

Current Books

Olson's account, like the essays by the women themselves, describes the emotional devastation that followed SNCC's decline and implosion. The feeling of loss, of "searching for the kind of meaning and fulfillment" of the early years of the movement, has haunted many alumni, black as well as white, men as well as women. As Casey Hayden confesses to Olson, "It's hard

to sense that you've peaked in your twenties and that nothing is going to touch this afterwards."

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Name That Tune

READING LYRICS.

Edited by Robert Gottlieb and Robert Kimball. Pantheon. 706 pp. \$39.50

Reviewed by James Morris

What good is a song
If the words just don't belong?

Jay Livingston and Ray Evans didn't get around to asking that question in a song ("To Each His Own") until 1946, but the sentiment was hardly new then, and it hasn't aged a day since. The common wisdom is that words and music are inseparable, a taken-for-granted couple like love and marriage, horse and carriage. And yet, the music of many a song lives without its lyrics. So how would the words to those same songs fare if sent orphaned into the world? On the evidence of this hefty brief for independence, the lyrics on their own would have an up-and-down time of it, and a lot of them would go hungry. But that's not to say they don't deserve a shot at freedom.

Gottlieb and Kimball gather the words of more than a thousand American and English popular songs written during the first 75 years of the 20th century as if the sum of them made a new species of Norton poetry anthology. And throughout the collection, the lyrics have the look of poetry. They're in slivers down the page:

What'll I do
When you
Are far away
And I am blue
What'll I do?
(Irving Berlin)

Or they grow to Whitmanesque width:

And list'nin to some big out-a-town jasper
hearin' him tell about horse race gamblin'
(Meredith Willson)

Or they find distinctive cadences in between:

My ship has sails that are made of silk—
The decks are trimmed with gold—
And of jam and spice
There's a paradise
In the hold.
(Ira Gershwin)

But though they may look like poetry from a distance, they mostly lack good poetry's denseness and complication. Of course, they don't need to be poetry. They're pliant and colloquial and always meant to be only half of a whole. The stronger the claim of lyrics to poetic independence, the less comfortable they'll be making the accommodation to music.

Poetry—even poetry that may fall comfortably and intelligibly on the ear when recited—makes its first impression on the page and allows a reader to linger over its complicating devices. Lyrics are written to be heard and apprehended more or less immediately, which is why the emotions in them are so direct and simple—simple-minded even ("Tea for Two," for goodness' sake). But wrap what is spare in

a transforming cloak of sound, and the embarrassing simplicity can become bliss. Take the following:

Of thee I sing, baby—
Summer, Autumn, Winter, Spring, baby.

The words are Ira Gershwin's, and maybe there's some vague promise in the formality of the four opening words against the jolt of "baby," but nothing more. Add George Gershwin's notes, and those same words launch an anthem.

For giving lyricists their due, this is a book to treasure, and plainly a labor of love. Gottlieb, a jazz buff, was once editor of the *New Yorker*, and Kimball edited or coedited collections of the lyrics of Cole Porter, Lorenz Hart, Gershwin, and Berlin. All the great lyricists are here (Berlin, Gershwin, Porter, Hart, Oscar Hammerstein II, Stephen Sondheim, E. Y. Harburg, Johnny Burke, Leo Robin, and more), along with others who managed to be proficient often enough, or at least once. The editors invoke an unimpeachable criterion: "Singableness was our final test for every song considered for inclusion." On page after page, they introduce individuals whose names we never knew or have long since forgotten, but whose legacy we take for granted: Herman Hupfeld ("As Time Goes By"), Roy Turk ("Mean to Me"), Mort Dixon ("Bye Bye Blackbird"), William Engvick ("While We're Young"), Edward Heyman ("Blame It on My Youth"), Edgar Leslie ("For Me and My Gal"), Noble Sissle ("I'm Just Wild about Harry"), Haven Gillespie ("Santa Claus Is Comin' to Town").

Gottlieb and Kimball give every prominent lyricist a paragraph of introduction and biography, and append to each set of lyrics the name of the composer who made them into song. In the index, each song title carries its year of composition and its provenance (if the source was a

show or a movie), and the name of the performer who first sang it. So *Reading Lyrics* has all the credentials to be a proper reference volume—and even stronger claims to be a shameless reminiscence volume.

For every reader, this will be a different book from page to page, and sometimes from one part of a page to another. The reason is simple: if you know the music to a set of lyrics, you read the words to its cadences. Unavoidably. The words can't escape the hospitable shackles of their tunes. They dance and strut, or languish and sigh, or glide and whirl to the sounds in your head. But when you bring to the page only silence, the plain words may look awfully wan, unable to manage so much as a twitch.

The real pros overcome the disadvantage. Lorenz Hart, funny and rueful and doomed, never met an internal rhyme he didn't like:

Sir Philip played the harp;
I cussed the thing.
I crowned him with his harp
To bust the thing.
And now he plays where harps are
Just the thing.

Or:

I may be sad at times
And disinclined to play
But it's not bad at times
To go your own sweet way.



Ira Gershwin in 1956

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Cole Porter can glitter on the page, particularly when he's on a tear in one of those giddy catalogue songs ("Let's Do It," "You're the Top," "It's Delovely," "Let's Not Talk about Love," "Brush Up Your Shakespeare"). "Fred Astaire" rhymes with "Camembert" and "Zuider Zee" matches "broccoli," the refrains multiply and the show-off names proliferate—drawn from headlines and from history, from literature, geography, and mythology, from social norm and proper form. Maybe Porter labored over the lyrics for days or weeks, but on the page, and in the hearing, they have a spontaneous rush. The man was so sly and smart that he could pay tribute, at once, to the English music hall, the Broadway showstopper, and the bawdiness of Shakespeare:

If she says your behavior is heinous,
Kick her right in the "Coriolanus" . . .
When your baby is pleading for pleasure,
Let her sample your "Measure for Measure."

You don't need an education to get Berlin, but for Porter (as well as Sondheim, Noel Coward, Alan Jay Lerner, and others), a little schooling helps.

On the other hand, a lifetime of learning won't help you decipher what Alan and Marilyn Bergman intended in "The Windmills of Your Mind," a song that lets the simile police declare an emergency:

Round like a circle in a spiral,
Like a wheel within a wheel. . . .
Like a snowball down a mountain
Or a carnival balloon,
Like a carousel that's turning,
Running rings around the moon.

Unrepentant, the Bergmans plant "the meadows of your mind" in a second song, and it appears on the very same page of this anthology—wicked Gottlieb and Kimball! Perhaps those meadows have windmills for grass.

This tribute to one particular type of 20th-century American song—the kind born on Broadway and in Hollywood and up and down Tin Pan Alley—is an elegy as well. The songwriting skills the country once took for granted, because they were so common, had only the common American

75-year run at life. Songs such as these disappeared along with radio and TV hit parades, movie musicals, and Broadway shows that had music instead of notes. The discipline to write them is lost, the audience to hear them dulled. Many an assassin played a part, but those dreary sung-through shows of the past generation—*Jesus Christ Superstar*, *Cats* (in which the helpless T. S. Eliot had a dead hand), *Les Misérables*, *Miss Saigon*, *Phantom of the Opera*, *Aspects of Love*, and such—were among the most efficient. Those burdensome theatrical events seemed designed not to delight but to lumber like failing elephants to the cultural graveyard of PBS pledge week.

How do Gottlieb and Kimball disappoint? By omission, of course; every reader will regret the absence of some favorite ingenuity (I vote for Sondheim's rhyming of "raisins" and "liaisons"). They also make odd mistakes of punctuation and transcription—an exclamation point where the music calls for none ("In other words, please be true!"); the strange-looking "Madem'selle" in a Lerner lyric, when what's plainly sung on the first recording is "Made-moi-selle." Perhaps they're only reproducing what they found on the sheet music, but in "I'm Through with Love," for example, wouldn't the line make more sense as "I have stocked my heart with icy, frigid air," and not "with icy frigidaire," the refrigerator being a bulky encumbrance for the narrow confines of a heart?

In the words of Ira Gershwin, "Who cares?" It may be possible to trace through these hundreds of pages an imagined course for the 20th century, from "By the Light of the Silvery Moon" innocence to Sondheimish resignation ("Quick, send in the clowns. Don't bother, they're here."). But the book needs no ponderous scheme to make it significant. To these words, through these words, generations of Americans fell in and out of love, fretted and pined and recovered, celebrated and grieved, grew up, grew wise, grew old. If you open to one page, you'll be lured to the next, and the next. Measured against the enticements here, the Sirens' song was only scales.

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