

February 17, 2002

How Singers Fall in Love With Songs

By BARRY SINGER

WHEN Patti LuPone appears at Carnegie Hall on Feb. 28, she won't be singing only her greatest hits. Mostly she'll be singing her greatest regrets. For the concert, Ms. LuPone has put together a one-woman revue that she calls "Coulda, Woulda, Shoulda," songs she never sang on Broadway -- but wishes she had.

This conceit raises a fundamental, if rarely asked, question: How do singers choose their songs?

For Ms. LuPone the answer is sharply contrarian. "I was always drawn to songs written for the second-banana female character or even the male lead; not Maria's songs in 'West Side Story,' but Anita's; not Marion the Librarian's songs from 'Music Man,' but Harold Hill's 'Trouble.' Why? Because those are the songs with guts. The female leads always get the romantic melodies. But their songs are just too passive for me."

Ms. LuPone's unexpected take on song selection is only one answer among many. Ask other good singers to think aloud about this issue and many surprises emerge.

"To choose a song, I always start with the lyrics," Ray Charles said in a recent interview. "The lyrics must capture my attention. The music complementing the lyrics is what makes the song work for me."

His simple observation has profound implications. It helps to explain the constancy of Mr. Charles's soulful expressiveness as a singer. One doesn't think of Ray Charles as a lyric interpreter in the narrowest sense. Instead, he is seen as making songs his own by internalizing them so intensely, both as a pianist and as a singer, that they become universal statements that actually transcend the lyrics. What we now learn is that he, in fact, views the music as largely an extension of the words.

Diana Krall acknowledges that she, too, listens to lyrics first, judging new songs from a theatrical, narrative perspective. "I want to sit across the table from you and just tell you the story," Ms. Krall said not long ago. "I get into a character as I sing a song -- it's a story in my head. Though I want the audience to find their story in it, too. So I don't tell them everything."

For other singers, the attraction begins with the melody. "Because I'm a musician primarily, I listen to the music first," said the cabaret legend Blossom Dearie. "If I don't like the music, then I don't do the song. Lyrics are the icing on the cake for me."

Her view is shared by Harry Connick Jr., the young singer and pianist who recently composed his first Broadway score. "Melodies stick in my head quicker than unfamiliar lyrics do," he said. "Though, if a song's got a great melody and corny lyrics I probably won't do it. I also check out the chord changes; most of the songs I pick have to have real solid harmonic bases."

The focus on either lyrics or melody is not necessarily exclusive. As the jazz singer Cleo Laine observed: "The best lyricists are musicians, too. And any good composer is just painting words with music."

Tony Bennet, when asked about his own guidelines for choosing a song, replied with a favorite quotation: "Yip Harburg, one of America's greatest lyricists of popular music, used to say: 'When the melody touches your heart emotionally and the words hit your brain intellectually, more than likely you'll find you have an excellent song to sing.'"

But can this be accomplished systematically? Or is the whole business ultimately about intuition?

The answer to both questions is yes. Technicians that they often are, jazz singers may approach their material more rigorously than, say, pop singers. Still, as Billie Holiday wrote in her memoir, "Lady Sings the Blues," "With me, it's got nothing to do with working or arranging or rehearsing. Give me a song I can feel."

And then there is a pop singer like Cher who, in a recent interview, said, "I probably listen to at least 10 songs for every one that I ultimately choose." She quickly added: "I know if I'm going to like a song in the first 10 to 15 seconds because it just 'does something' to me. The strange thing is, I don't really think I'm going through any mental process at all; I'm hearing, but I don't think I'm listening, especially to the words. Later, I find out that I must have been listening, because a theme becomes apparent. After I recorded the songs for my upcoming record, someone said: 'Did you know how many times the words "strong," "lonely" and "love" appear in these songs?' Somehow I must be hearing more than I think."

Beyond a singer's initial subjective attraction to a song, there is the matter of audience taste. For a cabaret performer like Bobby Short, the nightly grind of live performance dictates a particular pragmatism.

"I go back to what I heard Marian Anderson say once: 'First a song has to be beautiful,' Mr. Short said. "However, 'beautiful' covers a wide range of things. I have to admire a song's structure and what it's about. But I also have to determine how I can transfer my affection for a song to an audience; I have to decide whether I can put it across. Nothing is more heartbreaking than to break your back learning a song that is difficult and then find that it doesn't fly with an audience."

So, how do singers find new songs to sing?

"I may just hear something on the radio," said Mr. Connick. "That's how I recorded 'Tie a Yellow Ribbon Around the Old Oak Tree' -- I first heard it on the radio and found myself humming it and I thought, 'Well, that's pretty cool.' And the lyrics didn't bug me too much. The melody was just so easy

to sing and it's real fun to play piano on."

New material often comes via musical directors and other professional conduits. Until the rise of the singer-songwriter in the 1960's, record company A & R (Artists & Repertory) people did most of this work directly with music publishers, matching singers to songs. "There was always an element of corruption in it," said George Avakian, the director of the Popular Album Department at Columbia Records throughout the 1950's and 60's. "Usually, in exchange for the latest hit -- what they called their 'push song' -- A & R guys had to take on a publisher's lesser-known stuff. These were the songs many black artists like Billie Holiday early on, or Fats Waller, were offered; literally given stacks to choose from. Some of these songs were actually pretty good. Though Fats was a master at making good records out of bad songs."

As Ms. Dearie pointed out, composers remain a singer's best source. "People come to me with songs all the time and I also have friends, like Dave Frishberg, who brought me 'Peel Me a Grape' and, with Bob Dorough, 'I'm Hip.'"

Sometimes one singer finds a song because another singer sings it. "I recorded 'Peel Me a Grape' in the 1960's," said Ms. Laine, "because Blossom Dearie was working in London and she thought it would be ideal for me."

This interaction has its limits, though. Almost every singer interviewed for this article maintained he or she would never touch songs associated with greats of the past.

"I would never sing a Billie Holiday song like 'God Bless the Child,'" insisted Ms. Krall.

For Ms. Laine, Peggy Lee's "Love Me" is strictly off limits.

Ms. Dearie has a short list of standards: ' "Stardust,' 'My Funny Valentine' and 'The Man I Love.' I leave them alone," she said.

As for Mr. Connick, there is only one Frank Sinatra: "A lot of those Frank tunes I wouldn't do, especially those that were written for him, like 'Come Fly With Me.' That's just his stuff. 'One for My Baby.' I mean what are you going to do with that? It's Frank's."

As for Sinatra, what drew him to a song was apparently elemental. "Sinatra once sat through a demonstration of perfectly decent new songs by some songwriter," said Jonathan Schwartz, the radio personality and Sinatra expert. "Sinatra, though, remained unimpressed. And all he said to the songwriter was: 'But where's the chick?'"

"Of course, later in life, Sinatra sang on other themes," Mr. Schwartz added. "But at his peak, it was always about one thing, really: where's the chick?"

In the end, the relationship between singers and songs is not just romantic but erotic. And as in any affair of the heart, it isn't the head or even just the heart that rules.

"Yep," Ms. LuPone concluded, pointing to her own head. "I do like to feel a song up here. But," she went on, gesturing well below her belt, "I really have to feel it here. That's where all good songs have to go."

Old Favorites

Singers have their favorite songs, and there's a story behind each. Here are a few.

CHER

Hey, Good Lookin'

"My mom sang it. It's the first song I ever heard. She was in a country western band when she was 10, singing in honky tonks in Oklahoma City."

HARRY CONNICK Jr.

If I Only Had a Brain

"I was plunking real slow through the Harold Arlen songbook and I thought, 'Man this is a beautiful tune.' Playing it slow, just to learn it, revealed it to me."

BLOSSOM DEARIE

The Surrey With a Fringe on Top

"I heard the original cast from 'Oklahoma!' sing it in a corny way and I thought, great melody, but I can improve on that."

RAY CHARLES

America the Beautiful

"I did an album, 'Message From the People,' encompassing several songs about some of the wrongs of our country. But I also wanted to show what was beautiful and great as well."

BARRY SINGER

Photos: Patti LuPone, performing in "Matters of the Heart," prefers the gutsier songs of the secondary roles. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times); Harry Connick Jr. (Rahav Segev); Bobby Short (Richard Termine); Diana Krall (Associated Press)