

THE GREAT AMERICAN SONGBOOK

BY ALEX DONNER



THE FIRST TIME I ever sang with a band was in 1972, in the freshman dining hall at Princeton. “Without a song, the day would never end...,” I sang. “When things go wrong, a man ain’t got a friend...without a song.” Singing those Great American Songbook tunes with a band spoke to me, and I’ve been privileged to sing this repertoire professionally for more than 30 years.

So what is this Great American Songbook? It consists of about 500 songs that were melodically simple and harmonically much more complex than former popular songs, written by a group of composers who worked in teams from about 1920 to 1960. Rodgers and Hammerstein, Kern and Hammerstein, Rodgers and Hart, Dietz and Schwartz, and Johnny Burke and Jimmy van Heusen had their names prominently displayed on marquees.

This golden era of music all started with the piano and mass-market publishing. In the late 19th century, the smaller and less-expensive upright piano began to replace the grand piano. The earlier standard fare of classical music and hymns was replaced by more crowd-pleasing pop songs. New printing

presses made possible mass market sheet music.

Then came World War I. The day after the United States declared war against Germany, George M. Cohan composed “Over There,” a simple patriotic march. It was recorded by singer Enrico Caruso, and it sold an unprecedented two million sets of sheet music and one million records.

The government formed a new agency called the Committee On Public Information to drum up support for the war effort, and 75,000 speakers fanned out across the country to churches, town halls, bandstands, and gazebos. Liberty Bond rallies were replete with marching bands and singers performing the new patriotic songs like “Over There.” Many attendees went home to play and sing these tunes on their new uprights.

The Roaring Twenties followed the end of the war, with Prohibition passing and women garnering the vote in 1920. Speakeasies sprang up, the races mixed as never before, and there was an increased openness to black female vocalists like Bessie Smith and musicians of color like Louis Armstrong. The



This page: Ella Fitzgerald performing with Ray Brown playing upright bass, while trumpeter Dizzy Gillespie and vibraphonist Milt Jackson look on; Charlie Bennett, Tommy Dorsey, Benny Goodman, Louis Armstrong, and Lionel Hampton in a scene from the 1948 movie A Song Is Born (inset). Opposite page: The author, pictured with his band, the Alex Donner Orchestra, has been singing the Great American Songbook professionally for more than 30 years.



Just as the music of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven will always have a special place in our culture, the Great American Songbook will always be performed.

jazz age was on, and the jazzy swing bands helped promote the new standards, which were written for singers but were also played as extended instrumental versions in speakeasies.

In 1927, Al Jolson's *The Jazz Singer* inaugurated the "talkie" era of movies. The Busby Berkeley extravaganzas followed, along with the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers films featuring the music of Berlin, Kern, and Gershwin, presaging the Bob Hope and Bing Crosby films of the Forties. There was big money in all of this, but even more in those songs that were taken out of their original film context and proved to have "legs."

Depression came in the early Thirties, and the country found escape with popular music played on new, affordable Victrolas. Annual record sales went from 10 million to 50 million. Radio began large-scale broadcasts and soon replaced sheet music as the way most Americans first heard a song. And rather than just play the record at home or listen on the radio, Americans wanted to go out and dance to that band and see that singer.

Benny Goodman's 1938 Carnegie Hall concert loosely marks the end of the swing era, replaced by the big band era. Ensembles of up to 18 musicians plus singers that played strictly orchestrated arrangements rather than improvised swing became the rage. They were broadcast live on radio across the country from ballrooms like the Roseland, the Cotton Club, and the Savoy in New York, and others in Chicago and Kansas City.

The Big Band leaders of the era, like Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington, Tommy Dorsey, and Benny Goodman, became celebrities. Some married socialites or Hollywood actresses and had cameo roles in major films. Some of these powerful bandleaders were also instrumental in the beginning of American desegregation, as they integrated top black musicians into their ranks.

Before amplification, a singer had to virtually shout to be heard in the back of the hall. Bing Crosby became the first singer to employ the new microphone technology, which enabled him to whisper jazzy phrases that previously would have been unintelligible, adding a sense of intimacy to his recordings and performances. Crosby became the best-selling recording artist of the 20th century, and his recording of Irving Berlin's "White Christmas" is still the biggest-selling single of all time.

Pearl Harbor was attacked in December of 1941. America's men, including a lot of musicians and even bandleader Glenn Miller, went off to war. This, coupled with a musicians strike and other union issues, opened up an opportunity for Frank Sinatra. The Big Band format had been a full instrumental chorus or two of the band, with the singer finishing up the song with a

vocal chorus. Singers played second fiddle to the bandleaders and some of the solo musicians. But Sinatra changed all of that.

Having started in 1939 with big band leader Harry James, in 1940 Sinatra moved on to the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra. In July 1940, they had a number-one hit with "I'll Never Smile Again." In 1942, Sinatra struck out on his own. At his first solo concert on December 30, 1942, Frankie performed to the shrieks of 35,000 bobby-soxers at the Paramount Theatre in Times Square.

American songs were becoming known all over the world just as the United States was taking its postwar place as a global power. Broadway also entered its "golden era" following World War II, with Rodgers & Hammerstein cranking out hit after hit and Cole Porter penning a number of successful musicals. Many of these songs had "legs" and were performed by a multitude of talented and charismatic singers, including Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Sarah Vaughan, Tony Bennett, Perry Como, Bobby Darin, and Dean Martin. Having started in radio, almost all of these newly popular singers were now hosting and guest-starring in the fast-developing new medium of television. Many were cast in major films.

The Great American Songbook was firing on all cylinders. A show would open on Broadway, and then the best songs would be sung live on television and radio. A singer like Sinatra would record the song, which would then be played on the radio and performed at high-profile nightclubs. The song would then be reprised on the various pop-singer television shows. Soon the cover versions would come out, and you would start to hear the song played in corner bars and cabarets. Presto, a new standard was born.

So when did it end? The number of radio plays for the standards that make up the Great American Songbook had started to drop off drastically beginning in the mid-'50s. Broadway shows no longer produced as many hits with legs. Sinatra was considered past his prime. The romance of the Great American Songbook was overtaken by the music known as rock 'n' roll.

But just as the music of Bach, Mozart, and Beethoven will always have a special place in our culture, the Great American Songbook will continue to be performed. Recent recordings by pop stars, like Lady Gaga's duets with Tony Bennett, are bringing the music to a new audience.

Dance orchestras like mine now perform everything from Gershwin to Gaga, and Berlin to Beyoncé. But there will always be a special connection with the audience for a singer performing the Great American Songbook. As Vincent Youmans wrote in 1929, "I only know, there ain't no love at all, without a song." ♦





This page, from above: Duke Ellington conducts his big band at Granada Studios, Chelsea, 1963; Frank Sinatra, 1964; Enrico Caruso with a Victrola phonograph, 1913. Opposite page: Blues singer Bessie Smith poses for a portrait circa 1922 in New York City.

