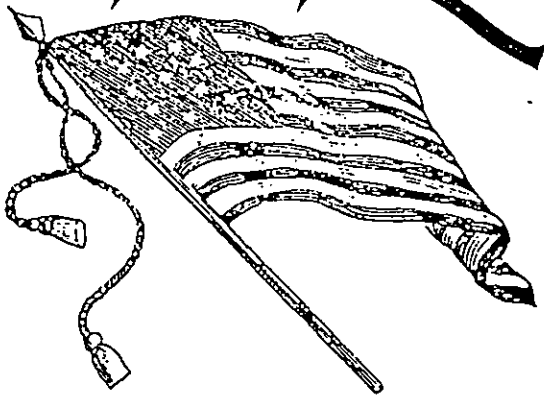
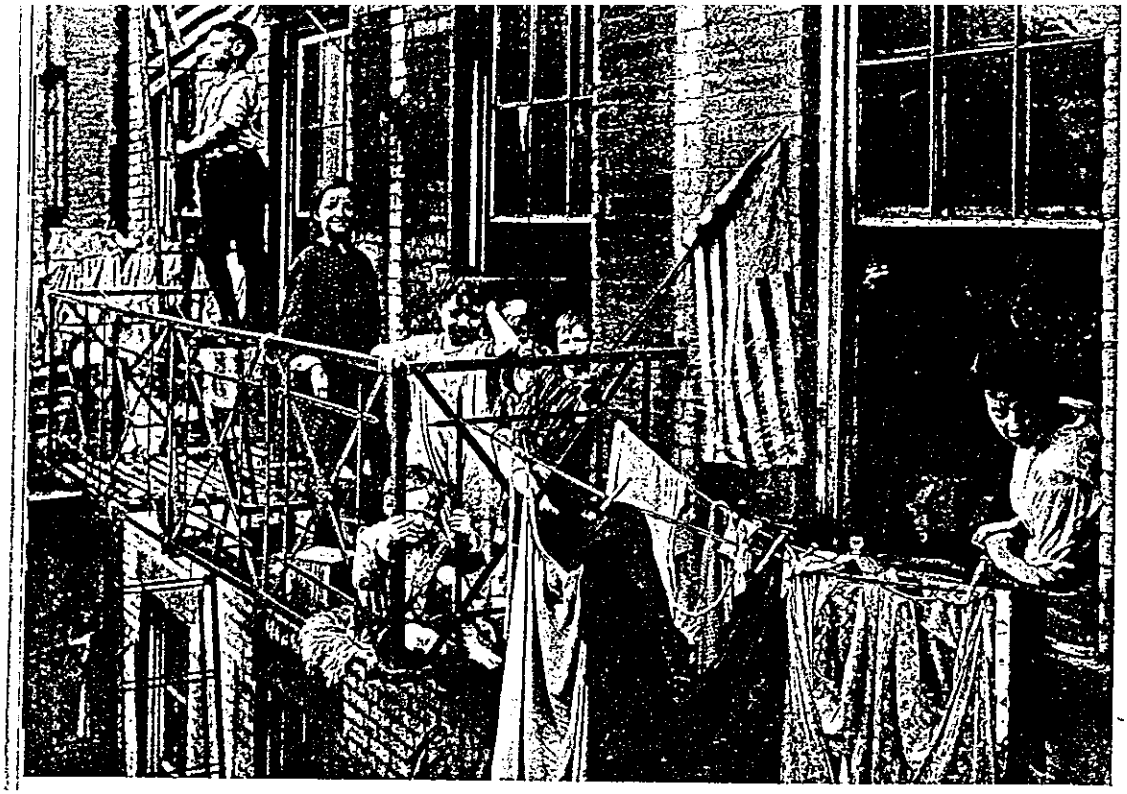
# TINTYPES



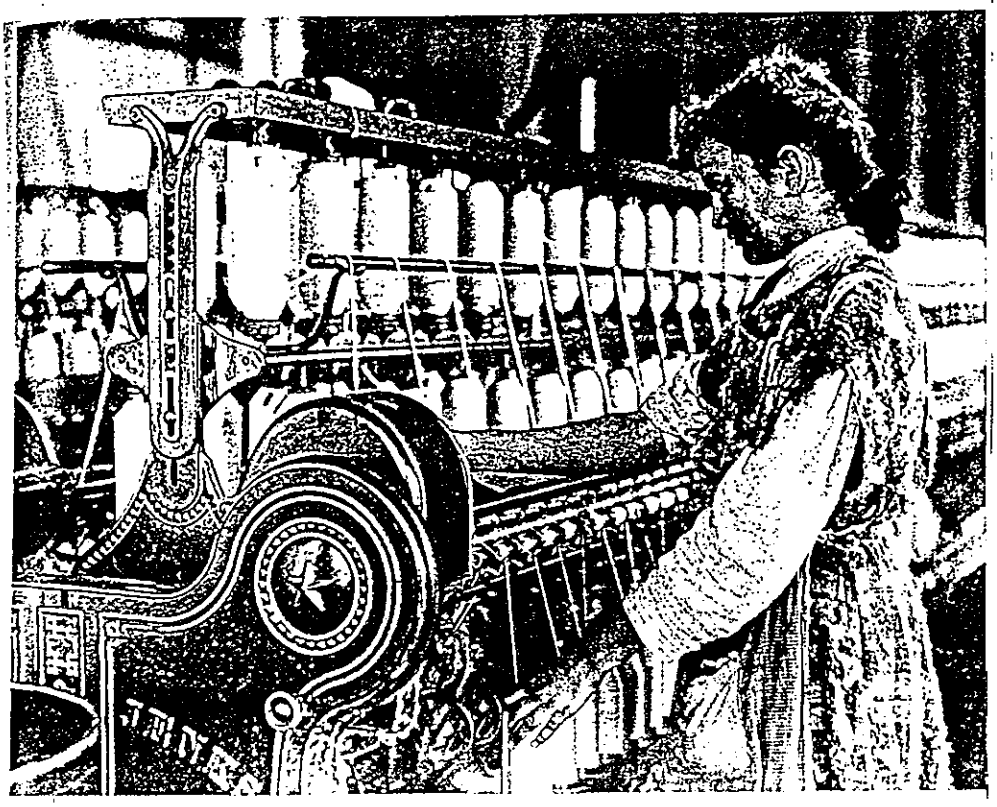
THE WORLD OF TINTYPES IS THE CURIOUS HALF-CENTURY BETWEEN THE CIVIL WAR AND THE ROARING Twenties, one of the most tumultuous eras in American history. "Yellow press," "Whisky Ring," and "conspicuous consumption" entered the language, the transcontinental railroad and Carnegie Hall were built, roller-skating became the rage, and such disparate politicians as William Jennings ("Cross of Gold") Bryan and Theodore ("Bully!") Roosevelt gave Wall Street conservatives heart failure. ("*Now* look!" moaned one senator when McKinley's death thrust "T.R." into the Oval Office. "That damned cowboy is President of the United States!")

It was a time of explosive growth: America's population doubled in thirty years, and one-third of the leap came from abroad. A million Irish after the potato famine; three million Germans fleeing Bismarck's "blood and iron;" nine million Jews, Slavs, and Italians between 1900 and World War I. The opening mime of TINTYPES presents a quintessential immigrant, complete with weatherbeaten cap and sack—a kind of Yiddish Charlie Chaplin—and introduces him to a small gallery of American figures. There's a bluff "swell" who flips the newcomer a coin and later turns into a toothy, bespectacled Roosevelt. An elegant society lady becomes *chanteuse* Anna Held. A black woman (whose skin color baffles the immigrant) evolves into the upwardly-mobile hired girl of the time. And a female drifter metamorphosizes into radical Emma Goldman.



Immigrants had a tough time; the gap between the America of their dreams and the reality they faced was often wide. "My people do not live in America," quipped a bitter Slav in lower Manhattan. "They live underneath it." In a government run by incompetents who were, in turn, run by tycoons, it's small wonder many were tempted by labor unions, Socialism, or anarchy.

On the average workday, Andrew Carnegie's pension was $44,000—and two million children earned 25 cents. ("The most beautiful sight we see anywhere," rhapsodized the founder of Coca-Cola, "is the child at labor.") Early in TINTYPES, the immigrant dozes off at work and successively dreams of a romantic fling to the waltz tempo of a bicycle wheel, the driving beat of a locomotive, and the reckless abandon of a drive in an automobile. Then he wakes up, dreams shattered, to the ominous minor key of factory labor and the plaintive stories of working girls, their only relief found in letters to neighborhood editors. A popular lyric of the day, "And all I want is fifty million dollars," pretty well summed things up: what else should the poor think when John D. Rockefeller claimed that God gave him his money? Could the haves and have-nots share *anything* of the American experience?

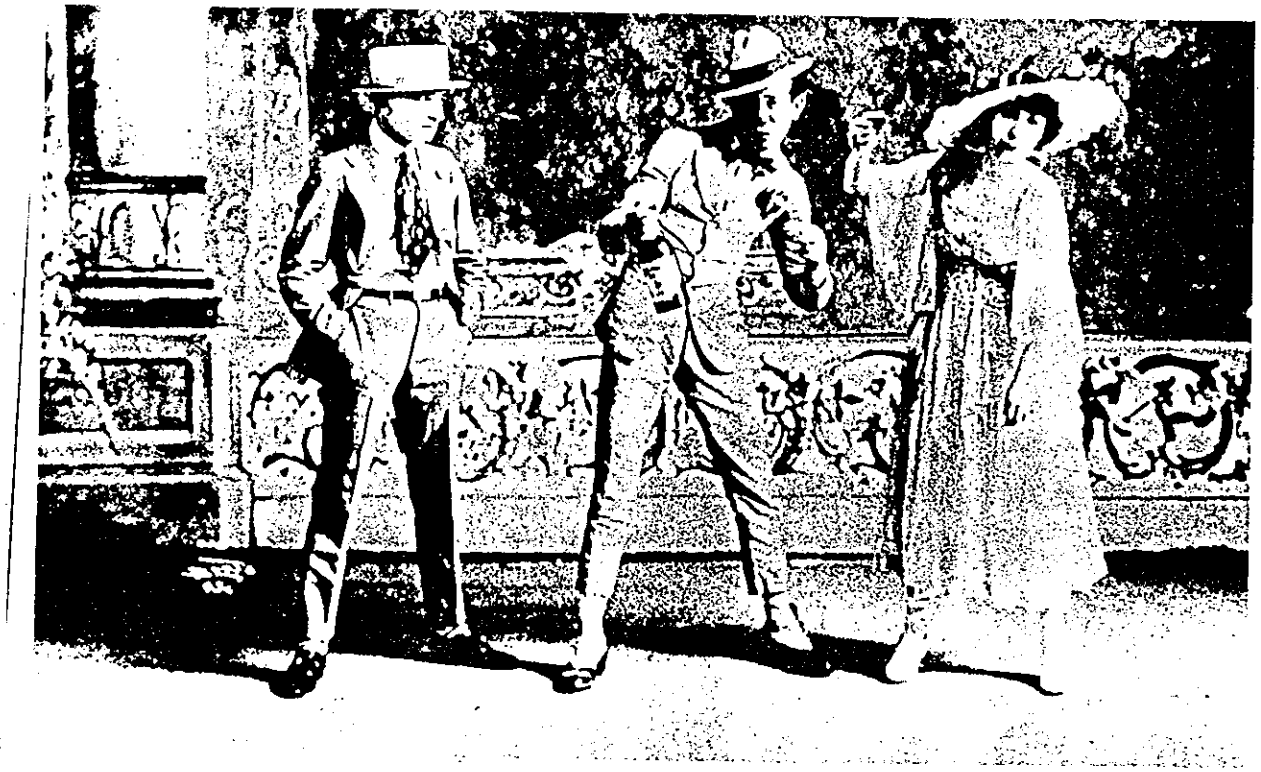


# THE MUSIC

THE ORIGINS OF MANY SONGS WERE AS ENJOYABLE AS THE NUMBERS THEMSELVES. "SMILES" EMERGED FROM a lecture on enthusiasm in business dealings; "Meet Me in St. Louis" from a drink request to Louis the bartender. It took horrified letters to get George M. Cohan to change the title of "You're a Grand Old *Rag*." Minstrel Bill Bailey was assured by composer Hughie Cannon that his angry wife would soon beg him to "come home"...and so on. Lesser-known titles probe even deeper into our musical past—"Teddy Da Roose," a rousing ethnic salute to T.R., or "Jonah Man," a superb ballad of a hard-luck type:

*When I was young, my Mama's friends/To find a name they tried/They named me after Papa—And the same day Papa died...*
*I'm a Jonah; I am a Jonah man /Sounds just like that old, old tale /But sometimes I feel like that whale...*

And there were titles with a life of their own: "I Want What I Want When I Want It," "Fifty-Fifty" (equality for women), "When It's All Goin' Out and Nothin' Comin' In" (money), or—no explanation needed—"She's Gettin' More Like the White Folks Every Day."



For, despite the gap between rich and poor, there was a native optimism at work. *Anything* seemed possible. (No wonder we look back longingly—as Brendan Gill put it in *The New Yorker* apropos of TINTYPES: "We feel a nostalgia not only for what used to be, but for what ought to have been.") Inventions set musicians' pens racing and fired the national imagination. A forty-four day trek from Detroit to Portland inspired Bryan and Edwards' infectious "In My Merry Oldsmobile," evoked in TINTYPES to dazzling effect with little more than a wheel, a horn, and goggles. "Daisy Bell" sent millions of women careening off on bicycles, and led to such sequels as "March of the Bloomers"—or, for women whose bicycles had bested them, "Her Bloomers Are Camphored Away."

Black composers remained virtually ignored. It took fifty years after Scott Joplin's death to assure him revivals, albums, soundtracks, and a very posthumous Pulitzer Prize. Songs like "Nobody"—the emotional high point of TINTYPES, sung by Anna Held's maid in response to a catty "Shortnin' Bread"—were the exception: its rendition by Bert Williams in the 1910 *Follies* made him the first black singer given "equal billing" on Broadway. But the frustration of these performers and composers must have given the refrain in "Nobody" that extra edge:

*I ain't never done nothin' to nobody // ain't never got nothin' from nobody, no time,*
*And until I get something from somebody, some time // don't intend to do nothin' for nobody, no time.*

Heroes in these songs suffered (but won), villains chortled (but lost), virtue triumphed, and bad girls were invariably run over by a trolley in the last verse. Like the public, composers were susceptible to the latest fads. "Within the last six weeks," moaned one turn-of-the-century sheet-music entrepreneur, "I have rejected almost three ping-pong songs a day—*and still they come!*" In 1910 alone, the big publishers—Harms, Witmark, Harris—sold over two billion pieces of music.

Perhaps a modest era, musically—but a memorable one. Like TINTYPES: no earthshaking indictments, no moralizing over the souring of America. (The rich figures in the show don't get soaked, just slightly damp.) Reviewing the show off-Broadway in the spring of 1980, I pointed out "a prevailing air of jaunty innocence, of dreams on the make." Which is what some of the best American music is all about. Henry James defined sentimentality as unearned emotion: the beauty of TINTYPES is that its emotion is earned.