
It is possible to determine songwriters from the latter half of the 20th century who fit into the Great American Songbook canon. For many, the Songbook era ended with rock and roll; Wilder ends with 1950. However, many songwriters have persevered in continuing this style of writing, in cabaret, in theater, in film and in television. Near the end of Johnny Carson’s run hosting the Tonight Show, Joe Williams introduced a new standard, Here’s to Life by Artie Butler. In retrospect, radio personality and Songbook devotee Jonathan Schwartz has described it as ”America’s classical music.”[2] What makes these songs classic is their lasting value for one, but in structure, musical content, phrasing, and details of composition, they remain close to classical music, the difference being context and a greater emphasis on rhythm and closeness to speech rather than pure singing. The biggest threat to this music has been the long period in which there were no variety shows on which new songs could be introduced to the public, and the declining use of songs in movies, as well as the filtering in of commercial rock and pop influence on Broadway shows. Nevertheless, in the 1970s-90s, one could still encounter wonderful songs by Henry Mancini, Michel Legrand, the lyricists Alan and Marilyn Bergman, Johnny Mandel, and many other composers still active, especially in Hollywood.

### Songwriters and songs

There is no definitive list of musicians and lyricists whose work constitutes the Great American Songbook, but the following writers and songs are often included:

and Dance", "There's No Business Like Show Business", "I've Got My Love to Keep Me Warm")


- **Hoagy Carmichael** ("Stardust", "Georgia on My Mind", "Lazy River", "The Nearness of You", "Heart and Soul", "Skylark")

- **J. Fred Coots** ("I Still Get a Thrill [Thinking of You]", "Love Letters in the Sand", "Santa Claus is Coming to Town", "For All We Know", "A Beautiful Lady in Blue", "You Go to My Head")


- **Duke Ellington** ("In a Sentimental Mood", "It Don't Mean a Thing (If It Ain't Got That Swing)", "Satin Doll" (with Billy Strayhorn), "Mood Indigo", "Sophisticated Lady", "Take the "A" Train", "I'm Beginning to See the Light")

- **Sammy Fain** ("I'll Be Seeing You", "That Old Feeling", "Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing", "April Love", "Tender is the Night")


- **Herman Hupfeld** ("As Time Goes By", "Let's Put Out the Lights (and Go to Sleep)")

- **Bart Howard** ("Fly Me to the Moon")

- **Isham Jones** with lyrics by Gus Kahn ("It Had to Be You", "I'll See You in My Dreams")


- **Frank Loesser** ("If I Were a Bell", "Slow Boat to China", "Standing on the Corner", "Baby, It's Cold Outside", "Luck Be a Lady")

- **Jimmy McHugh** ("I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby", "I'm in the Mood for Love", "Don't Blame Me", "On the Sunny Side of the Street", "Exactly Like You", "It's a Most Unusual Day")
• **Johnny Mercer** (4-time Academy Award winning lyricist: "On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe", "In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening", "Moon River" with Henry Mancini, "Fools Rush In", and "Days of Wine and Roses"; wrote music and lyrics for "Dream", "Something's Gotta Give", and "I Wanna Be Around"; wrote lyrics for "Midnight Sun", "Day In, Day Out", "Laura" and "I Remember You")


• **Harry Ruby and Bert Kalmar** ("Who's Sorry Now?", "Thinking of You", "I Wanna Be Loved by You", "Three Little Words", "Nevertheless", "A Kiss to Build a Dream On")


• **Jule Styne** ("Time After Time", "Guess I'll Hang My Tears Out to Dry", "I Fall in Love Too Easily", "Diamonds Are a Girl's Best Friend", "Let It Snow! Let It Snow! Let It Snow!", "People", "Don't Rain on My Parade", "Just In Time", "Saturday Night (Is the Loneliest Night of the Week)", "The Party's Over")


Fe", "This Heart of Mine", "You'll Never Know", "My Dream Is Yours", "I Wish I Knew", "Serenade In Blue", "Nagasaki", "(I've Got a Gal In) Kalamazoo", "That's Amore", "Innamorata")


- **Jack Yellen** with Milton Ager ("Ain't She Sweet", "Happy Days Are Here Again", "Big Bad Bill (Is Sweet William Now)", "Glad Rag Doll", "Hard Hearted Hannah (The Vamp of Savannah)", "Louisville Lou (That Vampin' Lady)" with Lew Pollack, "My Yiddische Momme")

- **Vincent Youmans** ("Tea for Two", "Time on My Hands", "More Than You Know", "(The) Carioca", "Sometimes I'm Happy", "Without a Song", "I Want to Be Happy")

- **Victor Young** ("I Don't Stand a Ghost of a Chance with You", "Stella by Starlight", "Love Letters", "My Foolish Heart", "When I Fall in Love", "Around the World")

**Style and structure**

**Style**

Despite the relatively narrow range of topics and moods dealt with in many of the songs, the best Great American Songbook lyricists specialized in witty, urbane lyrics with teasingly unexpected rhymes. The songwriters combined memorable melodies – which could be anything from pentatonic, as in a Gershwin tune like "I Got Rhythm", to sinuously chromatic, as in many of Cole Porter's tunes – and great harmonic subtlety, a good example being Kern's "All the Things You Are", with its winding modulations.

**Structure**

Many of the songs in the Great American Songbook are in thirty-two-bar form. Many were composed for musicals, and some originally included an introductory sectional verse.

The sectional verse is a musical introduction that typically has a free musical structure, speech-like rhythms, and rubato delivery. The sectional verse served as a way of leading from the surrounding realistic context of the play into the more artificial world of the song, and often has lyrics that are in character and make reference to the plot of the musical for which the song was originally written.

The song itself is usually a 32-bar AABA or ABAC form, and the lyrics usually refer to more universal and timeless situations and themes – typically, for instance, the vicissitudes of love. This greater universality made it easier for songs to be added to or subtracted from a show, or revived in a different show.

A few of the songs which were written with an introductory sectional verse are nearly always performed in full with the introduction. However, the sectional verse, if it exists, is often dropped in performances of Great American Songbook songs outside their original stage or movie context. Whether or not the sectional verse is sung often depends on what the song is and who is singing it. For example, Frank Sinatra never recorded "Fly Me to the Moon" with the introductory sectional verse, but Nat King Cole did.
• **Singers**

• **The early years**
  - Since the 1930s, many singers have explicitly recorded or performed large parts of the Great American Songbook. Lee Wiley was among the first to record collections of one specific songwriter or songwriting team, beginning with George Gershwin and Ira Gershwin (1939), followed by Cole Porter (1940), Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart (1940), Harold Arlen (1943), Irving Berlin (1951) and Vincent Youmans (1951).

• **Contemporary singers**
  - Over the last several decades, there has been a revival of the Songbook by contemporary singers.
  - In 1970, Ringo Starr released *Sentimental Journey*, an album of 12 standards arranged by various musicians. In 1973, Grammy-winning singer-songwriter Harry Nilsson released a critically well-received album of 12 classic standards, *A Little Touch of Schmilsson in the Night*, arranged by Gordon Jenkins. The album was re-issued on CD in 1988 with a total of 18 standards sung by Nilsson. Also in 1973, Bryan Ferry, of Roxy Music fame, released *These Foolish Things*, and he has subsequently recorded several such albums. In 1978, country singer Willie Nelson released a collection of popular standards composed by such notables as Hoagy Carmichael, George Gershwin, and Irving Berlin titled *Stardust*. This was considered risky at the time but has become perhaps his most enduring album.

  "*What's New* isn't the first album by a rock singer to pay tribute to the golden age of the pop, but is ... the best and most serious attempt to rehabilitate an idea of pop that Beatlemania and the mass marketing of rock LP's for teen-agers undid in the mid-60s. During the decade prior to Beatlemania, most of the great band singers and crooners of the 40s and 50s codified a half-century of American pop standards on
dozens of albums, many of them now long out-of-print.\[5\]

- In 1991, Natalie Cole released a highly successful album *Unforgettable... with Love*, which spawned a Top 40 hit "Unforgettable", a virtual "duet" with her father, Nat "King" Cole. Follow-up albums such as *Take a Look* were also successful.

- Since the mid-1980s, vocalists such as Michael Feinstein, Harry Connick, Jr., Michael Bublé, Diana Krall, Jane Monheit, Karrin Allyson, Susannah McCorkle, John Pizzarelli, Stacey Kent and Ann Hampton Callaway have been notable interpreters of the Songbook throughout their careers. Michael Feinstein in particular has been a dedicated proponent, archivist, revivalist, and preservationist of the material since the late 1970s.

- **Other singers**
- Since 1980, various established singers in unrelated genres have also had success in treating the Songbook. Beginning in 2002, Rod Stewart has devoted a series of studio albums to Songbook covers, indeed using the "Great American Songbook" name explicitly. Other rock and pop artists who have utilised the work include Keith Richards, Carly Simon, Bette Midler, Gloria Estefan, Barry Manilow, Caetano Veloso, Pia Zadora, Queen Latifah, Joni Mitchell, Boz Scaggs, Robbie Williams, Sting, Ray Reach, Pat Benatar, Morrissey, Norah Jones and Rufus Wainwright, with a great variation of musical success. In 2012, Sir Paul McCartney joined this list with the album *Kisses on the Bottom*. John Stevens, a 2004 *American Idol* contestant, also gave exposure to this trend. Steve Tyrell has forged a successful solo career with his interpretations of songs from the Great American Songbook. His version of "The Way You Look Tonight" for *Father of the Bride* (1991) was noticed and kept in the film at the insistence of its star, Steve Martin. This led to several albums, including *A New Standard, Standard Time*, and *Bach to Bacharach*.

**References**


**Further reading**


**External links**

- The Society for the Preservation of the Great American Songbook
- The American Songbook Preservation Society
- Popular Songwriters and The Great American Songbook
- Interview with Entertainer and Music Historian Max Morath
- Michael Feinstein Foundation for the Preservation of the Great American Songbook


**Great American Song Book Reading List**

Want to learn more about the Great American Songbook? Select from this non-exhaustive, and highly informative, list of publications to build your knowledge of this special music.


Gavin, James  INTIMATE NIGHTS: The Golden Age of New York Cabaret

Williams, Gary  CABARET SECRETS

Winer, Deborah Grace  THE NIGHT AND THE MUSIC: Rosemary Clooney, Barbara Cook, and Julie Wilson