Was That a Song?

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Readers of a certain age will recall Doris Day’s 1953 rendition of “Secret Love.” (Younger readers, always blithe about copyright, may consult YouTube.) The tune’s by Sammy Fain—no slouch, to put it mildly—but alluring as Day’s voice is, the arrangement manages to be both cloying and mechanical. The tune just won’t bear that much melodramatic weight, even with the puffy-clouds-of-buttercream lyric by Paul Francis Webster. It’s hard not to snicker. Camp, or one kind of it, is innocence recollected with irony.

The scene changes: let’s make it October 16, 2008. No, not the Village Vanguard; not the Blue Note; not Yoshi’s or Baker’s Keyboard Lounge or the Jazz Showcase. Instead, we’re at the Krannert Art Museum, Champaign, Illinois, where Trio X wrapped up an inquisitive set with “Secret Love.” That fall, they gnawed away repeatedly at “Secret Love,” and I’ll say a bit more about what you can learn about their strategies by pondering the differences in their attempts. But at the Krannert, things are straightforward and deeply affectionate. (Or so I think. A colleague of mine happened to wander into my office while I was playing this cut. He looked at me dourly: “Do you actually like this nonsense or do you just think you’re supposed to?” I sighed. I guess he’d prefer Doris Day.)

Joe McPhee’s on tenor sax, and he launches the song by himself. His tone is a bit querulous, his rhythm casually disrespectful of the dictates of a boring metronome, rubato with a vengeance, but he sticks pretty close to the original melody. Dominic Duval is right behind him on bass, spraying intricate lines that imply the original harmony but already gleefully tug free. A few soft skittering strikes on the cymbal and Jay Rosen lays down a
swinging rhythm on drums; Duval comes closer to a walking bass line, his quarter notes anchoring the tune. The combination is one of jazz's sexiest seductions for listeners and players alike, but they succumb only briefly. Sometimes when you think these guys are going to lock into a pattern, someone nonchalantly tries something else—or some two, or all three, do. Within a couple of minutes, McPhee's playing is insistent, rapid, petulant, and Duval is suggesting chords not even tenuously related to anything Fain ever imagined. Then magically they are all much quieter—did Rosen hush the proceedings? Was there a visual cue? Hard to say—and McPhee is again caressing the melody, even if Duval and Rosen aren't as meekly cooperative as they were at the outset. Then McPhee rivets his attention on a motif, wryly turning the tune into a brief snatch of "Pop Goes the Weasel," and they're done. If McPhee is shouting his love from the highest hills, as the song's regrettable lyric has it, his shout is acerbic, sometimes anguished, and, at least from the vantage point of a listener sixty years after Doris Day entered the studio, a lot more honest than her confection. There's not a lot of applause. But I bet the Krannert doesn't seat hundreds.

Theme and variations? Maybe. But not with the architecture that has served jazz musicians so well and so long. You know: the band plays the "head" or melody; the rhythm section keeps churning through the chord changes while one horn player or lead instrument after another solos; maybe the piano and bass and drums take their turns; and then everyone returns faithfully to the head. That October night in Champaign, "Secret Love" tumbled through dizzying changes in just a few minutes. But I bet the trio had plotted out very little of what they were going to do ahead of time. They're not just improvising on the melody. They're improvising on every facet of the tune, seizing on rhythmic and harmonic possibilities as they flutter by, listening intently to each other and tweaking and subverting musical suggestions as often as following them. These guys are cheerful anarchists, and if your fusty self doesn't find enough order in what they're up to, well, I guess you can always take the A train to Lincoln Center and masochistically submit to the stern conservatory ethic of Wynton Marsalis.

Don't get me wrong: Marsalis is a hell of a player and I've had tons of fun listening to some of his work. But like other modern art forms, jazz moves relentlessly forward; there's something funereal or even necrophiliac about faithfully reproducing its earlier moments of glory. Joseph Jarman, sometime
sax player with the Art Ensemble of Chicago and sometime Jōdo Shinshu priest in Brooklyn, gets it exactly right: “It’s meaningless to repeat what one of the masters has done, note for note. We are not as good as the master was, simply by repeating his notes. We need to play our own music and incorporate the master’s ideas, but show they’re an influence, not an affliction.” Jazz constantly spins off new possibilities, seizing on fusion with rock, new rhythms from Brazil and then “world music,” astringent harmonies and atonal combinations from “new” music or twentieth-century “classical,” and more. Some possibilities work out, some don’t, and nothing guarantees that musicians or audiences will keep mining and extending the more rewarding ones.

In fact, jazz musicians have been relaxing constraints since the beginning. Why play the stated melody when you can play variations on it? In swing recordings from the thirties, there really is a rhythm section: piano, bass, drums, and guitar, all kachunking away at the beat and chords. In the bits of film I’ve seen, those musicians always look somber: it’s hard to resist the inference that they’re bored. But then guitarists disappear or guitars turn into lead instruments. And with the rise of bop, drummers offer explosively exciting accents, breaking up the serene four-count measure in hitherto unimaginable ways: even their more settled rhythmic grooves are intricate challenges. Piano players might keep “comping” or accompanying the soloists with well-chosen chords, but they might roam free or just stop playing. It’s enough, plenty of groups figure, for the bass player to state a rhythm and imply some chords. Listeners ought to be alert enough to figure out what’s going on. (Forget modernism and recall Wordsworth: these musicians too hoped to create the very audiences that would appreciate their work.) And then why not have the bass player too slip out of prison? Especially when the band is playing a warhorse—“Green Dolphin Street,” say, or “Round Midnight”—alert listeners ought to be able to supply the structure themselves.

A lot of first-rate jazz today still relies on older organizational strategies. But—I don’t want to quibble about who started it, or when—by the 1960s we have free jazz, shattering one structure after another. Goodbye bop harmonies, goodbye swinging triplets and dotted eighth notes, goodbye one soloist after another over the chord changes: goodbye and good riddance! Those constraints might once have opened up intriguing musical spaces, but now, some musicians have come to think, those spaces are stale and
exhausted. Those deploiring free jazz hear musicians shrieking hysterically on their instruments without rhyme or reason, as if other musicians weren't in the room, as if the goal were to play fast and furious in a confounding gesture of contempt for earlier music and current audiences alike. No wonder skeptics, baffled by or contemptuous of the development of extended techniques producing odd sounds on all kinds of instruments, wondered if these musicians actually knew how to play properly.

Sure, some free jazz is like that, and I confess I have little interest in or patience with it. But the enchanting stuff isn't like that at all. It's quiet, or anyway it usually starts quietly, and exploratory: the musicians trust each other to cooperate and see what unfolds. When things go awry, nothing much comes of it or someone settles into a repetitive riff or (yawn) a twelve-bar blues. Then the exploration is aborted, even if what follows is engaging in its way.

When things work, musicians create pieces of haunting beauty. No, not the beauty of, oh, Miles Davis playing “Stella by Starlight.” (Speaking of which, if you don’t already know: YouTube will give you a quick grasp of how much and how fast jazz could change if you listen to what Miles did with that tune in 1958 and 1964—for 1964, you want the more assertive Berlin version with Wayne Shorter on tenor sax.) Paul Bley, a pianist who has excelled for decades in spinning wistful gossamer webs, once suggested that improvisation is composition in real time. No sheet music, no rehearsals, no second takes: just play. I have seen the magicians of the Art Ensemble of Chicago make this work over and over. These days, Other Dimensions in Music is jaw-droppingly good at it.

Back to Trio X. I don’t know if they had a set list at the Krannert. I don’t know if they already knew they were going to close out with “Secret Love.” But I’m sure they didn’t know what they were going to do with the piece once they started playing. Even when they’re playing a song, their structures and strategies of attack are intensely improvisational.

You can see that when you compare other approaches the trio took to “Secret Love” that same week. The night before they were at the Krannert, Trio X appeared in Ann Arbor at the Kerrytown Concert House. (A grateful and gleeful shout-out to Deanna Relyea for keeping this wonderful venue up and running for many years, for classical music, community events, and a fair amount of jazz, not least the annual Edgefest, bringing in avant-garde
artists from all around the world: no small thing, especially to us music-hungry Midwesterners in a town where two jazz clubs have closed and the University Musical Society doesn't take chances. I can walk from my house, grab a sandwich at Zingerman's, hear world-class music in a small L-shaped space with surprisingly good acoustics and affordable tickets, and walk back home. It doesn't get better.) They closed this show too with “Secret Love.” This time, though, Rosen starts on drums, offering color, a bit of pulse, but no insistent tap-your-foot-boogie-to-it rhythm. Three minutes in, he abruptly backs off a crescendo. McPhee and Duval enter more or less at once and flirt surreptitiously with the tune: McPhee takes the opening phrase as a motif, repeats it some, pokes at it, and not for another couple of minutes does the trio settle down into a vaguely polite statement of the melody, if one more distracted than what the Illinois audience would hear the next night. There’s just a brief glimpse of the swinging drums and walking bass line, but McPhee saucily flouts the rhythm his bandmates are in, and in no time at all that fleeting suggestion of structure has collapsed. Soon McPhee is playing phrases indebted only to the rhythm of the song’s opening three notes; Duval and Rosen are happy to let him serve as foundation and gaily toss ideas back and forth.

It’s almost as if anyone could be anywhere in the tune anytime. Or, better, it’s musical cubism, offering startlingly disparate perspectives on the same song all at once. If that sounds like a recipe for cacophony, the sorcery is that it hangs together. You can tell these three have been playing together for years, not because they know each other’s standard moves, but because they listen keenly and react on a dime. By the time the melody reappears on sax, it has sprouted a key shift, a couple of implied new chords, and some elongated phrases, but the bass and drums don’t stumble. This version of “Secret Love” is more than twice as long as the Krannert version, much more abstract, and aching with tension, only some of it resolved. That same week the trio returned to “Secret Love” repeatedly. Every time it’s strikingly different. Modernism again: never has Ezra Pound’s injunction, “make it new,” been taken quite this seriously, let alone with a syrupy pop tune from the fifties. When I was a kid returning from rock concerts, my friends would gush, “they sounded just like the record!” I never could see the point.

Trio X transforms many other tunes, too. They’ve been offering yearning versions of “Goin’ Home”—once I thought it was a spiritual, but it’s lifted from Dvořák’s New World Symphony—for years now. They’re fond of
Thelonious Monk—how could you not be?—and 2006 finds them valiantly doing battle with "Blue Monk" and "Evidence." They do an amusingly persuasive calypso with "Brown Skin Girl," made famous by Harry Belafonte, and though I'm not sure now, I think I remember them once morphing it mischievously into Van Morrison's "Brown Eyed Girl." Rosen bashes away at "War," the Motown tune cut by Edwin Starr, and if Trio X is missing the slinky syncopated baritone sax and horn ensemble that makes the original exhilarating, there's something revealing about how bombastic their take is. "A Prince and the Revolution" is a workout on "Someday My Prince Will Come." (You haven't lived until you've heard the solo Coltrane takes on the version Miles recorded in 1961; YouTube to the rescue yet again, and it's Coltrane, not Hank Mobley, starting at 5:50 into the cut.) I assume it also owes something or other to Prince, or the artist formerly (and again?) known as that, but alas, I can't tell: I dropped out of the pop music scene many years ago. (That's why I didn't know until today that Bruce Springsteen had covered "War," and yes, it makes me feel old to learn that plenty of Springsteen fans have no idea it's a Motown gem.) In 2006, they summon up and exorcise "Stella by Starlight." Here McPhee even picks up his trumpet, but no one would mistake what he's up to for what Miles offered. Not because McPhee can't really play the trumpet—he's pretty good. He's in the imposing tradition of jazz musicians—Eric Dolphy, Sam Rivers, Anthony Braxton, and Daniel Carter come to mind—who've mastered multiple instruments. But where Miles and his band are digging harder and harder into the tune itself, McPhee and his trio are happy to allude to it, to keep it in the margins, to trespass over its frontiers and see what's outside.

Some of these performances stick pretty close to the originals. Some are only hazily connected. Once, for instance, Duval's fiendishly complicated improvisation on bass touches two or three times on a tag phrase from Monk's "Rhythm-a-Ning": the ascending F, G, Ab that repeats at the end of the opening line. Whatever Duval did or didn't intend, McPhee hears the possible connection: soon his own investigations wander toward Monk's line, and several minutes later it's easy to pick out the original—which evaporates before you know it. Again you can wonder how much of this was deliberately plotted out before the trio hit the stage, how much developed on the spot. My guess is they didn't even know they'd play the tune—it doesn't recur in that year's sets.
And sometimes, blissfully, Trio X doesn’t depend a bit on anything ever written before. The 2008 sets begin with extended and purely free improvisations, one over twenty minutes. You can’t tap your feet to them, at least most of the time. You can’t hum them afterward, unless you have an uncanny memory. McPhee here is at his best on soprano sax, infamously difficult to play well. His tone reminds me of Steve Lacy’s—that’s high praise—tart and sweet at once, not at all husky or harsh. And his lines are liquid. The notes don’t just blend into one another in the usual slurred or legato way. They seem somehow to overlap. Even when he’s playing very fast, mercurial lines cascading out of the horn, the music is relaxed, amiable, inviting: he’s playing, not working, and his playmates on drums and bass are having tons of fun, too. Serious fun, if you like, but impish too, more carefree than daredevil in taking chances. The goal is not to transgress for the sake of transgressing, not to offend the audience, but to see what the musicians can discover and develop in the moment. Here and there you can find a familiar device: Duval will nuzzle up against a chromatically descending bass line, the sort of thing familiar from the heyday of bebop; or he’ll start bouncing back and forth on an open fifth. But in these performances, their most free and most extended, the trio refuses to lock into any structure at all. Still they find yearning emotional spaces to explore.

If you’re new to jazz, don’t start with Trio X. It’s not that you’ll miss the frequent references, some of them facetious and funny, to familiar pop and jazz tunes. It’s that you’re likely to be lost or even angry. But if you know jazz or learn it, as you most assuredly should, you might stop with Miles, Monk, and Mingus, just as you might stop with Bach, Beethoven, and Brahms, and never grasp the beauty of Bartók, let alone Morton Feldman. But you might start down the same slippery precipitous road the whole tradition took, of wrestling free of what begins to feel like tired constraints, having your ears grow big enough to appreciate more exploratory music, hungering after the latest thing, hoping it will be promising and not a sterile dead end. You might learn to savor the likes of Tim Berne, Satoko Fujii, and Gerry Hemingway. Then you’ll realize what a musical feast Trio X serves up, night after night. You’ll wonder why they gig in such obscure locations and why they record for a tiny independent label. And you’ll ruefully learn to put up with people mocking your taste.

There are worse fates.