Singers and the Song

Gene Lees

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Foreword

These brilliant essays are as difficult to describe, and certainly to pigeonhole, as the restless original mind that produced them. The author calls this "a collection about singers by a writer who is a singer," but that is a little like calling *Moby Dick* a book about a whale hunt. This is about Americans. Gene Lees knows that the best of American music, jazz—and even the worst of Top Forty and disco—tells us who we are, where we came from and where we're going. He knows that if you made a thorough study of American classics like Armstrong's *West End Blues*, Ellington's *Ko-Ko*, Parker-Gillespie's *Shaw 'Nuff*, if you knew everything that went into the making of such miracles of brevity and everything that leaked out of them into the mainstream of our culture, you would arrive at a clearer understanding of contemporary America than you'd get from any number of sociology courses.

All the essays in this book, and the companion volume on instrumentalists that will follow it, first appeared in the *Jazzletter*, a remarkable journal published, edited, circulated by mail, and largely written by Gene Lees. Accepting no ads and meeting few deadlines, the *Jazzletter* has a thousand-odd subscribers who include the cream of jazz musicians (Dizzy Gillespie, John Lewis, Artie Shaw, Gil Evans), film composers (Henry Mancini, Johnny Mandel), film-makers, critics, singers, music educators, and mag-

azine editors, in addition to Gene Kelly, Dudley Moore, and Steve Allen who bought about three dozen subscriptions to send to his friends. Only I. F. Stone's *Newsletter* compares with it.

This stubborn little publication tapped into an underground of holdouts against the Mickjaggerization of America, odd folk who knew that Jerome Kern was as great a songwriter as Franz Schubert, who warmed to Baryshnikov when he said it was Fred Astaire's dancing that lured him to America, who care what happened to singers like Dick Haymes, and who prefer the folklore of jazz musicians to the gossip of fan magazines.

The *Jazzletter*'s creator is a combination of music critic, classical as well as jazz, linguist, translator, and biographer. Critics are not supposed to bare their vulnerable throats by going on the road and recording as singers, but Lees was a singer before he became a critic, and a lyricist whose words to Jobim's *Quiet Nights of Quiet Stars* and Bill Evans' *Waltz for Debby* have been recorded by every vocalist of stature from Tony Bennett to Ella Fitzgerald. So when Lees writes about Sinatra, he not only tells us he's great, he clarifies why in a way that no one else ever has. "Anybody who thinks Sinatra was just the boy next door," Lees says, "has a plentiful lack of knowledge of the art he brought to such perfection." His letters, which many people keep, are, like his conversation, full of surprises. For example: "Among singers, we all know how good Perry Como really is. I've never encountered a critic who knew it."

The *Jazzletter* came into being in 1981. Lees had just published a radically new rhyming dictionary, based, he says, on the patterns of French rhyming dictionaries. He had wearied of writing of all kinds, lyrics included, except for a prodigious correspondence with his close friend Julius La Rosa, a highly articulate man whom Lees considers one of the best singers in the business. He sensed after a time that he didn't hate writing but only writing brief pieces on complex matters to fit the space restrictions inevitable in publications such as *Saturday Review, Stereo Review, High Fidelity,* and *Down Beat.* "Without knowing it," he says, "I needed a larger form and was finding it in my correspondence with Julie. I can't tell you how much he had to do with my return to writing."

One day Lees sent a letter to his legion of musician and singer friends to ask whether they would be interested in a music newsletter, if he were to start one. A week later his mailbox was full of subscription checks.

From the beginning, the *Jazzletter* was not restricted to jazz, any more than this book is restricted to American singers. It is not so much about jazz musicians as *for* jazz musicians, reflecting the richness and variety of their interests and of those who are drawn to this music. Lees is not given to picking over the dried bones of jazz musicology but offers fresh nourishment about Edith Piaf, of whom Americans know little, and the late film composer Hugo Friedhofer, of whom we know nothing. When Friedhofer died, his friends asked Lees to handle the press. Lees telephoned the *New York Times* to give the paper the information for an obituary. He found that the people on the arts-and-entertainment desk had never heard of this revered patriarch of film scoring. The *Times* printed not one line about the passing of this historic figure. "That did it," Lees says. "I said to myself, 'We cannot continue at the mercy of amateurs promoted from the city desk. We have to have a publication of our own.' Hugo's death was the proximate cause of the *Jazzletter*."

In the extraordinary *Pavilion in the Rain*, Lees destroyed the persistent myth that the Big Band Era was killed off by bebop and television, showing with the meticulous care of the newspaper reporter he once was that the primary cause was the systematic dismantling of the public transit system. This essay has gained currency among university educators. *Pavilion in the Rain*—and for that matter, the entire book—should be assigned reading in colleges as an exquisite remembrance of that vital time "when so much popular music was good and so much good music was popular." One is tempted to quote its magical opening paragraph, evocative of Fitzgerald, but I leave you to discover it for yourself.

The essays in this book are not idly strung together but carefully selected to be read in sequence, beginning with *William and Harold and How to Write Lyrics*, one of the most original and readable things on the roots and development of the English language

yet to see print, and ending with the awesome four-part *A Journey to Cologne* wherein the universality of jazz binds together the youthful poems of Pope John Paul II as adapted by Lees for a suite of songs sung by Sarah Vaughan and performed by an exalted conclave of American expatriate and European musicians, assembled by a visionary Italian ringmaster and conducted by the Argentinian Lalo Schifrin in one of the most-bombed cities of World War II. This great essay is best read in conjunction with hearing the record album that resulted from the project, although it stands perfectly well on its own.

The conflicting themes of war and creation run through the entire collection, coming together at last in *A Journey to Cologne,* which in passing unfolds the wit, sensitivity, and gruelling anxieties of its author. It is an apt climax to this magnificent book.

—Grover Sales

Grover Sales teaches jazz history at San Francisco State and Stanford universities and is the author of Jazz: America's Classical Music.

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The minstrel boy to the war is gone,
In the ranks of death you'll find him;
His father's sword he has girded on,
And his wild harp slung behind him.

—Thomas Moore

William and Harold and How to Write Lyrics

In the autumn of 911, the Frankish king Charles III, known as Charles the Simple, unable to halt the bloody Viking incursions on his northwestern coast—indeed, the longships had gone up the Seine as far as Paris—made the best of a bad situation by coming to an agreement with the marauders. This was the so-called treaty of St. Clair-sur-Epte. Charles allowed them to settle permanently in an area to which in due course they lent their name. They were, in their own language, *nortmanni,* northmen. A little over a thousand years later some of their far-distant descendants would come from places as yet not dreamed of, such as Quebec and Winnipeg, Wichita and Chicago, Rimouski and Hoboken and San Diego, to land once more on these shores, young men bearing names derived from the *nortmanni,* such as Beaudry and Dupuis, Plumber and Draper, and Fitzgerald. They called the beaches here by new and alien names—Utah and Omaha, Sword and Gold—and many of them would die in the surf or flinging their grappling hooks up the cliffs or climbing the ropes with rifles on their backs, die in their struggle to come home to their ancestral Normandy.

In return for his undoubtedly grudging generosity, Charles got an agreement from the *nortmanni,* whose leaders became the dukes of Normandy: they were to keep the other Vikings off his neck, support his monarchy, and speak the language of the coun-

try, which was already recognizable as French, a dialect of the soldier Latin left behind by the long-vanished Roman garrisons. He thereby initiated the chain of historical events that determined how people who speak English as their primary language actually think, tell jokes, express anger, make love, and write songs.

Charles the Simple might be called the grandfather or possibly the midwife of the English language. But whatever we call him, had he not allowed the Vikings to settle in Normandy, the Franco-Germanic hybrid we call English would not exist.

The Normans were a ruthless, energetic, bellicose people with a taste and a talent for power. One of their dukes had by his mistress a son, a boy who was called William the Bastard. This is not a flattering name, and so after he defeated the army of King Harold near Hastings in September of 1066 and had himself crowned King of England, he saw to it that he was henceforth known as William the Conqueror. This is called public relations.

Conquerors are notably disinclined to learn the language of their subjects. We may surmise that this is because they are so busy with more important things, such as appropriating land, giving themselves titles, selecting the best of the local girls, and dispensing justice to those who object. In time the conqueror's language is perceived as that of the successful—the rich and the powerful who evolve into an emplaced aristocracy. To this day names like Beaumont and Clairmont and those with the prefix "de" seem to people who speak English to have more class than those of Anglo-Saxon origin. Traces of the social strata extant under the Normans are preserved in surnames. Those of craftsmen are English, for example Baker, Fisher, Hedger, Shepherd, Shoemaker, Wainwright, Weaver, Webber. But those of skilled artisans are French—Carpenter, Draper, Mason, Plumber, Tailor. And of course Irish names beginning with Fitz, corrupted from *fils de*, son of, are all Norman French.

Legal proceedings were conducted in French. This continued until the Plague killed so many people that there were not enough French-speaking judges to go around and English at last became the language of the courts. But by then the very vocabulary of the

law was almost entirely French, excepting Latin technical terms such as *sine die* and *nollo contendere,* and thus it remains: *tort, appeal, justice, jurisprudence, arraignment, verdict, illegal.* For nearly three hundred years, until 1362, Parliament (itself a French term) spoke French.

But though the common people learned a certain amount of French, they did not forget their own language, which in our time is referred to inaccurately as Anglo-Saxon. The Angles and Saxons were only two of the Germanic peoples who had brought their languages to England. The Danes had been there, and they left their mark in place names ending in *-by,* such as Rigby. Old Norse also made up part of the language which, by the time Harold caught an arrow at Hastings, was already known as English.

Once the flow of French into English was begun, it never ceased. And whereas the first influence was Norman French, Central French later penetrated the language. Thus we find in English a whole series of separate but related words imported from those two forms of old French—*catch* from Norman French, *chase* from Central French, the *w* of the former replaced by a *g* in the latter: *warden* and *guardian, warranty* and *guarantee, wage* and *gage, reward* and *regard.* Indeed, English preserves many traces of the evolution of the French language that French itself does not. These include any number of words imported twice, both before and after French dropped an *s* and replaced it with a circumflex accent over the vowel—*hostel* and *hotel,* for example.

Because the French were the aristocracy, to this day things in French seem so, well, *chic,* that we continue to import French terminology insatiably, adding to the English vocabulary such words as *couturier, coiffeur, chemise, culotte, chef, maître d'hôtel* (now assimilated to the point of the truncated "mater dee"), *hors d'oeuvre, cuisine, à la mode, à la carte, au gratin, au jus,* and *table d'hôte,* reflecting a profound admiration for French food and fashions. So great was French pioneering in the field of flight that its vocabulary is still extensively French—*aviation, aviator, aileron, fusillage, nacelle, dirigible.*

Latin remained the language of the scholars. For three centuries England's literature was not just bilingual but trilingual. There is a "pop" song of the period that contains these lines in French, English and Latin:

Ma très duce et très amé,
night and day for love of thee,
supiro.

English continued to borrow from Latin words that had already entered it in their French forms, giving us such pairs as *blame* and *blaspheme, chance* and *cadence, count* and *compute, dainty* and *dignity, fealty* and *fidelity, frail* and *fragile, poor* and *pauper, ray* and *radius, spice* and *species, strait* and *strict, sure* and *secure.*

With their pride of language broken, the English became wanton in their importations from other languages, eventually taking in *shampoo, bungalow,* and *pajama* from Hindi, *typhoon* from Chinese, and *tycoon* from Japanese. An enormous amount of Spanish has come into English through the American Southwest, and the process is accelerating.

But of all the languages to which English is indebted for the richness of its vocabulary, none compares to French. Roughly half the language is French or else derives from Latin words that are also used in French. The other half derives from Anglo-Saxon or Old Norse. The result is that English seems to have two words, or more, for almost everything. Those that derive from Anglo-Saxon seem earthier and more immediate than those from French, as in the pairs *freedom-liberty, friendship-amity, hatred-enmity, truth-verity, lying-mendacity, domicile-home.* Consider your own response to those two French words *hostel* and *hotel* and that Anglo-Saxon word *inn.* An inn seems older, more intimate, cozier, than a hotel, with good plain food and a fire. The words for basic things and concepts tend to derive from Ango-Saxon: *heaven, earth, hell, love, hate, life, death, beginning, end, morning, night, day, month, year, heat, cold, way, path, meadow, stream.* But we use French or Latin or sometimes Greek words to cope with and express abstractions. When we use a French word instead of the Anglo-Saxon, it has an

effect of intellectuality and detachment. English contains the French word *crépuscule* but it does not have the emotional heat and evocative power of *dusk, twilight, sunset,* and *sundown.*

I have often wondered whether a language shapes the people who speak it or a people develop their language in accord with their own tendencies of temperament. A language is always in harmony with the broad general character of the people. The Spanish language, with its formality, seems like the Spanish people. The German language, with its relentless consistency and inflexible structure, is like the German people in their passion for *Ordnung,* order. And the French language, with its clarity and transparency and lightness, is so like the people who speak it. Only a people who spoke such a tongue could have invented the *soufflé.* Or *meringue.*

In the case of English, one can see various important ways in which the language has shaped the people. Of course, all history shapes us, but English has some peculiar and powerful emotional effects on those who speak it as their native tongue.

Let us return to the Anglo-Saxon peasants laboring in the fields for the Normans. At their work they spoke English. When they surrendered the product of that work to the master, they spoke French. They raised pigs and cows and sheep and lambs, but when they turned the meat over to the Normans it became *porc* or *boeuf* or *mouton* or *veal.* In many French words the *l* has fallen silent, replaced by *u*, which is how *veal* became *veau.* English uses the older form of the French word. A French word containing *u* after another vowel often yields up its meaning if you replace it with *l.* The acute *é* at the start of a French word, like the circumflex in *bâtard,* usually indicates a vanished *s.*

The use of French words instead of the available Anglo-Saxon equivalents is one of the ways reality is masked in the thought processes of English-speaking people. I have yet to encounter a psychiatrist or psychoanalyst who had a grasp of this fact.

The horse escaped double-naming. The only thing you can call horse meat is horse meat. And we won't eat it. But the French, Swiss, and Italians will and do. How would you feel about ordering swine flesh in a restaurant? That is what pork is called in Ger-

man—*Schweinfleisch.* Would we eat horse if the meat were known as *cheval?* I think we might. Calling it *cheval* would permit us to avoid the awareness of where it came from.

Polite ladies and teachers caution the young not to use certain words because they are "not nice" without having any idea why they are not nice. They are "not nice" for no other reason than that they are, or sound like, or seem like, Anglo-Saxon words, still perceived as the language of the coarse and lowly. For example, to avoid the use of the word *belly,* which derives from Anglo-Saxon *belg,* polite people say *stomach,* which is grossly inaccurate since the stomach is an internal organ of digestion. But *stomach* derives from the French name for that organ, *estomac,* and therefore seems more genteel (from French *gentil,* meaning kind). A promenade seems to have more "class" than a mere walk. And in English the verb *to promenade* carries a connotation of conspicuous display and self-conscious posturing. Nice people don't say sweat, they perspire. An odor *(odeur)* is less offensive than a smell. It is far more elegant to recline than to lie down, to retire rather than to go to bed, to dine than eat.

This psychological bifurcation reaches its extreme in words pertaining to the body. Those Anglo-Saxon words denoting the body and its parts and functions have not only been barred from polite conversation for centuries, they have been literally outlawed until recent times. People could and did go to jail for using them.

The most suppressed word in the English language is a verb for the act essential to the survival of our own and every other species on this fragile sphere. There are more than four billion human beings on it, not to mention dogs, cats, lions, armadillos, dolphins, dugongs, lemurs, ladybugs, and fireflies. And we all got here the same way. The word in question is the only transitive verb we have for this action. And we are not supposed to use it. Mind you, the French cognate for it is used only in a coy and evasive way in slang expressions such as *fous le camp* and *je m'en fous.* The French use their word for *kiss* to replace it and then, having thoroughly confused the issue, use their word for *embrace*—demonstrably something done with *les bras,* the arms—to replace *kiss.* But

the French cognate of our condemned word has nowhere near the power of shock of the English, which to the day she died my mother referred to as "That Word." That Word is not, despite a popular theory, an acronym for an old British navy charge, *For Unlawful Carnal Knowledge.* Nor can it be defined as slang. Besides the French cognate, it has another in German, *ficken,* and still others in other languages. It traces back to Sanskrit.

Although French too has its evasions, they are nowhere near as extensive as those of English, and the French do not have the same fear of words that the English do, or the same need to conjure euphemisms from the vocabularies of other languages. The result is that many words that are quite "strong" in English from suppression have become weak from casual use in French. A classic example is *con.* It surely is not necessary to explain the cognate in English. Add the word *pauvre.* When the French call someone a *pauvre con,* the expression not only does not have the force of its English equivalent, it does not even have the same meaning. It means merely poor guy, poor jerk, and there is even a certain compassion in it. A film advertised and exhibited all over Paris was entitled *P'tit Con.* Even today, long after the death of Lenny Bruce, it is difficult to imagine a title utilizing the English cognate on billboards and movie marquees in Canada, Australia, the United States, or England.

The discomfort with Anglo-Saxon words, and even words that sounded as if they might be Anglo-Saxon, lasted so long that eventually any direct mention of the body became difficult if not impossible for many people. In some, even an indirect symbolic allusion became distasteful. During the reign of Queen Victoria, the polite English person would avoid use of the word *leg,* from Old Norse *leggr,* substituting the word *limb,* which is in fact Anglo-Saxon but looks French, perhaps because of a resemblance to *jambe.* This idiocy went so far that gentlefolk would even speak of the "limbs" of a table, and in time came to find even the sight of them so suggestive that they took to hiding them under long tablecloths. One can only shake one's head in wonder at the neurasthenia of people afraid of being turned on by a table.