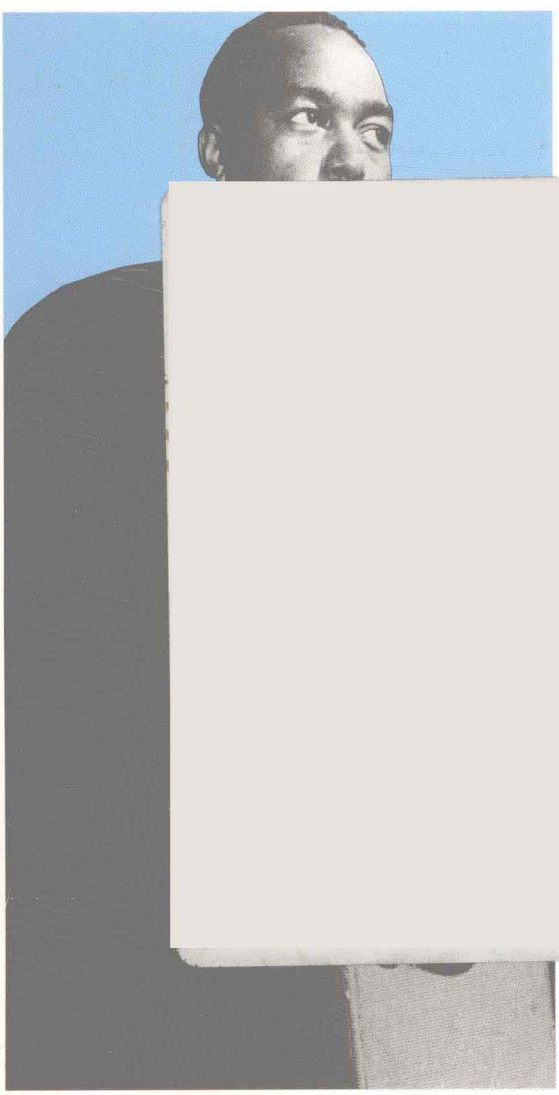
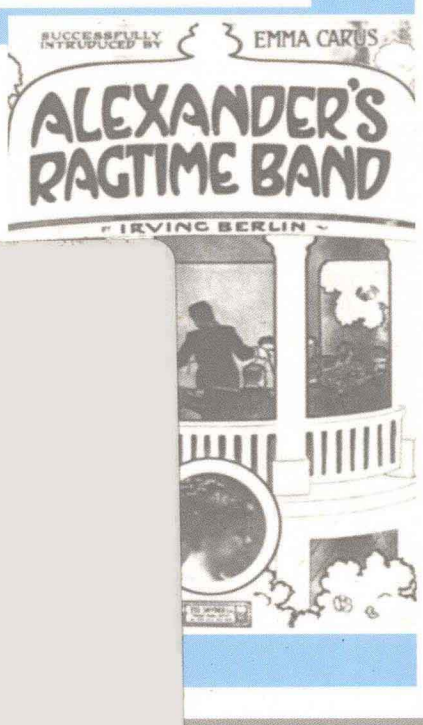
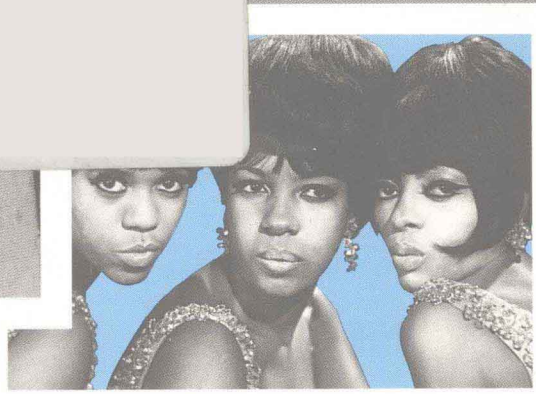
American Popular Music







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Preface

This book is intended for those like me who have had the task of squeezing the entire history of American popular music into one semester. This task is made more difficult by the lack of a single text of reasonable length that covers a variety of popular styles. With that situation in mind, I have written this book.

I have attempted to cover the major genres in popular music history—Tin Pan Alley, musical theater, ragtime and blues, early jazz, country, and rock—while restricting the length of the chapters so that each can be covered in approximately one week of class meetings. Within each chapter, I have tried to give the reader a balanced perspective of cultural and historical context, an insight into the development of the music industry and music technology, biographies of significant artists and producers, and an appreciation for the formal and stylistic design of the music itself. Each chapter includes "play-by-play" verbal analyses of recorded performances and an elapsed time chart for easy following of the recording. Suggestions for additional listening are given at the end of each chapter; instructors and students are encouraged to do their own analyses with these or with their own recordings.

Another feature of this book is an "active" discography. Rather than relegating a list of recordings to the end of the book, I have chosen to make citations within the context of the subject matter. This means that, based on its nature, a discographical entry may appear in the body of the text, in an endnote, or at the end of the chapter.

I have chosen recordings that are practical and relatively easy to obtain. The series of fine collections from the Smithsonian Institution, covering popular song, musical theater, jazz, and country, are a primary source for this book and provide their own extensive annotations. Rock music collections are somewhat more problematic, though the series from Time-Life Records has made the gathering of a comprehensive rock audio anthology easier. For those recordings not covered by the Time-Life series, I have chosen other readily available albums and anthologies.

This book is not exhaustive or comprehensive. To attain the goal of creating a realistic one-semester text, the material contained herein had to be broad in scope but selective in detail. There is not enough space to address every style or artist or to justify the inclusion of and elaboration on those who are addressed. This study, therefore, ultimately reflects my own sense of scholarly balance. Instructors new to teaching a survey course in popular music may be unfamiliar with the large body of scholarship on any one of the topics in this book; or they may lack the expertise, the time, or the inclination to design their own teaching materials. This book will give such instructors a workable solution to their teaching dilemma.

More seasoned lecturers and scholars, who may object to some of my choices of certain artists and topics, can make substitutions for their own study and presentations. After all, experienced instructors probably have compiled their own material and have strong feelings about certain aspects of popular music history. I hope that the brevity of this book will encourage supplementation with existing teaching materials. This course will then be all the richer.

I would like to express my gratitude to everyone who helped me vocationally and emotionally in the preparation of this book. First and foremost, I would like to thank my wife, Kathy, and my children, Michelle and Robert, for enduring the neglect and the long affair with my word processor. I would also like to thank my colleagues in the Division of Jazz Studies and in the Division of Music History and Theory at the University of North Texas College of Music for lending their support and considerable expertise. I also owe thanks to the many music scholars and performers I consulted who were so gracious in listening to my ideas, in reading drafts, and in offering sound suggestions. These include Dr. Kip Lornell and Dr. John Hasse of the Smithsonian Institution, Dr. Steven Friedsen at the University of North Texas, David Jasen at Long Island University, Dr. Edward Berlin of Queensborough Community College, Paul Wells of the Center for Popular Music at Middle Tennessee State University, Dr. David Evans at Memphis State University, and Dr. Susan Cook at the University of Wisconsin–Madison.

Finally, I would like to thank the prepublication reviewers for their valuable comments and suggestions: Marcus W. Engelmann of Allan Hancock College, Raymond F. Kennedy of John Jay College–CUNY, Ron Pen of the University of Kentucky, James S. Phillips of the University of Notre Dame, and Alan G. Schmidt of Erie Community College.

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Chapter One Tin Pan Alley and American Popular Song

Popular music is one of the most pervasive forces in our lives. By its very nature, it entertains us and relates to us. There are as many varieties and levels of sophistication in popular music as there are tastes among its listeners. Yet popular music has always been the great homogenizer of culture, searching for a common bond between us and capitalizing on it. Popular music is ever-changing, subject to the whims of the general public; but its various styles also experience periodic revivals generated by those who are discovering what is, to them, a new style.

The study of popular music highlights human cultural diversity. It is a journey through time, locale, and ethnicity that documents our values and our concerns. It also celebrates human ingenuity through the craft of music, an exacting and demanding discipline. In this increasingly pragmatic world, music is often seen as a mere luxury. In reality, it helps us to cope with and to express life's experiences; it touches our innermost beings in a way shared by no other art form.

The United States has impacted the world of popular music like no other country. With its young history and pluralistic culture, America's unique gift to the world has been distinctive and compelling forms of popular music. To understand how this phenomenon occurred, we must look back hundreds of years and follow popular music to the shores of the New World.

The earliest history of popular song is elusive and poorly documented. Until the sixteenth century most of the literate people in the Western world were the clergy and students of universities run by the church. By the ninth century A.D. notation had developed to the point that posterity could accurately re-create composed music, but the vast majority of the music preserved was religious. The prose and music of the common people was largely confined to oral tradition, dependent upon the memory of its performers for survival.

The written tradition of European poplar song begins in the twelfth century with the song collection *Carmina Burana,* compiled by carousing, male university students (*goliards*). The songs are tales of love, drinking, and good times. (Much of this collection can be heard in a modern chorus and orchestra setting by the twentieth-century composer Carl Orff.) In the twelfth and thirteenth centuries written popular song flourished in the courtly compositions of the *troubadours* and *trouveres* of France and the *minnesingers* of Germany. For all these aristocratic songwriters the dominant subject matter was love. Their songs idolized women and romance, but with decorum and non-sensuality suitable for presentation to the upper crust of society. With love songs popular music found the subject that has dominated its history into the present time.

At the beginning of the seventeenth century, Italy developed the opera, a sophisticated, dramatic, theatrical context for singing that required an equally sophisticated technique from its performers—*bel canto,* literally "beautiful singing." This Italian penchant for vocal specialization spread throughout Europe, appealing mostly to learned aristocrats and royalty. England, the dominant culture of colonial America, absorbed some of the Italian opera influence as well, epitomized in the work of Henry Purcell. England, however, was remarkable among European countries for the musical attention it gave to the common-class consumer. This is most apparent in the output of published music for purchase and performance by amateurs. Simple *airs* and *glees* were the rage, establishing music publishing as a profitable business. Another published song type in England was the "broadside" ballad, as seen in figure 1.1, the precursor of popular sheet music. Broadsides were topical songs employing a casual language style; they served as the gossip tabloid and lampoon magazine of their day. Usually printed without a musical line, they could be sung to familiar popular and folk melodies.

A popular pastime in eighteenth-century England was dining and strolling in vast, landscaped public gardens. Some, like the famous Vauxhall Gardens, offered musical entertainment among other appointments. The songs of these pleasure gardens were simple and strophic in form; that is, one melody is repeated over and over with a changing lyrical verse. The popularity of these songs prompted their publication for home use, and their popularity as sheet music led to the production of other "parlor songs" specifically tailored for the amateur market. Parlor songs were sentimental and easy to perform. The standard form was usually ABA: a short first theme, a second theme of equal length, and a return of the first theme. The harmonic scheme rarely exceeded three chords. Parlor songs remained popular for English and American audiences throughout the nineteenth century.

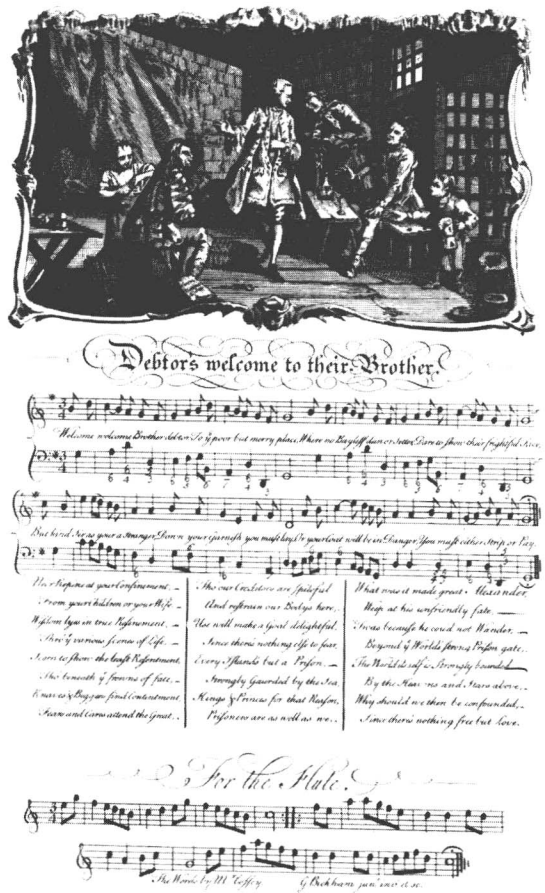

Figure 1.1

This is a broadside from George Bickham's *Musical Entertainer*, published in London, 1738. The upper staff is the vocal melody. The lower staff is a bass line. The numbers tell a keyboardist the chords. A flute accompaniment is at the bottom of the page.

The Beginnings of American Popular Song

America imported most of its fashion, art, and entertainment from Europe, particularly from England. In the popular realm, parlor songs and pleasure garden songs reigned supreme. English parlor song composers and performers like Henry Russell, who wrote "Woodman! Spare That Tree!" and "The Old Arm Chair," successfully concertized and sold sheet music in the New World. America's demand for parlor songs was further stimulated by the introduction of affordable, domestically manufactured upright pianos around 1830.

The primary output of American composers and publishers of the eighteenth century was sacred music, exemplified by the hymns of William Billings and Lowell Mason. Americans tried their hand at art music and popular music but without much success. American music historian Charles Hamm cites 1789 as a turning point for the production of American secular music. In that year the newly ratified Constitution of the United States made provision for a national copyright act, protecting printed materials for fourteen years, renewable for another fourteen years. It was also in 1789 that a war-time ban on theatrical activities was lifted, opening the market for performing and publishing popular songs.[1]

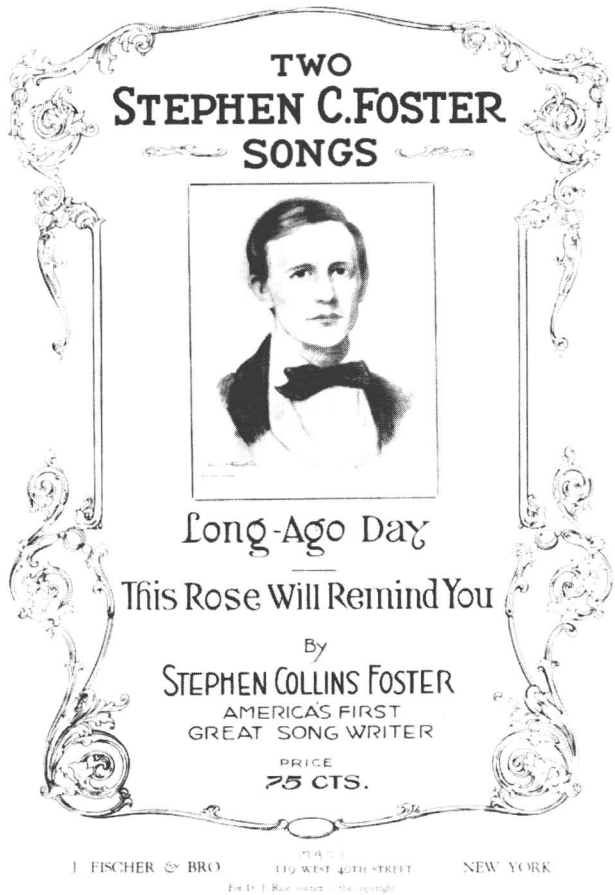

Figure 1.2
Stephen Foster was the greatest of the minstrel composers. In his music we can witness the increasing influence of African-American music on mainstream white culture in nineteenth-century America.

The greatest American song composer of the nineteenth century was Stephen Foster (1826–1864) seen in figure 1.2. In Foster's later songs we see American popular music take a decided turn toward establishing a distinctive character, breaking away from the tradition of English parlor songs and Scottish Irish folk songs. Foster's earliest works such as "Beautiful Dreamer" and "Jeannie With the Light Brown Hair," were parlor songs in the Scottish and Irish style known so well by his audience. His most significant pieces, however, were those he wrote later in his career for the blackface minstrel theater (discussed in the next chapter). Songs such as "Massa's in the Cold, Cold Ground," "Old Folks at Home," and "Camptown Races" demonstrated Foster's unique ability to integrate the dual influences of British parlor songs and black American folk songs. Other minstrel composers of the day used this practice, but Foster took it to a greater height than his contemporaries. The influence of dance and dance rhythms, particularly from the American black tradition, marks Foster's best work and vividly forecasts popular song of the twentieth century.

After the Civil War sentimental parlor songs continued to sell briskly, though they were of much poorer quality than before the Civil War. Most parlor songs of the post-Civil War period were serious and vapid to a fault, exploiting the moral bent of Victorian Americans who combined the qualities of hearty frontiersmen and sentimental moralists. Tearful songs were considered songs of good conscience, related closely to hymns. There were images of old rocking chairs where a dear departed mother once

held her children, letters of pardon that came too late, barefoot orphans standing in the snow, and soldiers lying dead in a rain-soaked trench.

A lively theatrical alternative to the minstrel show and the parlor song came to the United States in 1878, when the Gilbert and Sullivan operetta *H.M.S. Pinafore* was first performed. William Gilbert's lyrics were witty and beautifully fashioned, and their interaction with Arthur Sullivan's melodies went on to influence many of the finest American lyricists. While Gilbert and Sullivan's operettas demonstrated England's continuing influence on American popular entertainment, that influence would never again be as strong as it was in the first half of the nineteenth century.

The 1880s saw the rise of a new form of entertainment—vaudeville. It was inspired by the English music hall and eclipsed all other styles of entertainment by the beginning of the twentieth century. The use of the French term *vaudeville* was first applied by one of the genre's most successful producers, Tony Pastor, to describe the variety show at his theater at 14th Street and Union Square in New York. Whereas minstrel shows had an established ensemble of performers, vaudeville shows featured a playbill of individual performances that had never before appeared on the same stage. Vaudeville was also considered more appropriate for family entertainment than the minstrel show. Every vaudeville bill contained a performance by a singer of sentimental ballads. With a constant flow of new and established talent on the vaudeville stage, this new theatrical format continually demanded more music to present to the public; thus the new "pop" song industry was created.

The Birth of Tin Pan Alley

In the 1880s American sheet music publication began to gravitate around the theater district in New York, in order to provide vaudeville acts with the abundant number of songs they required. The first successful theater district publisher was the T. B. Harms Company, who specialized in songs only, which was a unique position to take in publishing at that time. Harms aggressively solicited vaudeville singers and producers to feature his company's songs in their shows. "Singing stooges" were planted in theater audiences to stand up and lead the crowd in the chorus of the new song. Before phonographs, radio, or television, live performances were the only means of demonstrating new music to the public. If the new song was well received, it was immediately printed and sold through various music retailers for amateur performance at the home piano.

In no time other publishing firms sprang up in New York near the theater district. Many of the early pop song publishers had been salesmen: Edward Marks sold buttons, Joseph Sterns sold neckties, Leo Feist sold corsets, and Isadore Witmark sold water filters. Typically, these songwriters and publishers did not sing and could not read or write music; notation and performance of their wares was left up to professional arrangers on staff for the company, many of them recently arrived European immigrants.

The song publishing neighborhood became known as "Tin Pan Alley," a name attributed to *New York Herald* journalist Monroe Rosenfeld who described the collective cacophony of tinkling pianos issuing from the open windows of the publishing houses on a hot summer's day. The community of New York music publishers continued to grow and prosper. In 1914 this exclusive fraternity created the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (A.S.C.A.P.), a licensing organization intended to enforce payment of royalties to composers and publishers for public performances of their material.

The background of Charles K. Harris is typical of many Tin Pan Alley songwriters and exceptional in that he had the first runaway Tin Pan Alley hit. He was one of the first popular music publishers to move to New York from the hinterlands—in his case from Milwaukee—where he had a "songs written to order" service. At a price of up to twenty dollars he composed songs on his banjo for weddings, birthdays, funerals, or any other occasion. Harris's break came when he had his three-verse story ballad "After the Ball," written and published by him in 1892, inserted into the hit musical *A Trip to Chinatown* (see figure 1.3). The song became America's first million seller; in fact, in twenty years it sold ten million copies, and after its first year it was bringing in $25,000 a week.

"After the Ball" was a thoroughly Victorian, nineteenth-century waltz. A little girl climbs on her old uncle's knee to ask him why he has no children and no home. He replies that he had a sweet-

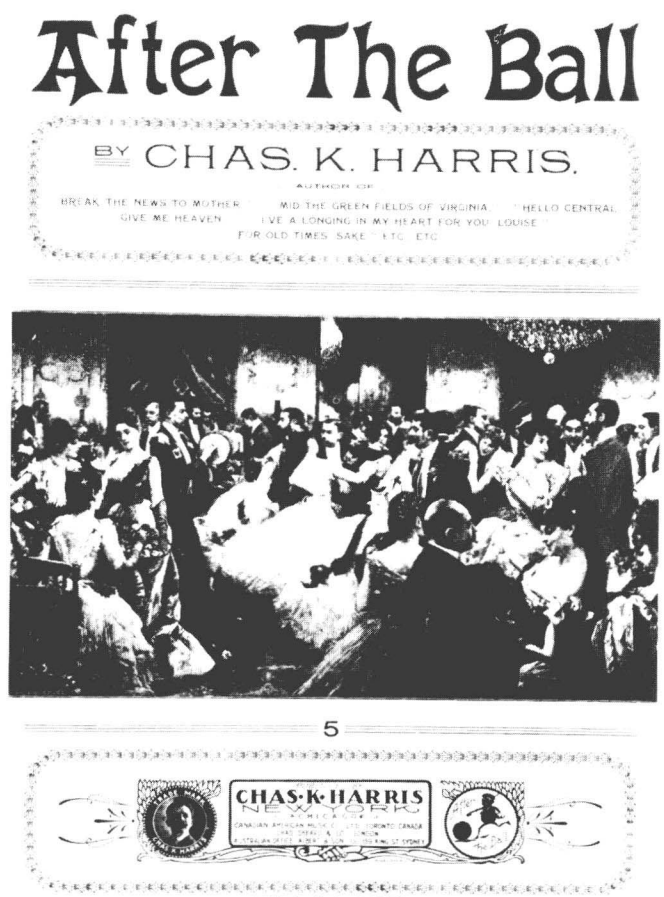

Figure 1.3
This is the cover of "After the Ball," America's first million-seller piece of sheet music. The other Harris titles listed indicate the dominance of sentimental songs at this time.

heart, but caught her kissing another man at a ball. He would not forgive her or listen to her explanation and years later, after her death, learned that the man in question was only her brother.

"After the Ball" was followed by such hits as Charles Lawlor and James Blake's "Sidewalks of New York" (1894) and Arthur Lamb and Harry Von Tilzer's "A Bird in a Gilded Cage" (1900). Triple meters such as 3/4 and 6/8 were the most successful, and a conventional form arose: an introductory verse, followed by a chorus that offered the main melody. This verse-chorus form was conducive to the story-telling type of narrative song in this era.

The national success of Tin Pan Alley's popular music in no way indicates its immunity to criticism. The development of symphony orchestras and fine arts support groups accompanied the growth of cosmopolitan cities during the post-Civil War years. European classical music had a strong voice in the American cultural world, backed by the power of America's wealthy aristocrats. It was imposed on the often resentful public, and the imposition went beyond the concert hall. Music education, from elementary school to the conservatory, mandated the exclusive study of European art music styles. Music critics writing in the popular press and music journals preferred and defended European concert music. They reviled the commercially successful popular music and, by implication, its mass audience.

Yet the same urban social phenomena that brought about the art music contingent also led to an assertion of popular music culture in the latter nineteenth century. The moral restraint of provincial Victorian culture began to crumble as a more freethinking and more dynamic urban social style took over. America realized, as it pulled away from its European origins, that its emerging identity was comprised of African-American as well as European-American cultures. The dominant white society was both captivated and repelled by the openness and exuberance of African-American culture. White America struggled between the pressures of its own mores, emphasizing poise and expressive reserve, and individual expressive needs that found fulfillment in the adoption, to whatever extent, of African-American culture.

The Twentieth Century and the Emergence of an American Style

Popular music historian James R. Morris calls the twentieth century "the American century."[2] Significant cultural and stylistic changes took place toward the end of the nineteenth century, shaped by the American literature of Mark Twain and by the art of Winslow Homer and Frederic Remington. Great waves of European immigrants came to America. The ebullient high life of wealthy urban society set the pace for the style of American leisure. The character of American popular song and the style of its presentation in the twentieth century changed to reflect this more relaxed social outlook.

The new setting for public song presentation was the cabaret. Theaters present entertainers on an elevated stage, separated from the audience that sits in a darkened house. Though the actors may address the audience directly, there is still that physical threshold that severs the entertainer from the audience. Cabarets bridged the gap between performer and patron by bringing them into