

The Great American Songbook: A Conclusion

Herewith, the final installment in this annotated list of a central and defining element of 20th-century American life and culture.

By Terry Teachout

“Let me make the songs of a nation,” the Scottish statesman Andrew Fletcher declared in 1703, “and I care not who makes its laws.” This oft-quoted remark applies with particular force to the huge body of pre-rock popular songs written in the 20th century and now known collectively as the Great American Songbook. To a remarkable degree, a large number of these songs—most of them, interestingly, romantic ballads—have embedded themselves in the consciousness of the public, and have since come to be identified throughout the world with the American national character and way of life.

American popular song and American popular singing are for all intents and purposes consubstantial. It is all but impossible, for example, to recall Harold Arlen’s soaring melody for “Over the Rainbow” without simultaneously hearing the plangent voice of the young Judy Garland, who sang it in the 1939 film version of *The Wizard of Oz* (as well as on countless subsequent occasions). In order to illustrate this symbiotic relationship, I have compiled an annotated list of 50 popular singers of the 20th century, each one performing a different song, all of which are currently available on CD. What follows is the fourth and final installment of that list, the first three installments having appeared in the February, March, and April issues of COMMENTARY.

By way of a reminder, here are the first 40 songs, listed alphabetically by performer:

1. Karrin Allyson: “Some Other Time” (music by Leonard Bernstein, lyrics by Betty Comden and Adolph Green).
2. Louis Armstrong: “How Long Has This Been Going On?” (music by George Gershwin, lyrics by Ira Gershwin).
3. Fred Astaire: “Cheek to Cheek” (music and lyrics by Irving Berlin).
4. Mildred Bailey: “St. Louis Blues” (music and lyrics by W.C. Handy).
5. Chet Baker: “He Was Too Good to Me” (music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Lorenz Hart).
6. Tony Bennett: “I Walk a Little Faster” (music by Cy Coleman, lyrics by Carolyn Leigh).
7. Andy Bey: “Someone to Watch Over Me” (music by George Gershwin, lyrics by Ira Gershwin).
8. June Christy: “Lazy Afternoon” (music by Jerome Moross, lyrics by John Latouche).
9. Rosemary Clooney: “Do You Miss New York?” (music and lyrics by Dave Frishberg).
10. Nat King Cole: “Stardust” (music by Hoagy Carmichael, lyrics by Mitchell Parish).
11. Perry Como: “They Say It’s Wonderful” (music and lyrics by Irving Berlin).
12. Mary Foster Conklin: “Mad About You” (music and lyrics by David Cantor).
13. Bing Crosby: “Make Believe” (music by Jerome Kern, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II).
14. Meredith d’Ambrosio: “Dream Dancing” (music and lyrics by Cole Porter).
15. Blossom Dearie: “If I Were a Bell” (music and lyrics by Frank Loesser).
16. Dena DeRose: “More Than You Know” (music by Vincent Youmans, lyrics by Edward Eliscu and Billy Rose).
17. Jim Ferguson: “The Night We Called It a Day” (music by Matt Dennis, lyrics by Tom Adair).
18. Ella Fitzgerald: “What Is There to Say?” (music by Vernon Duke, lyrics by E.Y. Harburg).
19. Helen Forrest: “Day In—Day Out” (music by Rube Bloom, lyrics by Johnny Mercer).
20. Judy Garland: “The Man That Got Away” (music by Harold Arlen, lyrics by Ira Gershwin).
21. Johnny Hartman: “Lush Life” (music and lyrics by Billy Stray-horn).
22. Dick Haymes: “It Might as Well Be Spring” (music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II).
23. Woody Herman: “I Hadn’t Anyone Till You” (music and lyrics by Ray Noble).
24. Billie Holiday: “You Go to My Head” (music by J. Fred Coots, lyrics by Haven Gillespie).
25. Shirley Horn: “Where Do You Start?” (music by Johnny Mandel, lyrics by Alan and Marilyn Bergman).

26. Jack Jones: “You Must Believe in Spring” (music by Michel Le-grand, lyrics by Jacques Demy and Alan and Marilyn Bergman).
27. Rebecca Kilgore: “Glad to Be Unhappy” (music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Lorenz Hart).
28. Diana Krall: “I Get Along Without You Very Well” (music and lyrics by Hoagy Carmichael).
29. Cleo Laine: “Anyone Can Whistle” (music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim).
30. Barbara Lea: “Guess I’ll Go Back Home (This Summer)” (music by Willard Robison, lyrics by Ray Mayer).
31. Peggy Lee: “Days of Wine and Roses” (music by Henry Mancini, lyrics by Johnny Mercer).
32. Julie London: “Laura” (music by David Raksin, lyrics by Johnny Mercer).
33. Dean Martin: “Imagination” (music by Jimmy Van Heusen, lyrics by Johnny Burke).
34. Carmen McRae: “Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye” (music and lyrics by Cole Porter).
35. Mabel Mercer: “Did You Ever Cross Over to Sneden’s?” (music and lyrics by Alec Wilder).
36. Joe Mooney: “But Beautiful” (music by Jimmy Van Heusen, lyrics by Johnny Burke).
37. Joan Morris: “I’m Old Fashioned” (music by Jerome Kern, lyrics by Johnny Mercer).
38. John Pizzarelli: “I’m Putting All My Eggs in One Basket” (music and lyrics by Irving Berlin).
39. Polly Podewell: “After You, Who?” (music and lyrics by Cole Porter).
40. Annie Ross: “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face” (music by Frederick Loewe, lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner).

Now for the final ten singers and songs, followed by a few concluding reflections on the place of the Great American Songbook in American art and culture—plus some brief remarks about one of its most notable contributors.

41. Daryl Sherman: “This Is New.” Music by Kurt Weill, lyrics by Ira Gershwin.

Virtually no classical musicians of note have written successful popular songs, though a surprising number have tried, among them Milton Babbitt, Jascha Heifetz, and William Schuman. So, too, comparatively few European composers have worked effectively in the idiom of American popular song. An exception to both rules was Kurt Weill, a German-Jewish pupil of Ferruccio Busoni whose involvement with popular music dates as far back as *The Three-Penny Opera* (1928), the first of several theatrical collaborations with the poet-playwright Bertolt Brecht in which he made highly creative use of the idiosyncratic sounds of German “jazz.” Weill emigrated to the U.S. in 1935, where he soon began writing for Broadway, collaborating on such musicals as *Knickerbocker Holiday* (1938, with Maxwell Anderson), *Lady in the Dark* (1940, with Moss Hart and Ira Gershwin), and *One Touch of Venus* (1943, with S.J. Perelman and Ogden Nash). Weill’s unique ability to infuse the American popular-song idiom with his own distinctive musical vocabulary can be heard in “This Is New,” a ballad from *Lady in the Dark* that, though not as frequently heard as the better-known “September Song” or “Speak Low,” ranks among the finest of his American period.

Unlike most jazz singers who came of age in the 70’s, Daryl Sherman was influenced not by bebop and later idioms but by the music of the Swing Era, in particular the singing of Mildred Bailey. Sherman’s engaging style, which recalls Bailey’s shivery vibrato and lightness of rhythmic touch, is well displayed in the affecting performance of “This Is New” heard on *Look What I Found*, a superior collection of unhackneyed standards accompanied by a dapper ten-piece band led by the trombonist-arranger Dan Barrett. The excellent guitarist on “This Is New,” incidentally, is Bucky Pizzarelli, John Pizzarelli’s much-admired father (*Look What I Found*, Arbors Jazz ARCD 19154).

42. Frank Sinatra: “Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars (*Corcovado*).” Music by Antonio Carlos Jobim, English lyrics by Gene Lees.

Starting in the 1950’s, a group of Brazilian musicians influenced by the “cool jazz” of such American artists as Gerry Mulligan and Bud Shank developed a sophisticated musical idiom that came to be known as bossa nova. In the 60’s, their songs began to be taken up in turn by American singers and instrumentalists. Antonio Carlos Jobim would ultimately contribute to the Great American Songbook directly, collaborating with the lyricist Gene Lees on English-language versions of his Portuguese songs as well as on new songs written directly in English. Their best-known effort, “Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars” (known in Portuguese as “*Corcovado*”), is a softly

meditative bossa nova whose unusual harmonic structure—it neither begins nor ends on a key-establishing tonic chord—inspired Lees to produce one of his most romantic lyrics.

Frank Sinatra, generally regarded as the greatest of all American popular singers, made definitive recordings of a large number of songs now recognized as standards. To pick only one as representative of his style is impossible, so I have chosen instead to include a performance in which Sinatra departed—with complete success—from his accustomed repertoire. His 1967 recording of “Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars,” delicately accompanied by the luminous orchestral palette of Claus Ogerman, displays with particular clarity Sinatra’s ability to fuse words and music into an indissoluble expressive amalgam. Note especially his subtly varied “readings” of the two repetitions of the phrase “a bitter, tragic joke” (*Francis Albert Sinatra & Antonio Carlos Jobim*, Reprise 1021-2).

43. Jeri Southern: “Let Me Love You.” Music and lyrics by Bart Howard.

Almost all of the songs written for New York’s cabaret performers in the 50’s and 60’s are forgotten, in most cases deservedly so. Only one cabaret composer of that period, Bart Howard, eventually succeeded in breaking through to a wider audience, and that happened largely by chance. A pianist who worked as the master of ceremonies at the Blue Angel night club from 1951 to 1959, Howard produced a small but striking group of wistful, beautifully wrought love songs that were sung by a number of fine artists (including Mabel Mercer) but failed to catch the public’s ear. Then Johnny Mathis included three Howard songs on his 1957 LP, *Wonderful! Wonderful!*, and the resulting royalties made the composer wealthy enough to give up songwriting. Four years later, Peggy Lee sang “Fly Me to the Moon” on *The Ed Sullivan Show*, and Howard unexpectedly found himself the author of one of the last major song hits of the pre-rock era. Though “Fly Me to the Moon” remains the most popular of his songs, it is for his earlier ballads that he is especially admired, particularly “Let Me Love You,” a gentle yet insistent lover’s plea that is a model of cabaret song-writing at its best.

Jeri Southern was all but forgotten when the jazz bassist Charlie Haden included one of her long-unavailable recordings on his 1992 album, *Haunted Heart*. Four decades earlier, she had had a brief vogue as what was then known as a “song stylist.” A thoroughly trained musician, Southern also played excellent piano and sang in a low-pitched, softly sibilant voice; her popularity, though, had less to do with her exceptional artistic gifts than with her knack for projecting self-doubt and ruefulness—two qualities with which she was severely afflicted in her personal life. Chronic stage fright eventually forced her to stop performing. A bland orchestral accompaniment by Tutti Camarata notwithstanding, Southern’s 1957 recording of “Let Me Love You” conveys something of her special intensity (*You Better Go Now/When Your Heart’s on Fire*, Jasmine JASCD 602).

44. Jo Stafford: “Haunted Heart.” Music by Arthur Schwartz, lyrics by Howard Dietz.

Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz wrote a large number of first-class songs between 1929 and 1937, most of them, like “Alone Together,” “Dancing in the Dark,” and “Something to Remember You By,” for such Broadway revues as *Three’s a Crowd* (1930) and *The Band Wagon* (1931). They were less successful with the plot-driven “book” shows that came to dominate musical comedy, and in 1937 Schwartz began working in Hollywood, also with limited artistic success. After World War II, the two men resumed their collaboration on Broadway. “Haunted Heart,” with its wedge-like melody in which ascending scalar passages alternate with descending intervals, is one of Schwartz’s most memorable inspirations. (Arthur Schwartz’s son Jonathan would later become one of New York’s best-known radio personalities and a key figure in the contemporary revival of the Great American Songbook.)

Jo Stafford was that rarest of birds, a hugely successful singer who was also universally admired by her fellow musicians. Her smooth-textured, maternal-sounding alto voice, infallible sense of pitch, and straightforward yet subtle interpretative style made her one of the most popular vocalists of the 40’s and 50’s. Stafford was especially beloved during World War II, when she recorded such evocative ballads as “Long Ago and Far Away” and “I’ll Be Seeing You,” though her later performances of more sophisticated songs like “Haunted Heart” have been of greater interest to a new generation of admirers. Paul Weston, Stafford’s husband and regular collaborator, arranged the un-assuming yet wholly appropriate orchestral accompaniment to “Haunted Heart” (*Autumn in New York/Starring Jo Stafford*, Capitol/EMI 8 59958 2).

45. Mel Tormé: “When the Sun Comes Out.” Music by Harold Arlen, lyrics by Ted Koehler.

Not many American songwriters have produced actual twelve-bar blues, but more than a few of them have been affected by various aspects of the blues form, particularly the distinctive melodic coloration provided by its characteristic flattened thirds and sevenths. In this sense, no professional songwriter was “bluesier” than Harold Arlen, not only in “Blues in the Night” but in any number of his finest works. The very first phrase of “When the Sun Comes Out,” for example, pivots on a string of flattened thirds (“When the sun comes out/And that rain stops beating on my window pane”), immediately establishing a pungent major-minor ambiguity that is not resolved until the very end of the song.

Unusually for an American popular singer, Mel Tormé conformed to the typically French classical voice type known as *baryton martin*—a “lazy tenor” who takes high notes not from the chest but in a falsetto-colored mixed voice. Though his cultivated ballad singing made him a teenage idol in the late 40’s and caused him to become known as the “Velvet Fog” (a nickname bestowed by a disc jockey), Tormé was also strongly influenced by jazz, and his slow, impressively sustained version of “When the Sun Comes Out” is accompanied by a ten-piece “dektette” led by Marty Paich, modeled directly on the group with which Miles Davis made his influential *Birth of the Cool* recordings in 1949 and 1950. A talented songwriter in his own right, Tormé also wrote several interesting books, including a biography of the drummer Buddy Rich and a memoir of his stormy professional association with Judy Garland (*Lulu’s Back in Town*, Bethlehem/Avenue Jazz R2 75732).

46. Sarah Vaughan: “Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year.” Music and lyrics by Frank Loesser.

Before moving to Broadway, Frank Loesser wrote many memorable songs for Hollywood, and though his ballads tended to be the weakest part of his output, “Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year,” among the last of his film songs, is a first-class piece of work by any standard. Not only is the lyric unpretentiously tender, but the repeated octave-wide melodic leaps have an almost operatic amplitude—not altogether surprising in light of the fact that the song was composed for the soprano Deanna Durbin to sing in the 1944 film noir, *Christmas Holiday*.

Bebop, the virtuoso style of jazz identified with the trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and the alto saxophonist Charlie Parker, was primarily an instrumental idiom, but it also produced a few singers of interest. Foremost among them was Sarah Vaughan, whose vibrato-laden, luscious-sounding contralto voice grew still darker and deeper as she aged. A resourceful improviser, Vaughan was never primarily interested in songs for their own sake, and by the late 60’s her interpretations had become self-defeatingly ornate. Earlier in her career, though, she was still capable of singing in a relatively uncomplicated and uncluttered fashion, as can be heard in her 1953 recording of “Spring Will Be a Little Late This Year.” Though Percy Faith’s orchestral accompaniment is too gooey, Vaughan makes the most of Loesser’s handsome melody (*16 Most Requested Songs*, Columbia Legacy CK 53783).

47. Fats Waller: “Sweet and Slow.” Music by Harry Warren, lyrics by Al Dubin.

The hugely prolific Harry Warren is not nearly so well-known as most of the other composers on this list, but his 500-odd songs, largely written for Hollywood, include such standards as “Chattanooga Choo Choo,” “Jeepers Creepers,” “I Only Have Eyes for You,” “Lullaby of Broadway,” “The More I See You,” “There Will Never Be Another You,” and “You’re Getting to Be a Habit With Me”—more than enough to earn him a section of his own in the “Great Craftsmen” chapter of Alec Wilder’s *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950*. Though it is his ballads that are now most frequently sung, Warren also had a flair for catchy rhythm tunes, among them “Sweet and Slow,” a delectable little song built around a dotted “riff” (“Rock-a-bye me to and fro”) that he deploys with considerable imagination.

A now-volatile, now-delicate stride pianist with an impish streak, Thomas “Fats” Waller became famous in the 30’s for deflating third-rate pop ditties by singing them in an inimitably mock-pompous manner. On occasion, however, he also recorded songs of higher quality, interpreting them with a fetching mixture of satire and sincerity. Waller’s 1935 version of “Sweet and Slow,” one of his best recorded vocals, is unmistakably lewd—he italicizes every *double entendre* in Al Dubin’s mildly naughty lyric—but also unexpectedly touching. No less

delightful is the light-fingered Waller piano solo with which the record opens (*Fats Waller: The Quintessence, 1929-1943*, Frémeaux & Associés FA 207, two CD's).

48. Wesla Whitfield: "I Wonder What Became of Me." Music by Harold Arlen, lyrics by Johnny Mercer.

To my mind, Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer were the foremost songwriting team of the pre-rock era, not excluding the Gershwins. Though each of them produced memorable songs in tandem with other colleagues, their special aptitudes—Arlen's flair for blues-colored, harmonically fresh melodies, Mercer's uncanny ear for the colloquial—were uniquely compatible. As is the case with the recordings of Frank Sinatra, it is impossible to choose a "best" Arlen-Mercer song, so I have opted instead for one of their less frequently sung masterpieces. For all the *joie de vivre* of his lighter efforts, Mercer was in private life a hard-drinking depressive capable of writing lyrics full of quarter-to-three sorrow à la "One for My Baby"; even more than that familiar song, "I Wonder What Became of Me" plumbs the depths of his alcohol-heightened despair. Arlen's harmonically complex setting of this masterly lyric is appropriately unsettling, not least in its eerie unwillingness to settle securely into a home key.¹

In recent years, the word "cabaret" has come to be used to refer not only to such *recherché* artists as Blossom Dearie and Mabel Mercer but also to a number of younger performers of more traditional inclination (such as the late Nancy LaMott) who in the 50's would have appeared not in small cabarets but before mainstream pop audiences. Among the finest of these latter singers is the San Francisco-based Wesla Whitfield, who performs standards in a silvery, sharply focused mezzo-soprano voice, sensitively accompanied by her husband, the pianist Mike Greensill. A witty, swinging interpreter of rhythm tunes, Whitfield is no less at home in such dark ballads as "I Wonder What Became of Me," which she sings in a deceptively cool manner that does nothing to conceal the pathos of Mercer's despondent lyric (*My Shining Hour*, High Note HCD 7012).

49. Margaret Whiting: "Time After Time." Music by Jule Styne, lyrics by Sammy Cahn.

Jule Styne and Sammy Cahn, one of the top songwriting teams of 40's Hollywood, both spent the second halves of their careers working with different partners and winning still greater fame. Styne left Hollywood for Broadway after the war, subsequently teaming with Betty Comden and Adolph Green for *Bells Are Ringing* and with the young Stephen Sondheim for *Gypsy*, while Cahn replaced Johnny Burke as the principal collaborator of Jimmy Van Heusen. But the best of the many songs they wrote together remain deservedly popular—especially "Time After Time," whose sumptuous, wide-ranging melody evokes the following tribute from the famously demanding songwriter and chronicler Alec Wider: "It's a strong, pure, dramatic, uncluttered, unselfconscious melody. It bespeaks personal involvement and great warmth. I know of no other ballad by Styne equal to it. I'd have been proud to have written it."

Margaret Whiting was one of the few female pop vocalists of the Swing Era who did not launch her career by singing with a big band. The daughter of the noted songwriter Richard Whiting, she was discovered by Johnny Mercer and started singing on network radio and recording for Capitol, Mercer's label, while still a teenager, scoring an immediate success with her father's "My Ideal." Few popular singers have had so finished a technique at so early an age; though she remains active to this day, Whiting's winningly direct style is best heard on the recordings she made in the 40's and 50's, including this 1946 performance of "Time After Time" (*Spotlight on Margaret Whiting*, Capitol CDP 8 29395 2).

50. Lee Wiley: "I've Got a Crush on You." Music by George Gershwin, lyrics by Ira Gershwin.

Appropriately enough, this survey ends with one of the most beloved ballads of the Gershwin brothers, whose work is widely thought to epitomize American popular song at its best and most characteristic. As was so often the case in their collaborations, Ira's irony-tinged, light-verse lyric for "I've Got a Crush on You," with its slightly self-conscious wordplay, sheds its emotional detachment when enlivened by George's heartfelt, precisely sculpted melody.

For the most part, jazz musicians of the Swing Era had little use for the pop singers with whom they were so often forced to work, but a few "canaries" managed to escape this opprobrium. Though there was nothing

obviously jazzy about Lee Wiley's liquid alto voice and tasteful, unmannered interpretations, she liked working with jazz musicians, particularly the Chicago-style players associated with the guitarist-bandleader Eddie Condon, and they invariably reciprocated by speaking of her with affection and admiration. Wiley was the very first pop singer to make albums devoted to the songs of a single composer, and she recorded "I've Got a Crush on You" twice, first as part of a 1939 all-Gershwin album accompanied by a small jazz combo with Fats Waller on piano, then again in 1950, this time backed by a string quartet and the cornet of Bobby Hackett. Both versions are irresistible, and both are included in an imported four-CD set containing most of Wiley's studio recordings, making it unnecessary to choose between them (*Manhattan Nights: The Complete Golden Years Studio Sessions*, Definitive DRCD11157, four CD's).²

To compile a list of this sort is to realize with painful clarity how much must necessarily be left out. Not only great individual songs ("Body and Soul," "I'll Be Seeing You," "I'm All Smiles," "What's New?") but important composers and lyricists (Dorothy Fields, Isham Jones, Burton Lane, Hugh Martin, Victor Young) have been passed over or scanted, simply because of the sheer impossibility of covering the entire field within the compass of a mere 50 songs.

What is no less distressing is that I have also been forced to omit a number of singers whose work I admire tremendously, either because their best recordings are no longer in print (Teddi King, Irene Kral, Nancy LaMott, Julius LaRosa, Nancy Marano, Eddie Monteiro) or because the recordings they made of the songs I chose to include are not currently available on CD (Connee Boswell, Jackie and Roy, Helen Merrill, Jack Teagarden).

To the many readers of COMMENTARY who have already written to point out where I have gone astray, I can only plead that, over and above matters of pure taste, undertakings like this one are by definition imperfect. Be that as it may, I am struck in retrospect by the kaleidoscopic variety of this list, for which credit belongs not to me but to the extraordinarily gifted artists who made the Great American Songbook so central a part of American art and culture in the 20th century, and whose continued efforts today are ensuring that it will remain relevant to American life in the century now upon us.

Of all the songwriters who figure in this list, only one, Johnny Mercer, appears more than three times. It was Mercer who wrote the lyrics for "Day In—Day Out," "Days of Wine and Roses," "I Wonder What Became of Me," "I'm Old Fashioned," and "Laura." Significantly, he wrote these songs in collaboration with five different composers: Rube Bloom, Henry Mancini, Harold Arlen, Jerome Kern, and David Raksin. No other American lyricist worked more effectively over a longer period of time with a larger number of composers. Indeed, in addition to the many fine songs Mercer wrote with these five (and most notably Arlen, with whom he also wrote "Blues in the Night," "Come Rain or Come Shine," "One for My Baby," "Out of This World," "My Shining Hour," and "That Old Black Magic"), I could just as easily have chosen five different Mercer songs written with five *other* composers. Such a list might be culled from any of the following: "Early Autumn" (Ralph Burns), "Emily" (Johnny Mandel), "I Remember You" (Victor Schertzinger), "I Thought About You" (Jimmy Van Heusen), "On the Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe" (Harry Warren), "Once Upon a Summertime" (Michel Legrand), "P.S. I Love You" (Gordon Jenkins), "Skylark" (Hoagy Carmichael), "Too Marvelous for Words" (Richard Whiting), and "Something's Gotta Give" (for which Mercer himself wrote the music).

Mercer's true distinction, however, lies not in his versatility but in his singularity. Of all the lyricists represented here, it is he who most completely embodies in his work the specific qualities of American speech. The American's "one desire is to make speech lucid, lively, dramatic, staccato, arresting, clear—and to that end he is willing to sacrifice every purely aesthetic consideration," H.L. Mencken wrote in *The American Language*. "He judges language as he judges poetry, not at all by its grace of form but wholly by its clarity and poignancy of content." This is also true of Mercer, at least up to a point, for as it happens, his best lyrics also exhibit the "grace of form" Mencken reserves for poetry. Whatever utilitarian considerations brought them into being, their aesthetic appeal is considerable, raising them above the level of supremely well-crafted song lyrics and into the realm of the poetic.

As for the purely musical component of the Great American Songbook, it is no less memorable an achievement in its own way than are the many fine art songs written by major American classical composers like Samuel Barber, Aaron Copland, and Ned Rorem. Considered as a whole, indeed, the Great American Songbook must be seen to form a major part of the proud claim that 20th-century American culture can make on the attention of posterity.

Except as indicated, all of the CD's mentioned above can be purchased online by viewing this article during the month of May at COMMENTARY's website:

www.commentarymagazine.com

¹ Revealingly, Stephen Sondheim included "I Wonder What Became of Me" on a list of "songs I wish I'd written (at least in part)" that he drew up last year as part of a 70th-birthday tribute. (The present list contains another song cited by Sondheim on that occasion, Cole Porter's "Ev'ry Time We Say Goodbye.")

² It should be noted, however, that a much better-sounding transfer of the 1939 version of "I've Got a Crush on You" is available on an anthology of recordings prepared by Richard M. Sudhalter to illustrate *Lost Chords*, his definitive 1999 history of "white musicians and their contribution to jazz" (*Lost Chords, 1915-1945: A Musical Companion*, Retrieval RTR 79018, two CD's).
