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The Media
At This Point in Time

Recently I was discussing the state of journalism with Doug Ramsey, one of the most astute of jazz critics and an eloquent essayist. Doug has had a distinguished history as a newspaper reporter and, later, television anchorman in New York City and other major centers, and he is now senior vice president of the Foundation for American Communications, an organization funded by the news media and private donors. His job is in part to try to raise the standards of journalism. I said, "It seems to me that the quality of journalism is going rapidly down."

"No kidding," he said, with a dry chuckle.

The issue of bad reporting, sloppy and unquestioning on the one extreme, vicious and biased on the other, is enormous and complicated. But even on the smaller scale, I am appalled by the quality of the writing. I was startled to see the phrase "younger than him" on the front page of the New York Times. Not only did the writer not know that it should be "younger than he". Neither did the editor who handled the story, the copy-reader who "corrected" it, nor the proofreader who handled it.

This is grammar of the yuppie generation. Not only is the quality of reporting deteriorating, with major papers stooping to the ethical level of the supermarket tabloids; the quality of language itself is falling. The ungrammatical is fused to the trite, and weird new expressions crop up and spread. The worst language is heard on television, particularly when the anchor-people wing it without script for a moment, and the anchorladies contribute vapid comments to the story the co-anchor has just read. Terrible tragedy. A real heartbreak for those folks. A happy ending to that story. And similar airy banalities.

I once encountered the expression "main thrust" three times in one issue of Newsweek. "Thrust" was hot then. It was almost impossible not to encounter it at least once in any given newspaper or magazine, or to hear it in the course of a news broadcast. It's fading from use, but alas is not dead. For example, the Los Angeles Times, September 14, 1992, third paragraph of a story by Michael Parks: "But the thrust of the Israeli Cabinet's five-point statement . . . "

Once in a while, a writer comes up with an ephemerally vivid expression that spreads like the 'flu from one periodical to another, becoming particularly conspicuous in television, where the bottom line is basically the arguably awful quality of the writing at this point in time. Our age of excessive verbiage is scattered with these expressions, like bits of eggshell in an omelette. It is far too late to object to the misuse of "hopefully", a legacy of John F. Kennedy. And we owe "at that point in time" and "at this point in time" -- replacing "then" and "now" in our lexicons -- to the Watergate hearings of receding memory.

"Basically" is one of the worst neologisms, being basically thrown in all over the place. I heard it four times in about five minutes on one television station's coverage of the January California flooding. I once asked a girl in a small-town gas station: "Can you tell me how to get to Highway 401?" She replied, waving her hand at the main street, "It's basically down that way." Where is it the rest of the time? I remarked "basically" twice in one column of U.S. News and World Report. "Literally" is misused almost as often. Check it out, to use another of the neologisms.

"Main thrust" may be fading, but "free fall" has become a mainstay of news writers. The economy is in free fall, the employment rate is in free fall, the reputation of this politician or that is in free fall. The term, borrowed from parachute jumping, seems to have turned up in this new use within the past few months. I don't know what the TV anchorthings would do without it. Basically the English language is in free fall at this point in time in newsrooms everywhere, with such expressions as "jump start" and "arguably", as in "jump-start the economy, which has arguably been in free fall since . . . "

Another of these nervous verbal ticks is "even as we speak", which has reached epidemic proportions on television. It is rapidly being overtaken in frequency by "any time soon". "Glass ceiling" is coming up fast.

Once upon a time "showers" meant rain. Now weatherthings say "snow showers" and "rain showers," where there used to be rain, showers, downpours, cloudbursts, sleet, hail, snowfalls, snow flurries, and blizzards. I say "newsthings" and "weatherthings" to obviate offending the neo-feminists, since "newspersons" contains the word "son," which would appear to be masculine and therefore is not Politically Correct. These people have already demanded use of the word womyn in place of women, and rather than wait for them to demand that we abandon spokesperson, alderperson, chairperson, and the like, I propose the immediate adoption of "thing", as in policething, firething, salesthing, and anchorthing.

For the record, "person" has the same root as "sonic". Roman actors wore masks that contained mechanical amplification devices to project their voices in amphitheaters. The mask was a "persona", which meant "by the sound device". The word came to mean the character in the play, and eventually "person" took on the meaning we now ascribe to it.

The vocabulary required to be Politically Correct is a long subject. I will note in passing that years ago the white public was required to eschew the term "colored" and use "Negro" as a term of respect. Then the Rev. Elijah Muhammed demanded that everyone say "black," which is to say that the English word black was substituted for the Spanish word meaning black. This linguistic gerrymandering did nothing to erase bigotry in America or equalize opportunity, and now the term "black" has also been ruled demeaning, although whites did not start its present usage.

The usage now demanded (by whom is uncertain) is "African-American", and again newspapers are acquiescing. It too will

pass from use, for two reasons. One is that it's inaccurate. A white South African or an Egyptian, Libyan, or Moroccan who becomes an American citizen is an African American. Since Albert Camus was born in Algeria, he could claim with far more accuracy than Jesse Jackson to be African. But the main reason "African-American" will not last is that the term is too long for newspaper headlines. Even the black press will slide back to using "black". Meanwhile, the United Negro College Fund and the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People have not changed their names.

The weather-and-traffic-things in Southern California have for years been using a word that baffled me: sigalert, seeming to connote something to do with a signal. It apparently indicated a traffic delay. Perhaps the spelling was cygalert, suggesting that the traffic was held up by a baby swan. No one seemed to know what the word meant. Doug Ramsey enlightened me. There was once, on one of the radio stations, a traffic reporter whose first name was Sig, who told you about stalled traffic in this or that lane of the freeways. These warnings became known as Sigalerts, and the police took up the usage. It is endemic to the Los Angeles area. So far it doesn't seem to have spread to Paramus, New Jersey; Lawrence, Kansas; or Kapuskasing, Ontario, but the way these things go, it could.

A particularly irksome word is "venue", widely used now in show biz. Venue, which is the past participle feminine of the French verb "venir", is a legal term, meaning a coming-together place where a trial or some other such proceeding is held. It does not mean a nightclub or concert hall or football stadium, but that's how it's used. It was correctly used when the newspapers reported a change of venue to Simi Valley in the Rodney King flogging. It is not correctly used when someone refers to a magazine as a venue for an article.

The sheer ignorance of the English language in "media" people is amazing. I watched a yuppie radio talk show host earnestly discussing some Los Angeles economic problem on a recent television round-table. He was clearly impressed with himself and used his vocabulary with earnest confidence. When he said the community was "vulcanized" on this issue, I thought I must have heard wrong. But I hadn't, and I laughed helplessly every time I thought of it for the next day or so, and it nearly destroyed Doug Ramsey when I told him about it. What an image.

Such gaffes are not new, of course. Doug said that in October, 1957, when he was in the Marine Corps, traveling back to Quantico from Washington, D.C., a disc jockey on his car radio said, "It has just been reported that the Soviet Union has launched a Seattle-ite into orbit around the earth." Doug added, "One night in the early 1960s, I heard a disc jockey say, 'This bulletin has just been handed to me. The pilot of a Red Chinese MIG has landed in Formosa and defecated to the west."

Jeff Greenfield, one of the ABC-TV correspondents, has for years been telling the story about his surprise when, listening to anchorthing Anna Bond on New York's ABC outlet, he heard her say, "Pope John Paul today beautified a carmelized nun."

Another little horror is "viable," a term drawn from biology meaning that the plant or animal is capable of survival. It is now used to mean "practical", as in "viable alternative". Hopefully we're not basically stuck with it, but I fear we have already been vulcanized.

A much-misused word is "unique", as in "rather unique" and "most unique." "Unique" means one of a kind. Something can't be slightly one of a kind. It either is or it isn't one of a kind and thus unique.

Our English cousins don't hesitate to adopt our worst verbal perversions (or we theirs; remember "gear" and "fab"?). So far, however, they don't say "jump start." They say "kick start," although even motorcycles nowadays have electric ignition.

Here's a partial list of the arguably awful neocliches in use in America at this point in time:

Cutting edge, leading edge, wish list, short list, worst-case scenario, fire storm, any time soon, unarguably (even worse than arguably), world class, in-depth, send a message, hit the ground running, hidden agenda, send a signal, resonance, resonate, riveting, layered (very popular with critics, as in "the film resonates with his riveting, layered performance"), factor in, go ballistic, level playing field, upscale, downscale, downside, upside, bottom line, role model, even as we speak, done deal, parameter, mind set, learning experience, spin control, maven, state of the art, push the envelope, on his (her, your, my) plate, mind set, and loose cannon.

One of the newest is the use of the adjective "absent" as a preposition. "Absent photographic evidence," "absent a new budget," and so forth. It is used to replace "without" and "lacking." Mary Tillotson of CNN, who is a very good reporter, nonetheless has a bad case of the absents. I suppose writers think it makes their work sound elegant and literate. But there is no precedent for this usage in any dictionary, although I once saw it embedded in a lease. It is wrong, and it is spreading, in magazines, newspapers, and television. The earliest use of it that I have found is in a book published in September, 1991, but it obviously goes back farther than that since books are at least a year in production. The proliferation, however, is recent.

One of the worst offenders is the Los Angeles *Times*. Though its general coverage has improved in recent years, its use of language seems to be sinking steadily as reporters who learned their grammar from Elvis Presley and Bob Dylan have moved up to become copy-readers and editors passing judgment on reporters who learned it from heavy metal groups.

For example, in the August 14, 1992 issue, a reporter wrote "students who once were loathe to cross the Blue Line tracks". The writer didn't know the difference between loath, an adjective meaning reluctant, and loathe, a verb meaning to detest.

Trite and trashy language has become characteristic of the

paper. "Absent an unexpected turn in the talks" -- Ronald Brownstein, Los Angeles Times political writer, August 1, 1992. "If Bush was re-elected," same writer, front page, August 16. Same issue, in a story about nerve-gas incineration, under the byline Eric Charrison: " . . . the alternative technologies need to be further developed before they become viable," and " . . . note that the project isn't a done deal." Same issue, article by Suzanne Garment: "But the playing field is not quite level."

An editorial August 15: "Will Mrs. Bush's views resonate with the Republicans . . ?" Same issue: "This time, however, the democrats believe their message will resonate far better . . . "

Also in that issue a reporter named Peggy Y. Lee wrote that authorities "pledged to crack down on gangs like they never have before." It should of course be "as they never have before." And a reporter named Edwin Chen wrote that the relationship between Al Gore and Bill Clinton could be "among the most unique relationships in White House history."

All in one issue.

August 23 issue, in a story about a powerful Los Angeles show business attorney: "Kenneth Ziffren . . . arguably wields as much clout as . . . " He wields it arguably? Same issue, in a political commentary: "a Bush-Quayle ticket in free-fall in California." Aside from its neotriteness, the term was used with a hyphen that rendered it the adjectival form when it was used as a noun. O great hard-nosed copyreaders, where are you now that the L.A. Times needs you?

"Resonates" is a word that apparently resonates with Kenneth Turan, who, incredibly, was for a long time interim book editor of the Times and is now the paper's movie critic. In a review (August 7) of the Clint Eastwood movie *Unforgiven* -- Turran's paean to the picture read like a rewrite of a studio handout -- he said that the film "resonates with the sprit (their typo, not mine) of films past . . . " Farther along his language progresses from new cliches to old with the phrase "each and every act of mayhem . . . " He didn't, happily, say the performances were layered or that the film was riveting. Perhaps he is saving them for future reviews.

In the same issue, a reporter refers to George Bush's "free fall in California". Page 1, the August 25 issue: "The cutting edge of American architecture . . . "

One used to hope -- vainly, as it turned out -- that children weren't developing their sense of language from Top 40 pops and television commercials. Now we can only hope they are not getting it from newspapers, especially the Los Angeles Times.

What is the cause of this deterioration in the use of language? Is it indeed that so many of the writers for newspapers and magazines, never having learned to parse a sentence or consult a dictionary, have absorbed their usages from rock-and-roll and television in an advertising age whose harbinger was the copywriter who gave us Winstons taste good like a cigarette should? Is this why they reach for these shabby neologisms? Is it because they have grown up in a culture that is not so much illiterate as a-literate? I can only tell you that elder journalist colleagues in England, Canada, Switzerland, Sweden, and France tell me that language is deteriorating in all their newspapers.

Yet Doug Ramsey insists there is hope:

"As bad as things are, I must point out that some newspapers, to their great credit, have hired full-time writing coaches to watch over the language. One who comes to mind is Jack Hart of The Oregonian in Portland. He has made a real difference in the quality of writing -- and thinking -- at that paper."

I certainly wish Doug and Mr. Hart well in their struggle for better writing and better journalism. But even as we speak the main thrust is that absent pride of craft, writers on the leading edge of contemporary journalism will not forego these little horrors of grammar and diction any time soon.

A Death in the Family: The American Song

Part Seven

From time to time, there seems to be a stirring of renewed interest in the best material of the golden era of American songs. Recordings by Linda Ronstadt, Carly Simon, Willie Nelson, and others not usually associated with that kind of music have brief flurries of success with it. They don't do it well, and there is little in music quite as embarrassing as hearing Bob Dylan sing a Gershwin song with wrong chords, as I did once on a television special.

The Natalie Cole album *Unforgettable* has been such a success both aesthetically and commercially that even skeptics in the music business cautiously suggested that it might be the start of a trend. The acclaimed, and exquisite, *Here's to Life* album by singer and pianist Shirley Horn offers further temptation to think so.

But such albums and any trend growing out of them will not create circumstances for an outpouring of *new* songs of the quality and above all in the quantity achieved by the wizards of the '20s, '30s, and '40s. There are people around capable of writing them. I cite Dave Frishberg and Alan and Marilyn Bergman among lyricists and I can think of any number of composers who turn out tunes of that quality. One swallow does not make a spring, and Shirley Horn and Natalie Cole do not add up to a revival of the golden era of American song.

The CD reissue programs of the major labels remind us of the richness of American popular music in the 1940s, '50s, and '60s.

CBS issued a complete Frank Sinatra package, four CDs, from his Columbia period, and the work from his Capitol and Reprise periods has been extensively reissued in various packages. CBS has reissued Sarah Vaughan's Columbia recordings. Bing Crosby's records are again available, as are those of Jo Stafford

and Peggy Lee. A diligent Dick Haymes Society keeps his work available. Nat Cole's records are found not only in great stacks in record stores but are even sold on television.

Polygram has put out albums from its Emarcy, Mercury, and Verve labels by Sarah Vaughan, Doris Day, Billy Eckstine, Ernestine Anderson, Blossom Dearie, Anita O'Day, Dinah Washington, Morgana King, and Helen Merrill, as well as more than 20 albums by Ella Fitzgerald, including the composers' songbook series produced by Norman Granz with charts mostly by Nelson Riddle. The Billie Holiday CD reissues remind us just how large her body of work was. Sony has put out a three-disc 70-song set covering all her work for Columbia between 1933 and 1958, while GRP has issued a two-CD 50-song collection of all her Decca records during her five-and-half years (from 1944 to 1950) with that label. The biggest collection is a huge, beautifully annotated, ten-CD Polygram compendium of all her work for Norman Granz's Clef, Norgran, and Verve labels.

Sinatra, Lee, Cole, Haymes, Stafford (a singer so unprepossessingly perfect that only singers know how good she was), Andy Williams, Frankie Laine, Tony Bennett, and Perry Como were at the peaks of their fame and productivity, turning out what we now call standards but which were actually huge popular hits. All of these performers bowed at one time or another to the exigencies of commercial pressures even then evident but not yet decisive. You can laugh at Como's *Papa Loves Mambo*, but Sinatra's *The French Foreign Legion*, Cole's *Those Lazy Crazy Hazy Days of Summer*, and Bennett's *Rags to Riches* are not among the jewels of American song either.

Sony has issued a 22-song two-CD Sony of Kitty Kallen's work from the mid-1940s when she recorded *It's Been a Long Long Time* and *I'm Beginning to See the Light* as the band singer with Harry James through to 1965, when she lost her voice, then recovered it, getting a hit in 1962 on a synthetic but clever little song called *My Coloring Book*. In 1965, blood clots on her lung made it difficult for her even to breathe. She would never sing again. The CD reminds us how good she was: intelligent interpretive phrasing, lack of pretense, and a sweet voice which shared with that of Ella Fitzgerald a little-girl quality. Kallen is all but forgotten, which makes it the more illuminating to muse that in 1954 she was voted the most popular female singer in America by the Juke Box Operators Association of America.

It is further startling to realize that during that roughly 25-year period, Johnny Hartman, David Allyn, Frank D'Rone, Felicia Sanders, Sylvia Sims, Tommy Leonetti, Audrey Morris (still singing superbly in Chicago), Jeri Southern, Lurlene Hunter, Nancy Wilson, Kay Starr, Chris Connor (who phrased so late that she frightened me), June Christy (who sang flat but with a naive sincerity), Keely Smith, Peggy King, Joannie Sommers, Betty Bennett, Ethel Ennis, Matt Monroe, Jack Jones, Mel Torme, Steve Lawrence, Edie Gorme, Julius LaRosa (an immensely under-rated performer who is singing his best at the age of 63), and Marge Dodson (a superb singer once my neighbor and very dear friend, now so forgotten that I can't find her), were all performing and recording. So were The Four Freshman, Jackie and Roy, and the Hi-Los. And Marilyn Maye.

Since I don't care for the game of who's-best, when I tell music-loving friends that Marilyn Maye was the best singer I ever heard, they give me a look of pity that gives way to one of incredulity when I play them one of her records. Not even the best opera singers (a lot of whom have intonation that makes me nervous) had her total chops. She had an exquisite sense of phrasing, breath control that made her singing sound seamless, impeccable time, a huge range without any break of color or character from the bottom to the top, astonishing dynamics from a pianissimo (which she favored) to belting power that never produced anything but a beautiful sound, unfaltering musicianship, total control of her vibrato, and the kind of intonation that made your eyebrows levitate. She had deep and sensitive feeling and unfailing taste, though she did on occasion, like everyone else, record material unworthy of her at the insistence of her record label.

Let me add a story to her legend. Marilyn was one of the first singers to record my lyric (Jobim's music), *Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars*. I attended the session, whose producer was Joe Rene, a Dutch Jewish arranger and onetime bandleader who had spent the World War II years hiding with a friend in an attic in Holland. To keep themselves from going mad, they played chess all day every day which, he said, made him a man not to mess with at a chessboard. And he wrote a completely new book for his band, which he reorganized after the war. Later he emigrated to the United States.

Joe, then one of the top producers at RCA, had organized an album for Marilyn called *The Lamp Is Low*. He'd scheduled my song and I'd told Jobim we were going to get this recording by a singer I admired. Alas, Joe placed it as the last song of the two session. The second session, which was in the evening, was from 7 to 10. It ran a little long, and as the clock approached ten, I got nervous. It looked as if the song would be left out. At about 10 to 10, Joe asked Marilyn if she thought she could do it in so little time. She had never seen the song before, or heard it. "Sure," she said. Peter Matz, who had arranged it, ran the chart down ("for notes," as arrangers say -- to eliminate copyists' errors), and said they were ready. It was about 9:56. They began. I held my breath, astonished at her sight-reading, and nervously watching the second hand of the clock, hoping there would be no mistakes. There weren't. She finished about one minute to 10, leaving me limp after the best performance (only Sinatra's equals it) the song ever had.

Not too long after that, Joe Rene, who was also Ethel Ennis's producer, told me, "They," meaning the record executives, who were now being displaced in their jobs by lawyers such as Clive

Davis and accountants, "used to give me two, three, even four or five years to build a singer's name and career. Now they want a hit and a return on the money in a year." Joe proved to be all too prophetic. The wonderful Ethel Ennis was dumped as unprofitable by RCA, and after six or seven albums, Marilyn Maye suffered a similar fate. Ethel went back to Washington to sing for a small coterie of the appreciative, and Marilyn went home to Kansas City, Kansas, and never recorded, at least for national distribution, again, though she would turn up on the Johnny Carson show from time to time and blow everyone away. And Joe Rene left the commercial record industry to make albums for children.

As the record industry, like the movie and book-publishing industries, looked for ever more garish merchandise to sell -- from brains getting splattered on walls to chain-saw killings, from the tits of Madonna to a gruesome series of books on serial killers that Time Warner is currently flogging on television -- all critical standards gradually have been abandoned.

One of the younger critics, Roger Kimball, who didn't begin writing criticism until the mid-1980s, puts it this way: "the purveyors of public-relations cant and hawkers of politicized academic gibberish dispensed an abundance of material masquerading as criticism."

The reference is made in an essay titled *Requiem for the Critical Temper*, which appears in a book called *Beyond the Boom*, meaning the baby boom. "In some respects," Kimball writes, "the new intellectual poverty proved even more corrosive than either the pedantry or the radicalism. The horizon of shared knowledge that educated people could once take for granted suddenly collapsed. To be blunt, people didn't know very much. Yes, the newspapers and press releases assured us that we were awash with 'culture.' More and more people were going to college and graduate school. There were more and more museums, more and more galleries, more and more books, performances, art and non-art events of all kinds. This was the age of the blockbuster -- where record crowds paid good money to file past certifiably important works of art -- as well as the age in which everyone was to be declared an artist . . . . But in the fact the appetite for serious culture -- and *a fortiori* the taste for serious criticism of culture -- was rapidly disappearing."

Kimball continues: "Not only did this mean that the audience for criticism had more or less evaporated, it also meant that the young critic found himself in the anomalous situation where criticism was about the last thing that was wanted from critics. Knowledge, clarity, discrimination, insight: increasingly, these traditional critical virtues were regarded as eminently dispensable. Indeed, they somehow acquired an aura of disreputableness. Too much knowledge is a bit boring, you understand, while clarity is a mark of superficiality; one was told that discrimination is fundamentally elitist -- and insight: what is it, really, except the codification of prejudice? All across the board, in literature, dance, theater, music, and the visual arts, criticism was *out* while politicized cheerleading leavened with a knowing dollop of arcana was *in*.

"It is often said that the '60s had opened up new realms of feeling and experience. Today we see that something closer to the opposite is true. In breaking down traditional barriers, and assaulting conventional strictures in intellectual, artistic, and moral matters, the boomers did not expand the horizon of human experience but perverted it. Among the many casualties was the independent place granted to art and aesthetic experience. Disinterested criticism is a corollary of that independence, and it, too, was a casualty of the politicization of culture.

"In short -- despite the odd exception here and there -- by the mid-'80s cultural life in this country had become something of a wasteland."

In illustration and utter verification of what Kimball is talking about, Colin Larkin, editor of the new *Guinness Encyclopedia of Popular Music*, wrote in his introduction to the work:

"Comparisons between 'serous' music and popular music are not new. For many years pop suffered from an inferiority complex based on class . . . .

"The ultimate intention of this work is once and for all to place popular music shoulder to shoulder with classical and operatic music. It is a legitimate plea for acceptance and tolerance. Popular music is now not only worth of serious documentation, it is worth of the *acceptance* of serious documentation. Like a bottle of fine claret, popular music now has age on its side."

And the Beatles' *Sergeant Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band* is equal to Beethoven's Ninth Symphony (as one rock critic, who had probably never heard the Ninth, said at the time), Madonna is as good as Marilyn Maye, Floyd Kramer plays piano every bit as well as Bill Evans or Rudolf Serkin, Kenny G is Charlie Parker's peer, and the recordings of Eddie Duchin are as valuable as those of Art Tatum.

Johnny Mandel may see a blush of dawn in the two albums by Natalie Cole and Shirley Horne, both of which he wrote for and the latter of which he produced. But in view of the aesthetic relativism proclaimed by Colin Larkin and observed and corroborated by Roger Kimball, which goes with the moral relativism embodied in the policies of Time Warner, the days of the great songs and the great singers would appear to be gone.

There is a French aphorism that I once thought was the foundation of all aesthetic judgment. I believe it comes from Anatole France, but whatever the source, it seemed to me to be a universal verity: Le gout est le resultat de mille degouts. There should be some acute accents on e's there, but my computer won't make them. The phrase won't translate perfectly, but roughly it means: Taste is the result of a thousand

distastes. Why it won't translate perfectly is that "degout" means both distaste and disgust. The process of aesthetic refinement, then, grows from a long series of rejections. Colin Larkin and the Guinness book assert a principle that there are no disgusts, there is nothing to reject. The ultimate populism. A French Swiss journalist friend of mine said once -- and this translates perfectly -- "France is the last refuge of idiot individualism." Colin Larkin's essay is the open assertion of idiot egalitarianism.

Allen Hall, a Jazzletter subscriber who lives in South Haven, Minnesota, wrote to me after reading Fredric Danner's scathing expose of the record industry, *Hit Men*:

"Nowhere in this saga of the greedy, power-crazed, crooked and salacious did I find one word about the tragedy of peddling schlock to a generation of young people. Those kids who bought into the product of manufactured musical celebrities (the Monkees, Fabian, et al) will be artistically stunted forever.

"It is a biological axiom that to be held back while developing dictates that a human or non-human animal will never realize its potential growth. I will almost warrant extension of the axiom to both social and artistic development in humans. I remember how my kids badgered me into letting them go to the Monkees movies, buy the Monkees records, and the Monkees haberdashery. I guess I was too drunk and/or too sick to protest but, at the time, even I knew the Monkees were less than worthless, they were somehow damaging. Worse yet, those kids who idolized irredeemably bad music are now twisted. They cannot express any semblance of critical intelligence about music. It's as though they have been imprinted on bogus and bad music, like a duckling imprinting 'Mother' on the first moving thing it sees once out of the egg. Once imprinted, these kids may never be able to recognize anything but schlock as music.

"Let's say, for argument's sake, that a hundredth of Danner's book is true. Even if that is the extent of it, the book is still a compelling indictment of the rock music business which has been created by and with the complicity of law-breaking lawyers."

Certainly we are not about to enter an era remotely like that when Rodgers, Hammerstein, Carmichael, Kern, Gershwin, Porter, Berlin, Loesser, Fields, Warren, Youmans, Mercer, Dietz, Schwartz, Arlen, Kohler, Ellington, Van Heusen, and more, not to mention that second tier of Carolyn Leigh, Cy Coleman, Matt Dennis and Tom Adair were all working, pouring out a stream of extraordinary popular music, more or less at the same time, and all the singers we have mentioned had record contracts and the active support of major labels.

Colleges and universities have all sorts of courses in jazz singing, producing ever more emulations of King Pleasure, Lambert-Hendricks-Ross, and Manhattan Transfer, but as far as I am concerned, these courses are implicitly hostile to songs themselves in that they are assaults on meaning, the failure to understand that a song is a balanced projection of words and music.

For purposes of the Grammy awards, the National Academy of Recording Arts and Sciences has assigned a category to the new young singers mining the great song lode of the past. "Traditional Pop Vocals." Most of the singers in this group don't quite get it.

They are mannered and self-conscious and, as in the case of Judy Niemack, while skilled, seem to have no spiritual connection to the classic older material they are performing. Niemack, for example, by meaningless personal emendations, utterly butchered Mercer's lyric to *Come Rain or Come Shine* in an album she made with Kenny Barron. She inserted not only syllables but entire words -- far beyond even Sinatra's unfortunate proclivity to this practice -- as if she were correcting Mercer's mistakes. It is a little unfair to single out Niemack, who could grow into a great singer if she ever acquired a re[dacted] confidence in the sound of her quite lovely voice and a grip on the value of simplicity, because there are so many others like her. That's what makes her an interesting case; she has great talent but broken taste. These well-trained women -- there seem to be no men emerging -- have apparently been inculcated with a false aesthetic of hip, the corollary of which is a lack of respect for the songs themselves and the writers who made them. Only a genius like Sarah Vaughan or Carmen McRae is capable of such invention that the song no longer matters, for the performance transcends the material. There are not many geniuses around. And let us not forget that one who was one, Nat Cole, never sang anything but straight melody, and he never, never, never tampered with lyrics.

Roger Kimball again:

"In the academy we have seen the institutionalization of a whole range of radical absurdities. College curricula -- like college faculty appointments -- are increasingly being determined by radical political imperatives. In the name of scholarship, university presses are disgorging mountains of politicized tr[dacted] that is as unintelligible as it is noxious . . . . At its 1989 meeting, the prestigious Modern Language Association countenanced all manner of dubious investigations, including a symposium called *The Muse of Masturbation* at which one could learn all about 'Jane Austen and the Masturbating Girl.' And then there is the extent to which popular culture has invaded the academy, replacing traditional objects of study and providing new grist for the mills of pedantry. The combination of popular culture and French-inspired critical theory has proved to be especially lethal. For example, in an unbearably pretentious study of rock-and-roll music videos by E. Ann Kaplan, a professor of English and director of the humanities center at the State University of New York at Stony Brook, we read that 'the plethora of gender positions on (MTV) is arguably linked to the heterogeneity of current sex roles and to an imaginary (sic) constructed out of a world in which all traditional categories, boundaries, and institutions are being questioned . . . . The romantic video,'

Professor Kaplan concludes, 'functions in the pre-symbolic dyadic terrain between the illusory merging with the mother and the phallicism that follows the mirror phase.' Got that?"

Yes, I got it. She's one of those people who say "arguably".

When you are 15, you think that 50 years is an eternity. As I grew older, a series of shocks made me realize that a hundred years is a blink. One of these was interviewing in 1955 a woman in Louisville who had been born a slave and remembered the Civil War. Still another was meeting Rudolph Friml, whom I had at one time assumed was dead. In 1972 I wrote and hosted a TV documentary on Friml for the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. As I shook his hand, a thought flashed through my mind that I later wrote into my voice-over narration on that scene. Since Friml had studied with Dvorak, and Dvorak knew Liszt, and Liszt knew Beethoven, and Beethoven met Mozart, and they were all presumably polite enough to shake hands, I was only five handshakes from Mozart.

When I was a boy, it occurred to me that there was a remote chance that I would live to see the twenty-first century, though the invention of nuclear weapons made it seem unlikely. Now that new century is approaching us with the weight and power of a train. You remember trains, don't you? Those great iron romantic monsters hurrying through the night, passengers in lighted windows off to adventures in places you could not even imagine, trailing Doppler whistles behind them, red-light signals clanging at the crossroads as they roared on through, celebrated in song by the likes of Johnny Mercer and Harry Warren and Irving Berlin, who wrote *When the Midnight Choo-Choo Leaves for Alabam* in 1912, a year after *Alexander's Ragtime Band*.

When the twentieth century dawned, that great body of American song had not yet come into being. It rose, it flourished, and it was displaced by music of incremental inferiority that was proclaimed as art by the record publicists assigned to sell it and at last enshrined in encyclopedias like that edited by the likes of Colin Larkin.

But for a while there something unprecedented, something magnificent, happened. We shall not see its like again.

Blue Turning Gray

Over the course of about four decades, from just before the start of the 1920s into the 1950s, the United States nurtured a remarkable group of lyricists of high literacy, quick deft imagery, exquisite sonority, wit, and poignancy. This group included Berlin, Fields, Hart, Porter, Oscar Hammerstein II, Frank Loesser, the over-rated Ira Gershwin, the under-rated Howard Dietz, Yip Harburg, and Johnny Mercer. Alan Jay Lerner thought Mercer was the best of them all. I concur.

Just under that group was a tier of less-known but gifted lyricists that included Tom Adair (*Let's Get Away from It All* and *The Night We Called It a Day*) and Mitchell Parish (*Deep Purple* and the incomparable *Stardust*). There was also Andy Razaf, whose life could be described in a phrase John Hammond applied to Fletcher Henderson: a study in frustration. Razaf, in collaboration with Fats Waller, gave us what at one time was one the most notorious double-entendre song in the American repertoire, *Honeysuckle Rose*. Double entendre, of course, is gone now. Sexual songs now are brutally direct, which has the effect of rendering *Honeysuckle Rose* quaintly charming.

Razaf is remembered -- to the extent that he is remembered at all -- as the chief collaborator of the wantonly gifted and sadly undisciplined Waller. But he worked with others, among them Eubie Blake, with whom he wrote the haunting *Memories of You*, and the great stride pianist James P. Johnson. He set lyrics to various big-band instrumentals, such as *Stompin' at the Savoy* and *In the Mood*, not the best of ideas for a lyricist. And he wrote the words for *Keepin' Out of Mischief Now, Ain't Misbehavin', Make Believe Ballroom, Christopher Columbus; That's What I Like About the South; Milkman's Matinee; Blue Turning Gray Over You; Gee, Baby, Ain't I Good To You; The Joint is Jumpin'*; and the disquietingly realistic (in its time) *I'm Gonna Move to the Outskirts of Town.*

Razaf was the grandson of John Waller, no relation to Fats. John Waller was born a slave around 1850 and became a lawyer, orator, delegate-at-large from Kansas to the 1888 Republican National Convention, and in 1891 U.S. Consul to Madagascar. There he got caught in a squabble between the French and American governments for colonial control of that island, and he was for a time imprisoned in France.

Waller's 15-year-old daughter Jennie had married Henri Razafkeriefo, a nephew of the island's Queen Ranavalona, and become pregnant. Henri apparently died fighting the French, and Waller's wife returned to the U.S. with her children, Jennie among them. In Washington D.C. Jennie gave birth to a boy she named Andreas Paul Razafkeriefo, who one day would shorten it to Andy Razaf. The ASCAP Dictionary, a standard reference work, gives the date as December 16. Since the source of the ASCAP biographical entries is usually the songwriter him or herself, the book is not infallibly accurate. Irving Berlin, for example, falsified his birthplace in Russia, for reasons no one knows. Razafkeriefo omits the year of his birth but says the date was December 16. In a biography published by Schirmer and titled *Black and Blue* that will be fascinating to anyone with an interest in the evolution of American song, author Barry Singer says it was 1895 and the date December 15.

It is one of countless details Singer found elusive. In his prologue, he describes the difficulties of his attempt to recon-

struct the outlines of Razaf's life. If in the end he failed, it is not his fault. The trail had long since grown cold, and even the boxes of papers he found in the garage of Razaf's last home could not draw the lines between the dots of the puzzle of Razaf's life. Razaf hardly appears at all in the first third of the book. What does appear is a remarkably fine cityscape of Tin Pan Alley and the Broadway theater world and their relationship to the night life of Harlem during the Prohibition era when the flashy clubs such as Connie Immerman's Connie's Inn and Cotton Club, owned by the gangster Owney Madden, where Duke Ellington became a national name, flourished brazenly without police interference. And Singer chillingly emphasizes the hideous mistreatment of black artists by the power brokers of a music biz that was, by all testimony, even more corrupt than it is now.

If the work of black songwriters and performers emphasized the torrid and wanton sexuality that was supposed to be characteristic of "the Negro", that's because the white publishers and producers perceived the subjugated people that way and demanded that they be shown as lascivious exotics in entertainment designed for white audiences. Jazz as we know it emerged not as a black music meant for black audiences but as a black music for white audiences: indeed blacks were barred from the audiences of Connie's Inn and the Cotton Club, as they were from the clubs of Chicago. The solid citizens of the community were outraged by this image of themselves and by the roaring nightclubs during the period now known as the Harlem Renaissance.

All this is vividly reconstructed in Singer's book. What is missing is Razaf. We seem to be viewing a movie of marvelous backgrounds against which the protagonist moves like a ghost who only occasionally becomes visible. Singer is constantly forced into speculation, even about Razaf's first encounters with Eubie Blake and Razaf's major collaborator, Fats Waller. Singer's portrait of Waller is lively and clear; Razaf keeps eluding him. He writes that "Razaf must have yearned fiercely for . . . . it is likely that Razaf on occasion heard . . . . Razaf may have first encountered (Willie 'the Lion') Smith at . . . . It is also easy to imagine . . . . a firm date remains speculative . . . . Razaf may have met . . . " Much of Razaf's life is irretrievable, history lost to us forever.

But the moments Singer does retrieve are memorable. He describes an afternoon during the pre-Broadway trial of *Hot Chocolates* when the ominous gangster Dutch Schultz, its angel, told Razaf he should insert a song about a little "colored girl" singing about how hard it is to be colored. Razaf said he couldn't write such a song. Schultz slammed Razaf against a wall and shoved a gun in his face, telling the lyricist he would write it or never write anything again.

Razaf wrote it. There are those who consider the song bathetic, but that's a matter of judgment, and judgment is subjective. Every lyricist knows that in this emotional art, you are constantly walking on the edge, in danger of slipping into the lugubrious. The trick is to go to that edge and not slip. And in my opinion Razaf didn't. I consider the song he wrote that day something of a masterpiece: *Black and Blue*. It is probably the pinnacle of Razaf's career, and it has frequently been cited as America's first racial protest song, though that distinction doubtless belongs to various songs in blues form. To those who know it, its recurring refrain line is a throat-constricting indictment of the abuse of an entire people: "What did I do to be so black and blue?"

Singer is resolutely politically correct on racial issues, which leads him into error. He says that the rise of the white bands in the swing era drove the black bands off the scene. Fletch Henderson's band folded because he was a feckless leader. Benny Goodman didn't steal his arrangements, he bought them and assigned Henderson a position of respect as a writer. Ellington and Basie grew more popular during that decade. Lionel Hampton didn't even form his band until 1940, five years after Benny Goodman's breakthrough. Cab Calloway continued to be a smash. Jimmie Lunceford's band went on until his death in 1947, when many of the white bands had vanished. Ellington and Basie led bands and recorded until their deaths in, respectively, 1974 and 1984, and Ellington almost certainly left the richest estate of any bandleader in American history, whereas Woody Herman died in poverty. Hampton still has a band.

And Singer's view of the lyricist's craft is a little odd. Commending one Razaf lyric for wit and being "soundly rhymed", he quotes the couplet:

Why should men approach with caution
Such an extra special portion?

"Caution" and "portion" hardly constitute a sound rhyme, except perhaps in Boston.

A lot of Razaf's rhyming is, in fact, rough and forced, and he inverts sentences to achieve it, a poetic practice that was already fading. And much of his imagery was tired even in his time. But Razaf brought into American songwriting, in the separate songs and in the few ventures into the theater a bigoted world allowed him, a chill realism about the black world, despite all the laughing bawdy songs the business demanded and sometimes got from him. *Outskirts of Town*, which is about infidelity, has a quality common in French songs early in this century but not found much in the great Broadway songwriters, those creators of what the country-and-western people somewhat shyly call uptown music. It is in the best country music and in some of Razaf's songs that you find this kind of gritty realism.

Flawed though it is, *Black and Blue* is a solid and valuable book about an era in an art too little documented. It belongs on the shelf next to Philip Furia's excellent 1990 study *The Poets of Tin Pan Alley*.