *Porgy and Bess* in 1935, she sat between George and Ira; they spent so much time at the piano together that, until her last illness, she was the first port of call for any Gershwin scholar who wanted to hear how George would have played any particular piece; the original manuscripts for the Preludes and several other works are written partly in his hand, partly in hers; they shared musical notebooks, jotting down themes and melodies, he starting at one end of the pad, she from the other.

After George's sudden death, she and Ira carefully preserved and numbered all the unused jottings, with Kay filling in the gaps from memory. Gradually and selectively, they began turning the best into new songs — first for the 1939 World's Fair, next for a Betty Grable film, *The Shocking Miss Pilgrim* (1946). The latter produced a couple of lasting additions to the Gershwin oeuvre — "For You, For Me, For Evermore" and "Aren't You Kind Of Glad We Did?" — but, over the years, more than a few of us wondered how much of the music was Gershwin and how much Swift.

"I would say to Ira, 'Look, this theme here would be really good for a main section, and then on this page there's a theme that we could work into a middle-eight,'" she recalled. But, in any kind of music, how the themes are put together are at least as important as what they are: surely, I suggested, she ought to have taken a co-composer's credit. "Oh, no," she insisted. "Every note is George's." Like Ira, at times she was content to neglect her own career to serve what she saw as George's genius.

Her own catalogue includes the music and lyrics for *Paris '90*, a revue for Cornelia Otis Skinner; the song cycle *Reaching For The Brass Ring*; and the score for one of George Balanchine's earliest American ballets, *Alma Mater* (1935), a spoof on the Harvard-Yale football game. But most of us know her for "Can This Be Love?" and other sophisticated revue songs.

She cracked Broadway in 1929, contributing to the score of *The Little Show* one of its biggest hits. "Can't We Be Friends?" is one of those effervescent swingers typical of the Twenties but with enough surprises — sliding down to a low D natural — to put it a cut above most of the rest. For words, Kay Swift turned to "Paul James" — a pseudonym for her husband, James Paul Warburg, scion of three great banking families and, as financiers go, not a bad lyricist: "I thought I'd found a man I could trust / What a bust! / This is how

me down and say Can't We Be Friends?" It's a neat lyric, though whether it suits the breezily carefree tune is another matter. Sinatra sang it slow and mournful, taking his cue from the words, attempting to infuse it with a solemnity the melody can't really support; most versions, such as Linda Ronstadt's successful revival, go with the tune, freewheeling and up-tempo.

Mr and Mrs Warburg landed another hit in 1930 with the title-song for *Fine and Dandy*, a number with an irresistible rhythmic device. She never found the notion of bankers on Broadway as striking as it seemed to others. "Bankers invest in the shows, they go to the shows, they throw the first-night parties for the shows," she told me, "so why shouldn't they write them?"

She had a theory, based on her friendships with Gershwin, Ravel and others, that composers look like their music. You can see it in George: brash, restless, assured, etc. But Kay Swift always looked to me like what she was — a high-tone banker's wife. She sprang to



life, though, when conversation turned to music. "When Ira was pleased with a lyric, he used to run around the room like a squirrel," she'd say, and then she'd show you. At the piano, she could conjure from memory an old Irving Berlin ragtime novelty that she'd last sung with her brother when they were 10 years old.

Unlike George, who was driven, Kay could turn her hand to everything and so never did enough. After his death, she went west and married a rodeo cowboy, an unlikely union which she chronicled in an idiosyncratic memoir, *Who Could Ask For Anything More?* (from a Gershwin lyric, of course). The book outlasted the marriage and was filmed in 1950 as *Never a Dull Moment* with Irene Dunne and Fred MacMurray as Kay and her cowboy. She wed a third time — to a radio announcer — and was divorced a third time.

Almost from their first meeting, it was George who was the most important man in her life. She was a tireless promoter of *Porgy And Bess* after its shaky premiere — but she knew enough, and was trusted enough by George, to suggest a few judicious cuts. And, despite his at times suffocating ego, she was never far from his thoughts. At the opening of *Strike Up the Band* (1930), in the middle of conducting the overture, he turned round to Kay, sitting directly behind him in the front row, and whispered, "April and Andy" — a reference to her daughters, who liked to do a little dance to one of the score's songs, "I've Got A Crush On You". She never ceased to marvel that any composer, on the first night of a show and on his first stint in the orchestra pit, could find time to recall a small moment of domestic pleasure.

In August 1936, the Gershwins left for Hollywood. Kay saw them off at the airport, having already agreed with George that it would be best if they didn't see or speak to each other for a year; then, when he returned, they would decide their future. The following June, after badgering friends for news of her, he phoned from California and said, "I'm coming back for both of us." A few weeks later, he was dead.

Mark Steyn

Kay Swift, composer, lyricist, writer, born New York City 19 April 1897, married 1918 James Warburg (two daughters; marriage dissolved 1935), 1943 Faye Hubbard (marriage dissolved 1947), Hunter Galloway (marriage dissolved), died Southampton Connecticut 28 Jan. 1983.