

the rant

GETTING UNDER MY SKIN

For me, listening to 'Shadows in the Night'—Dylan's homage to Frank Sinatra—is like eating anchovies on ice cream

by John Stark | Monday, March 9, 2015

Like Michael Feinstein, Harry Connick Jr. and Michael Bublé, I am a staunch defender of the "Great American Songbook." Written mostly before the end of World War II, those songs belonged to my parents' generation. They're the songs I loved hearing as a kid, and still love.

My musical tastes were cemented early in life by the vocal interpreters of these compositions, from Billie to Frank to Billy to Bing. As a young man, I had no interest in Pink Floyd or the Grateful Dead; I didn't need their music or a joint to get high. I just had to put on any one of Ella Fitzgerald's songbook albums from her Verve years, where she paid tribute to the likes of Cole Porter, Duke Ellington and Rodgers and Hart. To quote the Gershwin brothers, "Who could ask for anything more?"

After decades of being eclipsed, the "Great American Songbook" made a comeback in 1982. It was the year I bought my first Linda Ronstadt album, the Grammy Award-winning "What's New?" It was the first of three LPs in which she teamed with Nelson Riddle and his Orchestra to sing (exquisitely so, sans gimmicks) the classic songs of the 1920s, '30s and '40s. I even went to see her perform with Riddle at the Orpheum Theater in San Francisco.

I loved Ronstadt for bringing back this sophisticated art form, and for exposing it to a new generation. But over the years I've also come to hate her for it. In her wake have come a flood of recordings by misguided rock stars, folk singers and opera singers, all of whom decided to step out of their musical comfort zones to sing the songs of Irving Berlin, Harry Warren, Harold Arlen, Johnny Mercer and the gang. They include Carly Simon, Sinead O'Connor and Wagnerian soprano Jessye Norman.

The latest to join the fold is Bob Dylan, whose new CD, "Shadows in the Night," pays homage to the romantic songs of Frank Sinatra.

Maybe Dylan figures that if raspy-voiced Rod Stewart can make a fortune in his senior years singing the "Great



Illustration by Drew Friedman

American Songbook" as of all five albums of them—then so can he. Stewart has become the Margaret "Big Eyes" under... Keane of the genre. The purist interpreters of those songs, like Mel Tormé, Nat King Cole, June Christy, Anita O'Day, Billy Eckstine and Sarah Vaughn, knew how to play it cool, avoiding sentimentality. Tony Bennett is still going strong—even teaching Lady Gaga how to do it right.

No one can ever accuse Dylan of being a great singer. Still, when I heard he was about to release an album of Sinatra songs, I remained open-minded. I had, after all, heard Peggy Lee, Rosemary Clooney and the legendary Mabel Mercer perform at the end of their careers. They could still deliver, even if they practically talked their songs. The same goes for Jack Jones, who in his late 70s is still recording. I reasoned, because Dylan is anything but schmaltzy, he just might pull it off. He certainly appreciates great lyrics.

Dylan tells AARP magazine in its latest issue, "I love those songs, and I'm not going to bring any disrespect to them. To trash those songs would be sacrilegious. And we've all heard those songs being trashed, and we're used to it. In some kind of ways you want to right those wrongs."

So it was with great hope that I downloaded "Shadows in the Night." Believe me, I've tried my best to listen to his croaky renditions of such standards as "Some Enchanted Evening," "What'll I Do?" and "Full Moon and Empty Arms," but hard as I try I can't make it to the end of a song. And it's not just because he's so painfully out of tune and can't hold notes. I can't bear hearing Oscar Hammerstein's elegant, mellifluous lyrics reduced to "Who can give ya reasons, who can tell ya why." For me, listening to "Shadows in the Night" is like eating anchovies on ice cream.

In the late 1950s and early '60s, conductor and arranger Paul Weston and his wife, the great jazz singer Jo Stafford, recorded five albums under the pseudonyms of Jonathan and Darlene Edwards. The albums involved Weston playing songs on the piano in unconventional rhythms, while Stafford sang off-key in a high-pitched voice. My favorite of them—which I possess in its original vinyl—is "Jonathan and Darlene Edwards in Paris." In this LP they deliberately massacre songs about the City of Light, including Porter's "I Love Paris" and Kern's "The Last Time I Saw Paris."

For that send-up, Weston and Stafford took home the Grammy Award for Best Comedy Album of the Year. Maybe Dylan will too.

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Jeri Golovin Gillin · Poughkeepsie High School

I think you have to be a true Dylan fan to appreciate the wistfulness that some of these songs reveal. While I don't think his is, by any means, the best cover of them, I still like what his version brings.

Reply · Like · 1 · March 12 at 10:45am



Paul Besmertnik · Top Commenter · Owner/ President at Engineering Consultant. Please visit BesmertnikHomeInspections.com

Some of the covers work well, like in any album. Chill

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John H Mckeown · Top Commenter · Mott Community College

Linda Ronstadt and Rod Stewart did a pretty good job. However, Bob Dylan singing classical songs by Sinatra would be like Johnny Cash singing Motown songs.

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Helen Grohusky

I agree. He should sing these songs in the privacy of his shower at home.

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