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Prison Area, Independence Valley

Rob Kroes

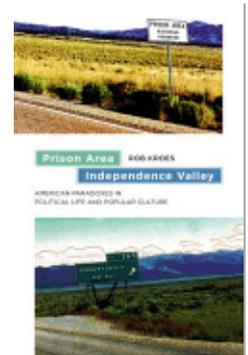
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MUSICAL AMERICA: STAGING THE U.S.A.
TO THE SOUNDS OF MUSIC

WERE THIS A radio program, you would be hearing the opening bars of Darius Milhaud's 1923 African-chic spectacle *La création du monde*, The Creation of the World. When it was first performed as a ballet in Paris, with a scenario by the Simultaneist poet Blaise Cendrars and sets and costumes by the Cubist innovator Fernand Léger, the high-point of the Parisian infatuation with jazz, or *Le Jazz* as it was referred to at the time, had already passed. It had been only one fashionable fad among others briefly toyed with before being cast aside in the restless quest for new idioms and modes of artistic expression by the cultural avant-garde of the time. Others had cocked an ear to jazz before Milhaud, such as Stravinsky in his musical impressions of Ragtime, or Poulenc with his *Rapsodie nègre*, full of pseudo-African mumbo-jumbo, in much the same way that later on Ravel would concoct a hodge-podge of mock-Chinese and French in his *L'enfant et les sortilèges*. They were all playful forays into exotic terrain, all equally noncommittal when it came to the authenticity of the cultural sources, African American or otherwise. The attitude was one of an omnivorous appetite of tasting and sampling, of what is sometimes referred to as cultural slumming, typical of a mode of cultural consumption equally prevalent in 1920s Paris as in New York in the days of the Harlem Renaissance.

When Milhaud wrote his *Creation of the World* he had done his share of slumming in both places. In addition to the adulterated sounds of what Paris knew as “Le Jazz,” Milhaud had been to Harlem joints and listened to blues singers like Bessie Smith and stride pianists like Willie “The Lion” Smith and James P. Johnson. More than any of his French fellow composers he had gone out to seek the genuine article and become the most alert practitioner of “Le Jazz” in his own writing of music. Yet a paradox remains. Much as he had exposed himself to genuine early forms of jazz, when upon his return to Paris he regurgitated what he had so eagerly taken in, the sounds of jazz were not meant to evoke the nervous modernity of New York, the skyscraper mystique that informed so many European visions of an imagined America in the 1920s. Instead, as the soundscape to his evocation of a world at the stage of its creation, the music called forth an image of a mythical primordial Africa in much the same way as African masks, which had been all the rage in Paris in the early twentieth century, and had inspired the visual language of painters such as Picasso. What Milhaud did was recontextualize a music that many would identify with the modernity of America, and reconceive it as a music representing an imagined Africa mediated through America’s black population, a remembered Africa as it kept inspiring its far-away descendants.

This is even more remarkable if we remember that at the same time American composers in their quest for a truly American musical idiom recognized jazz as precisely the material they were looking for. Composers like George Gershwin or the lesser known black composer William Still wrote music that in its tonality, sonority, and syncopation resembles Milhaud, yet in their case served a radically different musical program. The program ironically had been outlined for them in the late nineteenth century by a visiting European composer, Antonin Dvořák, a leader in the international movement that sought to infuse the writing of music with a national voice, rooted in local traditions. While in the United States, Dvořák in his teaching and writing had re-

mindful Americans that the music of America's black population might provide them with the folk traditions that he, and others like him, had found in ethnomusical traditions in their own national settings. It was an amazingly radical suggestion at the time, when America's black population was far from being seen as a natural component of America's social texture. In 1893, for instance, Dvořák advocated his views in the *New York Times*, when its pages were regularly filled with news of Negroes being lynched all over the American South.¹ It may have seemed an odd suggestion at the time, strangely out of place and time. Yet it was not long before American composers would take him up on his advice.

Gershwin made his first serious foray into black music in 1922, with the vaudeville opera *Blue Monday Blues*. Set on 135th Street in Harlem, this brief one-acter tells of a woman who shoots the man who's done her wrong, or so she thinks. The arias lack the verve of the best Gershwin tunes, awkwardly shuffling among the conventions of European operetta, Yiddish musical theater, and black musicals like Will Marion Cook's *In Dahomey*, a work, incidentally, inspired by Dvořák's *New World* symphony.² In addition to its cultural hybridity, Gershwin's *Blue Monday Blues* had a whiff of minstrelsy about it: white singers performed in black-face, and Paul Whiteman's smooth-timbred orchestra provided something other than an authentic Harlem sound. But Gershwin was learning as he went along. Commissioned by Paul Whiteman, who saw it as his mission to give jazz a quasi-classical respectability, and aided by Ferde Grofé in orchestrating the piece, Gershwin wrote *Rhapsody in Blue*, premiered in 1924 to general critical acclaim. Having come into his own as an acknowledged American composer he would go on to write his 1925 piano concerto and his 1928 *An American in Paris*. Jazz, in these compositions, was one of the ingredients along with the additional sounds of modernity, first explored by Edgar Varèse and George Antheil, in a music that was widely seen and welcomed as representative of America. Here we had a

musical vision of contemporary America, a “musical America,” as the eponymous journal that had carried that name as almost its program since its founding in 1898, had advocated. Echoing Dvořák’s call, the journal epitomized the quest for musical nationalism, or rather for a rooted cosmopolitanism in music, on a par with the best in contemporary music written in Europe. If Gershwin had carried the ambition to achieve this aim in the area of symphonic music, he would go on to fulfill the dream of writing the “great American opera” when, in the mid-1930s, he finished writing *Porgy and Bess*. It was the fulfillment of a dream in more ways than one. Not only had it been Gershwin’s dream to write an opera that could vie with the best in the established European canon while at the same time imbuing it with Americanness, he had at the same time fulfilled a more general American dream of cultural transnationalism, a dream that had inspired a generation of cultural nationalists around the time of World War I. Most famously in the pages of the influential, but short-lived, journal *The Seven Arts*, intellectuals such as Randolph Bourne, Van Wyck Brooks, or Waldo Frank had called for an American cultural emancipation, for a coming-of-age in which the United States should wrest itself free from Europe’s, particularly England’s, cultural tutelage, and find its own national voice. Their call contained a strange paradox. If the aim was for America’s creative talent to explore and find an American cultural identity, the way to that end was a transcendence of the multiplicity of transplanted Europes represented by its variegated immigrant populations. They saw it as their mission to transcend the many ethnic voices and identities and to reach a stage of transnationalism, weaving the many discordant immigrant voices and identities into one transcendent American voice. America’s national identity would be unlike Europe’s mosaic of national identities, aiming for a new synthesis that merged the national and the transnational into one.

Gershwin, in writing *Porgy and Bess*, had powerfully contributed to achieving this aim. The idea of writing a full-scale

opera had preoccupied Gershwin for years. The arts patron Otto Kahn—chairman of the board of the Metropolitan Opera, prime mover of Jazz Age culture, old friend of Richard Strauss—spurred him on, inviting him to write a “jazz grand opera” for the Met. Gershwin concluded, however, that the Met’s staff singers could never master the idiom; a true jazz opera could be sung only by a black cast. That was a radical, if not crucial, position to take, if the issue was to create a transnational culture. He broke through established racial compartments, opening up a stage for black artists on an equal footing with whites. More generally, he accomplished a feat in reaching toward what we might call a postethnic culture, a feat in cross-ethnic empathy. Here we had a work composed by a second-generation Jewish immigrant, immersing himself in a world first evoked in *Porgy*, a novel by a white Southerner, Dubose Heyward, but enriched by Gershwin’s eager exploration of the life and culture of blacks living on the Georgia sea islands. Exploring cultural exoticism and alterity, he managed at the same time to make the cultural difference his own, appropriating a cultural language for purposes of his own artistic expression.

The word “postethnic,” as I use it here, may seem like an anachronism, a word moved backward in time from the 1990s.³ Then it first appeared in the nationwide debate about multiculturalism, a debate not unlike the way multiculturalism was revisited in a number of European countries. On both sides of the Atlantic multiculturalism as a program for coping with ethnic diversity was seen as counterproductive, as unduly compartmentalizing ethnic groups, locking them within their own cultural particularisms. Trends that since the 1960s had been welcomed as strides toward cultural emancipation, encouraging ethnic groups to take pride in their diverse cultural identities, were now seen as leading to cultural fragmentation and splintering. As American historian Arthur Schlesinger saw the result, it was one of disuniting America.⁴ A powerful counterargument—for example, by cultural historian David Hollinger—pleaded in behalf of

promoting postethnicity, as a program and a policy to educate Americans in cultural empathy across ethnic lines. If universities wished to engage in identity politics, they should offer a version where black studies, women's studies, Native American Studies, and the like should no longer be in-group enclaves, but instead offer introductions into the many lives as they were led across ethnic divides. If this approach held out an ideal, it was one that we may rightfully recognize in George Gershwin's daring exercise in cross-ethnic empathy.

That was not, however, how his opera was initially received. Gershwin was seen as having crossed too many lines without a proper passport. Leftwing critics attacked what they saw as white exploitation of black material. Gershwin's racial ambiguities, his miscegenating mixture of Western-European, African American, and Russian-Jewish materials, were seen as problematic. Duke Ellington for one made the point that *Porgy and Bess* was not a true and authentic Negro Opera. As for Gershwin's blurring of genre lines, composer Virgil Thomson concluded: "I don't mind his being a light composer and I don't mind his trying to be a serious one. But I do mind his falling between two stools."⁵ Falling between two stools was, in fact, the essence of Gershwin's genius. He led at all times a double life: as music-theater professional and concert composer, as highbrow artist and lowbrow entertainer, as all-American kid and immigrants' son, as white man and "white Negro."

As it was, though, nothing in the end could stop Gershwin's folk opera from becoming an American classic. Many of its songs turned into evergreens and became part of the great American songbook, the canon of its great entertainment tunes, rendered and transformed time and again by popular singers and musicians, black and white alike. At the same time in its afterlife it conquered the great opera stages of the world, from New York's Metropolitan Opera to the Scala, from the Glyndebourne Festival to opera stages in Vienna, Leningrad, and Moscow. Interesting things happened on the way, testifying to the cultural free-

dom that the opera opened up to its performers, making room for them to bring their creative agency to bear. British conductor Simon Rattle, for example, in the Glyndebourne production, had stopped the rehearsals asking the cast to teach him the intricacies of their style, their sense of beat and rhythm. He asked them, in other words, to teach him how to breathe life into the work as only they knew how.⁶

The opera was further helped along in gaining a worldwide audience through the panoply of technical means of cultural transmission, through gramophone recordings and radio, through film and television productions. American cultural diplomacy had its own role to play, particularly in the context of the Cold War. If the point was to disseminate an image of the United States in its cultural richness and variety, *Porgy and Bess* along with American Jazz, American painting and ballet, American writing and photography, showed the United States as creatively engaged in mastering the many problems of a society in the throes of modernization.

Gershwin's opera of course was only one musical representation of America, complex, mercurial, and multilayered. It could be unpacked and repackaged as the occasion demanded. It did provide its publics with a view of a musical America, but it was not alone in doing this. We mentioned jazz, we mentioned the repertoire of great American songs produced by what is succinctly known as Tin Pan Alley, the popular music industry. Younger generations growing up in war-ravaged European countries eagerly took in American popular music as so many sounds of modernity and vitality, providing them with models for constructing their own private worlds and identities shared with their peers. In their eyes the United States became that imaginary realm that they could hear and picture for themselves through their simple exposure to American cultural fads and fashions, carried by Hollywood films, American advertising, consumer products, radio programs, and gramophone records. Without political agency, outside the conduit of a conscious American cultural

diplomacy, all these sights and sounds had washed across Europe as so many signs of an American cultural sway that slowly but irresistibly established itself in the wake of America's rise to world power.

One specific constellation of sight and sound will occupy us from here on, a composite that my title more specifically refers to: Musical America, the imagined America that is carried by one of America's cultural products in particular—its musicals. If there is a Hollywood America conveyed by film, there is equally an America, or should I say there are Americas, represented by Broadway musicals. Of course, in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries Americans had never been without musical entertainment, but rather than presenting them with a musical America, they had been offered musical Englands by way of the highly popular Victorian fare of Gilbert and Sullivan productions, or belle époque musical Europes in Viennese operetta. Despite its roots in European popular stage productions such as operetta, as a typically American genre the musical came into its own in the 1920s. In the grand American manner it creatively merged European inspirations with local traditions, such as vaudeville and the American revue with its rich repertoire of songs popularized via the market for sheet music first and radio later on. The revue had known its most vibrant efflorescence in the 1920s in Florenz Ziegfeld's "Follies," which lasted from 1907 to 1931, originally modeled on the *Folies Bergère* in Paris. The signature of the Follies had been the chorus line, eye-catching and erotically clothed women whose synchronized dancing echoed the exciting Paris precursor of the Can-Can, but would go on to receive its American transformation in the cinematic choreography of Busby Berkeley in the 1930s. There were African American revues as well. Among the most notable was *Shuffle Along*, with music and lyrics by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, which debuted in 1921 on Broadway and ran for 484 performances. The cast of the show included Paul Robeson, with a young Josephine Baker in the chorus. Because of its success,

Shuffle Along helped inspire a fad in the 1920s for revues starring black singers and dancers. It was a fad that early on crossed the ocean and would find eager audiences in Paris. The deepest impact of the revues, however, was on early musical comedy, a homegrown alternative to European-style operettas. The entertainer most responsible for the birth of musicals drenched in Americana was George M. Cohan, an Irish-Catholic American in spite of what his name seemed to suggest, and in spite of the fact that it was Jewish song-writers, lyricists, and entertainers who perfected the modern musicals of the 1920s and beyond. Cohan, the composer of songs like “The Yankee Doodle Boy,” “You’re a Grand Old Flag,” “Give My Regards to Broadway,” and “Over There,” linked vaudeville with ragtime. And he used urban slang and contemporary settings to create stories and characters that could not exist anywhere except New York.

Merging these disparate sources into one, the American musical burst onto the stage with a bang: Jerome Kern’s and Oscar Hammerstein’s 1927 *Show Boat*. The musical, based on Edna Ferber’s best-selling novel from 1926, was the first “book” musical in which the characters and the story were closely linked to the songs. *Show Boat* adopted the style of Europe’s operettas to explore the legends and darker undercurrents of America’s past. More specifically, it dealt with the themes of racism and race miscegenation, not the usual topics for Broadway musicals or popular entertainment more generally. Songs like “Ol’ Man River” and “Can’t Help Lovin’ That Man,” with their reliance on the blues and on African American vernacular, foreshadowed Gershwin’s *Porgy and Bess*. *Show Boat* became one of the few musicals from the 1920s and ’30s to be continually revived after World War II, in the United States and abroad. It was twice made into a film, in 1936 by Universal Pictures in black-and white, and in 1951 by MGM, in sumptuous color but highly sanitized when it came to the black-and-white of race relations. The 1936 version of *Show Boat* is considered by many film critics to be one of the classic film musicals of all time, and one of the best stage-

to-film adaptations ever made. Frank S. Nugent of the *New York Times* called it “one of the finest musical films we have seen.”⁷

If this is an example of the happy symbiosis between the stage, the silver screen, and later television and DVD, it also testifies to the American mastery of the tools of mass dissemination of its cultural products. It helps account for the global conquest of markets for the American musical. Yet it is not simply a matter of additional media being brought to the task of disseminating one original product. There is, as Nugent reminds us, the matter of adaptation, of creative translation from one medium into another. There is a creative challenge there that was taken up early on in the United States, bringing to life a parallel universe for musicals to flourish in. In addition to the Broadway musical a new genre came to life, that of the Hollywood musical. It would have its golden age in the years of the Great Depression, with its mixture of realism and cynical comment, as in famous songs like “We’re In the Money” and “Remember My Forgotten Man,” with its stark sets inspired by German expressionism. There is also “Brother, Can You Spare a Dime” from the 1931 musical *New Americana*, by lyricist E. Y. “Yip” Harburg and composer Jay Gorney. If there was a “musical America” represented here, it was one mixing the temporary oblivion held out by Hollywood’s dream factory and a daring engagement with the social anxieties of the time. Busby Berkeley was the creative mind able to straddle the divide. For the *Gold Diggers of 1933* film he choreographed with equal mastery the dreams of money and affluence in the song “We’re In the Money” and the downbeat “Remember My Forgotten Man,” where he brought to bear his memories of the 1932 War Veterans “Bonus” March in Washington. In order for Berkeley to realize his choreographic visions the cinematic genre of the backstage musical was developed, basically two films rolled into one, with a narrative part set aside for the plot, and choreographed sections for Berkeley’s dance sequences to unfold. Given this creative space, Berkeley developed a cinematic language that presented chorus line dancers as only a camera

could see them, producing abstract configurations of stunning kaleidoscopic power.

Until the late 1930s, Depression-era gloom left its mark on popular culture. The stage production and film version of *The Wizard of Oz* played on the conspiratorial views that had inspired populism as a political movement and sentiment, with “Wicked Witches of the East” and “West,” respectively, representing the powers of the world of finance concentrated in Wall Street, and of exploitative extraction industries as these had ravaged the West. In the film version a girl named Dorothy, played by a young and radiant Judy Garland, is transported from her drab, gray Kansas farm to the enchanted Technicolor land of Oz. The wizard turns out to be a charlatan, in the great American tradition of the Confidence Man. Still, he has an important lesson to teach. People, he says, don’t need a wizard to give them a heart, a brain, or courage. All they need to do is look inside themselves. Inner strength, not a social miracle, is the wizard’s (and Hollywood’s) key to salvation. So a movie that begins with Dorothy imagining a fantasy world somewhere over the rainbow (in Yip Harburg’s memorable lines) ends with her back in Kansas, proclaiming that “there’s no place like home.” It set the tone for a celebration of the common folk and the “Common Man,” as it had more generally inspired the artistic production of the time. Most memorably so in Aaron Copland’s work in what he himself would later refer to as his vernacular period, in *Rodeo*, *Appalachian Spring*, *Fanfare for the Common Man*, and his *Lincoln Portrait*. That tone of celebration, if not cheery optimism, was most evident in another revisit of the American heartland, in Rodgers and Hammerstein’s 1943 production of *Oklahoma!* With the end of the Depression and a regained sense of national purpose and mission in World War II, America had taken heart and found courage within itself, projecting it onto the folk in its heartland. It was a smash hit and ran for five years and a record-shattering 2,212 performances. Its popularity was enhanced by the cast album, which sold more than a million cop-

ies when originally released. Albums henceforth would remain instrumental in establishing Broadway musicals as an essential component of America's wartime and postwar culture, helping it to conquer foreign publics along the way.

What made *Oklahoma!* special was its sophisticated fusion of music, dance, and drama. Still, for all its stylistic modernity, *Oklahoma!* was an exercise in Americana. It was a celebration of the end of the Depression. In 1939 John Steinbeck had portrayed an Oklahoma in *The Grapes of Wrath* that, like the rest of America, was still marked by scarcity and deprivation. Now, in 1943, Rodgers and Hammerstein created a mythical Oklahoma that, unlike Steinbeck's dustbowl, was a bountiful land where the corn grew as high as an elephant's eye. Audiences elsewhere could also appreciate the music and the tale. When *Oklahoma!* opened in London in 1947, it was as popular as it had been in the United States. By the 1950s the show was drawing large crowds in France and Italy and would soon be performed throughout the world. When I first met my wife in the late 1960s, I was welcomed to her house by a parrot intoning "Oh, what a beautiful morning." *Oklahoma!* was thus a global as well as an American success story, with publics both human and avian. At the same time it powerfully projected a musical America for all the world to behold. And as the American musical conquered the world, an older story of the cultural reception of American forms of entertainment by others repeated itself. Not only did they function at the same level of "mere" entertainment, making for a pleasant evening out, they moved up the scale of cultural and critical appreciation. Thus the successful Broadway musical *Guys and Dolls*, based on Damon Runyon's ribald sketches of Manhattan street life, moved to London to open, in 1982, not as a commercial West End production—as one might have expected—but on the stage of the National Theatre, the pinnacle of British drama. It was a cultural "first." The musical was directed by Richard Eyre, one of the all-time great directors of the National Theatre, who once admitted to having greater affinity with American

popular culture, having grown up with it, than with the hallowed canon of British theater.⁸

At the same time, we should remember, American musicals daringly ventured into appropriating foreign materials, constructing fantasy versions of Paris in *An American in Paris*, of a late Weimar Berlin in *Cabaret*, an exoticized Thailand in *The King and I*, a Victorian England and its class distinctions in *My Fair Lady*, an Austria on the eve of Nazi takeover in *The Sound of Music*, or the South Pacific in a musical by that name influenced by Puccini's *Madame Butterfly*. Increasingly for the American musical the world was its oyster. Any country's past would do, any literary repertoire could serve the purpose. Ovid's story of Pyramus and Thisbe, rendered twice by Shakespeare, once as farce in his *Midsummer Night's Dream*, and once as dramatic romance in *Romeo and Juliet*, underwent its American appropriation in Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story*. In this mercurial expansiveness not every American musical therefore carried a musical America. Yet, undeniably, there always was an American touch, an American way with artistic creation, that left an American imprint on the narratives it told, whether on the stage, in film, or in music. Exposing foreign publics to the generic Americanness of its cultural production, it set cultural standards and created cultural formats for others to emulate. If for generations among America's creative elites Europe had been the imposing father figure that needed to be killed for the American progeny to come into its own, the tables had now been turned.

One way to go was for foreign countries to be as good as the Americans, as expert in finding mass audiences, yet replace the Americanness with foreign content. And many foreign productions show that it is possible successfully to take up the challenge. The ultimate sign of success is then for foreign productions to cross the Atlantic and to "make it" on Broadway. As it is, there have been successful imports from England, from the late 1950s—early 1960s on, purveying Britishness as in Lionel Bart's *Oliver!*

or in Julian Slade's and Dorothy Reynold's *Salad Days*, or from France, using French content as in the case of Claude-Michel Schoenberg's *Les Misérables* or *Miss Saigon*. Soon, it turned out, musical productions could travel on their own and no longer needed the appeal of their national origin. A good case in point is Andrew Lloyd Webber's *Jesus Christ Superstar*, produced on Broadway and available on record before it was staged in London. This also goes to illustrate the further point that increasingly the production of musicals has become an international business. It was after all an Englishman, Cameron Mackintosh, who internationally produced Schoenberg's French musicals. Today's production of musicals aims for markets, where London's West End or New York's Broadway are mere nodal points in a larger picture. At the same time, though, Broadway has kept its full symbolic weight as being the ultimate yardstick for success. It still sets standards for others to follow.

Ultimately, then, if imitation is the tribute one has to pay to success, isn't there one further step in this process, beyond imitation? Can we imagine a foreign emancipation from the American model, a hybrid form consisting in an appropriation of the many Americas that publics have been exposed to while consuming America's mass culture but mixed in with critical refractions as forms of cultural resistance? In order to illustrate this point I suggest a widening of what so far I have understood by the term "musical America." In our present day and age, with the rise of the World Wide Web and YouTube, there is a constant barrage of musical Americas in the form of music videos. For the sake of my argument we may conceive of them as condensed musicals, telling short stories, mixing visual imagery with music. In that format, more easily than in the expensive stage production of musicals, we come across examples that rely on globalized forms of visual entertainment, often of a markedly American imprint, while rearranging the material to produce statements of cultural resistance, if not cultural anti-Americanism, in the face of a threatening Americanization.

I have two illustrations of the complex interactions between the European appropriation of American cultural forms, and their rearrangement in defense of the variety of Europe's local cultural identities. Both are visual documents, music videos produced in Europe, one in the Basque country in Spain, the other in Romania in the wake of the toppling of its communist regime. The Basque video, which I discussed in the previous chapter, in itself represents an act of cultural emancipation from the cultural hegemony imposed under the Franco dictatorship. The lyrics are in Basque, and the station broadcasting the video has all-Basque programming. This may suggest localism, if not cultural provincialism. Nothing would be further from the truth. What we have here is a perfect example of "glocalisation," to use Roland Robertson's neologism.⁹ The claim made in this video is on behalf of the authenticity of regional cultures struggling to survive in a world threatened by the homogenizing forces of globalization. Yet the medium of communication, the music video and the musical genre, testifies to the impact of precisely those forces as much as it protests against them. There is much irony in all this, but most important is the fact that what is shown as modernity truly revives a long repertoire of European cultural anti-Americanism. America *is* modernity, and the long history of European resistance to America is truly a story of resisting the onslaught of modernity on Europe's checkered map of regional and/or national cultures.¹⁰

The Romanian music video, a coproduction by Puya and Rap singer Connect-R, is called "My Americandrim" (My American Dream). It takes the viewer back to the heady days of the toppling of the Ceausescu regime, eagerly reported on American TV news. Connect-R, who in other work shows he can be the perfect local replica of an American gangster rapper, here takes a disabused view of life in Romania after the revolution, presented as a landscape of broken dreams with its democratic promise unfulfilled. The refrain—in English—keeps repeating these lines:

I can be what i want to be
Losing my identity
Cause i got a lot of life in me
Let me live my American dream

The key words here are “losing my identity.” Images and lyrics go together in showing a cultural wasteland, cut adrift, without local moorings or a sense of cultural continuity with the past, yet open to influences and cultural imports from all sides. The images build up to an indictment, not unlike the Basque video, of the pernicious impact of globalization. Yet, ironically, the message is being delivered by a man who does live his American dream in the borrowed identity of an American gangster rapper.¹¹

These are only two examples of cultural reception being critically turned against its originator, of music videos as an American genre providing the language for a critique of Americanization. They come closer to doing this than any form of musical America on stage that comes to my mind. Unless we go back in time to the heady days of Weimar Germany’s infatuation with things American, at the height of its “Amerikanismus Debatte,” and remind ourselves of Kurt Weill’s and Bertold Brecht’s *Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*. From even before the heyday of the American musical, Brecht and Weill give us a musical America as a satire of the American Way.