

The Great American Songbook: Part 3

This month's installment pairs fifteen classic popular songs with the singers who have brought them to life.

By Terry Teachout

Though America flooded the Western world with countless pop-culture exports during the 20th century, it is hard to think of one that has given more lasting pleasure to more people than our vast catalogue of pre-rock popular song—unless it is our comparably long list of pre-rock popular singers.

Like jazz, the other musical idiom with which American popular song is indissolubly commingled, the Great American Songbook (as the finest of these songs have come to be collectively known) is no longer seen as purely popular. The best efforts of the great professionals—the Irving Berlins and George Gershwins and Cole Porters—are increasingly regarded as comparable in artistic quality with the “art songs” performed in recital by classical singers. Indeed, many classical singers themselves now routinely program selections from the Great American Songbook, though few perform them with anything like the idiomatic grace of such noted pop and jazz singers as Fred Astaire, Nat Cole, or Helen Forrest.

In order to illustrate the intimate relationship between American popular song and American popular singing, I have compiled an annotated list of 50 American pop singers of the 20th century, each one performing a different song. What follows is the third installment of that list; parts 1 and 2 appeared in the February and March issues of COMMENTARY.

This is not a “canon.” Many previous attempts have been made to draw up more specifically canonical lists, some of them quite plausible, of major songs and singers.¹ But, particularly in light of the fact that recordings by pre-rock singers go in and out of print with some frequency, I have opted instead for the more personal and modest goal of simply discussing 50 of my favorite songs as recorded by 50 of my favorite singers in performances currently available on CD. My purpose has been to suggest the remarkable range of the pop-song idiom—hence the absence of many well-known songs and singers, and the presence of some less well-known pairings equally worthy of serious attention.

26. Jack Jones: “You Must Believe in Spring.” Music by Michel Legrand, lyrics by Jacques Demy and Alan and Marilyn Bergman.

Michel Legrand is one of the few European-born songwriters to have completely mastered the American popular-song idiom, in part because his involvement in this country’s musical life has been so extensive. A fluent jazz pianist who has also worked with success as a jazz and pop arranger, Legrand is now known primarily as a composer of film music. Most of his songs were themselves written for movie soundtracks, among them the exquisite “You Must Believe in Spring,” drawn from *Les Demoiselles de Rochefort* (1966). Director Jacques Demy’s original French lyric was deftly adapted by Alan and Marilyn Bergman, with whom Legrand subsequently wrote numerous standards.

Jack Jones was one of the very last singers of standards to become famous prior to the rise of rock-and-roll. The son of Allan Jones, a light-opera singer of the 1930’s and 1940’s, he is, like Tony Bennett, a full-voiced tenor who typically sings in high-baritone keys—what opera connoisseurs call a “lazy tenor”—and is greatly admired for the unusual finish of his vocal technique. In common with most traditional pop singers active in the 1960’s and 1970’s, Jones sang and recorded a good deal of second-rate material, and his highly developed technique tempted him to indulge in excessive displays of virtuosity, but in recent years his singing has become purer in

style. A superb example of his later work is the precisely controlled performance of “You Must Believe in Spring”; he recorded it in 1998 with Mike Renzi, a jazz pianist who specializes in accompanying singers (*Jack Jones Paints a Tribute to Tony Bennett*, Honest OME 1021).

27. **Rebecca Kilgore:** “Glad to Be Unhappy.” Music by Richard Rodgers, lyrics by Lorenz Hart.

No lyricist wrote darker love songs than Lorenz Hart, and none of his lyrics is more characteristic than “Glad to Be Unhappy.” Its deliberately paradoxical words, set with grace by Richard Rodgers, could have stood as an epitaph for the desperately unhappy Hart: “Unrequited love’s a bore/And I’ve got it pretty bad/But for someone you adore/It’s a pleasure to be sad.”

Rebecca Kilgore, who lives and works in Portland, Oregon, has a bright, open vocal timbre that recalls the big-band singers of the Swing Era. She appears regularly with the pianist-songwriter Dave Frishberg, and their latest CD, a live duet album called *The Starlit Hour*, contains a version of “Glad to Be Unhappy” whose unadorned simplicity is characteristic of Kilgore’s engaging style (*The Starlit Hour*, Arbors Jazz ARCD 19255).

28. **Diana Krall:** “I Get Along Without You Very Well (Except Sometimes).” Music by Hoagy Carmichael, lyrics by Carmichael, based on a poem by Jane Brown Thompson.

Though Hoagy Carmichael rarely wrote the words for his own songs, he took a close and actively collaborative interest in the efforts of the lyricists with whom he worked. In one notable instance, “I Get Along Without You Very Well,” he turned a piece of light verse by an obscure poet, Jane Brown Thompson, into one of the finest lyrics of the 1930’s, setting it to an uncommonly poignant melody whose balanced phrases, like those of such other Carmichael tunes as “Skylark,” immediately recall the “correlated phrasing” of the jazz cornetist Bix Beiderbecke.

Diana Krall, a Canadian jazz pianist who, like Nat Cole, started singing professionally after she had already begun appearing as an instrumentalist, unexpectedly became a full-fledged pop star in the 1990’s—the first vocalist of her generation to win mass popularity by singing standard ballads. Certain critics, deceived by the shrewd marketing campaign that brought her to the attention of the American public, have dismissed her as excessively commercial in style; but she is in fact a first-class balladeer and a hard-swinging jazz pianist—one of the best self-accompanists since Cole—and her pungently colored mezzo voice is heard to particularly fine effect in her recent recording of “I Get Along Without You Very Well.” The pastel orchestral accompaniment is by Claus Ogerman, a German classical composer who has also written arrangements for such jazz and pop artists as Bill Evans, Frank Sinatra, and João Gilberto (*The Look of Love*, Verve 314 549 846-2).

29. **Cleo Laine:** “Anyone Can Whistle.” Music and lyrics by Stephen Sondheim.

A student of the avant-garde classical composer Milton Babbitt and a protégé of the veteran lyricist Oscar Hammerstein II, Stephen Sondheim emerged in the 1970’s as the last major figure in traditional American musical comedy—though his technically adventurous songs have also proved hugely influential with a new generation of theater composers. Most of Sondheim’s songs are too closely connected to the shows for which they were written to be fully intelligible outside their original contexts, while his oblique melodies and emotionally ambivalent lyrics are of limited appeal to many singers (and listeners). But a few of his best songs

have become standards, including “Anyone Can Whistle,” a melancholy monologue about inhibition—one of Sondheim’s recurring themes—set to a perfectly balanced, immediately memorable tune whose wide leaps underline the hesitant hopefulness of the lyric.

Born in London of mixed West Indian and English parentage, Cleo Laine has an unusually flexible voice with a distinctively tawny timbre. A pop singer who is comfortable with jazz rhythms, she has performed and recorded a remarkable variety of music (including an English-language version of Arnold Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire*). Though her interpretations can be overripe to the point of self-parody, Laine’s performance of “Anyone Can Whistle,” part of a well-chosen program of Sondheim songs, is both unaffected and deeply affecting. The luminous orchestration is by Jonathan Tunick, who has scored most of Sondheim’s Broadway shows (*Cleo Sings Sondheim*, RCA Victor 7702-2-RC).

30. **Barbara Lea:** “Guess I’ll Go Back Home (This Summer).” Music by Willard Robison, lyrics by Ray Mayer.

Most of the best-known standards are both urbane in tone and urban in setting and subject matter, but three major American songwriters—Hoagy Carmichael, Johnny Mercer, and Willard Robison—deviated from that path, choosing instead to give their work a regional flavor. Robison, the least well-remembered of the three, was a Missouri-born singer and pianist who was briefly popular in the 1920’s and 1930’s as a radio entertainer. Many of his songs, in particular the sweetly nostalgic “Guess I’ll Go Back Home (This Summer),” portray an idyllic small-town world—as well as a remembered innocence, lost in adulthood.

Virtually unknown save to her fellow musicians and a small but passionately loyal cadre of connoisseurs, Barbara Lea sings well-chosen standards in a quiet, unassuming, unselfconsciously tasteful style. Few singers of her generation have been better able to illuminate the subtleties of a first-class lyric. Among Lea’s most impressive albums is a collection of eighteen Robison songs containing the best recorded interpretation of “Guess I’ll Go Back Home (This Summer)” (*The Devil Is Afraid of Music*, Audiophile ACD-119).

31. **Peggy Lee:** “Days of Wine and Roses.” Music by Henry Mancini, lyrics by Johnny Mercer.

Like many composers who worked in Hollywood after the rise of rock, Henry Mancini acquired a not altogether undeserved reputation as a purveyor of easy-listening music for middlebrows, and the vast popularity of such instrumental miniatures as “Baby Elephant Walk” and “The Pink Panther” obscured his ability to write consummately singable melodies. Frequently working in collaboration with the nonpareil lyricist Johnny Mercer, Mancini wrote some of the most memorable standards of the postwar era; most of them, like the poignant “Days of Wine and Roses,” were originally conceived as theme songs for hit movies.

Peggy Lee emerged from the Benny Goodman band to become one of the biggest pop stars of the 1950’s and 1960’s. A talented song-writer in her own right, she was, with her flute-like voice and uncanny rhythmic poise, equally at home with ballads and up-tempo swing. Lee recorded more extensively than any other female singer of her generation, continuing to make records for Capitol well into the 1970’s, long after most non-rock artists had been dropped by the major labels. Though it is impossible to choose a single recording that is more than partially representative of her protean style, her version of “Days of Wine and Roses,” delicately accompanied by a sextet of Los Angeles jazzmen, is a good example of her hushed way with a ballad (*Mink Jazz*, Capitol CDP 95450).

32. **Julie London:** “Laura.” Music by David Raksin, lyrics by Johnny Mercer.

While many standards have been written for films, “Laura” is one of the few to have been based on a theme from a previously written background score. *Laura*, a sophisticated film noir directed by Otto Preminger, features a monothematic score by the distinguished Hollywood composer David Raksin. The theme—never heard in its entirety during the movie—was subsequently fitted with a lyric by Johnny Mercer, and to the amazement of musicians who took it for granted that so complex a melody would never appeal to a mass audience, it quickly became one of the biggest hits of 1945.

Julie London, a sultry starlet married in turn to Jack Webb, the creator of *Dagnet*, and Bobby Troup, the composer of such novelty songs as “Route 66,” made her recorded debut as a singer in 1955 with an album of standards sparsely accompanied by the guitarist Barney Kessel and the bassist Ray Leatherwood and featuring a cheesecake photo of the singer on the album cover. *Julie Is Her Name* became a runaway hit, and made London one of the top nightclub draws of the 1950’s. Though her pinup-girl image contributed to her success, London’s uncomplicated, fresh-voiced style was appealing, too, as can be heard in the lovely performance of “Laura” (*Julie Is Her Name, Vols. 1 and 2*, EMI 7 99804 2).



33. **Dean Martin:** “Imagination.” Music by Jimmy Van Heusen, lyrics by Johnny Burke.

Jimmy Van Heusen, a consummately professional Hollywood composer with a penchant for jazzily chromatic bass lines, composed a large and impressive body of standards, working first with the lyricist Johnny Burke (with whom he wrote for Bing Crosby) and later with Sammy Cahn (with whom he wrote for his close friend Frank Sinatra). Many of his ballads lend themselves to gently swinging interpretations, none more so than “Imagination,” whose bridge is built around two cunningly juxtaposed upward-sweeping scales.

Dean Martin is now mainly remembered as a hard-drinking TV star and screen comedian who never took himself—or his work—seriously. From time to time, though, he recorded an album that was worthy of his considerable gifts, and the Italianate warmth of his Crosby-influenced baritone is showcased on *This Time I’m Swingin’!*, which includes a delightful version of “Imagination.” The orchestral accompaniment is by Nelson Riddle, the foremost vocal arranger of the 1950’s and early 1960’s, who is best known for his collaborations with Frank Sinatra. Riddle added strings and symphonic woodwinds to the standard big-band lineup of the Swing Era to create a distinctive sound that would become the universally recognized instrumental signature of classic 1950’s pop (*This Time I’m Swingin’!/Pretty Baby*, Capitol/EMI 8 54546 2).



34. **Carmen McRae:** “Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye.” Music and lyrics by Cole Porter.

Though Cole Porter is most vividly remembered for his hypersophisticated lyrics, his strongest songs were the passionate ballads in which he gave free rein to the romanticism that he normally kept under the tightest possible control. In “Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye,” Porter’s peerless technique as a lyricist is used not for its own sake but to express intense emotion with impressive economy. Note especially the repeated use of the dangerously wide-open long “i” in the opening couplet: “Ev’ry time we say goodbye I die a little/Ev’ry time we say goodbye I wonder why a little.”

Many jazz singers are so preoccupied with the challenge of improvisation that they neglect to make the most of the carefully crafted tunes—and lyrics—that they sing. Carmen McRae was an improviser par excellence, but

she also knew how to present a song instead of merely using it as a vehicle, and her sword-sharp voice and unsentimental, implicitly ironic interpretative approach add a new layer of implication to “Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye” (*Carmen McRae Sings Great American Songwriters*, Decca Jazz/GRP GRD-631).

35. **Mabel Mercer:** “Did You Ever Cross Over to Sneden’s?” Music and lyrics by Alec Wilder.

In addition to writing *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950*, Alec Wilder distinguished himself both as a popular songwriter and as one of the few classical composers to have made idiomatic use of the language of popular music. (He blended the two in the series of octets for woodwinds, harpsichord, and jazz rhythm section that he composed and recorded in the 1940’s.) While he had a few hits, most notably “I’ll Be Around,” Wilder was a “songwriter’s songwriter,” esteemed by colleagues and performers—including Frank Sinatra—but little known to the public at large. “Did You Ever Cross Over to Sneden’s?,” perhaps the most admired of his songs, is a wrenching meditation on love and loss whose rhythmically square-cut phrases have a distinctly hymn-like feel. Like many of Wilder’s so-called popular songs, it is surprisingly close in character—and quality—to classical art song.

Wilder liked to write for artists he knew, and “Did You Ever Cross Over to Sneden’s?” was composed for Mabel Mercer, a cabaret singer whose other fans included Sinatra and Billie Holiday. Mercer is an acquired taste: her voice was wobbly and unsensuous, and in her old age she was rarely capable of doing much more than lightly sketching the contours of the melodies she “sang.” But within the compass of her narrow vocal range and austere timbre, she was able to evoke a startlingly wide range of emotions, and no popular singer, not even Sinatra, was capable of finding more meaning in a lyric. In addition, Mercer sang with great musicality, loosening up the written rhythms of a melody so as to make them accord with the natural rhythms of speech. In her recording of “Did You Ever Cross Over to Sneden’s?” which became one of her signature pieces, her idiosyncratic style can be heard at its most immediately convincing (*The Art of Mabel Mercer*, Collectables Jazz Classics COL-CD-6838).

36. **Joe Mooney:** “But Beautiful.” Music by Jimmy Van Heusen, lyrics by Johnny Burke.

Bing Crosby’s relaxed, nonchalant style influenced not only singers but songwriters, who appreciated his unflinching lightness of touch. Diffident about the unmediated expression of emotion, he preferred not to sing lyrics that contained the phrase, “I love you.” Johnny Burke, who in the 1940’s wrote many songs for Crosby’s films, found countless ways to avoid the fatal words, none more ingenious than his wonderfully conversational lyric for “But Beautiful,” a song that also features one of Jimmy Van Heusen’s most apposite melodies.

Of all the many jazz instrumentalists who have doubled as singers, none was more musically creative than Joe Mooney. The quartet he led in the late 1940’s, which featured his intricate arrangements and bop-flavored accordion playing, can stand direct comparison with the far better-known King Cole Trio. Though Mooney’s small, short-breathed voice was less distinctive than Cole’s warm baritone, he used it with uncommon sensitivity, and his readings of standard ballads are every bit as effective as his droll versions of the novelty tunes both men liked to sing. “But Beautiful,” recorded with a small woodwind ensemble in 1964, also offers a brief glimpse of the surprising elegance with which Mooney played the plebeian accordion (*The Happiness of Joe Mooney/The Greatness of Joe Mooney*, Koch jazz KOC-CD-7886).

37. **Joan Morris:** “I’m Old Fashioned.” Music by Jerome Kern, lyrics by Johnny Mercer.

Jerome Kern worked with a variety of lyricists during his long and influential career, including a late but triumphant partnership with Johnny Mercer, with whom he wrote the score for the Fred Astaire-Rita Hayworth film *You Were Never Lovelier*. “I’m Old Fashioned,” the hit song from that movie, features a Kern melody of near-operatic amplitude, original in form (ABCA, with a slightly varied repetition of the first strain) and full of harmonic surprises. Mercer rarely wrote a bad lyric, but this one is superior even by his exalted standards.

Unlike the other singers in this series, Joan Morris performs exclusively in concert (rather than in clubs), accompanied by the composer-pianist William Bolcom, her husband and regular recital partner. Her huge repertoire encompasses everything from such turn-of-the-century ballads as “Love’s Old Sweet Song” to Bolcom’s not-quite-classical cabaret songs, all of which she sings “straight,” performing the melodies exactly as written. Though her classically trained mezzo-soprano voice is small and undistinguished in timbre, Morris uses it with a Mabel Mercer-like sensitivity to the rhythms of natural speech, and her ability to “read” a lyric is unrivaled by any singer of her generation (*Let’s Do It: Bolcom & Morris at Aspen*, Omega OCD 3004).

38. **John Pizzarelli:** “I’m Putting All My Eggs in One Basket.” Music and lyrics by Irving Berlin.

No one wrote more songs for Fred Astaire—or better ones—than Irving Berlin. The rhythmic lightness that Astaire carried over from his dancing, as well as the clarity and directness of his delivery, inspired Berlin to some of his finest work, especially in “rhythm songs” like “I’m Putting All My Eggs in One Basket” (from *Follow the Fleet*, in which Astaire was teamed with Ginger Rogers). As usual with Berlin, “I’m Putting All My Eggs in One Basket” seems perfectly simple at first glance, but the key changes heard in the bridge are no less typical of a songwriter whose work is full of what the jazz critic Whitney Balliett once called “the sound of surprise.”

John Pizzarelli, with Diana Krall the most deservedly popular of the contemporary singers whose styles are rooted in the music of the pre-rock era, is an accomplished jazz guitarist who sings standards in a sweet, light-footed tenor that at times suggests a cross between Astaire and Chet Baker. His working group, heard on this performance of “I’m Putting All My Eggs in One Basket,” plays with an infectious zest reminiscent of the King Cole Trio, the ensemble on which it is modeled (*Let There Be Love*, Telarc CD-83518).

39. **Polly Podewell:** “After You, Who?” Music and lyrics by Cole Porter.

Fred Astaire sang “After You, Who?” in the 1932 Broadway show *The Gay Divorcé*, but the song was dropped from the score when the show was renamed *The Gay Divorcée* and turned into the first of the Astaire-Rogers film musicals. In common with the other Porter ballads I have chosen for this series, it is both comparatively unfamiliar and different in tone from Porter’s better-known songs—“sadder and not so clever and sophisticated,” in the words of Polly Podewell, one of the few contemporary singers to have recorded “After You, Who?” Like “Ev’ry Time We Say Goodbye” and “Dream Dancing,” it is striking in the directness of its emotional appeal.

Long after the big bands of the 1930’s and 1940’s ceased to be a major force in American popular music, young singers continued to do impressive work with such groups. Polly Podewell, for example, appeared in the 1970’s and 1980’s with the bands of Benny Goodman, Woody Herman, and Buddy Rich; her low, slightly edgy voice is perfect for “After You, Who?,” which she sings in a smoothly gliding medium tempo, letting Porter’s lyric speak eloquently for itself. Her accompanists include Ross Tompkins, the long-time pianist of the *Tonight Show* band

under Doc Severinsen, and Jake Hanna, one of the greatest big-band drummers of the postwar era (*Don't You Know I Care?*, Audio-phile ACD-276).

40. **Annie Ross:** “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face.” Music by Frederick Loewe, lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner.

My Fair Lady, an adaptation of George Bernard Shaw’s *Pygmalion*, was one of the last indisputable triumphs of the Broadway musical. In tone more like an operetta than a conventional Broadway show, it was filled from start to finish with hit songs, the most lastingly popular of which has been “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face.” It is no insult to Frederick Loewe’s handsome melody to suggest that the ultimate source of the song’s appeal is the lyric by Alan Jay Lerner: a heartfelt “list song” in which a lover describes all the aspects of his beloved that, once taken for granted, have now become indispensable.

Annie Ross became famous as a member of Lambert, Hendricks, and Ross, the trio that popularized “vocalese,” a style in which complicated lyrics are written to pre-existing jazz solos. But while she was spectacularly adept at tossing off such tongue-twisting lyrics, her cool, subdued voice was equally well suited to standards like “I’ve Grown Accustomed to Her Face” (sung here with a change of pronouns). In this 1957 performance, Ross is gracefully accompanied by the Gerry Mulligan Quartet, the piano-less ensemble that was one of the most successful and admired jazz combos of the 1950’s (*Annie Ross Sings a Song with Mulligan*, Pacific Jazz 7 46852 2).

To be continued

Except as indicated, all of the CD’s mentioned above can be purchased online by viewing this article during the month of April at COMMENTARY’s website:
www.commentarymagazine.com

¹ One of the best of these efforts was *American Popular Song: Six Decades of Songwriters and Singers*, a fine boxed set published in 1984 by the Smithsonian Institution—now, alas, out of print.
