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## **The End of Jazz**

How America's most vibrant music became a relic **By [Benjamin Schwarz](#)**



Duke Ellington with his close collaborator Billy Strayhorn ( Underwood & Underwood/Corbis )

Musician, composer, scholar, teacher, perhaps a bit of an operator—albeit of a distinctly nerdy variety—Ted Gioia is also the sort of compulsive, encyclopedically knowledgeable enthusiast the jazz world engenders. (Dan Morgenstern, Will Friedwald, and the winningly neurotic savant and broadcaster Phil Schaap immediately come to mind as other examples of the type.) The author of eight books on jazz, including *West Coast Jazz*, a subtle and sweeping masterpiece of historical reconstruction and musical analysis, Gioia here offers a guide to more than 250 key jazz compositions—the “building blocks of the jazz art form,” as he puts it. He intends that this volume, made up of two-to-four-page entries for each song, will serve as a reference work for jazz lovers and as a practical handbook for musicians: “I have picked the compositions that ... a musician is most frequently asked to play,” Gioia writes. “Not learning these songs puts a jazz player on a quick path to unemployment.” But in meeting those modest goals, Gioia has done nothing less than define what he considers to be the jazz repertoire—that is, the pieces of enduring popularity and significance that form the basis of most jazz arrangements and improvisations.

- [The Jazz Standards: A Guide to the Repertoire](#)

by Ted Gioia

Although he suggests in his introduction that this book satisfies an unfilled need, in fact the Web site JazzStandards.com already provides a similar guide, written by a variety of contributors. But *The Jazz Standards*—issued by Oxford University Press, the world’s preeminent publisher of jazz titles, and informed by a single and esteemed critical sensibility—canonizes the selected works in a fashion that a Web site cannot. The value of such a work, of course, depends on the acumen of the author. In virtually every instance, Gioia delivers.

Take his entry on Billy Strayhorn’s bitter, lovely, transcendent “Lush Life” (1936). It’s clear from Gioia’s out-on-a-limb encomium--“If I were allowed to steal a single song from the twentieth century and make it my own, without a question it would be ‘Lush Life’” that he grasps the singularity of Strayhorn’s triumph, a triumph achieved before the composer was 21, and his characterization of that triumph—“the sheer audacity of ... a love song that denounces romance with such vehemence”—is at once spot-on and as eccentric as the song itself. For his handful of recommended recordings, he naturally enough lists the classic covers, the most famous of which are John Coltrane’s two versions, including his celebrated (and to my mind overpraised) recording with the singer Johnny Hartman. But Gioia also astutely selects Carmen McRae’s relatively obscure rendition, one of the finest vocal versions, and in fact rightly elevates it above the far-better-known versions by Ella Fitzgerald and Sarah Vaughan. Moreover, with great discernment he singles out Stan Getz’s brief, understated, overlooked recording.

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**VIDEO:** Benjamin Schwarz shares some of the greatest jazz recordings of all time, from Frank Sinatra to Billy Strayhorn.

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Still, the most impressive aspect of the entry is Gioia’s assessment of a single word. Strayhorn was openly homosexual, a fact that has led many commentators to somewhat reductively define him as a gay composer, and to congratulate themselves on their knowingness by seizing upon the first lines of “Lush Life” (“I used to visit all the very gay places”) as evidence of supposedly hidden messages in his work. But in a sensible, mild, elegant corrective, Gioia, who studied English at Stanford and is undoubtedly familiar with William Empson’s *Seven Types of Ambiguity*, observes:

Scholars have debated the semantic resonance of the term “gay” back in the Great Depression ... In a song already rich with multiple meanings—even the title “Lush Life” can be taken two ways—the hypothesis that a coded additional level of signification resides in the lyrics cannot be resolved with any finality; yet even if Strayhorn intended this, I suspect he also felt confident that his song lost little in its overall impact when heard by audiences who missed the innuendo.

This perforce thumbnail appraisal of the song can’t match the depth and sophistication of the definitive analysis—Friedwald’s 23-page chapter devoted to “Lush Life” in *Stardust Melodies* (in which Friedwald amply proves his thesis that “it’s hard to think of another piece of music that has anything at all in common with ‘Lush Life’”). Yet Gioia’s entry, in its own way definitive, is but one of a quarter-thousand assessments in this monument to taste and scholarship.

To be sure, in any compilation like this one, the reader is bound to quarrel with the selection of some items and to bemoan the exclusion of others—and I question Gioia’s neglect of four songs in particular. All are pop songs of the period, written by white composers, that began on Broadway or Hollywood but acquired new, and much longer, life by having been played, and importantly transformed, by jazz musicians both black and white. The first is Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart’s “Where or When.” The finest version of that song, and among the earliest—the pared-down recording that Peggy Lee and the Benny Goodman Sextet made in a New York studio on Christmas Eve 1941, barely two weeks after America entered the Second World War—speaks to the quavering uncertainty of that historical moment and remains, for me, the most poignant jazz record ever made. Surely that rendition, along with the versions by Artie Shaw, Clifford Brown, Ella Fitzgerald, Sonny Rollins, Sinatra with Count Basie, and, more recently, the too-often unnoticed Tierney Sutton have earned the song an important place in the jazz repertoire. The same goes for three Cole Porter compositions: “In the Still of the Night” (recorded by Charlie Parker, Billy Eckstine, Charles Mingus, Miles Davis, and Oscar Peterson, among many, many other jazz musicians of the first rank), “Begin the Beguine” (Artie Shaw’s version is among the most popular records in jazz history; Django Reinhardt, Parker, Dizzy Gillespie, Coleman Hawkins, and Erroll Garner also recorded it), and “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” (important covers include those by Cab Calloway, Parker, Clifford Brown, Stan Getz, Bill Evans, and Earl Hines—and of course, Sinatra’s is one of the most swinging recordings ever produced).

Most of the jazz standards began on Broadway but acquired much longer life by having been transformed by jazz musicians, both black and white.

These four songs are all indisputable entries in the so-called Great American Songbook—a notional catalogue of classic popular songs, a body of refined, complex work that stands at the apogee of this country’s civilization, mostly written for the musical theater from roughly the 1920s to the 1950s by such composers and lyricists as Porter, Rodgers and Hart, Jerome Kern and Dorothy Fields, Irving Berlin, George and Ira Gershwin, Harold Arlen and Yip Harburg, Vincent Youmans, and Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz. Items from the Songbook form by far the largest portion of Gioia’s selections, and indeed of any conceivable version of the jazz repertoire. The great overlap between the Songbook and the jazz catalogue largely explains a fact that troubles Gioia—that his book can enshrine “few recent compositions”—and raises doubts about his assertion, supported by passion rather than by argument, that “the jazz idiom [is] a vibrant, present-day endeavor.”

The Songbook and jazz evolved symbiotically. As the critic Gene Lees showed in an important essay in *The Oxford Companion to Jazz* (2000), the creators of both were musically sophisticated men and women who inevitably and profoundly responded to each other’s work. (Lees’s scholarship made clear the deep musical education of the jazz pioneers, and in the process put to rest the “subtly racist” idea that “jazz was created intuitively by a gifted but ignorant people in some sort of cultural vacuum.”) The result: the Songbook formed the lingua franca of jazz; its material provided the basis on which to assess a performer’s improvisations; and jazz musicians constructed their own compositions on the chord structures of its entries. For example, as Lees, James Lincoln Collier, and other musicians and scholars have demonstrated, Arlen’s “Between the Devil and the Deep Blue Sea” gave rise to George Wallington’s “Godchild.” The chords of Morgan Lewis and Nancy Hamilton’s “How High the Moon” are the foundation on which Charlie Parker built “Ornithology” and John Coltrane assembled “Satellite.” The Gershwins’ “I Got Rhythm” alone begat Sidney Bechet’s “Shag”; Lester Young’s “Lester Leaps In”; Count Basie’s “Jump for Me”; Duke Ellington’s “Cotton Tail” and “Love You Madly”; Dizzy Gillespie’s “Dizzy Atmosphere”; Parker’s “Red Cross,” “Dexterity,” “Moose the Mooche,” and “Steeple Chase”; Thelonious Monk’s “Rhythm-a-Ning”; Davis’s “Swing Spring” and “The Theme”; and Sonny Rollins’s “Oleo,” among many other compositions.

Of course, a number of original jazz compositions entered the Songbook when the Songbook’s lyricists put words to the music—most famously Ralph Burns and Woody Herman’s “Early Autumn” (lyrics by Johnny Mercer), Erroll Garner’s “Misty” (lyrics by Johnny Burke), and Ellington’s “Mood Indigo” and “Sophisticated Lady” (lyrics by Mitchell Parish, whose other credits include “Star Dust” and “Stars Fell on Alabama”). By the way, Gioia fails to recommend the superb, ethereal versions of those two Ellington classics by the Boswell Sisters, singers of largely ephemeral pop who were also among the greatest jazz vocal innovators in history.

Sinatra—who named Billie Holiday as his “single greatest musical influence”—is almost certainly the most important hinge joining jazz and the Songbook. No figure in American music did more to establish and celebrate the Songbook (from his emergence in 1939, as Friedwald avers, “he immediately established himself as the acknowledged leader of the movement to win recognition for this music as an art form”)—and few figures were as esteemed by, and exercised as profound an influence on, jazz musicians. In the critic Leonard Feather’s famous poll, Sinatra was named all-time favorite singer by, among others, Buck Clayton, Davis, Ellington, Stan Getz, Benny Goodman, Gerry Mulligan, Oscar Peterson, Bud Powell, Horace Silver, and Lester Young.

John Lewis, the music director of the Modern Jazz Quartet, noted: “Jazz developed while the great popular music was being turned out. It was a golden age for songs. They had a classic quality in length and shape and form and flexibility of harmony. The jazz musicians were drawn to this music as a source of material.” The Songbook, a product of a fleeting set of cultural circumstances when popular, sophisticated music was aimed at musically knowledgeable adults, was the crucial wellspring of jazz. Both jazz and its progenitor are worthy of radical—indeed, reactionary—efforts to preserve them. But despite Gioia’s ardency, there is no reason to believe that jazz can be a living, evolving art form decades after its major source—and the source that linked it to the main currents of popular culture and sentiment—has dried up. Jazz, like the Songbook, is a relic—and as such, in 2012 it cannot have, as Gioia wishes for it, an “expansive and adaptive repertoire.”

Benjamin Schwarz is *The Atlantic*’s literary editor and national editor.