

The New York Times

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February 20, 2000

MUSIC

MUSIC; Where Have All the Lyric Writers Gone?

By BARRY SINGER

Correction Appended

NAME the most important lyric writers of the past half-century. Stephen Sondheim, without question; the lyricist who single-handedly deepened the American song tradition with penetrating verbal invention and an enlivening dose of psychological complexity. But also Bob Dylan, Paul Simon and Joni Mitchell, folk balladeers who infused lyric writing with the imagery and confessional aspect of modernist poetry. Their innovations created an entirely new tradition, or perhaps antitradition -- that of the self-absorbed singer-songwriter for whom, in the name of personal expression, all lyric-writing rules could be broken.

It's a tradition that still dominates, having produced hordes of disciples, including many truly gifted lyricists, ranging from Bruce Springsteen and Lou Reed to Smokey Robinson, Stevie Wonder and Billy Joel, from Elvis Costello and Tom Waits to Beck, Rufus Wainwright and Fiona Apple.

Increasingly, though, to write in the classic, urbane style of Hart, Gershwin, Berlin, Porter and Sondheim is to discourse in a dead language. Their notion of lyric writing as a craft, a verbal equivalent of melodic composition, grounded in wit and elegant wordplay, is today so thoroughly antiquated that one can barely find a context for it. It has no place, either stylistically or thematically, in the aesthetic of anomie and instant gratification that informs most contemporary music. Nor has it much to do with the slipshod language of hip-hop, where rapped lyrics are mis-stressed and mis-rhymed in simplistic service to rhythm.

Composing lyrics in the classic tradition of American song has always demanded a respect for, if not slavish adherence to, laws: of form, function, poesy. That's the fun of it. The challenge. The ideal. We live, however, in the grip of a music culture that venerates rebelliousness. The intricacies of lyric writing have thus been reduced to brute effusion. Worse than a chore, adherence to craft is actually seen as a sellout.

Yet craftsmen still persist. Not in the pop realm, but, unsurprisingly, in the world of musical theater, where a handful perpetuate the painstaking art of matching words to music. None are revolutionary thinkers like Mr. Sondheim. Few seek to expand the form beyond its

long-preserved limits. Collectively, however, they ensure that an endangered vernacular treasure endures.

Working with the composer Stephen Flaherty, Lynn Ahrens has risen through the ranks, moving from Off Broadway to Broadway in the 1980's with the Tony nominated "Once on This Island," and more recently winning her first Tony Award for "Ragtime." Her signature remains a colloquial eloquence, as in the mordant, jingoistic empathy of "Journey On" from "Ragtime." Here, Ms. Ahrens uses a pair of well-placed rhymes -- "ship" and "trip," "danger" and "stranger" -- to reveal whole vistas of subtext and characterization:

A salute to the man

On the deck of that ship!

A salute to the immigrant stranger.

Heaven knows why you'd make

Such a terrible trip.

May your own god protect you from danger . . .

A salute to a fellow

Who hasn't a chance.

Journey on.

Susan Birkenhead is a multidimensional lyricist for hire. Though the lack of a constant composing companion may blur her identity a bit, Ms. Birkenhead's work has been extraordinarily consistent regardless of context. She has helped toe dancers sing (in "The Red Shoes," written with the composer Jule Styne) and a jazz legend dance (Jelly Roll Morton, her posthumous collaborator on "Jelly's Last Jam"). Her most widely applauded creation appeared halfway through the first act of "Triumph of Love," a musical adaptation of the French play by Marivaux. Here in the sensuously conflicted "Serenity" (music by Jeffrey Stock), the insistent stresses of Ms. Birkenhead's lines communicate the sad resignation and the exhilarating expectation of giving oneself up to forbidden love:

And now without warning you appear

So passionate, young and fair,

Assaulting the thing I hold most dear

With a toss of your sunlit hair . . .

Serenity.

Since his inaugural collaboration with the legendary composer Cy Coleman on "City of Angels" brought him a Tony Award, David Zippel has gone on to success in Hollywood, contributing lyrics for animated Disney features, anthems for the teenage singer Christina Aguilera and the theme for the Pokemon movie (a lesson in how a talented lyricist is forced -- or may choose -- to survive in today's music business). Mr. Zippel's most indelible work remains the double-edged drollery he framed for "City of Angels," an insouciant complement to Mr. Coleman's jazz-inflected score. An exchange between the show's detective-writer protagonist and his fictional creation in "You're Nothing Without Me" is indicative of Mr. Zippel's style. His brazen interior rhymes capture two glories of lyric writing at its best -- terseness and wit:

You gloating ignoramus.

You haven't any shame.

Hey, I'm a famous shamus

And most people don't know your name.

Best known for their work in cabaret, Craig Carnelia and Mark Waldrop have also known theatrical success Off Broadway. Mr. Carnelia, who is also a distinctive composer, provided the music and words for Craig Lucas's widely admired musical play "Three Postcards." Mr. Waldrop created the often hilarious lyrics for Howard Crabtree's two epic costume revues, "Whoop-De-Doo" and "When Pigs Fly" (music by Dick Gallagher).

It could be said that the often introspective Mr. Carnelia is much the miniaturist and the often extroverted Mr. Waldrop is not. But that would be too simple. There is also the pensive Mr. Waldrop of "Laughing Matters," deploying a profusion of rhymes to express the gentlest of messages:

What to do?

How to take a brighter view

When your noodle's totally fried,

Human spirits need to be

Leavened by a little levity . . .

Keep your humor, please,

Because don't you know it's time like these that laughing matters

Most of all.

And the almost rhapsodic Mr. Carnelia of "What You'd Call a Dream," using minimal rhyme to express maximum emotion:

There are two men out

And it's in the ninth

And the score is 4-3,

There's a man on first

And a man at bat

And the man at bat is me.

And I'm sort of scared

And I'm sort of proud

And I'm stronger than I seem,

And I take a swing

And my dad is there

And it's what you call a dream.

There are others, of course, a community of younger aspirants and just-established talents like Adam Guettel and Michael John LaChiusa. Both have received extensive attention of late as composers, yet both are promising lyricists too. Mr. LaChiusa is a true classicist, as tart as he is smart, while Mr. Guettel, in his yearning pursuit of spiritual release, conjures a lyrical realm quite unlike anything heard before in American song.

Kirsten Childs is an utterly original lyricist-composer who has shaped the sha-la-la of 60's girl group refrains into revelatory expositions about race in her forthcoming musical "The Bubbly Black Girl Sheds Her Chameleon Skin." The shrewdly satirical lyricist-composer John Foster, though not ideally displayed last season in his own Off Broadway revue, "A Good Swift Kick," is nevertheless that rarity, a lyricist who just writes funny. Even a writer like Willie Reale, in composing lyrics over the last two decades for his children's theater, the 52nd Street Project, has quietly yielded more lyric cleverness and offhand sophistication than Broadway has heard during the same period.

All of these lyricists labor in a painfully long shadow, one that both encompasses and excludes them. This becomes especially clear when examining the evolution of the 92nd Street Y's "Lyrics and Lyricists" series, which last month began celebrating its 30th season.

Thirty years ago this coming Dec. 13, one of America's greatest lyricists, Yip Harburg, took the stage at the Y's Kaufmann Auditorium to explain for the first time in a formally designed evening just what he did.

Over the next 12 years, nearly 50 more followed Harburg, a roll call of giants, from Sammy Cahn to Johnny Mercer. These programs, moderated by the Broadway conductor Maurice Levine, proved a revelation to all concerned, a reprieve from the neglect that was the lyric writer's lot as songwriting's often forgotten link.

And all the while, one could hear the clock ticking. By the end of the 1970's, many of these lyricists were dead, their Y appearances a collective epitaph. It's been four years since living lyricists (the husband and wife team Marilyn and Alan Bergman) last headlined a program. Before that, one would have to go back to 1980 (and Leo Robin). As the direct links disappeared the series and its audience seemed to grow ever narrower in their taste, convening solely for scripted nostalgic song tributes. Sadly, an institution that has for three decades championed the art of classic lyric writing today all but ignores it as a living tradition.

THAT none of the lyricists mentioned here have yet achieved the brilliance of their predecessors is hardly remarkable. Once lyricists developed by writing for vast, avid audiences and an insatiable song industry. No longer. Merely striving to maintain any standard at all in the face of the power of commercial pop is an accomplishment in itself.

Such steadfastness ensures that these lyric writing does remain a living tradition, its present uncertain, its future open to potentially inspiring questions. As in the words of Mr. Guettel:

Are we everywhere?

Are we anywhere at all?

. . . Only heaven knows how Glory goes,

What each of us was meant to be.

In the starlight, that is what we are.

I can see so far . . .

Photos: Members of a new generation of lyricists. From left, Craig Carnelia, Susan Birkenhead, Lynn Ahrens, Mark Waldrop and David Zippel. (Sara Krulwich/The New York Times)(pg. 36);

Yip Harburg, left, and Maurice Levine, of the "Lyrics and Lyricists" series at the 92nd Street Y, in 1972. (Nancy Flowers/92nd Street Y)(pg. 46)

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