

Song Title **SUMMERTIME**

Rating: **YES: Caution**  
**YES: Lyrics**

**This song was escalated to the Song Assessment Tool Subcommittee for discussion.**

**Although the lyrics of *Summertime* use Black vernacular, in this instance the use of the word "[Mammy](#)" is not meant to portray a southern enslaved female, but a mother. In regards to the Black vernacular and determining admissibility, we have noted that the dialect contained in this song is quite different from that contained in other songs that have been deemed inadmissible on these grounds. The purpose of the dialect in this song (and *Porgy and Bess*, generally)—while having been criticized by some as being stereotypical—is not to demean or mock, as is the case with minstrel songs and [c\\*\\*n songs](#). The song is therefore admissible, with the following cautions:**

- **It is required that performers use more modernized updated lyrics (WITHOUT the vernacular; e.g. yo' instead of your) and WITHOUT use of the word "mammy."**
- **IMPORTANT: Before choosing this song, all performers should understand the criticisms of the song and the opera it came from ([see notes on Porgy and Bess](#)) and come to their own decision as to whether or not the song is appropriate for their performing group.**
- **ALSO NOTE: Some musicologists consider *Summertime* to be an adaptation (some might say appropriation) of the Negro Spiritual *Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child* (unmistakable in [Mehalia Jackson's recording](#) of the two songs together).**

And indeed, Gershwin used a chord sequence typical of spiritual songs. ([reference](#)). **Thus, this isn't just a beautiful lullaby.** The lyric line: "One of these mornings you're going to rise up singing. Then you'll spread your wings, and you'll take to the sky," evokes the enslaved, singing about going to Heaven to escape the harsh confines of their lives. Spirituals were not uplifting ditties - they were an escape mechanism for an oppressed people.

\* \* \*

What year was this song written? 1935

Who wrote the lyrics? DuBose Heyward and Ira Gershwin

What did your research tell you about the lyricist?

**Edwin DuBose Heyward** (August 31, 1885 – June 16, 1940) was an American author best known for his 1925 novel [Porgy](#). He and his wife [Dorothy](#), a playwright, adapted it as a [1927 play](#) of the same

name. The couple worked with composer [George Gershwin](#) to adapt the work as the 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess*. It was later [adapted as a 1959 film](#) of the same name.

Heyward continued to explore Black Charleston with another novel set in Catfish Row, *Mamba's Daughters* (1929). He and Dorothy also adapted this as a play. Another Heyward work with a race theme is the 1931 play *Brass Ankle*. The title refers to a Southern term for a person of mixed-race ancestry, and was long used in a pejorative way. The play addressed issues of [mixed-race](#), featuring a couple in a small southern town who have grown up believing they were white and learning about some African-American ancestry. Reviewers treated his play favorably as a version of the "[tragic mulatto](#)" genre, but it was not a commercial success.

Heyward also wrote poetry and other novels and plays, as well as the children's book *The Country Bunny and the Little Gold Shoes* (1939).

**Ira Gershwin** (born Israel Gershowitz, 1896-1983) was an American lyricist who collaborated with his younger brother, composer George Gershwin, to create some of the most memorable songs in the English language of the 20th century. The Gershwins created their first joint hit, *Lady, Be Good!*, for Fred and Adele Astaire and followed it with more than 20 scores for stage and screen. Ira created, along with DuBose Heyward, lyrics for the libretto to George's opera, *Porgy and Bess*. Before and after George's death in 1937, Ira collaborated with such composers as Harold Arlen, Vernon, Kurt Weill, Jerome Kern, Harry Warren, Arthur Schwartz, and Burton Lane. Ira Gershwin was nominated three times for an Academy Award, and he was the first lyricist to be awarded a Pulitzer Prize for *Of Thee I Sing* in 1932.

**Research shows that a number of Ira Gershwin's songs reflect problematic racial DEI concerns.** See additional information and the song list in Ira Gershwin's bio on the [Songwriter Biographies page](#).

What other material has been written by this lyricist?

**Heyward:** Poetry collections include *Carolina Chansons: Legends of the Low Country*, *Jasbo Brown and Other Poems*, and *Skylines and Horizons*; novels include *Angel*, *Mamba's Daughters*, *The Half Pint Flask*, and *Star Spangled Virgin*.

**Gershwin:** Songs include *Strike Up The Band*, *Of Thee I Sing*, All songs from the opera *Porgy and Bess*, *A Foggy Day*, *Nice Work If You Can Get It*, *Fascinating Rhythm*, *Embraceable You*, *How Long Has This Been Going On*, and *I Got A Crush On You*. Full list: <http://gershwin.com/music-search>

Who is the composer of this song? George Gershwin

What did your research tell you about the composer?

**George Gershwin** (born Jacob Gershowitz, 1898-1937) dropped out of school and began playing piano professionally at age 15. Within a few years, he was one of the most sought-after musicians in the United States. A composer of jazz, opera, and popular songs for stage and screen, many of his works are now standards, including "Rhapsody in Blue." George collaborated with his older brother, lyricist Ira Gershwin, to create some of the most memorable songs of the 20th century. The Gershwins created their first joint hit, *Lady, Be Good!*, for Fred and Adele Astaire and followed it with more than 20 scores for stage and screen. Ira created, along with DuBose Heyward, lyrics for the libretto to George's opera, *Porgy and Bess*. George Gershwin died immediately following brain surgery on July 11, 1937, at the age of 38.

**Research shows that a number of George Gershwin's songs reflect problematic racial DEI concerns.** See additional information and the song list in George Gershwin's bio on the [Songwriter Biographies page](#).

What other material has been written by this composer?

Songs include *I Got Rhythm*, *Liza*, *'S Wonderful*, *But Not for Me*, *It isn't Necessarily So*, *(I'll Build a) Stairway to Paradise*, *Love is Here to Stay*, *I've Got a Crush on You*, *An American in Paris*, *(I've Got) Beginner's Luck*, *The Man I Love*, *Shall We Dance*, *Fidgety Feet*, *Who Cares*, *For You*, *For Me*, *For Evermore*, *They Can't Take That Away from Me*, *Swanee* <https://gershwin.com/catalog/>

Read the lyrics as a poem or a story. Who and what is this song about?

This song is a comforting lullaby.

What did you learn about the HISTORY OF THE SONG?

*Summertime* is the iconic opening soprano aria in the 1935 American opera *Porgy and Bess*, adapted from [Dorothy Heyward](#) and DuBose Heyward's play *Porgy*, itself an adaptation of DuBose Heyward's 1925 novel *Porgy*. The story's setting of the Gullah community in the slums of Charleston, South Carolina depicts the struggles and celebrations of the main character Porgy, a disabled beggar, and Bess, a drug addict looking to escape the abusive relationship of her lover Sportin' Life.

*Summertime* is performed by the character Clara as she sings this lullaby to her baby against the background of Catfish Row, an impoverished area of Charleston, South Carolina. On the surface, the lyrics paint an idyllic picture of easy living, with lines like "Fish are jumpin', and the cotton is high / Your daddy's rich, and your mamma's good lookin'." But this offers false comfort, as the characters are poor African Americans living during the [Jim Crow era](#) of deep oppression in the U.S. South. The song reflects the dreams and hopes of the characters for a better life, using dreamy and fantastic musical elements to convey this sense of longing. In this aria, Gershwin incorporates elements of African American spirituals and folk music, blending jazz with classical opera styles.

*Porgy and Bess* was the first opera of its kind, considered by Gershwin to be an American Folk Opera. The original Broadway production featured a cast of classically trained African American singers—a daring artistic choice at the time. It was adapted as [a film](#) in 1959. A 1976 [Houston Grand Opera](#) production – the first by an opera company and based on Gershwin's original full score (without the cuts and other edits Gershwin made for the original Broadway production) – gained it renewed popularity, and it is now one of the best known and most frequently performed operas.

*Summertime* has been recorded over 20,000 times by various artists including Ella Fitzgerald, Miles Davis, Nora Jones, Willie Nelson, and Billie Holiday.

Relevant historical events include: Mary Mcleod Bethune established the National Council of Negro Women; African American doctor and researcher Percy Lavon Julian synthesized the drug physostigmine which is used today in the treatment of glaucoma; both the [Dust Bowl](#) (1930-1936) and the [Great Depression](#) (1930-1939) were in full swing.

Share a link to the earliest performance of this song that you can find.

[July 19, 1938 recording "Summertime", Abbey Mitchell](#)

(this recording is actually 1935 and not 1938 as listed)

[Ella Fitzgerald & Louis Armstrong 1959](#)

Look up the original sheet music to this song. Does any illustration or other characteristic of the sheet music reflect an inappropriate theme? No

Does the research on the background of the song reveal any discriminatory, racist, or non-inclusive prior versions?

Please see [Notes on Porgy and Bess](#).

Please supply the links to any additional sources you used for this section of research.

[Dreams in Gershwin's "Summertime" | MASTERPIECES OF WESTERN MUSIC](#)

<http://gershwin.com/ira/>

[https://www.songhall.org/profile/Ira\\_Gershwin](https://www.songhall.org/profile/Ira_Gershwin)

<https://www.biography.com/musician/george-gershwin>

<https://gershwin.com/george/>

<https://andscape.com/features/a-new-porgy-and-bess-metropolitan-opera-raises-old-questions-about-race-and-opera/>

<https://arts.umich.edu/news-features/confronting-porgy-and-bess/>

<https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/19/arts/music/porgy-bess-gershwin-metropolitan-opera.html>

<https://www.smithsonianmag.com/smart-news/after-30-year-absence-controversial-porgy-and-bess-returning-met-opera-180973200/>

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DuBose\\_Heyward](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/DuBose_Heyward)

#### Additional Questions to Consider (do not pertain to Admissibility)

The remaining questions pertain to Diversity, Equity & Inclusion issues other than those of race. As such, **THESE QUESTIONS DO NOT AFFECT A SONG'S ADMISSIBILITY**. They are provided to encourage your group to consider factors that may affect members of your audience and/or your performers with regard to religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, and more. ***Please refer to the Music Choices section of Chapter Choices to Address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*** (in the ***Chorus Toolkit***) *for details and strategies related to these factors.*

Could the message/lyrics of the song, original or subsequent, limit any singer or audience member's ability to engage, related to the following? A YES answer does not imply that the song is demeaning or exclusionary. [Please see instructions here.](#)

Age: No

Disability: No

Gender: No

Religion: No

Sexual Orientation: No

Visible Physical Difference: No

Other? No

Please explain your reasoning for YES/UNSURE answers and any NO answers you wish to explain.

n/a

Are there any adjustments to the lyrics that would make it more inclusive or current to our chorus culture or societal norms?

Yes -- Please see Reviewers' Note up top

Write any suggested lyrics changes (if applicable):

Lyric change would substitute the word "mommy" for "mammy" in the context "With daddy and mammy standing by" Typically the term mammy depicts the enslaver and the female enslaved caretaker relationship. In this song, however, the word is used as the southern informal term of mother/mommy. It is the mother singing to HER child, not someone else's, especially not an enslaver.

If you have suggested lyric changes, consider the following: Would any performer or audience member likely be aware of the original lyrics and message, even with the suggested lyric changes?

This song has been recorded over 33,000 times. It is rare that the original "mammy" lyric is used and in the instance that it is, it is not in a derogatory manner.

Our performing group believes that this song is appropriate for a Sweet Adelines performance for the following reasons:

This song, though it may have a different cultural background than most Sweet Adelines members, shares a universal message of motherhood. This is the message that should be shared with the audience when performing. This ensures that the performer is giving honor to the origins of the music and the message intended by the composer and lyricists. Please see [Notes on Porgy and Bess](#).

Are there any other research sources you used that you have not yet provided? If so please provide here.

If sources you've used were already provided in response to earlier questions, enter N/A

[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summertime\\_\(George\\_Gershwin\\_song\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Summertime_(George_Gershwin_song))