

David Michael Hertz

Indiana University, Bloomington

Love, the Body and the Dance in the American Songbook (1910-1960)

The main topic of the American Songbook was romantic love in all its aspects, from joy to despair, and every conceivable emotion in between these two extremes. The form of the songs was based in eight-bar phrases, often in a sequence of just four of them, but sometimes spun out to longer lengths. Within this tautly controlled form, song lyrics became more visceral, more psychophysical, and more related to everyday life in the modern world. The dances associated with jazz became part of this new type of love song, celebrating the new rhythms, based in syncopation, and generating a freer movement of the human body, both on stage and in the rapidly developing art form of sound film. This essay explores some of the most significant songs that intertwine the love song with the brashly modern lyrics, the jazz-inflected harmonies and rhythms, and the new dances that were associated with the songs and choreographed in unforgettable films.

Keywords: Song, lyric, love song, dance, jazz, Tin Pan Alley, Jitterbug, Terpsichore, tap dancing, musico-poetic structure, words and notes, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Ira Gershwin, Dorothy Fields, Jerome Kern, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers, Betty Hutton, Gene Kelly, James Van Heusen, Sammy Cahn, Johnny Mercer, Frank Loesser, Frank Sinatra

According to Jean-Jacques Rousseau, a composer as well as a famous philosopher, language and music were invented together.¹ I

¹ Rousseau, *Essai sur l'origine des langues où il est parlé de la mélodie e de l'imitation musicale* (published posthumously in 1781). Rousseau, who worked as a music copyist, composed six operas and a number of theoretical pieces on music.

would supplement Rousseau’s hypothesis by adding that ever since poetry and music have existed, whether they were invented together or separately, they have been brought together in the hybrid art form of the song, and, moreover, ever since this was accomplished, there have been love songs, sung all over the world, sung seductively or out of desperation and despair, an essential expression of human experience. The troubadours sang of love (unrequited, especially), the Romantic composers wrote extended cycles about love (mostly mournfully), setting the texts of Jeitteles, Rückert, Müller, Goethe, Heine and many other poets of the era, poets both of great literary significance and minor in importance.²

But one of the most impressive collections of love songs, both in terms of quantity and quality, was surely created during the period known as the era of the American Songbook, which had roots in the early Tin Pan Alley period and lasted until around 1960. The great love songs produced during this era – now receding into history – are still known and sung all over the world, receiving reinterpretation after reinterpretation (known in the music business as “covers”) well into the 21st century.

There are reasons for this concentration on the genre of the love song. For one thing, it was a relatively safe topic, if not universal then widely understandable, a readily available and permissible subject in an era of history marred by racism. It was a genre open to many sorts of musicians, black and white, theatrically-based or jazz oriented, and, eventually, even to those hired to create songs to be utilized and distributed in the burgeoning new world of film. On the other hand, it was a topic that fit the bold and sensuous new rhythms of jazz and the contemporary language used in the newly modern lyrics of the jazz age.

The Tin Pan Alley format which became the basis for the Songbook was short and designed to hook listeners so that they remember the songs easily, whether they wanted to or not, and would then buy more copies immediately. The simple 32-bar chorus of these songs has been

² Ted Gioia has surveyed the topic of love in music recently in *Love Songs: the Hidden History*. See also the classic study by Rougement, *Love in the Western World*, which shows the long fascination with the topic of love and various ways in which it has been sentimentalized and commercialized throughout western history.

likened to Haiku, since it is just made up of four eight-bar phrases, but it is a bit more complex than that, since it is a hybrid of two art forms functioning in conjunction, poetry and music, working together in many different and sometimes mysterious ways. All songs, in fact, are a hybrid form with two extremely different systems of communication, one based in words, the other musical notes, and notes and words combine in many different ways, sometimes complimentary, sometimes even oppositional, to express the full art of the genre.

The first Tin Pan Alley bestsellers were sold as sheet music in the 1890s, but by 1920 recordings were readily available and people wanted to collect them. The early Tin Pan Alley songs were filled with nostalgia and often designed as “tearjerkers”, at first possessing overly verbose verses with silly Victorian moralism or tales of fallen women from the countryside, or the lost world of “mother” and the rural homestead. Ragtime stopped all that, as did the introduction of colloquial, everyday speech, modelled on African American speech.³

The Tin Pan Alley music industry gradually fashioned its own type of love song, but these were love songs written in a new way. As sentimental topics and nostalgia were weeded out, song lyrics became more boldly realistic, more evocative of modern life as it was lived and expressed in the contemporary world. Early examples of the new trend are Sheldon Brooks’s “Some of These Days You’ll Miss Me Honey” (1910); Jerome Kern and Herb Reynold’s “They Didn’t Believe Me” (1914); Charles Warfield and Clarence William’s “Baby, Won’t You Please Come Home?” (1919); and Irving Berlin’s “What’ll I do?” (1923).

The more it was clear that these new types of songs would sell, the more the ingenious entrepreneurs of Tin Pan Alley found songwriters who could produce them. Over time, the 32-bar chorus won out as the best frame for the anti-sentimental expression of everyday life, the direct expression of visceral lived experience in words and notes crying out with the immediacy of freshly felt emotion.

But the concentration on the accurate description of psychological experience also leads to an important subgenre in this great body of

³ Furia, *Poets of Tin Pan Alley*, 25.

songs. These are the songs that concentrate on the experience of bodily sensation and movement, including, especially, the dance.

Dance was important in the innovation of the new Songbook. Of great significance to the industry were the dances for ordinary people that evolved in conjunction with the new songs. Each new dance that followed ragtime liberated the movement of the body and allowed for the intertwining of dance partners in new ways. Daring new rhythms, rhythms not European, influenced by the cultures of Africa, were the heartbeat of the new songs. Americans were drawn to each new dance, right from the first formations of the Tin Pan Alley style. Some of the dances were: the Fox Trot, the Charleston, and various forms of the swing dance such as the Lindy Hop, the Balboa, and the Collegiate Shag (all at times characterized as types of the Jitterbug). These new dances were in 4/4 time, a broader time scheme that allowed for both more instrumental improvisation and freer movement. The older waltz time of European music was for the most part left behind. 4/4 time allowed for more syncopation, and therefore more imaginative expression of bodily movement in relation to music.

But that was for ordinary people.

Great dancers stepped out on the stage or into film and dazzled the world. These great talents, who were often also choreographers, invented a new type of virtuosic dance movement, inspired by minstrelsy, *vaudeville* performance and other elements that came together in the new culture of the modern world, evolving also with the melding of jazz and popular song. Foremost among the creators of the new dancing were Vernon and Irene Castle, Fred and Adele Astaire, Ginger Rogers (who followed Adele as Astaire's second great partner), and Gene Kelly. This tradition of strong dancers evolved from *vaudeville*, to Broadway shows and finally to film. As the late governor of Texas, Ann Richards once famously said, Ginger Rogers did everything Fred Astaire did, but "backwards and in high heels."⁴ Other strong female dancers, with similar or even greater ability, who appeared with Fred Astaire during his astonishing career were Marilyn Miller, Rita Hayworth, Jane Powell, and Betty Hutton. Foot drumming and other types of percussion sounds

⁴ Although Richards was probably not the first to say this.

made by the feet were a part of minstrelsy and early *vaudeville*, adapted again and again and stylized as Broadway developed in the 1910s. As choreographer Mark Knowles has shown, the roots of tap dancing are Irish, English, West Indian, and, most importantly, African, developing in New Orleans, and even on southern plantations, subsequently evolving from circuses and carnivals. Multi-cultural is too weak a word for the blending of styles in this new dancing, which might be termed poly-cultural to complement its polyrhythmic character.⁵ Emerging out of these earlier performance practices, a new choreography made up of tap dancing and jazz dancing were 20th century innovations that evolved along with the new songs. Strong male and female dancers rose to stardom. It was not enough to sing well. Moving well became important on Broadway and in early Hollywood films and the movement of the human body became a topic in the new songs.

Crucial to the development of the Songbook and jazz are songs that celebrate dance, but that do not have powerful lyrics. Songs such as “Tiger Rag” (1917),⁶ James P. Johnson’s “The Charleston” (1920), and Duke Ellington’s famous “It Don’t Mean a Thing (If It Ain’t Got that Swing)” (1931) record the relationship between how human beings move and how popular song develops. They call attention to the energy of modern dance, anthems for the intersection of song, jazz and popular dance.

Other songs take us deeper into human experience via stronger lyrics, lyrics imbued with more intense and sometimes darker emotions, expressing the reactions of body and mind to the powerful drug of love, as sentimentalized in the world of the Songbook. Some of these songs used the standard Tin Pan Alley 32-bar form. Two of these are by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart: “Ten Cents a Dance” (1930), a song about a “taxi dancer” who must dance for a living but who longs to find her “hero”, and “Dancing on the Ceiling” (1930), a charming song about an infatuated lover who sees his lover dancing in the shadows above him on

⁵ Knowles, *Tap Roots: The Early History of Tap Dancing*, 7-73.

⁶ The initial composers of this multi-authored song referred to themselves as “jass” musicians (predating *jazz* as a commonly understood term). They were Nick LaRocca, Eddie Edwards, Henry Ragas, Tony Sbarbaro, and Larry Shields. Lyrics by Harry De Costa were added in the 1930s.

the ceiling all night long, imagining it as a special upside-down dancing floor.⁷ “Dancing On the Ceiling” was cut from the original musical for which it was intended, but it later became a standard anyway. Another song, “Dancing in the Dark” (1931), by Arthur Schwartz and Howard Dietz, expresses the urge to dance through the night to discover love and brighten up the night, while it all builds up to a splendid high note on the title phrase of the song.

“Fascinating Rhythm,” the Gershwin classic of the 1920s, didn’t express much about what was on the mind of the singer of the lyric, except for the fact that he or she was happy to be alive and feeling the wondrous energy of rhythm, and, indirectly, it captures the 1920s vitality of New York, the city in which the song was born. Fred and Adele Astaire realized the music in choreographed time-space on the Broadway stage, bringing together dance, text and music in a combination that expressed the exuberance of the 1920s. George Gershwin himself, inspired by the energetic performances of the Astaire siblings, asked them to “travel” across the stage, from the center to the exit, while, as Astaire points out, they also “kicked out simultaneously” as they “crossed back and forth in front of each other with arm pulls and heads back.”⁸ It was not enough for Gershwin for the dancers to do all that. They had to move sideways as well. It was a perfect visual expression of the very complex and dynamic rhythmic energy in Gershwin’s own piano playing and composing.

While “Fascinating Rhythm” concentrates on the joy of rhythm in the Jazz Age, “I Got Rhythm” is something else again. The idea of rhythm now is connected to a love song, as expressed in an outburst of energy, expressing the joy of love, early in its moments of realization, capturing its most natural exuberance. It comes from *Girl Crazy* (1930), one of the last musicals the Gershwins wrote for Broadway.

⁷ Almost every song listed here and in this essay in general has a rich representation on the Internet, where many performances are available on YouTube or Vimeo and almost all of the lyrics are published in multiple places. Many songs also have earned long *Wikipedia* entries, improved over time. All of this is evidence of the continued interest in these songs in popular culture worldwide, and is, in fact, popular culture itself unfolding on our computer screens.

⁸ Fred Astaire’s autobiography as quoted in Riley, *The Astaires: Fred and Adele*, 105.

“I Got Rhythm” was by far the blockbuster hit of *Girl Crazy*. On opening night, Ethel Merman, who was awarded a big role after her audition, and who was then very young and full of lung power, drove the audience wild, especially by holding a single note, a high C, for the entire 32 bar chorus.⁹ “I Got Rhythm” soon became one of the main sources of the chord changes used by jazz musicians, so much so that the chords of “I Got Rhythm” were known as the “rhythm changes.”¹⁰ Quickly adopted as a favorite for Lindy Hop and other Jitterbug dancing, it also became one of the important songs for jazz dance improvisation, culminating in the superb dancing of Gene Kelly in the 1950 film, *An American In Paris*.¹¹ In this film, which features a rich selection of Gershwin music, Kelly plays a poor American painter in Paris who sings and dances “I Got Rhythm” as he teaches it to an intrigued group of French youngsters.

Other songs found their iconic choreography earlier. Written just a few years after “I Got Rhythm,” Cole Porter’s “Night and Day” (1932) brought together the spell of love as it inhabits mind and body, celebrated in poetry, music and dance. Will Friedwald has written a whole song biography of “Night and Day” which investigates almost every possible aspect of the song and its history.¹² It was originally written for the musical *Gay Divorce*, and might have even been inspired by a Muslim chant (the chorus) and the dripping drain pipe at Vincent Astor’s “cottage” in Newport, Rhode Island (verse). “I must have that eave mended” said Mrs. Astor.¹³ To my ear, the single notes repeated again and again, both in the long introduction, and in the chorus (or refrain) give a very strong sense of obsession, something that Porter is particularly good at exploring in his art. The chorus is a grand length of 48 bars, but with six phrases of 8 bars.¹⁴ As is the custom with Porter’s long songs, the phrase lengths are conventional, but the larger formal details may not be.

⁹ Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*, 472.

¹⁰ Friedwald, *Stardust Memories*, 203.

¹¹ Pollack, *George Gershwin: His Life and Work*, 479.

¹² Friedwald, *Stardust Memories*, 242-275.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 249.

¹⁴ The form is best described as ABA1B1CD because the phrases change, and D is final combination of A and B.

Fred Astaire was unable to grasp the unusually long song at first, but it eventually worked for him, as he learned to both sing the song and dance to it. Astaire, who was more agile as a dancer than a singer, was probably put off by the strange contour of Porter’s melody – the repeated notes for the words “night and day,” sometimes reversed to become “day and night,” and by the large vocal range and challenging chromaticism in the song. Notes repeat, but when they finally change, they change in strange ways. This Porter song is almost as chromatic as Duke Ellington’s contemporaneous “Prelude to a Kiss,” but the notes outside the usual major and minor scales in Porter also serve to communicate what it is to be obsessed by someone “night and day.” It is unsettling to feel this and so a settled tonality wouldn’t do, as Porter clearly understood.

The song and dance were soon recast in a new film, *The Gay Divorcee* (1934), with a slightly changed title to take attention away from the then still scandalous concept of “divorce.” In the film, Fred Astaire’s character seduces Ginger Roger’s in the choreographed song, which requires an interplay of word, music and the filmic recording of elegant movement. We easily discern what is happening in the dance, but the cinematic camera, with its close-up, can tell us what is going on by the change in Ginger Roger’s eyes, as Friedwald points out. Nevertheless, I am reminded of the mating dance of varied birds when I watch Fred perform for Ginger in this famous number. Men in tuxedos do resemble penguins, even when they move well, and spread their arms as if they are wings allowing for flight.¹⁵

The success of “Night and Day” touched off a new string of songs that were filmed with dancers, and soon it was no longer necessary to merely redo songs from theatrical shows. Irving Berlin’s “Cheek to Cheek” (1935), written for the film *Top Hat*, is part of this new genre, songs that are born in film, not created first for *vaudeville*, or musical theatre. At once, the film-engendered song has to take into account a

¹⁵ Some of the most delightful dancing birds who may well be Fred Astaire’s true precursors are readily found on YouTube. The BBC Planet Earth “Birds of Paradise mating dance” is a good example of a bird that hopes to mate. See also National Geographic, “Birds ’Moonwalk’ to Impress the Ladies.” Other birds simply enjoy rhythm.

very complex inter-artistic relationship: poetry, music, choreography and cinematic *mise-en-scène* are intertwined right from the start. The song immediately has a performer who dances (although the singing is pre-recorded off camera and lip-synched, as was customary), and in this case, since it is choreographed and sung by Fred Astaire, a multi-talented artist, who first planned out the dance with his dependable male colleague, Hermes Pan. Eventually, he was joined by the busy Ginger Rogers, who was brought in after the dance had been designed.

Writing for all of these great talents, Berlin created a long middle section for “Cheek to Cheek,” breaking out of the expected 32-bar AABA mold to write an expanded form of 72 measure in length that might be described as ABABCCDAB! The lyric for the very unusual middle section is as follows:

Dance with me
I want my arm about you;
The charm about you
Will carry me through to...

It takes us back to the opening words and music of the first phrase of the song:

Heaven, I'm in heaven,
And my heart beats so that I can hardly speak
And I seem to find the happiness I seek
When we're out together dancing, cheek to cheek.

The word “to” leads daringly from one section to “heaven” in the other, teasing the listener who expects to hear once again, in the culminating phrase of the song, why the singer is in “heaven.” The answer is in the close dance, “cheek to cheek.” This extended form is extremely unorthodox in the highly commercial world of Hollywood, but Berlin, fashioning his own words and notes to fit together in an ideal match-up, is able to pull it off beautifully.

Another tune that celebrates dance in its very title is Irving Berlin’s “Let’s Face the Music and Dance” (1936), composed for the movie

Follow the Fleet, yet another film starring Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers. The main phrase of Berlin’s cleverly devised tune seems to begin somewhere in middle Europe, or maybe Berlin’s native Russia, or somewhere in the thriving Yiddish theatre of the era, but it ends in jazz timing, and it is in the combining of the various influences that it becomes special. The contrast of minor and major tonalities is something that Berlin, who was not supposed to know much about harmony, manages to do in a very sophisticated way in this song as well as a number of his other songs (such as “Blue Skies” and “How Much Do I Love You”). It also has an unusual phrase structure, one of the few that doesn’t have a series of eight bar phrases.¹⁶ Here the pattern of writing a Russian-Jewish flavored introduction that transitions into a rag or jazz-inflected chorus, common in early Tin Pan Alley songs, has been done away with, and we see one complete song that seems to be a new type of hybrid. It is filmed as another dramatic mating dance for Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers, with Fred and Ginger starting in stillness, their characters at the point of despair, even suicidal, but then, as the music picks up and the male dancer sings to the female partner, they come together and dance, not just facing the music, but creating great art as they dance to it.

Whereas Fred Astaire created the image of the elegant male jazz dancer, Gene Kelly created a much more muscular and acrobatic approach. He first appeared on Broadway as the notorious anti-hero of *Pal Joey*, the innovative 1940 musical by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, which was based on John O’Hara’s short story series in *The New Yorker*. In realizing Joey onstage, Kelly created a new version of masculinity in modern dance. Another song in *Pal Joey*, “Bewitched, Bothered and Bewildered” is sung by one of his love victims, who is so beside herself, so upside down in her feelings for Joey, that her melody goes upside down in the bridge of her 32-bar chorus.

Jerome Kern was the composer who inspired both Gershwin and Rodgers to incorporate jazz sounds into their music. Kern had been active on Broadway since the early years of the 20th century and most

¹⁶ This unusual song is 56 bars long and is A (14 bars), A1 (sixteen bars), B (8bars), A (18 bars). However, it is a type of AABA form, though unorthodox.

historians credit him with writing the first “standard” in 1914, but he continued to develop as a songwriter until the end of his life. Kern’s 1930s tunes are also of great quality. Although Kern’s career was established in the musical theatre, his songs crossed over surprisingly well to film. The most obvious instance of this is his work for *Roberta*, the 1935 RKO film musical which featured Fred Astaire, Ginger Rogers and Irene Dunne in starring roles. *Roberta* had been a Broadway musical in 1933 and the film kept three songs from that: “Yesterdays,” “Let’s Begin” and “Smoke Gets in Your Eyes.” All of these later became standards.

New songs were also added for the film version of *Roberta*, and the most outstanding of the new songs was “I Won’t Dance,” resurrected from a completely different failed Broadway show but now retrofitted with a brilliant new lyric by Dorothy Fields. Kern had received a good lyric for “I Won’t Dance” by Oscar Hammerstein II and Otto Harbach. But his second lyric, written by Dorothy Fields, was even better. The film incarnation received a magnificent performance by Fred Astaire at his most charming.

For the new lyric, Fields creates a surprising level of psychological complexity that is so astonishing in many of these Songbook tunes, which are usually made up of just four phrases (in the chorus). The singer, male or female, proclaims “I won’t dance” but everyone knows that that is exactly what is desired, and more than that – more than merely dancing – *love is desired*. The push and pull of the love story, which is almost always a combination of mixed emotions, from initial resistance, emerging desire and hesitation, and more, all are caught in the work of art.

Rodgers and Hart did something similar with “I Wish I Were in Love Again,” but that song hits you over the head with its comical list (“broken plates, hateful hates... I wish I were in love again”). “I Won’t Dance” seduces you with the subtle interplay of words and notes. Here the music sends us special signals that indicate that the lyric is protesting too much. This is because the music itself, with its swank and catchy syncopated moves, makes it impossible not to want to dance while the singer proclaims just the opposite. There is no need for words and notes to convey exactly the same thing. Opposition can tell us more, but then

resolution comes as the song ends. Clearly the singer *will dance*, and *love will happen*. A novelist or playwright might take hundreds or even thousands of words to convey the same thing. Here it is all done in just a few phrases of words and notes. On the other hand, the little hesitations in the words and notes come together beautifully to make it very clear that what is going will lead to dancing and love, but only after inner struggle.

In the film version of *Roberta*, Ginger Roger’s character does everything she can to entice Fred Astaire to dance. He eventually erupts into a wild dance sequence, and it is one of the most charming scenes ever filmed in Hollywood.

While Kern first influenced Gershwin years ago, things may have now reversed. Just before the singer proclaims “I won’t dance” there is a little rest, making the syncopation that follows on those words all the catchier and all the more difficult for us to believe what the person who sings is proclaiming. This is very similar to what happens in “I Got Rhythm,” which begins, in the sheet music, with a little rest before the first “I got rhythm” in the lyric. In both cases, this offbeat start generates energy. While the form of “I Won’t Dance” is the traditional Tin Pan Alley AABA, there is some daring in the construction. Kern goes out for some very long phrases here, far more than eight bars each. Each phrase is 16 bars long. It is very catchy all the same.

Dance was not the only way in which the biological and psychological aspects of love were brought together in the era of the Songbook. The human experience of love is brought out in a new way, for example, in the Harold Arlen and Johnny Mercer classic “That Old Black Magic” (1942). The tune is what Arlen often described as a “snake song,” which is his term for one of his longer songs, in that it extends out into time for 72 measures (the same length as Berlin’s “Cheek to Cheek”), again breaking away from the old Tin Pan Alley mould. Scholars have recently theorized that Mercer’s lyric for the song was prompted by his affair with the young Judy Garland.¹⁷ Perhaps it

¹⁷ The three 21st century biographies of Johnny Mercer all mention this: Furia, *Skylark: The Life and Times of Johnny Mercer*, 179-80; Lees, *Portrait of Johnny: The Life and Times of John Herndon Mercer*, 161; Eskew, *Johnny Mercer: Southern Songwriter for the World*, 161.

was. In any case, the singing ‘I’ who describes the experience of love is swept up on an “elevator ride,” then down, as in “down and down I go.” Mercer’s lyric is describing psychological states that are felt deep within the body. He or she is losing control, psychologically overcome by the power of love. It is a modern expression, not sentimentalized, but very material, very recognizable, and very psycho-physical. The Arlen and Mercer classic uses one of the central innovations of jazz, syncopation, to emphasize the disorientation of the singing ‘I’, who is caught in the spell of the “black magic” of love. Almost the whole long, extended song, is off the beat, not on. Mercer is often touted as one of the greatest poets of popular song lyrics. Here he brings together inner psychological and bodily sensation with concrete images from the external world. It is one of his great talents as a lyricist.

Classics from the Songbook tradition that celebrate dance and love together tend to be longer and less formally constricted than the tighter 32-bar form that was so central to the success of popular songs as they evolved from Tin Pan Alley to Broadway to Hollywood. The expression of dance and dance-related topics and choreographed scenes in films did require composers to expand outward into longer time-shapes. However, some compact forms also call for dance, and intertwine the themes of dance and love in highly efficient ways. Also, sophisticated arrangements always enabled the repeat of a bridge and a last iteration of an A phrase, or a modulation to a new (often higher key), or simply a repeat of the whole 32-bar chorus, as needed. More time could be found for even the most minimal song to enable a jazz dance to be choreographed and performed in theatre or filmed, allowing more time for improvisation as well.

A wild celebration of love as expressed in dance and song is to be found in the whirlwind madness of “I Can’t Stop Talkin’ About Him,” which is by Frank Loesser, a late master of the Songbook genre who, like Porter and Berlin, was able to write both words and music. It is from the 1950 film *Let’s Dance*. Betty Hutton and Fred Astaire do a brilliant dance performance of the song in the film. Hutton also sings it flawlessly, making her a double threat, just like her partner Astaire. Dance and exuberance, even madness, combine as the singer pronounces the words at what seems like tremendous velocity and dances at the

same time, until the phrase explodes. Giacomo Rossini was a master at this sort of patter song, which was quite common in Italian opera. With his new style of jazz-inflected songs for theatre and film, Loesser matches Rossini.

The era of the great Hollywood musicals, however, was already over after the end of World War II. By the late 1950s, the jazz-influenced songwriters were increasingly facing unemployment as rock and roll dominated more and more of the music world with each passing month. The old rhythms and harmonies of jazz seemed less attractive to the younger audience of teenagers, a group with steadily increasing purchasing power, and who craved the simpler sounds of rhythm and blues.

To his credit, Frank Sinatra encouraged and supported a number of the greatest talents by simply performing and recording some of the best of this late-blooming group of songwriters. Among them, Sammy Cahn and James Van Heusen teamed up to write some of the most memorable and underrated classics of the American songbook. One of them, “Come Dance with Me” (1959) celebrates the movement of the body in dance with a new virtuosity, culminating on a wild chain of syncopation.

Oddly, the lyric contains the word, “Terpsichore” which refers to dance. In colloquial American English, *terpsichore* would qualify as a “fifty cent word,” but one with a history.

Terpsichore, whose name means “delight in dancing,” was one of the nine muses, daughter of Zeus and Mnemosyne, and mother of the sirens. It is surprising that she turns up in the vocal of a jazz song as sung by Frank Sinatra. But she already had received a reference in the jazz era. Earlier, there was a reference to Terpsichore in *vaudeville* when Danny Kaye joined a group called *The Three Terpsichoreans*. Also, there is a street in the Faubourg Lafayette, the tenth ward of New Orleans, the city in which jazz was invented.¹⁸

¹⁸ See *Wikipedia*’s “Terpsichore” entry. The scholarly reader may wish to consult the *Oxford Classical Dictionary* (online), sv. “muses,” or Grimal, *Dictionary of Mythology*, sv. “Terpsichore.” However, it is the writers of *Wikipedia* who point out the charming usages of the word in popular culture.

Cahn's insouciant lyric heightens the jagged jazz shapes of Van Heusen's melody right from the beginning of the famous chorus:

Hey there cutes, put on your dancin' boots and come dance with me
Come dance with me, what an evening for some Terpsichore
Pretty face, I know a swingin' place, come on dance with me
Romance with me on a crowded floor

The lyric later includes a reference to Irving Berlin's classic:

When the band begins to leave the stand and folks start to roam
As we wing home, cheek to cheek we'll be

Finally, in the last phrase, the songwriters take a last liberty with the AABA format, adding a final, culminating chain of syncopations on the words "come on:"

Come on, come on, come on! Come on, come on, come on!
Hey there! Come on and dance with me

The enjambed rhythms fall on the word "on" in "come on," repeated six times, creating a kind of rhythmic traffic jam, building up tension with repetition after repetition. Then there is a musical echo (with no words), followed by the cry of "Hey there!" After this, the song finally breaks through to the last exclamation on "come on and dance with me." In musical form, the cramming together of so many instances of the same idea creates a *stretto* effect, although there are not many vocal lines here, as in a Bach fugue, but one only. Most important, each 'on' is an example of jazz syncopation at its finest. It is off the beat, pushing forward in a way that contravenes the downbeat, building tension and also a sense of movement.

Chopin and Mozart knew how to build up tension, sometimes repeating a short phrase until a breakthrough moment comes when the phrases ripen into a longer extension of the idea, a final flowering in musical time. Here Kahn and Van Heusen do it in a classic jazz song

style, which is also, in its own way, delightfully effective, and a model of musico-poetic structure.

Finally the song resolves in a glorious outcome, a final call to the dance floor. In our imagination we should try to conjure up the unnamed couple implied in the song – which concerns an eager and infatuated dancer calling out to a prospective partner – finally joining together to do a fantastic dance, for it is one of the last jazz dances in the Great American Songbook.

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