

Bopping Along With Johnny Mercer

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By

Dr. Frank A. Salamone

Iona College

New Rochelle, NY

John said of the song "Laura": "If a fellow plays me a melody that sounds like something, well, I try and fit the words to the sound of the melody. It has a mood, and if I can capture that mood, that's the way we go about it. *Laura* was that kind of picture. It was pre-designed, because Laura was a mystery. So I had to write 'Laura' with kind of a *mysterioso* theme (http://www.jerryjazzmusician.com/linernotes/johnny_mercer.html."

There aren't many jazz musicians who have not performed a Johnny Mercer song. Bop musicians were no exception. Oscar Peterson and Dizzy Gillespie were just two among the many who performed "Autumn Leaves", for example. Cannonball Adderley and Miles Davis also found much to explore in the song as well. Ella Fitzgerald did an entire songbook album of Mercer melodies. In a movie portrait of Gillespie, Mercer's "Midnight Sun" is featured. The question is why Boppers turned to Mercer's tunes so often? What was there in his lyrics and melodies, which attracted them? For young Turks who were supposedly rebelling against the restrictions of Swing it seems an odd choice of material. However, deeper examination shows the logic of their choice and reveals a good deal about Bop, which is often overlooked.

Why do some songs become jazz standards and others of seemingly equally interest do not? I suggest that part of the answer lies in the habit of many jazz musicians of memorizing the lyrics of a song. Lester Young, the Pres, was famous for knowing the words of hundreds of songs, and fellow musicians called him to check on the words of a song they wished to perform. Miles Davis, a master of the ballad form, would state that he wished to play the trumpet in the way Frank Sinatra sang. He was, needless to say, one of the musicians who called on Pres for help.

Certainly, Johnny Mercer's lyrics are among the best ever written. Mercer was not only steeped in the jazz tradition but generally wrote lyrics with composers who were also in the know regarding jazz, from Hogie Carmichael to Henry Mancini. Understandably, those times he wrote his own music showed a fine sense of jazz feeling. At parties, for example, people would ask Mercer to improvise some jazz blues. There are recorded examples of Mercer doing so, showing great understanding of the form and ease with appropriate language to fit the melody. It was also a feat he performed on his radio program, "The Chesterfield Hour," according to Gene Lees (http://www.jerryjazzmusician.com/linernotes/johnny_mercer.html). Mercer would read the headlines before his show and then have a segment of his show where he improvised words and music relating to the news of the day. The music and words always fit together. As Daryl Sherman, a jazz vocalist and pianist noted, you can hear Johnny's lyrics in the melody.

It is the perfect wedding of the lyric and melody, whether Johnny wrote the words and music as with "Dream" or "Something's Gotta Give" or wrote lyrics to someone's else's music as

in "I Thought about You", "Midnight Sun", or "Autumn Leaves". And the lyrics appealed to jazz musicians as diverse as Lester Young, Louis Armstrong, and Miles Davis among many others. Indeed, it is more difficult to find jazz musicians who have not played a Mercer tune than those who have.

Thus, when praising Wynton Marsalis Frank Tirro says,

But as a model of the neoclassic in jazz *Autumn Leaves* stands out. A popular standard by Johnny Mercer, it has been sung, played, and orchestrated ad infinitum, to the point, in fact, that all educated jazz listeners know the harmonic and melodic sequences. Thus, it is ripe for a post-modern change. Through the first statement of the theme, time—in the sense of steady beat and single meter—comes and goes. The players mix groups of twos and threes, and they speed up and slow down. During the second statement, time not only continues to fade and return as a cohesive factor, but it is stretched and squeezed further as the tune is distorted. During the first solo chorus, harmonic progression is still noticeable, but during the second chorus of the trumpet improvisation, chords become static and attention is focused on rhythm as rhythmic development replaces melodic improvisation. Just before he leaves the limelight, Marsalis muffs a couple of notes as he slowly sequences up and around, but that too is part of the aesthetic of live performance. Many outstanding musicians will not let a studio technician clean up errors; instead, they strive and polish in the hope of one day achieving the perfect performance in real time.

The pianist in *Autumn Leaves*, in his accompanying and his solo performance, thinks and reacts the way Marsalis does. At times the bass is a harmonic instrument while at other times it creates lines, sounds, and rhythms that drift freely but always match the work of the other players. The drummer in this session, no longer principally a timekeeper, is not free—his role is to react, put glue in the holes, lead tempo changes, and straighten the alignment. Were this a bebop performance, the soloist would invent to the changes, the bass would lay down those changes, the drummer would keep time and drop bombs, and the piano would comp, albeit with syncopation, in time. In a neoclassical interpretation, the norm of a bebop performance is present in the listener's ear to set a standard by which the inventiveness, precision, and beauty of the new performance might be judged. To signal a bass solo, the piano clears the air with the harmonic progression of the last eight measures of the model. The bass player, too, ranges over his instrument, choosing a double-plucking rhythm as a motive for invention; he leaves the harmony, but not the time. Then the trumpet returns for a combination solo/recapitulation of theme, and a standard, simple ("Sears Roebuck") ending draws the piece to a close (Tirro 1993: 450).

Many other examples could be given of how jazz musicians react to Mercer's lyrics while playing a tune from Miles Davis's almost straight rendition of "I Thought about You" to Sonny Rollins's magnificent "I'm Old-fashioned " in which the words jump out at you through Sonny's exuberant flourishes and runs. Sonny, as well as Miles, is noted for his mastery of a song's lyrics.

I believe that Johnnie Mercer has clearly stated the reason for this respect for his lyrics. In his "An Evening with Johnny Mercer" (ASIN: B000000PF0), he states that he wrote his lyrics to match the rhythmic contour of the melody. They had to be sung a particular way, the way in which a jazz musician phrases them. Thus, Mercer was fully aware of the melody, harmony, and rhythm inherent in his lyrics. Because of his awareness and his ability to fit the lyric to the melody, harmony, and rhythm as well as the intent of the musician in using these elements in a jazz solo, Mercer's lyrics sing through the improvisations of Gillespie as well as Armstrong, Rollins as well as Lester Young or Coleman Hawkins, and Charlie Parker as well as Johnny Hodges. They are not "jazzy" lyrics; they are lyrics that personify the elemental humor and sophistication of jazz itself.

Three examples of musicians who sing along with Mercer's lyrics on their instruments drive home the point. Each of the people whom I have chosen is a unique bop or post-bop stylist who, with roots firm in that tradition create counter-melodies in their solos, rather than simply running notes, and who respect the lyrics and the mood they enhance in their solos as well.

The Jazz Vocalists

But Young exerted an equally pervasive influence on several generations of jazz and popular singers, both directly and through such key acolytes as Holiday and Frank Sinatra, who told Arlene Francis in 1981: "I knew Lester well, we were close friends and we had a mutual admiration society. I took from what he did and he took from what I did." Sinatra also praised Young for "knowing the lyrics" to the songs that he played: "knowing what the song is about has to come from the lyric, not merely notes on a piece of paper." *Forever Young—A Centennial Tribute* By Will Friedwald Reprinted from *The Wall Street Journal* ©2009 Dow Jones & Company.

Although Lester Young is not strictly speaking a bop saxophonist, he influenced in some way or other almost every succeeding modern saxophonist. Mercer and Young were certainly aware of each other, and, personal feelings aside, Sinatra was definitely aware of Mercer's work. Comparing their versions reveals the similarities of their approaches and their respect for Mercer's lyrics. Both Mercer and Sinatra were drawn to great musicians and their vocals reveal that attraction quite clearly. Lester Young, in turn, was certainly a lyrical musician who, like Sinatra, could swing with ferocity while remaining light on his feet and not intrusive on the lyric or melody.

Or Lester was a bit like Ella Fitzgerald. Ella had come from the Swing Era and become proficient in bop. She could swing hard and sing sweetly. It was no accident that long before she recorded the Johnny Mercer Songbook she waxed "My Baby Likes To Be-Bop," perhaps Johnny's first attempt at the new idiom. It is a fine novelty tune but more than just a novelty tune. Johnny's lyrics catch the fun, swing, and sophistication of the new music. Walter Bishop is listed as its composer. Mercer himself recorded it with Nat Cole. The lyrics flow to the music and capture the fun of bop's message.

Dizzy Gillespie returned the favor shortly after with his version of "That Old Black Magic," played in waltz tempo. The booker complained that Dizzy's music was too fast and convoluted for normal people to follow. So his band played it relatively straight, corny and slow. He made up for it later, playing "Autumn Leaves," "Moonlight in Vermont," "Days of Wine and Roses," "Moon River," "Laura," and "Laura" in his own way, providing fresh looks at these gems. For me, the lyrics take on deeper meaning and become more nuanced.

There is no mystery to why Ella Fitzgerald, Lester Young, and Dizzy Gillespie respected Mercer's lyrics. Ella, for example, recorded *The Johnny Mercer Songbook*, the only one of her songbooks dedicated to the work of a lyricist. Mercer was a hip jazz-influenced vocalist. He not only spoke the language; he also sang and wrote it. His lyrics are hip. After all, as Edie Adams says that Mercer during the production of *Lil Abner* "hated being around the set. . . . You always saw him at a jazz club somewhere (Furia 2003: 198)." Like Sinatra, whom he was not fond of, he enjoyed being in the company of jazz musicians and loved their music.

And they loved his. Vocalists as different as Louis Armstrong, Joe Williams, Susanna McCorkle, Frank Sinatra, June Christie, Connie Boswell, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holliday, among many others recorded his songs and sang them well. Johnny himself would sing his own songs just about as well as anyone else, and often better, showing how he thought they should be interpreted. Bopper or Moldy Fig loved Mercer's lyrics. Even those who went beyond bop found treasure in Mercer's work. Sonny Rollin's, for example, has some classic renditions of Mercer's works.

Sonny Rollins

Over the many years Sonny Rollins has been an outstanding musician he has recorded numerous Mercer songs. These include "Skylark," "I Remember You," "I Thought about You," "I'm an Old Cowhand," "Trav'ling Light" and others. Sonny grew up loving the movies and the songs heard in those movies. As the tenor saxophonist Joe Lovano states that Sonny never plays a song he doesn't love (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=2iT0qPkDENs>). Thus, it is obvious that Sonny loves Mercer's music. Listening to his interpretation of any of his songs is an education in deconstruction and reconstruction. Hidden meaning emerge and Sonny presents us with hidden meanings congruent with Mercer's intentions.

For example, Rollins's version of "I'm Old Fashioned" begins on anything but an old fashioned note. However, the core of his solo is a return to the melody over and over again, and one can hear the lyrics coming through, enhancing their meaning. One could spin an entire narrative about what Sonny is conveying. It is the contrast beyond the hard-bop and post-bop accoutrements and the old fashioned core of his solo that, for me, brings out the strength of the lyrics. Sonny is as hip as can be but there is a core of honesty and love for enduring values expressed in his solo that draws one back again.

Sonny Rollins has wrongly accused of being too rational and unsentimental in his playing. However, just a bit of serious listening dispels that contention. Similarly, one of his models, Charlie Parker was also accused of being too hard-edged in his playing. A brief listen to his version of "Laura" with its close adherence to the melody and lovely string background gives

the lie to the charge. Parker all but speaks Mercer's lyrics through his alto sax. It is a deeply romantic presentation. One that is both thoughtful and emotional. In sum, much like Mercer himself.

McCoy Tyner and Post-Bop Mercer

A final example comes from the work of McCoy Tyner, best-known, perhaps, for his remarkable work with John Coltrane. Both perform "Out of This World" (Coltrane 1962). Trane begins his rendition in the upper registers but close to the melody, accentuating the title and presenting an ethereal feeling appropriate to being out of this world. McCoy Tyner adds to that feeling with his all-but patented fourths in his comping and solos. There is a modal, eerie feeling to the tune and both Julian Priester's version and Herbie Hancock's demonstrate.

Tyner was also one of many to record "Autumn Leaves". He does a textured version, fully swinging and surprisingly more traditional than many other post-bop musicians. It is clean, brilliant, and beautiful. He allows the chords to carry the message of the tune, playing the original only at the beginning and end. Yes, the listener is never in doubt that "Autumn Leaves" is being played. McCoy's brilliance carries the lyrics as well as the melody. It is the kind of performance that Mercer's songs bring out in musicians.

There are in fact, hundreds of versions of "Dream," for which Johnny Mercer wrote the words and music. These range from rock stars to pop singers to jazz stars. Each found something worthwhile in the song. I suspect the fact that it is one of the few in which Mercer wrote both words and music has much to do with its popularity. It is unfortunate that he did not do more songs in which he wrote the music. The few in which he did became quite popular and are very good.

Conclusion

Johnny Mercer's lyrics are wedded to the melody of the song. It is something that jazz musicians love. It provides them with a narrative frame on which to build their improvisations. It signals to them the feelings of the song. It is interesting that not only Lester Young and Miles Davis memorized lyrics to songs but, at least when it came to Johnny Mercer's songs, others did so as well. The range of jazz musicians who recorded Mercer's creations is a wide one and is still being added to. There is a great difference between versions of his songs by jazz or jazz influenced performers and those from other genres.

Obviously, Mercer himself had strong jazz roots, which revealed themselves time after time. From the folksiness of "Lazy Bones" to the sophistication of "The Days of Wine and Roses" Mercer's lyrics were pure jazz poetry. Their meaning goes deeper than their surface, like a satisfying jazz solo. Both Armstrong and Coltrane could find jazz meaning in Mercer's lyrics as could many in-between. Mercer wrote some songs with jazz musicians, from the humorous "My Baby Likes to Be-Bop" with Walter Bishop, Jr. and the haunting "Midnight Sun" with Lionel Hampton to his final great hits with Henry Mancini, "Charade," "Moon River," and "Days of Wine and Roses".

After all the analysis of Mercer's work,, the simplest and truest statement regarding why jazz musicians, including the boppers loved Johnny's work is that he was one of them, a jazz lyricist who loved their work. It was a match made in heaven as Daryl Sherman (2009} suggests. This fine jazz pianist and performer notes that Mercer's lyrics are so well-formed to the melody that one can hear them in an instrumental performance because they were unforgettable.

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