

THE SONG, THE STANDARD, AND THE ART OF JAZZ

by Ian Muldoon*

There is so much beautiful music! There are so many beautiful songs! And many of the songs have been transformed by jazz musicians into beautiful art.



Irving Berlin, pictured here as a young man: he composed over 800 songs and was considered by George Gershwin to be America's Schubert...

**Ian Muldoon has been a jazz enthusiast since, as a child, he heard his aunt play Fats Waller and Duke Ellington on the household piano. At around ten years of age he was given a windup record player and a modest supply of steel needles, on which he played his record collection, consisting of two 78s, one featuring Dizzy Gillespie and the other Fats Waller. He listened to Eric Child's ABC radio programs in the 1950s and has been a prolific jazz records collector wherever he lived in the world, including Sydney, Kowloon, Winnipeg, New York and Melbourne. He has been a jazz broadcaster on a number of community radio stations in various cities, and now lives in Coffs Harbour. In 2021 he published a book of essays entitled "My Jazz Odyssey: Confessions of a Lifetime Enthusiast".*

The Jewish diaspora of the early 20th Century produced so much popular and beautiful music it's still a wonder to reflect on. Israel Bellin (Irving Berlin) who lived for 101 years and composed over 800 songs was considered by George Gershwin to be America's Schubert. *Blue Skies* and *How Deep Is The Ocean* are two Berlin songs that are established as jazz standards, but relative to his output, Gershwin, Porter, Rodgers and Arlen outnumber him easily in regard to being taken up by jazz musicians most likely because these composers themselves came under the sway of jazz greats such as Louis Armstrong.

Many of the greatest songs of that period have been kept alive and vibrant because they have been used as the basis of interpretation and exploration by jazz musicians. *Always April* (Berlin), *Learn To Sing a Love Song* (Berlin), *Beautiful Gypsy* (Gershwin) and *Dawn of A New Day* (Gershwin) may deserve to be heard again being superior to many ditties by lesser composers, but may not be heard again as they have not been taken up by jazz musicians.

Jazz musicians might take up a popular song because of its structure and progression as *I Got Rhythm* (Gershwin/Gershwin) was by many including Louis Armstrong, Benny Goodman, and Eric Reed (1997). Some songs may have been made popular in jazz by one particular performance as Coleman Hawkins did with *Body and Soul* (Green/Heyman/Sour/Eyton).



Coleman Hawkins, pictured as he was at the time of his success with “Body and Soul”, an example of a song being made popular in jazz by one particular performance... PHOTO COURTESY DUNCAN SCHIEDT COLLECTION

Some popular songs have been performed by great classical singers as *Ol' Man River* (Kern/Hammerstein II) was by Paul Robeson. Another popular song was *Bluebird Of Happiness* (Hamarti/Heyman/Parr-Davies) which was originally written for a classical singer, tenor Jan Peerce, who made it a world-wide hit and into a popular song, but it was not taken up so much by jazz musicians or singers. Another favourite of classical singers was *Without A Song* (Youmans/Rose/Ilescu) which has been recorded by Lauritz Melchior, Jan Peerce, Mario Lanza, the Supremes, and Al Jolson. Bernie McGann recorded both these strong melodies in 1991 (*Ugly Beauty*, CD Rufus 1998).



“Bluebird of Happiness” and “Without a Song” were strong melodies, both recorded by Bernie McGann (left) on his album “Ugly Beauty”...

Bluebird of Happiness and *Without A Song* were big hits when Bernie McGann was at a very impressionable age and they may have stuck in his mind or have had for him a tinge of nostalgia. Though both have strong melodies the latter has a deeper resonance. Vincent Youmans wrote *Without A Song* in 1929. The influential jazz orchestra of Fletcher Henderson introduced the song in the musical *Great Day*. Another influential band led by Paul Whiteman recorded a version with vocalist Bing Crosby. Jazz versions include one by Billy Eckstine in 1946 followed by a live version in 1960 and one by Sonny Rollins in 1962. Noteworthy is the lyric "A darkie's born, but he's no good no how, without a song."

Bluebird of Happiness has the following refrain:

*Though you're deep in blue
You will see a ray of light creep through
And so remember this, life is no abyss
Somewhere there's a bluebird of happiness*

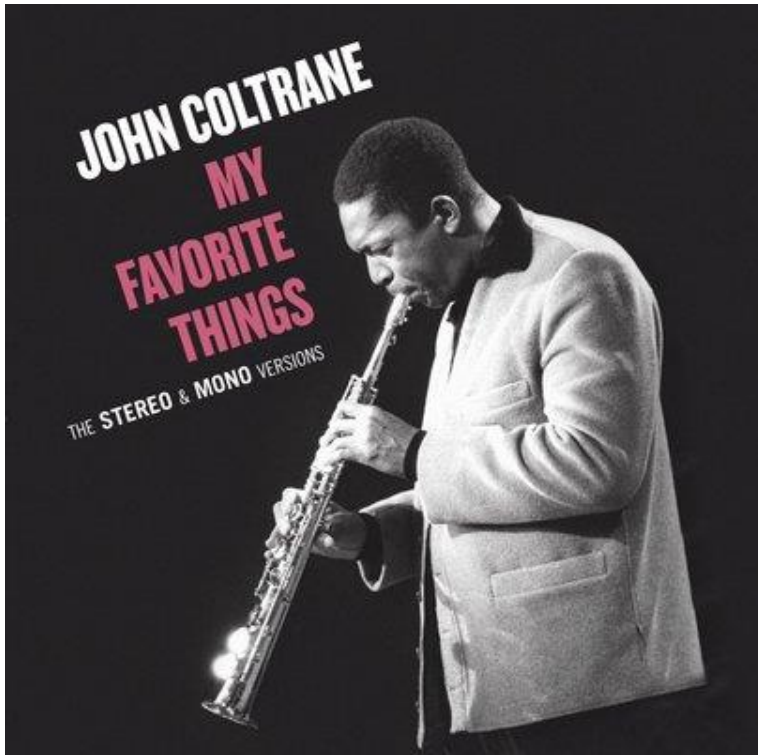
A 1948 version is by Jo Stafford and Gordon McRae is performed a *cappella*. This version in sentiment and nature would be familiar to Walt Disney fans especially in the films and use of choir. It is performed *adagio*, hymn-like in tone, supported by a “heavenly” choir. It is drenched in solemnity and seriousness at *larghetto* leavened perhaps by Jo Stafford’s lighter soprano which had been a founding voice of The Pied Pipers. Bernie McGann’s version is a radical reimagining of this song.



Jo Stafford and Gordon McRae: their 1948 version of “Bluebird of Happiness” is drenched in solemnity and seriousness... PHOTO COURTESY MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES

Recorded as part of the programme on his document *Ugly Beauty* (Spiral Scratch, 1991) with Lloyd Swanton on bass and John Pochée on drums, McGann provides a seven-minute romp through *Bluebird Of Happiness*. He begins with a repeated honking phrase before stating the melody and venturing into a rollicking *allegro moderato* improvisation. Using the high end of the alto, his tone is flippant, cheeky, and sprinkled with humour. But for evidence of his singular artistry and musical mastery witness his break between Pochée's second and third drum breaks at the close of proceedings. If there is an “Australian” sound to modern jazz, this is it, irreverent and rich in power and skill.

It may well have been John Coltrane who provided the template for McGann’s choice of *Bluebird of Happiness*. Neither it nor *My Favorite Things* (Rodgers/HammersteinII) were especially attractive vehicles for jazz musicians and this is evident with Coltrane’s interpretation. He quickly abandons the melody and its childlike sing song attributes for advanced modal improvisation. I have 11 versions by Coltrane of this song with one lasting 57’21”. It is a stunning artistic instance of turning a sow’s ear into a silk purse.

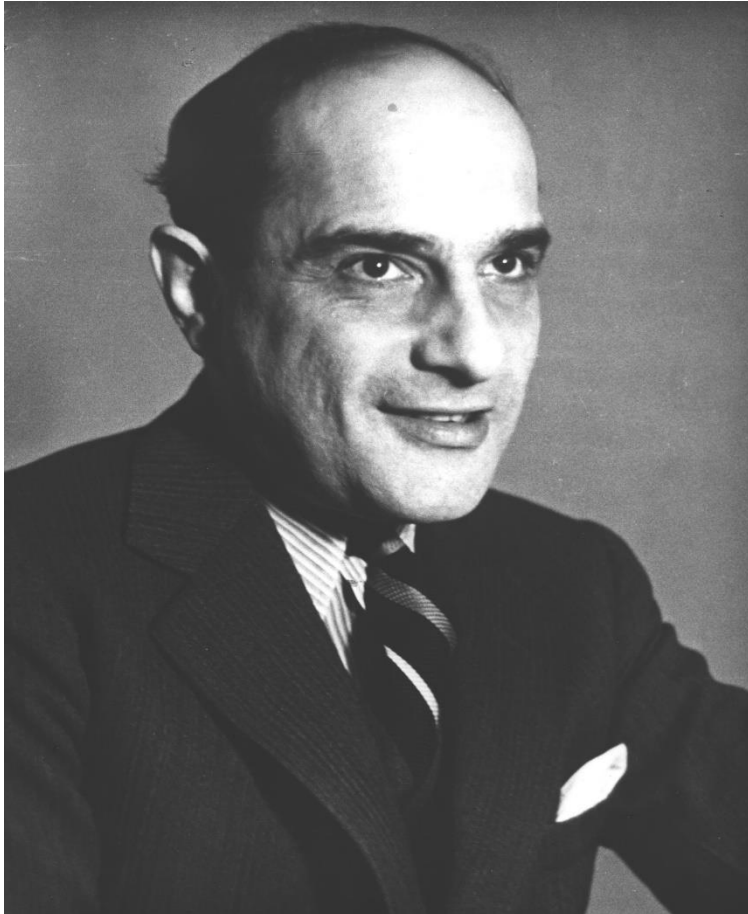


The original song appeared in the successful *The Sound Of Music* stage show in 1959 and subsequently in the 1965 Robert Wise film. This film may be one of the last gasps of the big budget musical fantasy world created by Hollywood. That icon of “girl next door goodness” Doris Day was considered for the role of Maria subsequently taken by the British version of goodness and one who was far better spoken in the “Queen’s English” Julie Andrews. After Coltrane, Sun Ra, Dave Brubeck, McCoy Tyner, and John McLaughlin *inter alia* did versions. *Blue Bird of Happiness* has had no such luck. Except for McGann’s version it remains a sow’s ear.



Julie Andrews: the British version of goodness...

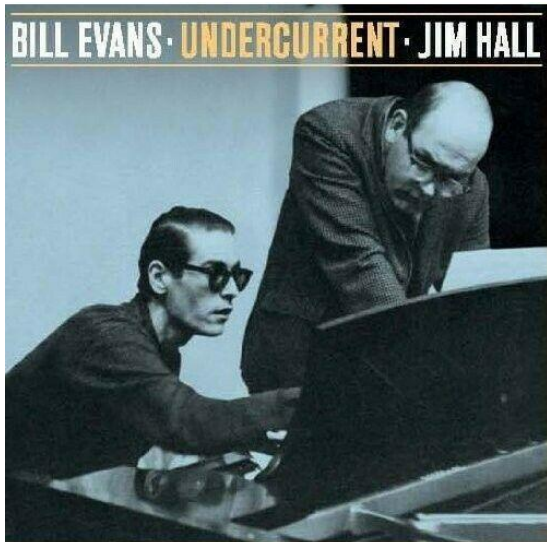
A somewhat different transformation occurred with *My Funny Valentine* (Rodgers/Hart) which is as unlike the sentimental slush of *Bluebird of Happiness* as it is possible to be. From the popular stage show *Babes In Arms* of 1937, the song was originally sung by a female about a male but is sufficiently ambiguous to be considered gender neutral. It is somewhat contradictory (*your looks are laughable, unphotographable - your mouth a little weak, when you open it to speak are you smart?*) but romantic in that despite unattractive physical attributes the object of desire is nonetheless loved. Lyrics by Hart hint at his attitude to his own looks.



Lorenz Hart (left), who wrote the lyrics to “My Funny Valentine”: they hint at his attitude to his own looks...

Chet Baker must get credit for the uptake of the song by jazz musicians whilst Sinatra’s version, which was the opening track on his very fine first album called *Songs For Young Lovers* (Capitol 1954), made it a popular hit. Baker recorded his first version in 1952 and subsequently recorded it over 40 times. Miles Davis recorded it at Philharmonic Hall in 1964 and titled the whole album *My Funny Valentine* (Columbia). This version was over 15 minutes performed at *lento* tempo. He performed a 16-minute version at The Plugged Nickel the next year in 1965. The original Baker version was a little over two minutes. Miles Davis made a very large meal out of it to brilliant effect. Even so he did nothing to alter its lyrical and romantic mood which made it so popular at a time when such romanticism was, if not dead, dying. Bill Evans did a number of versions too. Chet Baker made a living out of *My Funny Valentine* and good luck to him, but his versions remained very much Rodgers and especially Hart.

The document *Undercurrent* (United Artists) recorded 1962 with Bill Evans, piano and Jim Hall, guitar turns *My Funny Valentine* into an up-tempo, percussive and biting performance which seems to mirror the lyricist's view of the world as darker and decidedly not romantic and far from the "sweet little boy" rendition made famous by Chet Baker. The Evans/Hall performance which opens *Undercurrent* is perhaps the finest of all jazz versions notwithstanding Miles Davis or Ben Webster or Keith Jarrett. It is a perfectly structured take with each player backing the other sequentially with Hall's powerful intonation backed by Evans judicious notes, then Evans backed by the strident isolated chords of Hall, ending in an energetic surge to the end by both. A triumph of improvisatory and rhythmic brilliance.



Strike Up The Band (Gershwin/Gershwin) is the eponymous song from the 1927 musical subsequently made into a 1940 film starring the "All American" couple of Judy Garland and Mickey Rooney. It's a film drenched in white America's version of itself with the white jazz big band of Paul Whiteman giving a veneer of respectability to the black man's music. Arthur Blythe's version is my favourite.



Arthur Blythe: his version of "Strike Up The Band" is my favourite...PHOTO CREDIT FRANS SCHELLEKENS

Arthur Blythe (1940-2017) was a master musician who straddled the mainstream/avant-garde. He performed with a large number of established masters including Gil Evans, Woody Shaw, and Chico Hamilton but usually with musicians at the forefront of the music including Horace Tapscott and Lester Bowie. The use in his own aggregations of tuba instead of bass, and of cello was unusual for small group modern bands of the time. In terms of tone and style his grounding in R&B in his teens is evident in his stretching the upper end and his rhythmic power. His album *Blythe Spirit* was released in 1981 and was intended as a potted history of jazz: The Church, rhythm and blues, spirituals, a show tune; and his own works suggesting music of the future.

His take on *Strike Up The Band* is irreverent if not satirical, a witty, swaggeringly confident New Orleans polyphonic romp broken by a lone solo by drummer Bobby Battle. The band whips through it *vivace* in 2'46". The group is Arthur Blythe, alto sax; Abdul Wadud, cello; Kelvyn Bell, electric guitar; Bob Stewart, tuba; and Bobby Battle drums.

Keith Jarrett has had considerable success over many years through his interpretations of standards. He is a master musician whose original improvisations such as *The Koln Concert* (1975) or the *Sun Bear Concerts* (1976) bear witness to his pianism and originality. Even so it's his work in a piano trio that may be more interesting, satisfying and musically accomplished, especially in the way he has explored jazz standards with Jack De Johnette on drums and Gary Peacock on bass.

Just as Beethoven's magnificent sonatas provide a lifetime of enjoyment through their brilliant compositional qualities and structure with the innumerable opportunities for variations in emphasis and subtle tempo shifts they remain Beethoven. Each version of Jarrett's *Autumn Leaves* (Prévert, Mercer, Kosma) and I have 8, 11 and 27-minute versions, are substantially different and a far cry from the banal lyrics of *But I miss you most of all my darling, When autumn leaves start to fall*. Jarrett transforms the song into great jazz.



Keith Jarrett
(left)
transforms
"Autumn
Leaves" into
great jazz...
PHOTO
COURTESY JAZZ
REFLECTIONS

One justifiably memorable version was recorded by alto saxophonist Cannonball Adderley on his lone Blue Note album *Something' Else* (1958) with Miles Davis, trumpet; Hank Jones, piano; Sam Jones, bass; and Art Blakey, drums. Davis took it on board and recorded his own versions numbers of times. It was Adderley's version which launched the song into the standards repertoire.

But Jarrett has used standards perhaps more substantially in modern jazz than any other major artist. He has taken the very fine melodies of the minor art works of the American songbook and created major artistic statements. Using the song as a hook for the listener, he has each time taken us on journeys of exploration which have enlarged our musical world and enriched our pleasure often with special attention to rhythm engaging all three instruments in propulsive structural teasings of tension and release that are deeply satisfying added as they are to the melodic beauty and harmonic richness of performance. Consider if you will *You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To* (Porter).



Cole Porter: born rich, he lived lavishly all his life...
PHOTO COURTESY
PINTEREST

With its dangling preposition *You'd Be So Nice To Come Home To* was written for the flop 1943 film *Something To Shout About* and was nominated for an Academy Award. Porter's music is associated with urbane New York sophisticated wit in much the same way as British Noel Coward was associated with smart and elegant London society. Both Porter and Coward were gay but where the latter was born into modest circumstances and had to wend his way upwards in society, Porter was born rich and lived lavishly all his life with considerable income generated from his music. Whilst studying at Yale he wrote 300 songs. He once hired the entire *Ballets Russes* to entertain his guests at a party.



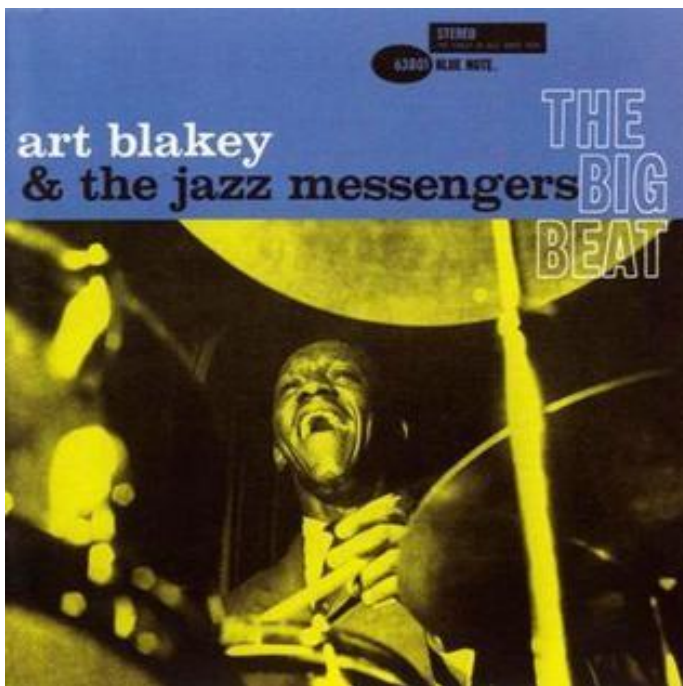
Helen Merrill, pictured in 1974: twenty years earlier she introduced the world of jazz to “You’d Be So Nice To Come Home To”... PHOTO COURTESY JAZZ TIMES

In 1954 vocalist Helen Merrill introduced the world of jazz to *You’d Be So Nice To Come Home To* on her eponymous album but it was Clifford Brown’s solo on the same album which established it as a standard. Cecil Taylor recorded it on *Jazz Advance* (Transition) in 1956 and lets go of the harmonic structures implied in the bass line and flies free in a solo that was quite adventurous for its time. Art Pepper, Lee Konitz (*Motion*), and David Murray, all recorded versions. But it's Keith Jarrett’s 5th June 1994 seven-minute version recorded live at the Blue Note, New York, where it is transformed into a masterpiece of piano trio jazz.

Taken at *allegro* tempo, Jarrett makes a melodic statement backed by Peacock’s acoustic bass and De Johnette’s drums. He then launches into a solo noteworthy for its structural brilliance, clarity of notes, space (where we relish the churning bass and drums as they propel us onward) and rhythmic power. We join him with delight as he cries out in ecstatic joy at one of the climaxes in the performance. The piece ends with a pianistic distillation of the melodic centre of Porter’s work. Oh to have been there that summer evening in New York. From minor to major art with the community of jazz lovers in a united culmination - is there a better experience with your pants still on?

If Porter's song was rescued by jazz, *It's Only A Paper Moon* (Arlen/Harburg/Rose) needed no rescuing as it was popular from its first appearance in the flop 1932 musical *The Great Magoo*. Major talents who have recorded it include Benny Goodman, Miles Davis, Perry Como, Bing Crosby, James Taylor, Paul Whiteman, Paul McCartney, Frank Sinatra and most notably Nat King Cole. His daughter's 1991 album *Unforgettable* featuring that song sold seven million units. Much as I like Nat King Cole's version(s) the most artistically satisfying one is by Art Blakey.

Art Blakey's first album for perhaps the most famous jazz label Blue Note was called *The Big Beat* (1960). Get a load of the band: Wayne Shorter, tenor sax; Lee Morgan, trumpet; Bobby Timmons, piano; Jymie Merritt, double bass; and Art Blakey, drums. Man! You dig? I've got no doubt Blakey thought a lot about the programme for this Blue Note date, especially the opening track. Why not choose one of the most popular songs ever by Nat King Cole, the world famous and much loved crooner, and show the world how it can be done and use that as the opener? The result of his stunning arrangement; gripping structured solos by two youngsters (Shorter 27, Morgan, 22) champing at their creative bit; the relentless powerful propulsive swing of the rhythm section; and catchy repetitive vamp; Blakey created a swinging hard bop masterpiece out of a popular ditty.



Blakey had played the song on the date with Miles Davis on that leader's 1951 *Dig* session. Morgan's solo is short on licks and strong on originality and fire. Shorter attacks the piece with surprising rhythmic displacements. Overall, the performance rocks like few others manage in the hard-bop repertoire. It's a pure delight one can return to time and again.

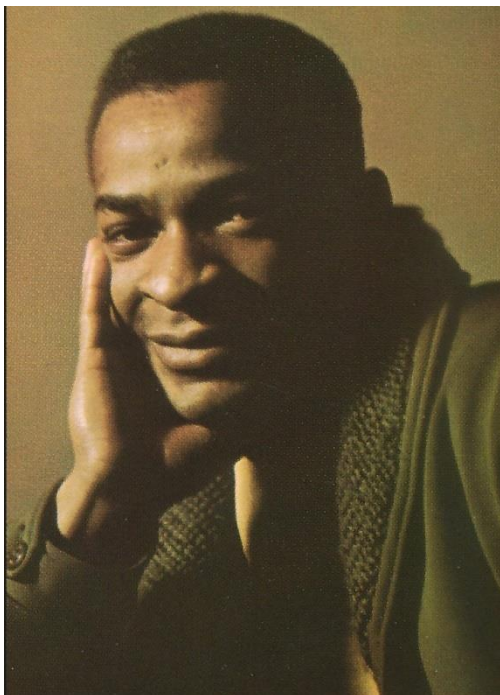
Another instance of a simple ditty transformed is *Music! Music! Music!* (*Put Another Nickel In*) (Weiss/Baum) which was a best-seller as well as most played on jukebox in 1950 and was sung by Teresa Brewer backed by (no less) a Dixieland jazz band. It was a rollicking good hit bouncing with enthusiasm and fun. Simple fun at that. Ahmad Jamal's version is almost exactly as long as the original but taken

at *vivace* tempo where the original was *moderato*. Although Jamal doesn't stray from the melody - if anything emphasising it - he transforms the song into a percussive, swinging number through repetition and touch with some bomb dropping from Vernell Fournier (punctuating the fourth beat with his bass drum). Jamal makes some astonishingly beautiful piano runs in the bridge which leap out in startling contrast to the preceding simplicity.



Ahmad Jamal: beautiful piano runs in the bridge which leap out in startling contrast to the preceding simplicity....

By contrast is a more complicated and more beautiful song, *If I Should Lose You* (Rainger/ Robin) from the 1936 film flop *Rose of the Rancho*, a remake of the 1914 film by Cecil B DeMille which was an adaptation of a play creaking with 19th Century hokum. The song has been recorded by Jane Ira Bloom, Booker Little, Peggy Lee, Frank Sinatra and McCoy Tyner amongst dozens of other major artists. This is an instance when the original song has merit and is best enhanced rather than used as a vehicle to be remade. An example of the former is Louis Armstrong making great art out of *Stardust* (Carmichael/Parrish) and an example of the latter is Ahmad Jamal making art out of *Music! Music! Music!*



Phineas Newborn: a phenomenal pianist with technique to burn, which became something of an albatross around his neck... PHOTO CREDIT WILLIAM CLAXTON

The versions I refer you to are by Phineas Newborn Jr from his album *While My Lady Sleeps* (RCA) 1957; Charlie Parker from *Charlie Parker With Strings* (Mercury) 1949; and Andrea Keller from *Travellers* (Jazzhead) 2015. Newborn was a phenomenal pianist with technique to burn which became something of an albatross around his neck. Ahmad Jamal noted how important discipline was in the musician's art - more is not always more, so to speak, and the temptations to show off to other musicians has to be resisted. In his version of *If I Should Lose You* Newborn takes the number at a steady tempo but indulges in double tempo runs at every opportunity, much in the way Tatum would. A string orchestra joins after his solo and its lush sound states the melody somewhat drowning it in overstatement.

The Parker version of *If I Should Leave You* is a beautiful instance of a master paying homage to a superior song and being at the service of the music not his own brilliance. He pretty much sticks to voicing the melody each time and is echoed by an instrument from the large string orchestra each time after each solo, once by Mitch Miller on oboe! It's a brief outing of 2'46".



Charlie Parker, recording with strings: his version of "If I Should Leave You" is a beautiful instance of a master paying homage to a superior song and being at the service of the music not his own brilliance... PHOTO COURTESY PINTEREST

The Andrea Keller version features composer and bassist Tamara Murphy and the late Allan Browne on drums. It opens the programme of nine pieces of mainly originals by the members of the trio and was recorded live at Bennetts Lane, Melbourne. The album is dedicated to Allan Browne. Keller takes it at *allegro* and doesn't stray far from the melody. It is an upbeat, infectious, happy take on the number with rhythm and a percussive piano touch driving the music forward. In terms of melodic beauty it is amongst the most satisfying recorded performances and has a swinging and rich musical appeal far greater than the Newborn one. It features a brief solo from Murphy. It's a rare instance of Keller tackling a standard but she treats this one with considerable felt intensity which is most admirable. I'm sure Allan Browne was most touched.



L-R, bassist Tamara Murphy, drummer Allan Browne & pianist Andrea Keller: their version of "If I Should Leave You" has a swinging and rich musical appeal far greater than the Newborn one...

My final instance of looking at standards made magic by jazz, is a jazz composition made so brilliant in its beginnings, further performances seem to pale in comparison. The tune is *Night In Tunisia* (Gillespie/Paparelli) though the latter's contribution was gifted by Gillespie for transcribing some of Gillespie's solos.

Charlie Parker's alto break of this composition is part of jazz lore, and Gillespie's arrangement and performance of it makes it a formidable one to tackle, so indelibly is it associated with the actual individual brilliance of Parker and Gillespie. When so-called rock musicians talk about "covering" a song they go so far as to learn notes and licks of the original in their playing of it. Jazz musicians eschew that and strive to make their individual interpretation memorable on that account. Tackling Ellington is especially hard as most of his music is connected to individual artists - *Concerto*

for *Cootie* (Ellington) for example is impossible to replicate because of Williams unique sonority.

Some versions of *Night In Tunisia* are legendary including Fats Navarro live at Birdland in 1950. Other versions include Bud Powell, Clifford Brown, Sonny Rollins, Dexter Gordon, Art Pepper, Charlie Mingus, Michel Legrand, Lambert Hendricks and Ross, and Donald Harrison in 2001. But my favourite reworking is that by the Gerry Hemingway Quintet on their document *Demon Chaser* (Hat Hut) 1993. The band is Michael Moore, alto saxophone, clarinet, and bass clarinet; Wolter Wierbos, trombone; Ernst Reijseger, cello; Mark Dresser, bass; and Gerry Hemingway, drums and steel drums. The music was dedicated to Huub van Riel who is long associated with the famous jazz venue Bimhuis, Amsterdam.



*Drummer
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Versions are typically up-tempo as is Art Pepper's. But the version by Hemingway's Quintet begins *larghetto* moving up to *andante* half way through. It's 12'34" with a long introduction by the cello and clarinet. The bass enters followed by the whole band when a rhythmic figure is created with the trombone soloing over it offering melodic echoes of the main theme. The trombone dominates solo space until the clarinet melds to state the theme jointly. An alto saxophone solo backed by bass and drums is a straight-ahead swinging turn followed by a reversion to the *larghetto* tempo, fade out, and end with a long bottom bass note. No licks. No cover. Just intriguing, inventive, rhythmic, and harmonic delights that keep one involved.

Standards will always be part of the artist's book as old ones fade away, and new ones are added, as *Footprints* (Shorter) has been, a composition wide open to a range of interpretations.