

Turning Points

Oregon Festival of American Music bookended with historic concert recreations.

Music evolves gradually, but usually the evolution is evident only in hindsight. Instead, we tend to progress happening in wild leaps — the Beatles on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, The Rite of Spring sparking pandemonium in Paris's Théâtre des Champs-Élysées, the Monterey and Woodstock festivals. One of those turning points happend on February 12, 1924, in New York City's Aeolian Hall, when America's most prominent bandleader, Paul Whiteman, staged what he called "An Experiment In Modern Music" — one of the first of many attempts to show highbrow audiences that homegrown American music could stand on the same level as European classics. The aptly surnamed Whiteman often drew rebuke from critics who accused him of blanching and watering down a vigorous black street music in his attempt to "make a lady out of jazz." But from the moment Whiteman's clarinetist Ross Gorman unleashed the opening glissando in the concert's premiere of Tin Pan Alley/Broadway pianist/composer George Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue*, music would never be the same. Popular American sounds have been invigorating orchestral music ever since.

On Wednesday, July 29, at the Hult Center, this summer's Oregon Festival of American Music (www.ofam.org) kicks off

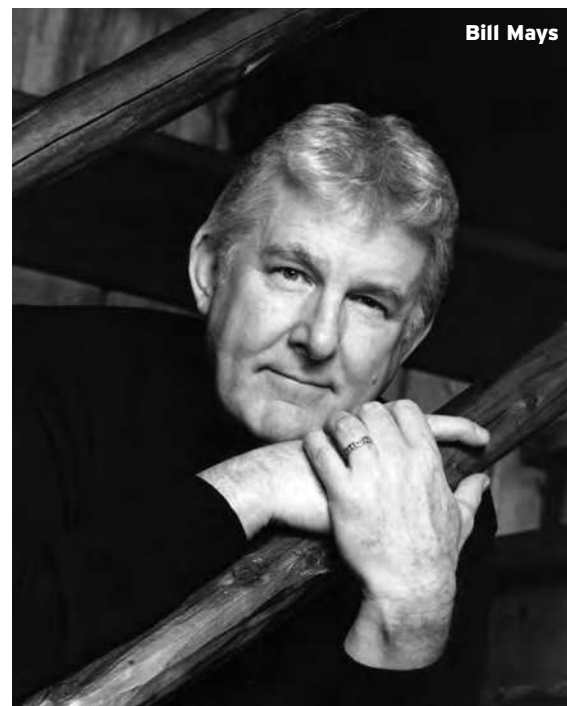
with a near-recreation of that historic concert, presenting some of the pieces performed that night — including the jazzy original big band version of Gershwin's *Rhapsody* — and other hits from 1924 such as "Kitten on the Keys," "Limehouse Blues," Gershwin's own "Fascinatin' Rhythm" and "Lady Be Good," and more. They'll be performed by the great jazz pianist Bill Mays and other OFAM regulars such as clarinetist and jazz director Ken Peplowski, singer Maria Jette, Bill Hulings and more.

The festival, which focuses — if that's the word — on the so-called Great American Songbook of standards that dominated clubs, cinemas and concerts for the ensuing decades, begins on July 24 with *A Connecticut Yankee* (see p. 25) and continues for the next 17 days with its characteristically entertaining and historically informative series of concerts (most at the Shedd), films, talks and two 1943 musicals, *Oklahoma!* and *Yankee*. The July 30 afternoon concert shows how Tin Pan Alley produced a slew of songs to support America's controversial entry into the Great War. That evening's recommended concert presents a centennial tribute to the superlative songwriter Johnny Mercer, featuring sturdy standards like "Blues in the Night," "Skylark," "Laura" and "Moon River" to relative obscurities like "Empty

Tables."

On July 31, the afternoon show offers a fascinating tribute to the early jazz label Gennett Records, with songs like "Tiger Rag," Jelly Roll Morton classics such as "Wolverine Blues" and "The Pearls," enduring classics by Hoagy Carmichael King Oliver and Louis Armstrong and much more, including some relative rarities. The August 1 evening concert covers the music of the classic 1952 movie musical *Singin' in the Rain*, including the dizzy 1920s and '30s numbers it revived and the two originals written for the film that made Gene Kelly a star.

On August 5, the festival showcases a crucial font of American song standards: the movies. The impossibly graceful dancing gets all the attention (two generations before Michael Jackson, Astaire and Rogers were bringing visual vivacity to pop music), but it's startling to see how many standard songs gained wide popular attention via RKO Pictures flicks, including Cole Porter's "Night and Day," Irving Berlin's "Cheek to Cheek," Gershwin's "They Can't Take that Away from Me" and so many more. Those and other equally durable classics like "Smoke Gets in Your Eyes" will shimmer in this concert, but one of the most enlightening aspects of OFAM is hearing now almost forgotten songs by those composers that



Bill Mays

rise almost to the level of the classics, and there'll be some of those, too.

This great music is played by local and national musicians, such as guitar legends Bucky Pizzarelli and Frank Vignola, trumpeter Byron Stripling, singer Ian Whitcomb and more. As always with OFAM, it's fun to get into the spirit of the era by attending free screenings of contemporaneous movies like *Swing Time*, *Singin' in the Rain* and *King of Jazz*. The festival continues next month with more spiffy concerts, including another historic concert re-creation. We'll tell you about all that next time.

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