BOOK REVIEW

Gene Lees, Singers and the Song. New York, Oxford University Press, 1987. 257 pages. ISBN 0-19-504293-X

A few weeks ago, I saw an exciting performance of Jerome Kern's 1920 Sally; it was done for the most part in concert form, though some action was sketched in to help the dialogue, and some dancing made clear the relevance of Victor Herbert's additional music. It was an important performance, because Sally has a significant place in the history of American musical theatre; and it was important because the concert version is almost the only form in which gems of our past can be seen and heard, with original orchestrations and with all the dialogue as well as all the music.

Mel Gussow of the New York Times tore it to shreds. He had contempt for the production and for the show. I thought of his review when reading a remark of Gene Lees: "Must we be forever at the mercy of amateurs promoted from the city desk?" So much of American art is at the mercy of people with little or no qualifications, and the shame is that the public loses in two ways: the past is obliterated by reviewers and critics who know nothing of history, and the audience has no opportunity to learn.

Lees' discussion of Frank Sinatra is an excellent case in point. Almost all anyone interested in American song knows or can know of Sinatra has to do with his personal life. Yet the only technical analysis of a singer who has retained incredible popularity over an incredibly long period of time (nearly fifty years) comes from Gene Lees. He speaks of the subject matter of Sinatra songs, of techniques he learned from Tommy Dorsey (including phrasing), of his enunciation (which consonants he has learned to stress, for example), his avoidance of "popping" consonants, his handling of each song (once he was able to leave the dance band) as a dramatic style, including his ability to slide into jazz, to "ride a rhythm section." In fact, Lees is able to show that for a long time, "Frank Sinatra turned the singing of the American song into an art form."

Lees does for other singers what he did for Sinatra--that is, force you to hear each singer afresh, with some knowledge and some understanding. After reading Lees, the reader will go back to Peggy Lee, Dick Haymes, and Jo Stafford and marvel at what was missed when they first recorded, and how much remains to enjoy.

But Lees' book does much more. He begins with a delightful chapter on the history of the English and French languages (his bilingualism can fool you; a good bit of solid research has gone into his casual generalizations and insights). He finds the use of French words rather than their Anglo-Saxon equivalents "one of the ways reality is masked in the thought processes of English-speaking people." He notes a "psychological bifurcation," with the result that we tend to use the French half of our language

for abstractions and the Anglo-Saxon for concrete feelings. And then he goes on to analyze French and English song lyrics based on the differences in their history, their sounds, their vocabulary, their rhymes ("There are only four words in English that rhyme with love...In French, however, there are fifty-one rhymes that I know of for amour..."), the placement of adjectives, the linking of syllables. He speaks of the different traditions of French and American songs (French from music halls and American from musical theatre). Almost every paragraph is illuminating, and the points I have listed are merely the beginning of his analysis of the songs and the singers who performed them.

Underlying all this is a dark side, dealing with violence, violence at Normandy; violence and its relation to creativity is a thread Lees weaves all through his book. In fact, what seems on the surface to be a collection of unrelated essays gradually reveals itself as a fairly tight-knit volume with ideas driving through to the final essay.

So, he follows his initial chapter on the roots of French and English song with an essay on Edith Piaf. He combines biography with anecdotes with analysis; the essay is complete in itself, yet manages to carry forward the themes he established at the beginning. The same is true of his next essay, on Johnny Mercer ("in my opinion the finest lyricist in the English language," says Lees). Again, the reader gets a mix of detailed analysis, biography, and anecdotes.

(Anecdotes abound throughout the book, and if many of them are wildly irrelevant, they are always of interest and well told--raisins in rice pudding, they're not crucial but they certainly improve the flavor.)

Lees uses his essay on Mercer to establish still another theme:

> We [generations growing up from the '20s through the '40s] absorbed into memory lyrics by...magnificently literate men...One assimilated from them one's sense of the English language. They were glorifying and elevating it, not in inaccessible works of High Culture but in popular music you heard every day on the radio...Today we hear illiteracy rampant [from those who] grew up on the Beatles and Elvis Presley and thus have been conditioned to the defective and inarticulate use of the English language.

For one who is always as good natured as Lees, his constant bitterness about the devastating effects of rock on an entire culture, strikes the reader powerfully.

Mercer's founding of Capitol records helps take us through the next few chapters. "Pavilion in the Rain" hauntingly speaks of the death of big bands. Again, Lees' insights into early jazz, into dance bands, are worth the price of the book. And always he ties down his background with the names of individual

bands, individual performers, and the constant anecdote from a man who, frequently, knew personally those of whom he writes.

He traces the death of big bands to a variety of sources--the greed of music publishers, a bad copyright decision by Judge Learned Hand, the loss of radio broadcasting (for example, he notes the fact that every comedy show had its own orchestra), the decline (or preferably, the evolution) of the Broadway show, the rise of ASCAP and BMI, the harm done by Petrillo, and even the loss of public transportation in California.

The following chapters on Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, Dick Haymes, Hugo Friedhofer ("one of the most important orchestral composers the United States ever produced;" the essay includes a list of all the films for which Friedhofer wrote the music), and Jo Stafford.

The final chapter is called "A Journey to Cologne," and tells of a concert in Dusseldorf, June 30, 1984, with an international group of jazz musicians, and featuring Gene Lees' translation and adaptation of some poems of Pope John Paul II, and sung by Sarah Vaughan. The extraordinary concert, from its conception through to the actual performance, is presented in tremendous detail, and the respect for the artists involved is conveyed to the reader with conviction; contrapuntally, the destruction of various cities is suggested, along with images of guns and guards at the Milan airport. And so, in the end as at the beginning, Lees balances the creative with the destructive, and the reader is left with a sense of the omnipresence and interaction of both.

Gene Lees is a lyricist, a singer, a novelist, and an editor and publisher (Jazzletter). He has written for High Fidelity, Stereo Review, American Film, and Downbeat. If there is someone in the world of jazz or popular music he does not know, it is not apparent from these pages. He has the authority to support his generalizations and the sort of insight that is completely original. "I never knew that," and "I never thought of that" were this reader's reactions throughout.

A word of warning. There is no index, and no discography. Yet he makes constant reference to recordings throughout. May I suggest that when you buy the book you keep a pencil and pad handy so that you may jot down the specific recordings you must listen to when you have finished reading. I guarantee you'll want to hear every record he discusses, and you'll want the book in your permanent library.

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