

KAY SWIFT

1897 – 1993

Keeper of the Flame

Hardworking, ambitious classical composer, Broadway tunesmith or vivacious New York Jazz-era socialite? The arc of Kay Swift's life and career, tied up forever with George Gershwin's legacy, took many surprising twists and turns. In the end she left behind a handful of gorgeous, unforgettable melodies.

Katharine Faulkner Swift was born in New York City in 1897. Her father Samuel was a music critic for a number of publications, including the New York Tribune and Sun. Katherine grew up surrounded by opera, symphonies and violin concertos. Although the family often struggled financially, they always found a way to develop their daughter's evident passion for music. At 6 she loved opera, especially Wagner, and began composing her own pieces on piano with surprising sophistication. By the time Katharine was 8, Samuel's contacts with the classical world enabled her to study at the Institute of Musical Art in New York (which later became Julliard) putting her in the hands of a series of strict and exacting teachers. Young Katharine thrived under the rigorous tutelage. Although many young ladies of the day studied piano and voice, few were encouraged to advance further. Fortunately for Katharine, the Institute was unusually committed to pushing those barriers, as she excelled at orchestration, advanced composition and theory.

The sudden death of her father in 1914 ended her dreams of becoming a classical composer. Although awarded the highest honors and an attending scholarship at the Institute which would have enabled her to study for at least another year, she instead registered for the piano teacher's course, no doubt realizing the new role as bread winner she must now play. Her skills as rehearsal pianist, at two dollars an hour, were in great demand.

While performing with a chamber trio, she was introduced to James Paul Warburg, the dashing son of a well known American Jewish-German banking family. Warburg was named after his uncle James Loeb, who was the co-founder of the Institute of Musical Art that had nurtured Katharine for so many years. His father Paul (who helped found the Federal Reserve and served on its first Board), was delighted with the match, as he admired Katharine's work ethic, earnest ambition and ability. Yet for some members of the family, marrying a non-Jew, and an independent career woman at that, was a shocking leap away from the social norm of their community.

If Katharine was intimidated by this leap from genteel, shabby poverty into a dazzling life of luxury with a staff of servants and a whirlwind social life, she never let it show.

The union seemed to invigorate both of them: James proved himself to be just as adept and brilliant a financial mind as his father and grandfather, and in between the birth of their three daughters Katharine resumed her serious studies of music, writing a fugue a week, and performing small concerts. The Sunday socials at her in laws boasted many remarkable names of the day. On one occasion, Albert Einstein played violin on an array of Stradivarius violins happily trotted out for the occasion by a famous curator.

Katharine and James Warburg were right at the center of a very exciting time in the theatrical, musical and literary world. At their East Seventieth townhouse, decorated in chic black and white, they threw quite glamorous parties which often included Dorothy Parker, Robert Benchley, George S. Kaufman, Lorenz Hart, and Richard Rodgers. It was the Jazz Age in all its glory, and their lives seemed to imitate an F. Scott Fitzgerald story.

George Gershwin appeared at one these parties (given in honor of violinist Jascha Heifitz) in 1925. This brash, charismatic genius who had been a Tin Pan Alley song plugger, sprang to success with the song “**Swanee**”, had just presented his cross-over masterpiece “**Rhapsody in Blue**” at Carnegie Hall and was bursting with ideas and confidence. The son of Russian Jewish immigrants, his limited musical education never damped his ideas, big music concepts or huge ego.

A growing friendship built on mutual admiration drew Katharine and George together. He exposed her to the best of popular music (which up until then she had found repetitive and musically limited) and she introduced him to a more sophisticated social world. He trusted her excellent compositional knowledge, and she would take quick dictation as he composed, providing suggestions for counterpoint and orchestration. Many of his manuscripts have both of their handwriting on them. He dubbed her ‘Kay’ – and this was the name she preferred from that day forward, Kay Swift.

Propelled by a new admiration for popular songs, she became a rehearsal pianist for Rodgers and Hart’s *A Connecticut Yankee*, and absorbed everything she could about Broadway. Her own compositions show how quickly she adapted what she loved in Fats Waller, Eubie Blake and George Gershwin, those blue notes and flat 7ths that surprised the listener of the day.

And what of James Warburg? Believing no doubt that his wife’s obsession with Gershwin would blow over, trying to take the most tolerant view of the situation, the busy banker turned his hand to writing lyrics for Kay under the name Paul James. He had always enjoyed writing light verse, and the leap to lyric writing felt entirely natural. It was a surprisingly fruitful partnership – but then, they had always seen eye to eye about so many things, why not music?

Kay started making the rounds of producers and publishers with their songs. After a period of rejection in which she continued to wed her considerable musical knowledge to the specific demands of musical theatre, Kay and 'Paul' began to place songs in Broadway revues from 1928 through 1930. Their haunting song "**Can't We Be Friends**" was debuted by the scandalous Libby Holman in *The Little Show*.

In 1930, while the Warburg marriage was strained and the stock market had crashed, the Swift/James team undertook the remarkable gamble of mounting their own musical. *Fine and Dandy* boasted a book by Donald Ogden Stewart, lyrics by Paul James and the first show on Broadway to be entirely composed by a woman. The unforgettable songs "**Can This Be Love**" and of course "**Fine and Dandy**" itself, outlasted the run of the successful show and placed Kay Swift firmly and forever in the Great American Songbook.

For the next few years, as James Warburg toiled within President Roosevelt's administration to put the banking industry back on firm ground, Kay Swift worked behind the scenes with George Gershwin as his increasingly indispensable musical confidante and romantic partner. Perhaps these remarkably productive years in his life (1930 – 1934) in which he produced five Broadway shows, scored film, composed classical concert works and mounted his masterpiece opera *Porgy and Bess*, were made possible by Kay's invaluable assistance.

In 1934, Kay Swift was commissioned by the American Ballet of New York to compose a score for its opening performance. *Alma Mater* featured their brand new Russian émigré choreographer, George Balanchine, and was received extremely well. Yet this exciting opportunity was no doubt dampened by the dissolution of Kay's marriage to James Warburg.

Now a single woman at the height of the Depression, Kay managed to secure work as staff composer for Radio City Music Hall, writing a song a week for the Rockettes. She was also still promoting, notating, and aiding Gershwin's work during this time. The original manuscripts for the *Preludes*, *Porgy and Bess*, 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. When the Gershwin brothers left for Hollywood in 1936, Kay and George agreed to break all contact for a year in order to re-assess the potential for their future, apart from the thousands of ties and intrigues which had characterized their union all along. It is said that he called her shortly before he was to return to New York, saying "I'm coming back for the two of us".

George Gershwin's sudden death in 1937 of a brain tumor was a tragedy experienced publicly in the music world, but quite privately for Kay Swift. She instructed his brother Ira to destroy all of her letters which

George had kept, and she did the same, leaving only the stories she told to her children and grandchildren.

Swift was appointed Director of Music for the 1939 New York World's Fair, which made her responsible for all of the classical music, opera, singers, dancers, musicians, clowns and strolling players that dazzled the crowds that year.

A marriage to rancher Faye Hubbard and a move to Oregon led her to pen a fictional version of her life during this time, *Who Could Ask for Anything More?* later made into the 1950 film *Never a Dull Moment* featuring three of Kay's songs. This marriage ended in divorce after a move to California. Another marriage to Hunter Galloway lasted 22 years.

In 1952 Kay Swift was back on Broadway, having collaborated on a one woman show featuring Cornelia Otis Skinner called ***Paris '90***.

Paris '90 was a delightful series of vignettes set in the Paris of Toulouse-Lautrec's day. Kay's score was conducted by the legendary Nathaniel Shilkret. The music is a wonderful example of her skill as both a songwriter and a theatrical composer. The show ran on Broadway for 87 performances.

When Samuel Goldwyn Pictures filmed *Porgy and Bess* they hired Kay to lecture and tour about Gershwin's masterpiece. Alfred Stern commissioned her throughout the years to produce music for various World Fairs and Expos '67.

Kay Swift lived in New York until she passed away in 1993. She was always available for any Gershwin scholar who wanted to hear how George would have played any particular piece. Her lifelong efforts to promote and celebrate George Gershwin has been generously acknowledged by the Gershwin Trust; and by her own granddaughter, the excellent author Katharine Weber, who maintains the Kay Swift Memorial Trust which is dedicated to preserving and promoting the music of Kay Swift.

Sources:

Fine and Dandy: The Life and Work of Kay Swift, Vicki Ohl, Yale University Press 2004.

The Memory of All That Katharine Weber (essay), "Few Thousand Words About Love", Mickey Pearlman, ed, St. Martin's Press, 1998

On the Sunny Side of the Street: the Life and Lyrics of Dorothy Fields, Deborah Grace Winer, Schirmer Books, 1997

Kay Swift Website: www.kayswift.com

The American Popular Ballad of the Golden Era, 1924-1950, Allen Forte, Princeton University Press, 1995

Kay Swift, www.IMDb.com mintunmusic.com

Yours for a Song: Women of Tin Pan Alley, American Masters 1999. (DVD)

George Gershwin: A New Biography, William G. Hyland, Praeger Publishers, 2003

New York Times, Obituary, Friday January 29, 1993

Suggested listening:

"Can't We Be Friends" - Frank Sinatra, *In the Wee Small Hours* LP

- Ella Fitzgerald & Louis Armstrong render a classic duet that shows off all the great verses.

"Can This Be Love" – Bobby Short (beautifully understated performance) Bobby loved this song, and it was always a treat to hear him play and sing this live.

- Sun Ra also recorded this on an LP made in his living room. Hearing the instrumental version brings out the beauty of Kay Swift's work.

"Fine and Dandy" - Barbra Streisand, on her first LP, treated the song as a very slow ballad, which served as a showcase for that astonishing voice.

- Django Reinhardt, "Jazz in Paris, vol 9"
- Stephane Grappelli, of course.
- Art Tatum, "Fine Art & Dandy" LP

"Fine & Dandy: (2004 Studio Cast) (World Premiere Recording)" Audio CD. Without this recording and the research that went into restoring the original performance materials, the Broadway show *Fine & Dandy* would have been lost to us. It's great fun to hear the original versions of these songs, including the many verses for the song **"Fine & Dandy"** filled with topical references of its day. Excellent liner notes, too.