



Celebrating The Great American Songbook

As a youth growing up in the 1970s, I was frequently derided by my disco buddies for my love of “Old Fogey” music, as sung by the likes of such disparate artists as Bing Crosby, Mario Lanza, Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra, Nat King Cole, Mel Torme, Sarah Vaughan, Ella Fitzgerald, Jack Jones, Barbra Streisand, Carmen McRae, Dinah Washington, and Nancy Wilson—to name a few.

Now don’t get me wrong: I enjoyed shaking my booty in the very Brooklyn club where “Saturday Night Fever” was filmed. And like our esteemed editor, I learned to swivel my hips to the rhythmic pulse of the Bee Gees and Donna Summer too.

But my first musical love affair was with all that “Old Fogey” music that my mother and father played on the Victrola for years and years. (Yes, we had vinyl records back then—and truth be told, I still spin them.) My love of American standards was nourished further by a brother (Carl Barry), who became a virtuoso jazz guitarist, and a sister-in-law (Joanne Barry) who became an extraordinary jazz singer of those very standards and lots more.

At a time when “performing artists” spit rage and revenge against their mothers, fathers, friends, and lovers with every permutation of the F-word imaginable, it is hard to believe that there was once an era of hit songs dominated by such romanticists as Cole Porter, George and Ira Gershwin, Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Richard Rodgers, Johnny Mercer, Henry Mancini, Johnny Mandel, Michel Legrand and Antonio Carlos Jobim. It is even harder to believe that the hit singles chart was once owned by singers whose words you could actually

understand, crooning songs that were worth understanding.

And it’s not as if rage and revenge were absent thematically from the lyrics of these standards. But the lyricists—and the singers—expressed their anger and pain *poetically*. When Tony Bennett recorded the Johnny Mercer classic, “I Wanna Be Around,” he could have echoed today’s artists by telling his ex-lover: “You fucked up my head! Now, suck my dick, Bitch!” Instead, with the lazy, bluesy arrangement of Marty Manning, Bennett sang:

*I wanna be around to pick up the pieces
When somebody breaks your heart
Some somebody twice as smart as I
(And you actually hear Bennett enunciate the “t” at the end of “heart” and “smart.”)*

*A somebody who will swear to be true
As you used to do with me
Who’ll leave you to learn
That mis’ry loves company, wait and see.*

*I mean, I wanna be around to see how he
does it
When he breaks your heart to bits
Let’s see if the puzzle fits so fine*

And that’s when I’ll discover that revenge is

sweet

*As I sit there applaudin’ from a front-row
seat*

*When somebody breaks your heart
Like you, like you broke mine*

Heart-break is also on display in Bennett’s rendition of “If I Love Again,” which, like other compositions of its era, sports an introduction that is as melodic as the song itself:

*I often wonder why you came to me
Brought such a flame to me
Then let it die
And if another love should find my heart
It will remind my heart of your goodbye
With every new love you’ll come back to me
In other eyes it’s you I’ll see*

*If I love again, though it’s someone new
If I love again, it will still be you
In someone else’s fond embrace
I’ll close my eyes and see your face*

*If I love again I’ll find other charms
But I’ll make-believe
You are in my arms
And though my lips whisper “I love you”
My heart will not be true
I’ll be loving you
Every time I love again*

Bennett’s recordings had no monopoly on angst. When Frank Sinatra sang “I’m a Fool to Want You” or “It Was a Very Good Year,” a lifetime of hard knocks coalesced in each of his brilliantly articulated syllables. And you could *feel* the depth of his emotional yearning—in such songs as: “You Go To My Head ... with a smile that makes my temperature rise. Like a summer with a thousand Julys. You intoxicate my soul with your eyes.” A self-proclaimed “Saloon



Singer," he learned to sing behind the beat, like a jazz master, swinging effortlessly through the lyrics of "I've Got You Under My Skin" or "Come Fly With Me." (And he gets extra points just for delivering the definitive version of "New York, New York," a virtual theme song for my New York Yankees.)

Another Italian-American artist, Mario Lanza, could practically *rupture* you with his passionate embrace of Jerome Kern's incomparable "All the Things You Are," a paean to love that has also been interpreted by several hundred jazz musicians since its 1939 debut. The composition's romantic lyricism remains a prime example of great American song-writing. Lanza's 1952 Rhino/MGM version repeats the last stanza, while leaving out the introductory stanza below (though the pianist accompanying Lanza actually plays the introductory melody under Mario's last note). Lanza's ability to shift dynamics from the softest whisper to the boldest operatic fortissimo remains one of his most exemplary characteristics as a singer:

*Time and again I've longed for adventure
Something to make my heart beat much faster
What did I long for, I never really knew.
Finding your love, I found my adventure,
Touching your hand my heart beat much faster
All that I want in all of this world is you.*

*You are the promised kiss of springtime
That makes the lonely winter seem long
You are the breathless hush of evening
That trembles on the brink of a lovely song.*

*You are the angel glow that lights a star,
The dearest things I know are what you are.
Someday my happy arms will hold you,
And someday I'll know that moment divine
When all the things you are, are mine.*

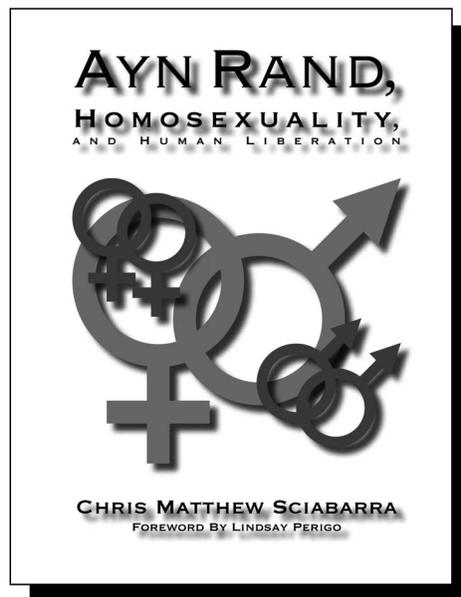
I'm not going to say that *nothing* like this has been written since its premiere, for there have been many wonderful lyrics and melodies to grace the music charts over the last sixty years. But it is no coincidence that contemporary popular singers—Rod Stewart, Linda Ronstadt, Carly Simon, Joni Mitchell, Michael Bolton, k.d. lang, Celine Dion, Luther Vandross, Bono, Willie Nelson, Patti LaBelle, Natalie Cole, Gladys Knight, Cyndi Lauper, and even disco diva Donna Summer—have continued to record the tunes of the great American songbook.

That's the nature of timeless art. It can be the soundtrack of love lost, love found—for any generation.

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