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Mail Bag

In *The Prez of Louisville*, I was captured in nostalgia and tenderness with your treatment of your feelings about early experiences with blacks. I too "never understood those who pull back from difference, or more, hate it."

I was born in the early years of the development of jazz, 1926. As I grew up, it took a certain amount of daring for me to visit the black ghettos of Long Beach, California, and Los Angeles. Blacks did not go into white restaurants or nightclubs, they did not appear in public on the same bandstand or even baseball diamond. Blacks rarely went into the stores where whites shopped in the 1930s and later, and whites rarely visited black neighborhoods, churches, clubs, or restaurants. Blacks were not even allowed to play on our high school basketball, football, or baseball teams, though many I knew were superior in skill to most of our team members. I recall asking Charlie Church, our basketball coach, why. His only answer was "the Septem will not permit it yet."

One year after we had won the CIF championship and were quite cocky, Charlie Church set up a game with a Los Angeles high school team, all black. They beat us badly, in every phase of the game. Charlie Church made his point: we weren't as good as we thought. Of course, we never had to play black schools in championship games; they weren't allowed. We went on to capture second place in CIF that year (1944). I often wondered whether we could have finished in the top *five* teams if the black schools had been allowed to compete. Later, in college, some schools began to integrate, thank God.

It was after World War II, when I returned to Los Angeles, that I first saw white and black musicians playing the same nightclubs -- those called sepia clubs, where whites and blacks could mingle and listen to great music together. I first met Jimmy Witherspoon in the Melody Club in Los Angeles. Also playing the club in those years were Oscar Moore, the Trenier Twins, Nat Cole, Sammy Davis Jr., and many more.

Just prior to being discharged from service in 1946, I spent more than a month on liberty in the Big Apple, virtually all of my time on 52nd Street, listening to jazz sixteen hours a day or more. I met Billie Holiday, the greatest singer ever, for me. Art Tatum, my idol, befriended me and began taking me to a spot in Harlem called Minton's. There he introduced me to all the greats who showed up to jam after hours: Max Roach, Curley Russell, Bud Powell, Thelonious Monk, Al Haig, and many more. I was in paradise. Billie Holiday called me "my cute little sailor boy."

In the early 1950s, I was a regular with my wife at Howard Rumsey's Lighthouse in Hermosa Beach. There were hundreds of greats we heard play and met briefly. Many were ex-Kenton band members. There was a continuous joy of hearing top musicians. And there were many other clubs where we enjoyed jazz.

From 1963 to 1969, my work as a sales manager took me into the charming city of Louisville. Though the laws have changed and segregation has ostensibly ended, the vestiges of a segregated society still exist there, and even in Cincinnati, where I now live.

When I was going to place a black sales representative in southern Kentucky, the owner of a large wholesale grocery warehouse told me that other companies had tried it and failed. Most of the people had crosses burned in their front yards, or received other unpleasant warnings. There are a few black sales representatives in Louisville today, but *very* few. Cincinnati has improved greatly, and black representatives are not uncommon today.

Yet it is rare even today to go into a black neighborhood bar and see a white man, except in clubs featuring jazz. So, while we have progressed some in the past 30 or 40 years, it is painfully slow and the dark and sad reality is that prejudice lives and even thrives in the hearts and souls of too many people in the "land of the free."

Gordon H. Sandberg, Cincinnati, Ohio

Ella By Starlight

A little girl stood transfixed, eyes wide, in a California supermarket, listening as a woman wearing thick glasses leaned toward her and sang in a voice of incomparable sweetness, "Do you know the Muffin Man?"

Whether the girl's mother recognized the singer is impossible to say; the child certainly didn't. The girl was listening to the voice of Ella Fitzgerald, famous around the world. I remember getting off an airplane in the small Chilean coastal town of Arica in 1962 and hearing that voice coming from a sound system somewhere.

Ella Fitzgerald recalled: "The little girl's mother said, 'Please don't stop. Just keep on.' And then there was a little boy who followed me all around in a store, when I sang to him. And that knocks me out. I just *love* children, and I hate to see anybody do anything to hurt them. The store where I go, the kids like me to sing. They wait for me to do a song in Spanish.

"I am a sucker for children. I'll stop on the street and sing for them."

From the stage of the Apollo theater in 1934 to the present, recording a title track for a Japanese movie or simply performing for her own delight to children, Ella Fitzgerald has been singing in public for 58 years. Hers is doubtless the longest singing career in American music, popular, jazz, concert, or any other kind of music, and it certainly is one of the most illustrious. More than a few critics have referred to her work as genius.

Occasionally through the years there has been debate over whether Ella Fitzgerald truly is a "jazz singer." The term is a dubious one, and a number of singers so described -- including the late Sarah Vaughan -- have objected to it as limiting. Sarah used to assert that she was not a blues singer, and if a flair for the blues is part of the definition of "jazz singer," then it didn't fit her.

Nor does it fit Ella Fitzgerald, whose career has been devoted almost entirely to the great American songwriters. In 1955, her manager and record producer, Norman Granz, began recording with her a series of two-LP "songbook" albums on the work of these composers and lyricists. During the next 12 years, she made so many of these albums that today she isn't sure how many there were -- albums devoted to Duke Ellington, Harold Arlen, Rodgers and Hart, Cole Porter, Jerome Kern, Johnny Mercer, George and Ira Gershwin, and more. All were successful, and some of them made the hit charts.

If, however, an ability to improvise vocally is part of the definition of a "jazz singer," then it assuredly fits Ella Fitzgerald, whose ability to scat sing with impeccable rhythmic, imagination and accurate intonation at high speed is incomparable. Yet in the songbook albums, she sang the songs very straight, with minimal embellishment.

Ira Gershwin told writer George T. Simon, "I never knew how good our songs were until I heard Ella Fitzgerald sing them."

Musicologist and historian Henry Pleasants, in his book *The Great American Popular Singers* (Simon and Schuster, New York, 1974), observes:

"She commands . . . an extraordinary range of two octaves and a sixth, from the low D or D-flat to the high B-flat and possibly higher. This is a greater range, especially at the bottom, than is required or expected of most opera singers."

Pleasants recalls Gerald Moore, the English pianist known for his distinguished work as accompanist, telling a story about Dietrich Fischer-Dieskau. Moore and the lieder singer had finished a matinee recital in Washington, D.C. The singer was about to rush to the airport to catch a plane to New York to hear a concert of Ella Fitzgerald and the Duke Ellington band at Carnegie Hall. "Ella and the Duke together!" Fischer-Dieskau said. "One just doesn't know when there might be a chance to hear that again!"

Pleasants wrote, "Many classical singers . . . like Fischer-Dieskau, are among her most appreciative admirers."

Edmund Thigpen, who was her drummer from 1968 to 1972 in a trio led by pianist Tommy Flanagan, said, "Ella's musicianship is just incredible. Playing with her is like playing with a full orchestra. She almost telegraphs it to you because of her vast knowledge of every song ever written, knowing all the verses, knowing what songs mean, and still interpreting them in her own way. Her rhythmic sense is uncanny. And she's a great listener.

"She's also one of the finest people I've ever worked with. She's a caring person, a giving person, and when she sings *People*, she means every word of it."

When I was growing up in Canada, certain things typified and embodied the far-away and fascinating places to which I yearned someday to go.

France was symbolized by the Eiffel Tower, the Champs Elysees, the Arc de Triomphe, and the voice of Edith Piaf. England was typified by Big Ben, Trafalgar Square, the statue of Eros in Piccadilly, and the voice of Gracie Fields. The United States was embodied in the Statue of Liberty, the Empire State Building, the Grand Canyon of the Colorado.

And the voice of Ella Fitzgerald.

That exquisite sound would come sailing across the border from radio stations in Buffalo and Rochester and Detroit, swinging and sensitive and young and absolutely pure, although she was played plenty on Canadian radio too.

It is hard to remember, in this age of talk radio, rock radio, and country-and-western radio, that what Fitzgerald did was not seen in those days as the high art it actually was. It was considered popular music, and some of her songs were very big hits.

As the years went by, her singing became more seasoned and brilliantly skilled, passing beyond anything anyone else could do. Certain of her performances linger in memory (and, fortunately, on records) as bright as jewels on velvet. But the strange thing is that the voice itself remained eternally young. In her sound, she seemed like what she was when she had her first hit: a teen-ager. And the combination, the sweet naivete of that sound coupled with the sophisticated and secure command of her art, was startling, and inimitable. To be sure, a lot of excellent singers have been influenced by her, but she remains unique, beyond imitation. An American monument.

Her long and distinguished career has made Ella a wealthy woman, and she lives in a big, comfortable home in Beverly Hills. It is dramatic, striking, a two-story structure in Mexican hacienda style built in a U-shape around a large inner garden rich in exotic tropical and subtropical flora, receding to a swimming pool in the distance. The rooms are richly and exquisitely furnished, with a great sense of space and proportion. The walls are covered in paintings, including a striking oil portrait of her by Tony Bennett, whose abilities as a painter have grown steadily from a tentative exploratory style 20 years ago to a daring mastery today.

I had lunch there recently with Ella and Val Valentin, who was for many years chief recording engineer for the Verve label. Before that Val was the engineer who recorded many of the Nat Cole and Frank Sinatra albums at Capitol. He remains Ella's close friend and a sort of informal adviser.

The usual adjective for her is the exhausted "legendary". Like most legends, hers is not entirely true. According to most standard references, she was born in Newport News, Virginia, April 25, 1918, although Norman Granz says she was born two years later than that. *The New Grove Dictionary of Jazz* says, "She was orphaned in early childhood and moved to New York to attend an orphanage school in Yonkers." Variations on this keep cropping up in biographies and articles, and that part of the story simply isn't so.

Ella isn't sure what happened to her real father, whether he died or he and her mother were divorced. "I know nothing of Newport News," Ella said. "My mother left there when she married my step-father. I don't know about my father. That part I can't tell you.

"My stepfather was Portuguese. I should have learned Portuguese. Now I'm sorry. Children don't realize the importance of learning. It was like my piano lessons. My

mother couldn't afford a lot of piano lessons. I had a teacher with big hands, who could stretch. I would be so thrilled by him that by the time he got through playing, it would be time for me to go home! My mother said, 'I work too hard to let you go there and you come back and you don't know *nothin'!*'

"I'm sorry now. Had I listened to my stepfather, I would probably be real down with my Portuguese. That was the kind of neighborhood we were in -- Italian, Spanish, Portuguese, and Hungarian. This was in Yonkers." Fifteen miles up the New York Central railway line from central Manhattan, Yonkers is the first city immediately north of New York City. Partly industrial and partly residential, it is a hilly community on the east bank of the Hudson River. It has deteriorated somewhat in recent years, but much of it is attractive, and it was more amenable when Ella was growing up there.

It was her mother who entered her name in the Apollo theater amateur contest in which she was "discovered." She was entered not as a singer but a dancer.

That was her burning childhood ambition, to be a dancer. "In Yonkers," she said, "I used to make my little money, standing around the corners, me and my friends, and I danced. I used to try to do Snake Hips Tucker." Snake Hips Tucker was a swivel-hipped dancer very popular in Harlem at that period. He performed at Connie's Inn and at the Lafayette and Apollo theaters, where Ella probably saw him. She said, "My friends and I would dance and people would throw us money, and that's how we'd make enough to go to the show. And my mother used to sing that song all the time, *The Object of My Affection*." The song was new: its publishing date is 1934.

Ella says that the big influence on her mother, and on her, was the Boswell Sisters. Now largely ignored, the Boswells were three girls from New Orleans, Connee, Martha, and Helvetia, who sang complex close-harmony parts. They became internationally famous, and Connee, who was heavily featured with the group, later became a solo star, despite having to spend much of her life in a wheelchair in consequence of poliomyelitis.

Ella said, "My mother liked to sing around the house, and she loved Miss Connee Boswell. Anything the Boswell Sisters sang, she liked, and she would sing it.

"There was a little Italian boy who just loved my mother so. If his mother couldn't get him to eat, she'd say to my mother, 'Please come and make him eat!' He'd come and stay with us. He wanted to go with my mother anywhere she wanted to go. And they were in the car one day. She was holding him. My cousin, who was driving the car, stopped the car fast. To save the little boy from hitting the front, my mother grabbed him, and hit her head. She got 54 stitches in her head.

"They didn't have all the medicines they have now, and it didn't heal. I was 15, going on 16. She had signed for me to go on the amateur hour at the Apollo." Ella was quite firm about her age at the time.

"I went on to dance. I wasn't going on as a singer! My girlfriends, Frances and Doris, were there. And of all people to go onstage, I was the first one they called out.

"They used to grab you if you didn't do right. They'd take you off, if the audience booed you. And I lost my nerve. When I walked out, I couldn't believe it. I saw all those people."

She stood frozen, frightened that she would be pulled off the stage. Someone called to her from backstage, "Don't just stand there, sing something!"

"I sang one of the Boswell songs," Ella said, and again, now, sang it:

If a voice can bring
every hope of the spring,
that's Judy.

She said, "I sang that and *The Object of My Affection*."

The audience loved her, and applauded warmly, giving her the victory in the contest.

"I won the amateur contest and I got first prize and I was promised a week there," she said. "And they never gave me the week. I thought I could go to different places. I went to the Lafayette theater, and they booed me. I didn't win no first prize there. Then I lost my nerve.

"Then I went to the Harlem Opera House, down the street from the Apollo, and tried, and they gave me a week. I did a week there. My mother had signed me for one of the radio amateur hours. But then she died of the brain injury from the accident."

In the audience the night of her Apollo victory was Benny Carter, by then well established as a jazz musician, as much for his compositions and arranging as for his solo work on alto saxophone and trumpet. "I knew nothing about her fright," Benny said. "I just heard her sing and thought, 'This girl is wonderful.'

"Soon after that I took her up to Fletcher Henderson's house. He heard her and he wasn't at all interested. But Chick Webb did get interested. I took Ella to meet him." Benny was an alumnus of the Chick Webb band.

Born in Baltimore February 10, 1909, Chick Webb was a small hunchback who never let his physical handicap defeat him. He used an adapted drum set that permitted him to control a wide range of colors, and, as Val Valentin said, "If he were alive today, I think he would give a lot of drummers something to worry about.' Webb had one of the best bands of the swing era. Much of the time it played the Savoy Ballroom.

Webb hired Ella to sing with the band for one week, and then permanently. With the death of Ella's mother, he became her guardian. Whether he actually adopted her, as is often written, is uncertain.

Ella said, "I can't say yes or no to it, but he was supposed to be my guardian, so I could travel with him. He was just a sweet person. Just a real sweet person."

It was at the Savoy that she made one of the friendships of her lifetime, a man she says was one of her important mentors: Dizzy Gillespie. Ella laughed: "Dizzy was with the Teddy Hill band and I was with Chick Webb. We used to get off the stage at the Savoy Ballroom and start dancing. We'd jump off and start Lindy hopping." The year was probably 1937. Ella was then nineteen; Dizzy was twenty.

"I learned a lot from those musicians," Ella said, "and I'm very grateful for it.

"When they used to have the after-hours jam sessions at Minton's, and another place, I used to sneak in with them. And I feel that I learned what little bop I do have by following Dizzy around these different places. I feel that that was my education. He is a wonderful teacher, and I am very grateful to him. I probably never would have tried to bop, but I wanted to do what he was doing. We used to go in there and jam all night, and sometimes we'd go down to 52nd Street to the Three Deuces and we'd sit up there and listen to Lady Day."

"And yet," I pointed out, "you developed a style that was original." There isn't a trace of Billie Holiday in her singing.

"Well I don't know how I got it," Ella said. "But I think I owe it mostly to musicians. By being around them, I learned by ear." According to some persons, she may have originated the term bebop or, as it was at first also known, rebop. They say that she used these syllables in a characteristic phrase when she was scatting with the musicians. Whether or not she really did invent the phrase, she was from the first in on the experimentation and innovation that would lead to bebop.

In 1938, when she was 20, Ella recorded *A-Tisket, A-tasket* -- adapted from a nursery rhyme -- with Chick Webb for the Decca label. It made her an immediate star, and she followed this with *Undecided*, a tune by trumpeter Charlie Shavers. The band continued to play at the Savoy, broadcasting nationally and making a long series of records for Decca, quite a number of them with Ella.

"When she wasn't singing," George T. Simon wrote in his book *The Big Bands*, "she would usually stand at the side of the band, and, as the various sections blew their ensemble phrases, she'd be up there singing along with all of them, often gesturing with her hands as though she were leading the band."

But Webb's health was fragile, and he went home to Baltimore to die of tuberculosis on June 6, 1939, only 37 years old. Ella took over the band and was its leader for the next three years. Then she disbanded and embarked on a solo career, making many records for Decca, including three with the Ink Spots, one with Louis Jordan, and even in 1946 a calypso number called *Cold Stone Dead in the Market*. She also made an unforgettable early LP accompanied only by pianist Ellis Larkins.

Then, in 1946, she began to tour with Jazz at the Philharmonic. Granz became her manager and career guide. When her Decca contract expired, she signed with Granz's Verve label and launched the series of records -- including the songbook albums -- that would secure her place in history.

Fitz -- as the Jazz at the Philharmonic veterans call her -- became an integral part of that touring family, and the musicians seemed to encircle her protectively.

Granz was particularly protective. And always, he fought to defend his performers from racism. One of his battles involved the Bell Telephone Company. At that time, guitarist Herb Ellis was in the group that accompanied Ella. When she was booked on the Bell Telephone Hour, the show's producers told Granz as delicately as they knew how that it would not be appropriate for a black singer to be seen on camera with a white musician. Granz insisted that Ellis and Fitzgerald be seen together.

The producers got around their problem by covering the lenses with a filter coated with vaseline, which creates a haloed, misty effect around the central figure. It was impossible to tell who was accompanying her. Granz took a full-page newspaper ad to denounce Bell Telephone for this evasion.

One of his stands against racism came close to costing him his life. On a visit to Houston, Texas, he ordered his ticket sellers to advise buyers that the concerts would not be segregated. Later, during the first of two evening concert, he noticed three strangers backstage, men in business suits. They told him they were off-duty police detectives who just wanted to listen to the music, and Granz relaxed one of his cardinal rules by allowing them to stay.

Oscar Peterson was performing while Gene Krupa, Illinois Jacquet, and Dizzy Gillespie, in Ella's dressing room, were playing a one-dollar game of craps. The three detectives entered the room and arrested them for gambling. When Granz entered the room to learn the cause of the uproar, he was told that he too was under arrest -- for running a gambling game. One of the cops entered Ella's bathroom. Granz, fearful that the man would try to plant narcotics, followed him. The detective said, "What are you doing?"

"Watching you," Granz said.

The detective pulled a gun and pointed it at him. "I ought to kill you," he said.

Granz later recounted, "I didn't say anything. I did realize there were witnesses, but there were also two other cops. I suppose if he had shot me they'd have come up with some story."

Granz, Dizzy Gillespie, Jacquet, Gene Krupa, and Ella were taken to a court house and charged with gambling. "Curiously enough," Norman told me long after the event, "there were newspaper photographers present. That's when I knew they'd set us up to smear us." Granz posted bail for all of them. "Ella was fit to be tied," he said.

The next morning there were pictures of the JATP group, Ella among them, in the newspapers. Granz could have forfeited the bail, which amounted to $50 for all them, but Ella's embarrassment disturbed him. "I decided to do what no one in his right mind would do," he said. "I decided to fight

them."

He did. It cost him $2,000 to get the $50 back. But Ella and his musicians were vindicated.

On another occasion, British customs officials held up the arriving JATP group to search them for narcotics. They found none, and as a last resort were about to conduct a body of search of Ella. Granz threatened to cancel the tour there and then, and the customs officials relented.

Scandal has come no closer to Ella Fitzgerald than these incidents. She was married from 1948 to 1952 to bassist Ray Brown, with whom she worked on the Jazz at the Philharmonic tours. They had a son, her only child, whom they named Ray. She remains on warm terms with her ex-husband and his family, and they have worked together often in the years since their divorce. She is notoriously shy, and her private life has always been private, and quiet. When she is home she indulges her love of children, including a grand-daughter and several nieces, her sister's children. She seemed startled that I knew she maintains the Ella Fitzgerald Day Care Center in one of the black ghetto areas of Los Angeles. It is for the children of working mothers. Is it true that she funds it entirely out of her own money? "We try to," she said, slipping shyly into the on-stage royal We. "I don't like to feel like I'm bragging for what I am doing.

"It's for kids of that neighborhood. It's down in Watts. I haven't been able to go down there in the last two years, after I became ill." She has had several illnesses, and her thick glasses compensate for cataract surgery.

"I'd usually be there when they had the Christmas celebrations. I'd sing for them. They give little shows for the kids. The last time I was there, there was a little Spanish boy, and he had a great big sombrero. And he was supposed to dance around it. But he was so small, he was falling down. It was the cutest thing. He would get up and start all over. I miss that from the kids.

"There are kids there of all languages, and they sing in all the languages." Val Valentin said the children send her huge cards covered in signatures.

Ella Fitzgerald on stage has always seemed an incredibly assured performer, pouring forth melody with consummate rhythmic force. Thinking of her terror at the Apollo, I said, "Have you ever had stage fright since?"

"Yes! I stayed that way! I still have stage fright. I think, if you really are sure of yourself, that nothing happens. You can't work. I don't think I could go on that stage, walk out there and go, *Well here I am!* and go ahead because you never know what that audience lacks."

At the height of her career, Ella was rather plump, matronly looking, but now she is thin. Her doctor, she said, had made her take off weight to lower her blood pressure. She appears to have recovered her health. Still, I didn't want to tire her, and insisted it was time for me to go. I asked her a final question:

"If you had your life to live over, would you do anything but sing?"

"No. Because I found out that I couldn't be a dancer."

The Nat Cole Legacy

Ten years ago, Charlie Lourie and Michael Cuscuna began negotiations with Capitol Records to bring out the complete trio recordings of Nat Cole on their Mosaic label. They have now released the result of that work, an 18-CD collection that is a sudden seismic reminder of how important Nat Cole was to the development of jazz piano. Had there been no Nat Cole, we would have no Oscar Peterson, Horace Silver, Bill Evans, Monty Alexander, Alan Broadbent, and so many others -- not, at least, as they are now. All owe him debts, directly or indirectly, as he in turn owed Earl Hines.

But it isn't only for historical reasons that this collection is valuable. It is a delight in and of itself. My admiration for Cole's work was boundless, and to the modest extent that I knew him, so it was for the man as well. If pressed to name only one favorite male singer of songs, I would probably name Nat Cole. If pressed to name one favorite pianist, I would absolutely name Nat Cole.

As a pianist he had everything, an advanced harmonic understanding, an exquisite touch and tone, a distinguished and highly selective melodic sensibility, and the most impeccable time I have ever heard in any musician on any instrument. He could play with and around the pulse like no one else, and you never, but never, heard him rush. There was a rhythmic ebullience even in his ballads. His playing was instantly recognizable. Among other characteristic devices was a usage of triplets in thirds. Indeed, the triplet is everywhere in Cole's playing, eighth-note triplets, quarter-note triplets, half-note triplets, manifestation of some infallible inner polyrhythmic sense and of course effortless independence of the hands.

We know that Louis Armstrong and Art Tatum, among others, would "set" solos and play them repeatedly. We find out that Nat Cole sometimes did too. There are two takes of *Embraceable You* from a December, 1943, session done not long after he signed with Capitol. After the guitar solo, there is a lovely and rather dramatic eight-bar piano passage in thirds. It is virtually identical in the two takes. In March, 1961, Cole re-recorded the song. That passage, again, is almost identical, except that he has been playing it for so long that he tosses casual ornamentations on top of it. Incidentally, the tempo is slower and he has evolved into a total master of his art. And the voice is deeper, the cigarette scratch in it having made it, ironically, even more attractive.

One of my favorite Cole albums is the *After Midnight* record with Stuff Smith, Lee Young, and Sweets Edison. That's here; but it had been previously available in CD. What hasn't been available since probably the mid-1950s is the material in the 10-inch *Penthouse Serenade* album recorded July 18, 1952. And that *is* my favorite Cole album, since the tracks -- *Penthouse Serenade, Rose Room, Somebody Loves Me*, etc. -- are all instrumental and you get to hear a lot of piano. He told me he thought he sang better when someone else accompanied him, and played better when he didn't have to sing: the split attention, he thought, diminished both. And maybe he was right: whatever the reason, I thought his playing

was at a pinnacle in that album.

The collection -- some 18 hours of music -- is a limited edition. It sells for $282, postage included, from Mosaic Records, 197 Strawberry Hill Ave, Stamford CT 06902. The phone number is 203 327-7111.

This incredible cornucopia is hands down the "album" of the year, and indeed for my taste the album of the decade.

American Songbook

Some years ago a judge from Jamaica remarked to me, "Jazz is God's gift to America and America's gift to the world."

Not bad, and fresher than the perennial and somewhat defensive, "Jazz is America's only original art form."

Artie Shaw said, "If Louis Armstrong had never lived, we would undoubtedly have something called jazz. But it would not be the same." Since jazz in its evolving years drew on the best material of the Broadway musical -- Gershwin, Porter, Rodgers, et al -- I think it is accurate to say that without Broadway we would have jazz, but it would not be the same.

A number of thoughtful people, James Baldwin, Billy Taylor and Grover Sales among them, have called jazz "America's classical music." To the extent that this definition demands for jazz a status in America comparable to that accorded art music in Europe, it has a point. My reservation is that "classical music" is a term even more evasive of definition than "jazz." In its original usage, it alluded to the art of the ancient Greeks and Romans, suggesting a past epoch whose models were perfect and therefore to be imitated. The plays of Racine and Corneille are defined as of the "classical" period in French drama. The plays of Shakespeare are not classical because he did not adhere to the unities of time and place of Greek drama. He was of course far the greater playwright for this departure, which gave his plays a fluidity comparable to that of modern film. In European music, the term "classical" is used as antithetical to Romanticism. In its strict sense it means the music from Palestrina to Beethoven. That of Brahms is not classical music, nor is that of Stravinsky, Verdi, Puccini, and Debussy. By this criterion, jazz -- not a "perfected" model frozen somewhere back there in time but an art still in evolution -- is not at all classical music.

A definition of jazz as folk music is even more dubious. Folk music is music created as avocation by anonymous "people." It is assumed that the names of its creators have been lost, if indeed the songs did not evolve as a cumulative culture experience. It is thus absurd to define as folk music the songs of commercial songwriters such as Bob Dylan, and it certainly is improper to thus describe the sophisticated poeticism of Gordon Lightfoot. It is equally absurd to define as folk art a music that from its earliest days has been the work of professional musicians, and, legend to the contrary, mostly well-educated ones at that: as Sweets Edison puts it, "Jazz isn't folk music. It's too hard to play."

Is it then popular music? Now we are on even more treacherous ground. There was a time in the 1930s and early '40s when, as Woody Herman said, "Jazz was the popular music of the land." The bands of Duke Ellington, Count Basie, Benny Goodman, and Herman played something that was indisputably jazz, the fact that its ensembles were written notwithstanding. These bands also played dance music, though it should be remembered that jazz has been through much of its history associated with dance, and in any case the so-called jitterbugs -- the term is an unjustified condescension, given that many of those kids were superb athletic dancers -- cried out for the hot instrumentals. And there were bands of a more commercial bent, such as those of Tommy Dorsey and Harry James, that could play very good jazz when the crowd was right for it. Basie was uncanny at judging material for the audience. So if "popular" is defined as that which has a br[illegible] public appeal, then jazz was very popular music indeed.

But was American popular music jazz? Most of us would reflexively reply, No, not at all. But then what happens when someone puts words to a "jazz composition" by Thelonious Monk or Duke Ellington or Ralph Burns and an opera singer gives it a fling? Does it cease to be jazz? And when a jazz group plays a melody by Richard Rodgers, does that make it jazz and remove it from classification as popular music?

Making matters murkier still is that music that was at the top of the hit parade in the 1930s is no longer popular. Throughout North America, it is almost impossible to find on radio the great American songs whose epoch ended, in the view of the late Alec Wilder, more than 40 years ago. Lorenz Hart's sister-in-law, Dorothy Hart, who lives in Palm Springs and is custodian of his estate, told me a year or so ago that she used to be surprised at the young people who said they loved his lyrics. When she would ask how they knew them, they would usually say they'd been steeped in them from the record collections of their parents. She never hears this admiration for Hart from young people these days. And there's a reason: the parents and even grandparents of tod[illegible] young people didn't listen to the classic American songs.

There was a time when, before he was considered fit to share a bandstand with the better older jazz musicians, a young player was expected to know the blues and a considerable body of popular songs so that when the leader called up *Sweet Lorraine*, he knew the melody and the changes.

Many of today's younger players are apparently unaware of the great popular songs of the past, excepting those who, like the Harper Brothers and the drummer Kenny Washington, have a strong feeling for and knowledge of history. And they have acquired that knowledge through study, not casually by osmosis: the music is no longer floating in the general air, to be heard on radio stations and juke boxes and in dance pavilions everywhere, as it once was.

If jazz colored American popular music, American popular music colored jazz. Alas, that great body of gorgeous songs has fallen out of memory and appreciation, and playing it for people raised on rock does you little good: they cannot hear harmony and are insufficiently literate to appreciate the lyrics.

In the next three issues, I'll examine the American songbook from 1900 to the present -- the American century in song.