

These notes by Ed Martin , Rec'd October 22, 2024

Jerome Kern lived from 1885 to 1945. He wrote more than 700 songs, mostly for stage and film productions. He was nominated for Oscars for original songs in movies 8 times, winning in 1937 for "Swing Time" (with Astaire and Rogers) and in 1942 for "The Last Time I Saw Paris" (in *Lady Be Good*, with Elenor Powell). He was awarded an honorary Grammy in 1987.

He wrote over 100 stage works, the most important of which is "Show Boat", with Oscar Hammerstein based on a novel by Edna Ferber. The musical follows the lives of performers and dock workers on a Mississippi River show boat. Among the best known songs are "Ol Man River", "Make Believe" and "Can't Help Loving Dat Man". The musical originally played on Broadway in 1927. It was one of the first musicals to be concerned with serious subjects such as racism in America.

"Ol Man River" is sung by a black stevedore and is heard five times during the musical. It contrasts the struggles of him with the uncaring flow of the river.

It is performed in a slow tempo, appropriate to the subject. It used a pentatonic scale (with five notes per octave, rather than seven) The most famous performer of the song is Paul Robeson, who was not in the original cast. <https://youtube/df4VdyGlqJ8>

My additions to Ed's notes:

This from Wikipedia: In May 1915, Kern was due to sail with theater producer Charles Frohman from New York to London on board the *RMS Lusitania*, but Kern missed the boat, having overslept after staying up late playing poker.^[12] Frohman died in the sinking of the ship.^[13]

Lifelong friendship with Oscar Hammerstein – they met in 1925 and first collaborated on "Sunny".

On Showboat, Kern convinced Hammerstein to adapt Ferber's novel *Show Boat*, and Broadway impresario Florenz Ziegfeld to produce the show. Hammerstein wrote the lyrics for most of the songs in the show.

Two movie versions of the musical: one in 1936, and one in 1951. Also a stage version on PBS Great Performances, and many revivals.

Long list of awards and songs on Kern's Wikipedia entry.

Show Boats were floating theaters on the Mississippi during the 1870s through 1930s. Ferber spent 4 days on the James Adams Floating Theater and then spent a year writing her novel. Excellent synopsis on the novel's Wikipedia page. (it's a complicated story- possibly saved by the music!!!)