

CULMINATING EXPERIENCE

UNDERSTANDING *TIN PAN ALLEY*

A Glimpse Into the Golden Age of Songwriting with
the *Big Five* American Songwriters Composing
Hundreds of New Songs Every Year.

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PREFACE

This is my 'Culminating Experience' project for the Contemporary Performance Master's Program of Berklee College of Music- in paper form. It is a collection of compositions, observations and interpretations of the central topic that is *Tin Pan Alley*. It must be noted that this is a glimpse at the very early stages of a much bigger (artistic) research into Tin Pan Alley in all its facets. This should not be considered an academic paper, but rather a record of experiences I've had digging into the topic over the past year- one that has inspired me tremendously and made me consider doing a thorough academic research at a later time.



INTRODUCTION

My birth name is Jesse Pieter Boere and I was born in a little town way east in the Netherlands, close to the border with Germany. I grew up in a family of six with three older brothers and two loving parents. My brothers and I all ended up taking music lessons at some point. We were all fast learners and performed at talent nights regularly. However, everyone had a different focus. My oldest brother played the keys and sang away. My second brother played Spanish classical guitar and later picked up an electric one. My youngest brother studied piano and started playing more and more jazz, as he got older. I was the 'choir boy'. I already started singing in a choir when I was 8 years old. I was recruited by the local boys choir (nowadays a very rare breed in the Netherlands) and was hooked to singing very soon. It did not take long for me to become the soloist of choir and it was then when I started getting my first private instruction lessons in classical singing - I was only 10 years old.

I was 13 when I already secretly knew I wanted a 'career' in music. At that time I only had been singing classical music, so automatically that was what I thought I wanted to study. This soon changed, though. I was 14 years old when I started to discover jazz. A friend of mine introduced me to this music that sounded very interesting to me. I was already playing piano a bit and tried out some jazz chords. It didn't take long before I was hooked to jazz and began singing and playing tunes - it was Jamie Cullum, a pop/jazz singer and pianist that had me doing that and soon I discovered he sang quite some jazz standards - I discovered the tunes I played were 'jazz standards', an unfamiliar term to me at the time. Before that I was already amazed by Herbie Hancock; stuff I loved a lot but could never play. Understanding the concept of 'jazz standards' automatically let me to - of course - Frank Sinatra. I think the fact Sinatra sang a song just like I sang Schubert songs in the past, attracted me a lot. Was this something I could do too?

And so it went. Almost naturally I turned from a classical singer into a jazz singer. I realized soon, though, that the two weren't so different after all. The basic technique is the same - the melodic and rhythmical freedom is what makes them different. Exploring this was a treat.

Then I had an unfortunate setback. I had a serious back problem that kept me from paying attention to anything else. Extensive surgery eventually ended this chapter of my life's book and all of this made me more determined than ever. I was going to work very hard to get into the conservatory and pursue my dream: to make and create music for a living. I took jazz singing lessons just one year before I auditioned for the top conservatories in the country. I was accepted to all except one and decided to go to Codarts Rotterdam because of their openness to fusion.

At the conservatory of Rotterdam (Codarts Rotterdam) I threw myself at jazz. Besides sharpening my listening skills, harmony skills, rhythmical skills, notating skills, I studied vocalists like Frank Sinatra, Mel Tormé, Dean Martin, Ella Fitzgerald, Billie Holliday, Louis Armstrong, Bobby McFerrin, and Chet Baker, but also singers like James Brown, Michael Jackson, Ray Charles, Stevie Wonder, Marvin Gaye, Prince, Tom Waits, and Bob Dylan. I also took interest in listening to more recent artists (a lot of times both singers and songwriters), like D'Angelo, Jamie Cullum, Peter Cinocetti, Erykah Badu, Raul Midon, John Legend, Gregory Porter, José James, Amos Lee, Kurt Elling, and John Mayer. Somehow I was also very inspired Scandinavian jazz - I especially liked the piano trios from this area because of their very melodic approach - like Tord Gustavsen, Jan Lundgren, Esbjorn Svensson, and Bobo Stenson.

At Codarts Rotterdam I have always been searching for my own sound and identity. Because of the little amount of male singers in jazz programs, you are easily pushed into the 'crooner corner', and I felt pushed into that corner too. It was when I decided to take my own writing seriously, when I suddenly found things started falling into place. The response was generally good when I played my own work. The compositions were not bad, the intention was good, my diction improved, my sound more genuine and I had more fun doing it.

Since that moment I've been starting to call myself a singer-songwriter. At that point, I had a lot of unfinished material on the shelves (or, as most songwriters would say, 'the trunk') and I forced myself to finish a lot of songs. Within a year I produced dozens of songs - some better than others, but one thing I learned was to always finish a song, however bad you think it is. My graduation concert was not a typical jazz one: I only played my own material that was not really straight-up jazz of course. Nevertheless, it was very well received and I think people saw that what I was doing was what I should be doing as an artist - I had found my identity as an artist.

I somehow felt that it was good for me to study some more and do that in a very different environment. After some extensive research, looking at only American universities (I felt the roots of my music lay there), I found that Berklee's master's program in performance would be the best fit for me. It could give me the right environment in terms of openness to different artistic identities, the guidance of interesting professors and furthermore the amazing facilities. The fact that the campus is in Europe was an advantage for me too for reasons that are beyond the scope of explaining in this document.

I have always loved being a songwriter, and my love for song has grown tremendously during my time at Berklee. Students and faculty alike have

given me the feedback that my music has a distinct music theater flavor. In searching for why this is, I realized my songs are influenced by jazz standards - most of which were originally written for musicals, revues, and vaudeville shows. Almost all of these were written in the 20th century, beginning in Tin Pan Alley, the name of the district in New York City that housed most music publishers and songwriters that dominated American popular music until the 1950s.

When I discovered this, I decided to begin to study the Tin Pan Alley's 'Big Five' songwriters: Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Richard Rodgers and Jerome Kern. Altogether, they wrote thousands of songs- a goldmine of material to study.

I aim to improve and diversify myself as a songwriter by learning from these five greats in two steps. It embodies learning about their lives, motives and influences. Furthermore, it embodies the analysis of their songs, trying to understand their techniques and methods and attempting to write in *Tin Pan Alley* style.

This turned out to be a very ambitious plan and I soon realized it would take years to accomplish. My Culminating Experience (CE) at Berklee is one that describes the process of discovering a magical world of song that was so interesting and big that I was overwhelmed by it.

In this year I barely scratched the surface of a thorough research into Tin Pan Alley and its impact on Broadway and jazz, but have been able to understand the scope of it- I know now where to begin when (and if) I would embark on the journey all the way to the end, if there is any; probably something that would take four to five years.

Despite all of this, I was able to compose and write quite a few new pieces in the style and/or spirit of *Tin Pan Alley*, something I aimed when I planned this research- in fact, it is an inherit part of it. In the end, I want to improve myself as a songwriter by practicing composing a lot *and* studying the great songwriters I so admire.

I have decided to focus this reflection paper on a brief history of Tin Pan Alley and one example of lyric writing in the style I call "Tin Pan Alley Style". Quite some music has been composed in this year, using the lyrics that have been written, but this is not included in the paper. The focus is on writing lyrics using a very particular set form.

TIN PAN ALLEY

New York City became the epicenter of songwriting and music publishing in the late 19th century. Tin Pan Alley, located on 28th street between Broadway and 6th Avenue in Manhattan, was the *alley*, or street, that housed most of the influential American songwriters and music publishers of that time, until 1920s. Before this time, the important publishers were divided over the entire country. Besides New York, they were based in Boston, Philadelphia, Baltimore, Detroit, Chicago, amongst others. Tin Pan Alley was a phenomenon throughout the 1930s and 1940s, but it could not be called the epicenter of publishing anymore, since a lot of money had moved to Hollywood.

There were many music publishers around this time, publishing not only sheet music (their main income stream), but also instruction books and school materials. It was a tough business with a lot of competition; there was no monopoly on success whatsoever.

Pianos became very popular after the American Civil War and subsequently; the demand of sheet music for piano became higher and higher every year. In the late 19th century, more than half a million young people were studying piano and they craved for new music like never before. New music publishing companies popped up like mushrooms. Most of these emerged in New York City. The reason was because NYC already was becoming a very important center for the performing arts. Musical talent was migrating to the Big Apple because they knew it was where all the new popular music-publishing companies were establishing themselves. This attracted even more companies- New York City was the place where the newest trends in musical style could be observed the first. It was *the* place to be for the publishers. In this time, a remarkable amount of new music was written, following and

creating new trends every year. The music industry flourished like never before.

Very successful publishers of that time were *Harms, Inc.* (1881) and *Witmark & Sons*. There were many publishers coming to New York City and leaving again after having failed. However, some were there to stay: *Irving Berlin, Inc.*, *Remick Music Co.*, *Berstein & Co.*, and *E. B. Marks Music Company*, amongst others. The reason they were successful and the others not, was partly luck, but also because they concentrated almost exclusively on popular music and had a big budget for marketing and marketing research.

Music publishers in that time earned a lot of money off of the composers and lyricists. They were usually hired under contract, which meant that all rights were transferred to the publisher. Market research determined which songs were selling best and composers were instructed to write in that style. Songs were tested on an audience and on performers and were trashed as soon as it was deemed to fail.

Song pluggers marketed the published songs. These pluggers worked in music shops and played the new releases. Performers were also paid to sing and/or play the songs in their shows to expose the music to a wider audience.

By the end of the 19th century, the most important publishers had moved to offices on 28th street between 5th Avenue and Broadway. This street became known as "Tin Pan Alley." It is not entirely clear where exactly this name originates; several stories go around about it. The most plausible one tells of a reporter names Monroe Rosenfeld who worked for the New York Herald. He wrote about the sheet music publishing business and ones tried to explain what you heard walking down 28th street. Rosenfeld characterized the sounds of many pianos coming out of the open windows of publisher's offices as

a bunch of tin pans clanging. After having describing this way in several newspaper articles at the end of the 19th century, the street became widely known as Tin Pan Alley.

At the same time vaudeville became immensely popular and at the center these shows were based on music – new music. Publishing companies jumped on this opportunity because it was a perfect way to make songs popular and sell a lot of sheet music. It is remarkable how the industry flourished in these years. Enormous amounts of new songs were published and became very popular. Sales were, even for today's standards, very high, with some songs selling more than 4 million copies of sheet music. Some of these songs are still sung today.

Although we consider many of the songs composed from the time of Tin Pan Alley works of art in the present day, in the time it was made it was for purely commercial purposes. It was all about creating and selling music that people wanted to buy. What sold in that time was music happy music; music that allowed people to escape from their life's troubles, even if just for a couple of hours.

The impact of the Tin Pan Alley publishers has been immense. Music today would have been very different without Bernstein & Co., Irving Berlin Inc. and the likes. Despite their purely commercial motives, they have been key contributors to some of the most beautiful music we still enjoy today.

THE BIG FIVE

Although the term 'The Big Five' is not very commonly used, it seems to be a term familiar to jazz vocalists and musical theater vocalists alike. It refers to the big five of modern American music, all connected to Tin Pan Alley: Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, and Richard Rodgers. Altogether, they wrote more than 4500 songs (published ones, that is). These were the *composers* of these tunes; they wrote the melodies and sometimes also the harmonies. Except for Irving Berlin and Cole Porter, they didn't write lyrics to the songs themselves, but collaborated with lyricists. A brief biography of the Big Five in order of birth year:

Jerome Kern (1885-1945)

Born on January 27th, 1885 in New York City, Jerome Kern was the first born of the Big Five. His father was a Jewish German immigrant, his mother an American Jew with parents from Bohemia. Jerome Kern grew up in New York City and as a child was taught to play the piano by his mother. When only 16, he already wrote songs for the musical of his high school. He attended the New York College of Music and studied piano and harmony before going to Heidelberg (Germany) to receive private tutoring in composition. After a couple of years, he returned to New York City and began to contribute songs to Broadway shows, usually imported from London. He also worked as a song-plugger for Tin Pan Alley music publishers.

His first complete score was for the musical *The Red Petticoat* (1912). After 1915 he composed many complete Broadway scores and was very productive. In 1925 he met Oscar Hammerstein II; they remained close friends for the rest of their lives. Together they wrote the first truly modern American musical with an integrated story, produced by Florenz Ziegfeld: *Show Boat* (1927). This musical is still being produced up to this day.

Jerome Kern went on composing for both theater and screen, dividing his time between Broadway and Hollywood. His movie hits included the film hit *Swing Time*. His death in 1945 was sudden. He suffered a cerebral hemorrhage in New York City. Six days after, with Oscar Hammerstein II and his wife at his bedside, he passed. Kern was one of the founding members of American Society of Composers (ASCAP).

Irving Berlin (1888-1989)

Having lived over a 100 years, Isreal Ballin (his birth name) has had a long life that started out in the poorest neighborhoods in NYC and ended in the richest ones. He was an immigrant of Belarusian-Jewish origin and moved to the United States with his whole family in 1893. His father died only a few years later, and Berlin dropped out of school to help his family that was barely scraping by. When he was 14, he realized he couldn't contribute enough to the family and decided to not burden them anymore and moved out. In the following years he discovered that singing was his best option to earn enough money to get by. He went to saloons and sang the few songs he had heard on the street. He began plugging songs and later worked as a singing waiter at the Pelham Café. It was that place where he composed his first piece "Marie From Sunny Italy" together with resident pianist Mike Nicholson. That was also the moment that Israel Ballin started referring himself as Irving Berlin (a very conscience choice).

Berlin's first hit song (and it was enormous) was "Alexander's Ragtime Band" in 1911. It sparked an international dance craze and made Irving Berlin famous to the wide public very quickly.

During his life (of which he composed 'only' 60 years), he wrote an estimated 1,500 songs. He was known to write songs that reached the heart of the average American, songs that were simple and uncomplicated. Jerome Kern: "Irving Berlin has no place in American music—he is American music."

He played a major role in both World War I and World War II by producing shows performed by the army – most notable songs from those times are “Oh, How I Hate To Get Up In the Morning”, and, of course, “God Bless America”

So great many great songs have been written by Irving Berlin that picking out a few wouldn't give it enough justice. However, notable because it's one of the most recorded songs in history, is “White Christmas”, for which Berlin received an Academy Award (Best music in an Original Song).

In the last 25 years of his life he didn't write a song anymore. He died on September 22, 1989 of natural causes.

Cole Porter (1891-1964)

Of the five, Cole Porter is one of the two songwriters (the other is Irving Berlin) that both wrote the tune and the lyrics for a song, whereas the others collaborated with lyricists.

How similar Berlin and Porter are in this way, how different are they in their background. Cole Porter was born to a wealthy family in 1891. His grandfather was the successful Indiana entrepreneur J.O. Cole. Despite the plans his family had for him (to become a lawyer), Porter went a different way. From an early age he showed great musical talent. He did enter Yale (as he was *supposed* to), but mostly composed songs for its Glee Club (he composed 300 songs while at Yale). He even went on to Harvard Law School but switched to Harvard's music department very soon because his heart lay in song writing. There he studied harmony and counterpoint.

His first Broadway show, *See America First (1916)*, only ran for two weeks and subsequent shows were also failures. Porter then moved to Paris and lived there for an extended period of time. Although bi-sexual (and some argue homosexual), he married in 1919.

It was when Cole Porter met Irving Berlin's brother-in-law E. Ray Goetz, when Cole Porter began to have success. The first show they wrote together,

Paris (1928), became a hit when it opened on Broadway and it was his first. It also marked the first hit song entitled *(Let's Do It) Let's Fall in Love*. At the same time a show called *La Revue* opened in Paris and this was also a hit, elevating Cole Porter to 'the big leagues'. In the decade that followed Cole Porter's shows were often big hits: *The Gay Divorce (1932)*, *Anything Goes (1934)*, *Jubilee (1935)*, *Red, Hot and Blue (1936)*, and *Born to Dance (1936, film)*.

In 1937, Cole Porter had a devastating riding accident that crushed his legs, something that followed him for the rest of his life. Despite many operations, he was in constant pain for the rest of his life. However, as soon as he could, he resumed working because it kept his mind off the pain. His greatest successes on Broadway came after the accident, including *Du Barry Was a Lady (1939)*, *Panama Hattie (1940)*, *Something To Shout About (1942)*, *Kiss Me, Kate (1948)*, and *Can-Can (1953)*. By then he divided his time between Broadway and Hollywood, since he wrote for both.

Porter's wife died in 1954 and he wrote less after that. In 1958 his right leg had to be amputated. After this Porter never wrote another song. He lived a secluded life and died from kidney failure in 1964.

George Gershwin (1898-1937)

George Gershwin was a composer of both popular and classical music. Born in 1898, he was the son of Jewish immigrants from Russia. He didn't care for music much until he was 10 years old and started taking piano lessons.

Gershwin dropped out of school when he was 15 and found his first job in Tin Pan Alley. As a song plugger he worked for the music publisher Remick & Co. His very first own song that got published, was "*When You Want 'Em, You Can't Get 'Em, When You've Got 'Em, You Don't Want 'Em*" in 1916. His first national hit followed in 1919: famous Broadway star Al Johnson sang "*Swanee*" in one of his shows. At the same time Gershwin also arranged and

recorded numerous piano rolls for several companies, and accompanied vocalists on the piano in vaudeville shows.

Gershwin collaborated with different lyricists, but was most successful with his brother Ira Gershwin. Their first hit show was *Lady, Be Good* (1924), most known for the songs “*Fascinating Rhythm*” and “*Oh, Lady Be Good!*”. The shows *Oh, Kay!* (1926), *Funny Face* (1927), *Strike Up the Band* (1927), *Show Girl* (1929), *Girl Crazy* (1930), and *Of Thee I Sing* (1931) followed, the latter winning a Pulitzer Prize for Drama- the first time a musical comedy won that prize.

In these years Gershwin gained notable recognition for works composed for the concert hall. Most notable are *Rhapsody in Blue* (1924), for piano and orchestra, the *Piano Concerto in F* (1925), and *An American in Paris* (1928). One famous work could never really be categorized: *Porgy and Bess* (1935). It hovers somewhere in between an opera and a musical. Gershwin himself called it a “folk opera”. Probably the most known song from this *folk opera* is the song “*Summertime*”, still sung today by both classical singers and singers in the popular genre. Although now considered a masterpiece and groundbreaking for the time, *Porgy and Bess* was a commercial failure.

In 1937 Gershwin began to have headaches. His doctors dismissed these ongoing headaches as symptoms of stress and even diagnosed him with *hysteria* later on. George Gershwin in fact had a brain tumor and as soon as that became evident, it was already too late. Shocking the country, he died on July 11, 1937 at the age of 38.

Richard Rodgers (1902-1979)

Like Cole Porter, Richard Rodgers was born to a wealthy family. He was mesmerized by musical theater at a very young age already and wrote his first songs in his early teens at summer camps. He met Lorenz Hart when he was

only 16. They both went to Columbia University and they began a collaboration that lasted for almost 25 years.

Although most of the productions Rodgers & Hart premiered failed, there were several songs that became popular on their own. It was in 1925 when they broke through with *The Garrick Gaieties* (1925), a benefit show meant to only run for one night. "Manhattan" was the hit song in this show and because of its success the show was re-opened later. In the following years the duo produced an impressive amount of shows (ten from 1925-1929) both on Broadway and in London, including hits like *Peggy-Ann* (1926) and *Present Arms* (1928).

For most of the 1930s, Rodgers & Hart composed for Hollywood, but in the late 30s and early 40s, they made their comeback to Broadway and produced hit after hit, most notable being *Babes in Arms* (1937), *The Boys From Syracuse* (1938), *Pal Joey* (1940-41), and their last complete show *By Jupiter* (1942). It had become harder and harder to work with Hart due to his alcoholism and subsequent unreliability. This is when Rodgers started to collaborate with Oscar Hammerstein II, who he studied with at Columbia University with whom he had actually friends with since he him when he was 13 years old- even prior to working with Hart, he already had written songs with Hammerstein II.

If the duo Rodgers & Hart didn't seem like a golden one yet - unfortunately Hart's health condition declined very fast and he died in 1943 - the partnership of Rodgers with Hammerstein II has turned out to be the most successful in in musical theater. Their first show, *Oklahoma* (1943), revolutionized the art form. All but one of the projects that followed were big successes too: *State Fair* (1945, film), *Carousel* (1945), *South Pacific* (1949), and *The King and I* (1951).

The duo spent most of the 50s in Hollywood working on adaptations of their shows for the silver screen. At the end of the decade they came back to Broadway and produced a few more shows. The last show they worked on

together was as revolutionary as their first. *The Sound Of Music* (1959) is perhaps the most well known musical that has been produced and was massively successful- it still is. Unfortunately, Oscar Hammerstein II didn't get to enjoy much of its success, dying in 1960.

After Hammerstein's death, Rodgers worked alone for a while. He wrote both music and lyrics for the musical *No Strings* (1962) and some additional songs for a re-make of *State Fair* and the film adaption of *The Sound of Music*. Later he collaborated with a few others: Stephen Sondheim on *Do I Hear A Waltz?* (1965), Martin Charnin on *Two by Two* (1970) and *I Remember Mama* (1979)- both failures, and Sheldon Harnick on *Rex* (1976). During the 1970s Rodgers struggled with his health but he always kept working. He died in 1979 at the age of 77.

SONGWRITING IN 'TIN PAN ALLEY STYLE'

I have spent most of my time reading about the Big Five American composers and by learning about their lives, learned a lot about their music too. All of them have their own ways of writing songs but surely there are similarities. Irving Berlin had ones penned down "The Nine Rules of Songwriting" which to me is both a funny and interesting list.

Nine rules of songwriting:

1. The melody should be within the range of most singers
2. The title should be attention-getting and, in addition, repeated within the body of the song
3. The song should be "sexless": able to be sung by men and women
4. The song requires "heart interest"
5. It should be original in idea, words, and music

6. Stick to nature. Not nature in a visionary abstract way, but nature as demonstrated in homely, concrete, everyday manifestations.
7. Sprinkle the lyrics with “open vowels” so that it will be euphonious.
8. Make the song as simple as possible
9. “The song writer must look upon his work as a business, that is, to make a success of it, he must work and *work*, and then WORK

In addition to these rules, there were some common rules that every songwriter used; something Irving Berlin didn't even have to mention. These are the rules of form.

The thirty-two-bar form

The commonly used and accepted form in Tin Pan Alley was the thirty-two-bar form, often referred to as the AABA form. Until the verse-chorus form started dominating the music scene, this was the most used form. In the thirty-two-bar form, each chorus is made up of four 8-bar sections. Usually, the first 8 bars (A) introduce a principle melody in the home key of the tune. These 8 bars are repeated, often entirely similar, but if lyrics are present, they are different. Then comes the middle 8, the B-part, which from the beginning can be in a different key (having modulated in the preceding bar) or modulated within the section. The melody in this section is usually significantly different. At the end it remains harmonically open and doesn't resolve to a new tonic but rather sets itself up to modulate back to the original key of the tune, often arriving at the dominant of the home key at the very end. The last section (referred to as the 'last 8) repeats the beginning 8 bars and ends on the tonic of the home key. Sometimes this section is extended with a coda.

With this in mind and the nine rules of songwriting in mind, I tried composing one of my first “Tin Pan Alley” tunes; it is also one of my best attempts:

A MELODY IS A BEAUTIFUL THING

J.P. BELL

MEDIUM SWING

A' C C^mA⁷ C⁶ C F[#]7 F^mA⁷ D^m7 G⁷

SHE MOVES A-ROUND WITH GRACE AND FLAIR— WITH GOL-DEN HEAD-BAND IN HER HAIR— AND

5 G⁷ E⁷/G[#] A^m7 D⁷ D^m7 G⁷

FLIES SO SWIFT-LY THROUGH THE AIR— OH HOW I WANT TO SING!

A'' 9 C C^mA⁷ C⁶ C F[#]7 F^mA⁷ D^m7 G⁷

I WILL NOT FOR-GET IT ONCE— IN MY MIND IT WILL STICK FOR MONTHS.

13 G⁷ E⁷/G[#] A^m7 D⁷ D^m7 G⁷ C⁶ B^bm⁷ E^b7

THROUGH MY LUNGS AND THROAT IT RUNS— A MEL-O DY IS A BEAU-TI-FUL THING. SHE

B 17 A^b B^bm⁷ A^b/C D^bm⁷A⁷ A^b B^bm⁷ A^b/C D^bm⁷A⁷

KIS-SES ME MOST PAS-SINATE-LY— WE LIVE OUR LIVES IN HAR-MO-NY— STILL

21 C[#]m⁹ F[#]7 B^mA⁷ D⁷ D^m7 G⁷

SOME-TIMES WE GET LOST BUT THEN— WE FIND OUR WAY BACK HOME. NO,

A''' 25 C C^mA⁷ C⁶ C F[#]7 F^mA⁷ D^m7 G⁷

NOTH-ING CAN COM-PARE TO HER— SHE IS THE QUEEN OF SONG FOR SURE— OH

29 G⁷ E⁷/G[#] A^m7 D⁷ D^m7 G⁷ C⁶ (D^m7 G⁷)

HOW I WANT TO SING! A MEL-O DY IS A BEAU-TI-FUL THING!

The experience of writing this tune was immediately very different than the ones I had before whilst writing songs. I almost always wrote music first and then lyrics. With this song I did it the other way around - Irving Berlin actually came up with a melody first most of the time - and this gave me a different perspective. Now I had to find the mood of the music that fit with the lyrics instead of the other way around. In the end this means you have more freedom. Usually when you write music first, you do not have a story in mind. Once you finish the music, you are stuck with a mood in which a story should fit. Now, some argue that writing songs is like telling stories. In that respect, if you have to fit a story to something else that already exists, you limit yourself in telling that story. However, if you know what the story is from the beginning by writing the lyrics first, you will write more creatively because the story and music are better connected. In the end it is not that black-and-white, I think. The music you write can inspire you to write stories/lyrics that you would never write if beginning with them from scratch and vice-versa. This could and probably is one of the reasons why songs are often written by a songwriter/lyricist duo: They can *inspire* each other and write things they would have never written if not for the work of their counterpart.

I cannot exactly remember where I got the idea from for this tune. I do remember someone saying the words "a melody is a beautiful thing" somewhere and it was something I wrote down immediately and knew I was going to use for a song. I also knew right away that would be the title. From what I've gathered, for Big Five songwriters this was usually how they got an idea for a song too. They heard someone say something that somehow sounded good to their ears and then used it in a song. Usually, this would be the title of the song too. It is interesting how the songs of that era have titles that are very memorable and capture the essence of the song, much more than song titles do today.

Rule 2 of Irving Berlin's 9 rules says that the title of a song should be "attention-getting and, in addition, repeated within the body of the song", something that has become characteristic for these type of songs. A lot of the songs actually begin with the title of the song ("Love for Sale", "In A Sentimental Mood", "Lullaby of Birdland") and audiences nowadays even confuse the first words of a song with the actual title, because they are *not* the same ("My One and Only Love", "The Christmas Song"). Titles are important, and I guess Irving Berlin thought so too, and wanted to make sure people knew the title of the song after having heard it. That's why he thought it should be repeated within the body of the song. Of course, it is also a way for people to know which song to ask for if they wanted to buy the sheet music...

When writing "*A Melody Is A Beautiful Thing*" I knew I wanted to end the song with the title, because it sounded to me like a shout-out. In the end I repeated it another time in the second A section just before the middle 8.

Now that I had a title and knew where I wanted to place it in the body of the song, I could start constructing the lyrics¹. It was obvious that I had to write about the fact that a melody is a beautiful thing. I quickly came up with the idea of using *a melody* as a metaphor for a woman, or rather a woman as a metaphor for a melody. However, I didn't want to give this away at the beginning of the song. All of this gave me enough ammunition to come up with words - I had to try and find words that could describe both a melody and a woman.

I had already scribbled down 'oh, how I want to sing!' pretty soon after having come up with the title and thought it was a good idea to use it in the 4th line of the first A section. I would then rhyme that with the 4th line of the second A section repeating the title before going to the middle 8. This left me

¹ While reading on, review the attached Keynote presentation that visualizes the process of writing the lyrics for the song "*A Melody Is A Beautiful Thing*".

with the first three lines for both the first and second A section.

It became apparent to me that the best rhyming scheme for both sections would be AAAC / BBBC, providing balance (that is what the lyrics needed to convey), but not feeling repetitious. I decided to use the first A section for descriptive purposes, to give the listener imagery right from the start. The second section would then slowly reveal that the song is not the typical love song about a woman.

I don't shy away from using a thesaurus and a rhyming dictionary; something the big five songwriters and their collaborations didn't either, I learned. Ones I have a line with a word at the end that needs to rhyme with one or even several words later, I look at my options and think if they can connect to the theme. A rhyming dictionary is a tool that speeds up that process. A thesaurus comes in handy when you'd like to use a certain word that doesn't fit the prosody of a line. A synonym with fewer or more syllables might be an outcome in that case.

After having constructed the first two A sections, I moved on to the B section, the middle 8. This section doesn't only contrast melodically, but also in terms of lyrics. It should, if only for a brief moment, question what has been said in the first half of the song – it might even confuse the listener for a brief moment.

Here is when I started thinking about the music too, and had the idea to use it to my advantage. I planned on writing a melody and harmony in this section that would go seriously somewhere else before snapping back to the home key, as if it got “lost” along the way. The 1st line became a kind of modulated version of the first line of the A sections. Then the 2nd line would

actually be a repetition harmonically, but not melodically, ending on a major 7th, not particularly stable and announcing a detour. From there on it briefly modulates again to the key of B major, a half step down from the original key, but abruptly finds its way back to the home key. This is a part where I almost literally translated the metaphor of the text into music.

This left the last A section. I knew the last line, the 4th, was going to be the title. I soon realized I also had to repeat the kind of 'tag' "oh, how I want to sing!" just before the last line. This left me with the 1st and 2nd line. What was left to say? A conclusion, and it had to top everything that came before. I knew it was turning out to be homage to 'the melody' and decided to go all the way and call it "the queen of song" to which "nothing can compare".

Writing the melody and harmony

Although I won't go deep into how I approached writing the melody and harmony for these lyrics and others, which was not the focus of my studies this year, I can give some general comments.

Apart from the lyrics, the musical style of *Tin Pan Alley* is also pretty particular. Harmony always seems to serve the melody and the melody always serves the lyrics. That's why the best order to do these things seems to be writing the lyrics first, then writing the melody, and then the harmony. This is also what I have attempted this year.

Actually, lyrics have kind of melody in them naturally already. You just have to speak them out loud and you start noticing where the tone ascends and descends. If you speak them out loud enough times, a melody will start shaping itself piece by piece.

This works the same for rhythm in some ways, although there is a little more freedom whereas you can emphasize words by giving them ‘time’ to be sung. But then again, this is also what we do in speech if we want to emphasize something. A high note does not emphasize, rhythm does.

More attempts

Over the course of my year at Berklee, I have written numerous lyrics attempting to somehow recreate the style of *Tin Pan Alley* but not copy it. On the next few pages you will find some of those attempts and their brief lyrical analysis. Some are in the thirty-two-bar form, others are in forms that were less commonly used, but nonetheless used – some becoming very successful. The author of these is J.P. Bell, pseudonym for Jesse Boere.

BLAME IT ON MY CURIOSITY

By J.P. Bell

A	Tell me, how do green beans grow	A
	I just really want to know	A
	I'll read about it endlessly	B
	Blame it on my curiosity	B
--		
A	Where do you live, what kind of flowers you like?	A
	Do you drive or do you ride your bike?	A
	What's the kinda thing in life you're looking for?	B
	Your glass of red is empty, would you fancy some more?	B
--		
B	I'll remember everything	A
	Our nine-week anniversary, that kinda thing	A
	Your mother's maiden name, she'll ask me how I knew	B
	I'll say I'm mighty curious, I just asked you	B
--		
A	Tell me baby, what's your favorite food	A
	Not for nothing, what gets you in the mood?	A
	Now if you think that I am being too rude, pardon me	B
	Blame it on my curiosity	B

I CAN LOOK YOU IN THE EYES

By J.P. Bell

A	I can look you in the eyes	A
	When I listen to you speak	B
	I can look you in the eyes	A
	When I feel mighty weak	B
	I can look you in the eyes	A
	In moment, of silence	C
	I can look you in the eyes	A
Like tigers, like lions	C	
	--	
B	Oh, how I'm lost in space, slow-motion	B
	In the blue-green skies a rising sun I see	C
	I can look you in the eyes	A
	Why can I look you in the eyes?	A
	Because you are the one for me	C

SPRING AIN'T WHAT IT USED TO BE

By J.P. Bell

A	Spring ain't what it used to be	A
	Birds haven't been themselves	B
A	Snow keeps falling down on my face	↓
	The April days want something else	C
		B
		--
B	I can't wait for the sun to appear in my eyes	B
	No one but me can see that you are spring in disguise	B
		↓
A	You are not who you used to be	A
	Spring, won't you try	B

20-bar form

MY GIRLFRIEND DOESN'T DRINK BEER

By J.P. Bell

A	She is perfect in every way	A
	That's what I thought three hours ago	B
	That's when I sighed and suddenly knew	C
	It is not just a particular brew	C
	--	
A	Should I be happy or should I be sad	A
	Some might think that I am being a little mad	A
	Still it's true, the fact's really clear	B
	My girlfriend doesn't drink beer	B
	--	
B	I know it's not rare to be	A
	Appreciative of other spirits you see	A
	But I will never split or share with you	B
	That liquid gold that breathes comradery	A
	--	
A	I just had thirteen in a row	A
	It's not the end of the world, I know	A
	Still I shed a little tear, when I found out right here	B
	My girlfriend doesn't drink beer	B

I HAVE TO LIVE LIFE ON MY OWN

By J.P. Bell

A
I've been alone
I feel it now

I'm at this place where the doors are locked somehow

A
You were the key
You'd save the day
You could unlock the very doors that paved the way

B
For a world with just a hint of make-believe
Just enough to feel alive and without grief

A

A
It's time to go
It's time to leave
Time to move on and stop being so naive

A
We had our days
We spend it well

Though, now that it's gone it feels like someone cast a spell

B
Over me and over everything I see
It's like love itself is madly judging me

A

C
I thought that I was doing quite alright
Now I know I have never had to fight
I knew you would always be
My protection for eternity

B

A
But we had our time
I have to go
I have to live life on my own

A

36 bars (extended thirty-two-bar form)

TAKE IT (OR LEAVE IT)

By J.P. Bell

A

Take it or leave it
What are you waiting for
Take it or leave it
I won't be waiting anymore

A
B
A
B

--

B

When the heat slips away
Reality will be here to stay
And darling, that will be the day
You lost your chance with me

A
A
A
B

--

A

Take it or leave it
Stop dodging arrows if you care
Take it or leave it
Don't regret it, don't you dare

A
B
A
B

--

B

I don't dream about you
Cause I don't sleep, no, not without you
Take it or leave it, you better believe it
I'll make sure that all your dreams come true

A
A
B
A

YOU'RE NOT A MILLIONAIRE?!

By J.P. Bell

A	No, you didn't win the lottery! It's just a scam, it's trickery There is no prize, no golden tree You're not a millionaire!	A A A D
A	If you'll insist you'll soon find out Who are your friends and who to doubt As long as you won't say out loud You're not as rich as Fred Astaire	B B B D
B	How are you doing, how have you been? Remember when we were nineteen It's not much; at least for you, I mean You're loaded now, it's only fair	C C C D
A	No, I didn't win the lottery! It's just a scam, it's trickery There is no prize, no golden tree I'm not a millionaire!	A A A D

DISCUSSION

This has been a year of a lot of composing and writing for me, despite all the coursework I had to do in a lot of other areas at Berklee. In my proposal for my Culminating Experience I explained I wanted to do just that. I also explained I wanted to learn about the history of Tin Pan Alley, about the lives of the Big Five American songwriters and analyze the tunes they have written. The latter proved to be something I was not able to dig into, due to the time restraint. However, because of my history in jazz singing and my familiarity with American Songbook repertoire, I could still build on some solid knowledge.

I would recommend any jazz musician to at least read about some of the most famous American songwriters. This is what I spend the most time on, and just by knowing about their lives, their motives, their work methods, and their beliefs, I feel I am a better performer and composer already.

I will most certainly carry on researching this era and will start using a more systematic approach, probably chronologically. Beginning at the beginning, I plan on making a time line from around 1885 outlining the news and successful shows and/or songs one by one and analyzing the songs. When finishing that timeline, I hope to have discovered some connections, some clear evolution and maybe even traits that every successful song has.

The following is a list of songs that should certainly be on that timeline. I made this to illustrate what I think are very important songs in the American songwriting history. Noted must be that this is a shortened list. A proper list for the purposes of the timeline mentioned before would be much longer.

Irving Berlin

Alexander's Ragtime Band (1911), I Love A Piano (1915), Oh! How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning (1918), A Pretty Girl Is Like A Melody (1919), What'll I Do (1924), Blue Skies (1926), The Song is Ended (but the Melody Lingers On) (1927), Russian Lullabye (1927), Puttin' on the Ritz (1930), Soft Lights and Sweet Music (1932), How Deep Is the Ocean? (1932), Supper Time (1933), Cheek to Cheek (1935), God Bless America (1938), Change Partners (1938), White Christmas (1942), There's No Business Like Show Business (1946), You Can't Get a Man with a Gun (1946).

Cole Porter

Let's Do It (Let's Fall in Love) (1928), What Is This Thing Called Love? (1929), Love For Sale (1930), Night and Day (1932), You're The Top (1934), I Get a Kick out of You (1934), Just One of Those Things (1935), I've Got You Under My Skin (1936), (You'd Be) So Easy to Love (1936), In the Still of the Night (1937), My Heart Belongs to Daddy (1938), Well, Did You Evah! (1939), I Hate You, Darling (1941), You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To (1942), Look What I Found (1946), From This Moment On (1950), I Love Paris (1953), True Love (1956).

More on next page

Richard Rodgers (with Lorenz Hart)

Manhattan (1925), Here in My Arms (1925), Blue Room (1926), My Heart Stood Still (1927), You Took Advantage of Me (1928), Isn't It Romantic? (1932), The Most Beautiful Girl in the World (1935), My Romance (1935), Little Girl Blue (1935), There's a Small Hotel (1936), Where or When (1937), My Funny Valentine (1937), The Lady Is a Tramp (1937), Falling in Love with Love (1937), I'll Tell the Man in the Street (1938), Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered (1940), Wait till You See Her (1942).

Richard Rodgers (with Oscar Hammerstein II)

Oh, What a Beautiful Mornin' (1943), People Will Say We're in Love (1943), If I Loved You (1945), You'll Never Walk Alone (1945), It Might as Well Be Spring (1945), Some Enchanted Evening (1949), Getting to Know You (1951), My Favorite Things (1959), The Sound of Music (1959), Sixteen Going on Seventeen (1959), Climb Ev'ry Mountain (1959), Do-Re-Mi (1959), Edelweiss (1959)

George Gershwin (with Ira Gershwin)

Fascinating Rhythm (1924), Oh, Lady Be Good! (1924), Someone to Watch Over Me (1926), My One and Only (1927), How Long Has This Been Going On? (1928), I've Got a Crush on You (1928), Embraceable You (1928), But Not for Me (1930), I Got Rhythm (1930), I Loves You, Porgy (1935), Summertime (1935), It Ain't Necessarily So (1935), Let's Call the Whole Thing Off (1937), Nice Work If You Can Get It (1937), They Can't Take That Away from Me (1937), A Foggy Day (1937), Love Is Here to Stay (1938).

More on next page

Jerome Kern

They Didn't Believe Me (1914)
Look for the Silver Lining (1919)
Who? (1925)
Ol' Man River (1927)
Can't Help Lovin' Dat Man (1927)
The Song is You (1932)
I've Told Ev'ry Little Star (1932)
Smoke Gets in Your Eyes (1933)
Yesterdays (1933)
Let's Begin (1933)
A Fine Romance (1936)
Pick Yourself Up (1936)
All the Things You Are (1939)
The Way You Look Tonight (1936)
I'm Old Fashioned (1942)
Long Ago (and Far Away) (1944)

Various collaborators

Herbert Reynolds
B.G. DeSylva
Otto Harbach & Hammerstein II
Oscar Hammerstein II
Oscar Hammerstein II
Oscar Hammerstein II
Oscar Hammerstein II
Otto Harbach
Otto Harbach
Otto Harbach
Dorothy Fields
Dorothy Fields
Oscar Hammerstein II
Dorothy Fields
Johnny Mercer
Ira Gershwin

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