



# The Great American Songbooks: Musical Texts, Modernism, and the Value of Popular Culture (Modernist Literature and Culture)

By T. Austin Graham

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In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, American authors pioneered a mode of musical writing that quite literally resounded beyond the printed page. Novels gained soundtracks, poetry compelled its audiences to sing, and the ostensibly silent act of reading became anything but. *The Great American Songbooks* is the story of this literature, at once an overview of musical and authorial practice at the century's turn, an investigation into the sensory dimensions of reading, and a meditation on the effects that the popular arts have had on literary modernism. The writings of John Dos Passos, Theodore Dreiser, T.S. Eliot, F. Scott Fitzgerald, Langston Hughes, Jean Toomer, and Walt Whitman are heard in a new key; the performers and tunesmiths who inspired them have their stories told; and the music of the past, long out of print and fashion, is recapitulated and made available in digital form.

A work of criticism situated at the crossroads of literary analysis, musicology, and cultural history, *The Great American Songbooks* demonstrates the importance of studying fiction and poetry from interdisciplinary perspectives, and it suggests new avenues for research in the dawning age of the digital humanities.

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### Review

"Graham offers a textured literary history of the blues's circulation from popular song and through poetry."  
--*American Literature*

"The Great American Songbooks encourages literary scholars to enrich their readings of nineteenth and twentieth century literary texts with a much-needed attention to music, and Graham's own efforts to do so reveal a remarkable and productive interdependence between literature and popular culture." --*Twentieth-Century Literature*

"Graham shows how the music can be revived and with it another way of understanding the literature." --*The Times Literary Supplement*

"[This book] revives an important debate about the cultural value of musical modernism, and offers its readers not only a distinctive thesis, but a distinctive soundtrack to accompany its deft articulation."--Will May, *Journal of American Studies*

"This valuable interdisciplinary book includes an online audio guide...Recommended." --*CHOICE*

"In this guide to the uncanny phonic instincts of American writers, Graham tunes into a literary jukebox purring alongside the more familiar songbooks of popular culture. Ranging from Eliot's 'jazz banjorine' and Fitzgerald's stage-lit prose to the Harlem Renaissance, *The Great American Songbooks* is a fittingly streamlined showcase for the musical playlist of American modernism." --Jed Rasula, University of Georgia

"A lively addition to work on music-literature relations, T. Austin Graham's *The Great American Songbooks* makes legible the soundtracks of canonical American writing, from the operatic airs of *Leaves of Grass* to the Broadway revues of *Manhattan Transfer* and beyond. This accessible synthesis should prove engaging to a wide audience, especially scholars of modernism, sound studies, and American culture in the era of its mechanical reproduction." --John Picker, Massachusetts Institute of Technology

**T. Austin Graham** is Assistant Professor of English and Comparative Literature at Columbia University.

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