

# Porgy and Bess

## USC LIBRARIES RESOURCE GUIDE

Tuesday, April 29, 2014, Ahmanson Theatre, Los Angeles



**ROSS SCIMECA** of the USC Libraries has selected the following resources to help you learn more about *Porgy and Bess*.

### Introduction

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*Porgy and Bess* premiered in 1935 on Broadway in New York City. The work is a collaboration among George Gershwin, DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin based on Heyward's novel and play, both named *Porgy*. Gershwin considered *Porgy and Bess* an "American folk opera," musically integrating blues and jazz into the classical opera genre. However, the work was not really accepted as an opera until the Houston Grand Opera mounted the complete score in 1976. Nine years later, the Metropolitan Opera performed it. *Porgy and Bess* is now internationally recognized as a profound and unique work that it is quintessentially American in expression.

The performance you will be attending is the most recent Broadway production, which opened in January 2012 and closed September 23, 2012. It was nominated for ten Tony Awards, winning Best Revival of a Musical and Best Performance by an Actress in a Leading Role in a Musical (Audra McDonald).

### Synopsis

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The following synopsis comes from the musical's official website at [porgyandbessthemusical.com/story](http://porgyandbessthemusical.com/story):

On a quiet evening in Charleston's Catfish Row, Clara and her husband Jake sing a lullaby ("Summertime") to their baby. In the courtyard, the men gather for a game of dice ("Roll Them Bones") while Jake tries to teach his baby about the ways of women ("A Woman is a Sometime Thing"). Amongst the players and bystanders are Porgy, a crippled beggar; Sporting Life, a shady drug dealer; Crown, an infamous drunk and bully; and Bess, Crown's woman who is shunned as a "hussy."

Porgy wins the game. When Crown flies into a rage, Robbins, another player, jumps to Porgy's defense. Crown and Robbins fight and Crown kills him with a cotton hook. With the police on their way, Crown flees but warns Bess that he will return for her. With no one else in Catfish Row willing to take her in, Bess takes shelter with Porgy.

The inhabitants of Catfish Row try to collect money to give Robbins a proper burial ("Gone, Gone, Gone"), as Porgy and Bess shock their neighbors by entering the funeral together. After a violent interruption from the police investigating Robbins' murder, the widow Serena laments his death ("My Man's Gone Now"). Bess helps convince the undertaker to accept what the community can afford to pay ("Leaving for the Promised Land").

One month later, the men set out fishing on Jake's boat, the Sea Gull ("It Takes a Long Pull To Get There"). Porgy, a changed man since Bess began living with him, sings about his life and his love ("I Got Plenty of Nothing"). Sporting Life arrives on the scene and Mariah threatens him with violence if he tries to sell drugs in Catfish Row ("I Hates Your Strutting Style"). Seeing how happy she has made Porgy, the community has come to accept Bess and Porgy decides to buy her a divorce from Crown. Sporting Life again tries to push drugs on Bess, but Porgy saves her ("Bess, You Is My Woman Now"). Bess is invited to the neighborhood picnic on nearby Kittiwah Island ("Oh, I Can't Sit Down") but Porgy stays behind awaiting the delivery of a brace for his leg.

On Kittiwah Island, Sporting Life interrupts Serena's "sermon" with a satirical punch on religion ("It Ain't Necessarily So"). As everyone else boards the boat to return to Catfish Row, a half-starved Crown jumps from the bushes and seizes Bess. The boat leaves and Bess is trapped on the island with Crown, who has been hiding out there since murdering Robbins. Bess struggles against him, insisting that she is with Porgy now ("What You Want With Bess?"). Crown, refusing to accept that Bess has changed, attempts to take her by force and Bess, desperate, gives in to his embraces. The two leave, deeper into the wilds of Kittiwah.

The next day, the fishermen head out to sea, even though it is high storm season. Bess stumbles back to Catfish Row, having walked twenty miles home from Kittiwah during low tide. She collapses, weakened and delirious with fever. Porgy remains steadfast at her side, and Serena prays for Bess's health ("Oh, Doctor Jesus"). As Bess recovers inside Porgy's house, vendors walk about Catfish Row selling strawberries, honey and crabs ("Street Cries"). Bess awakens and apologizes to Porgy for being with Crown. Porgy vows to protect Bess if Crown ever comes back to her ("I Love You, Porgy"). The hurricane bell sounds, warning everyone that a storm is imminent.

With the hurricane raging, all of Catfish Row huddles inside ("Oh, The Lord Shake the Heaven"). Suddenly, Crown barges in, mocking everyone's prayers with a bawdy song ("A Red Headed Woman"), demanding that Bess go with him. When Clara sees that Jake's boat has overturned in the ocean, she asks Bess to watch after her baby and runs into the raging storm to find her husband. Crown follows after Clara to rescue her. Crown, Clara and Jake all seem to be lost in the hurricane. After the storm, the town is in mourning ("Clara, Don't You Be Downhearted"). Bess has adopted Clara and Jake's baby as her own and sings Clara's lullaby ("Summertime (Reprise)"). That night, Crown, who actually survived the hurricane, returns to look for Bess. Porgy attacks Crown and kills him. Later, the police arrive and demand that Porgy come down to the station and identify the body. Afraid of being arrested for the murder instead, Porgy is dragged off unwillingly. In Porgy's absence, Sporting Life tempts Bess with cocaine, or "happy dust," and she considers leaving for New York with him ("There's a Boat That's Leaving Soon for New York").

After spending the night in prison, Porgy arrives back in Catfish Row. He is eager to see Bess but she is nowhere to be found. Porgy's neighbors reluctantly reveal to him that Bess has left for New York without him. Porgy, distraught, cries out for his love ("Bess, Oh Where's My Bess?") while Maria and Serena encourage Porgy to forget about her. Undeterred, Porgy calls for his cane and leaves for New York to find Bess ("Oh Lord, I'm on My Way").

## A Controversial Work

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Since its premiere, *Porgy and Bess* has been considered a racist opera. Indeed, the controversy is still with us today. Given at face value, the stereotyping of African Americans in the text of the musical work is indeed reprehensible, i.e., that blacks live in poverty, take drugs, gamble their money away and use their fists to settle arguments. One must remember, however, that the text is an outstanding example of literary realism using a specific regional setting. As an opera, it's text on the level of many of the Italian *verismo* masterpieces that focus on poverty and violence in provincial settings.

## Recommended Books

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### ***The Life and Times of Porgy and Bess: The Story of an American Opera* (1990)**

By Hollis Alpert

**Music Library: ML410.G288A68 1990**

### ***The Strange Career of Porgy and Bess: Race, Culture, and America's Most Famous Opera* (2012)**

By Ellen Noonan

**Music Library: ML410.G488N66 2012**

### ***George Gershwin: His Life and Work* (2006)**

By Howard Pollack

**Music Library: ML410.G288P65 2006**

### ***The Gershwins' Porgy and Bess: A 75th Anniversary Celebration* (2010)**

By Robin Thompson

**Music Library: ML410.G288T56 2010**

## Recommended Recordings

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Naxos Music Library Online—accessible through the USC Libraries' website at [www.usc.edu/libraries](http://www.usc.edu/libraries)—has three important recordings of *Porgy and Bess*. There is the 1952 Smallens recording of the complete opera; the RCA highlights disc with Price and Warfield; and Simon Rattle's complete recording from EMI. For anyone who wants an outstanding CD version of the opera, definitely acquire the Paul DeMain version on RCA with the Houston Grand Opera forces or the Loren Maazel version with the Cleveland Orchestra and Chorus on Decca. For those of you who collect vinyl LPs, I recommend the hard-to-find Columbia Masterworks 1951 recording of the full opera with Lawrence Winters as Porgy and Camilla Williams as Bess.