

The New Crooners

With former rock playboy Rod Stewart leading the charge, the Great American Songbook returns to its roots.

by Alexander Gelfand
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IN OCTOBER 1990, *Time* magazine featured a photograph of a clean-cut, earnest-looking jazz musician on its cover, next to the bold headline, "The New Jazz Age." Clad in a jacket and tie, with a trumpet pressed to his lips and a look of serene concentration on his face, he seemed to treat jazz with the seriousness it deserved. At the time, many saw him as a potential messiah who might bring the music back to its roots after the depredations of '70s jazz-rock fusion and '80s smooth jazz. He was young, black, and well versed in the tradition. His name, of course, was Wynton Marsalis.

Time has not been kind to those who thought Marsalis would rejuvenate their beloved music. The trumpeter has campaigned tirelessly for what he perceives to be the eternal verities of acoustic jazz — swing, blues, and standards — and has served as a role model for an entire generation of young neoclassicists. Yet overall, the circumstances facing jazz have changed little over the past 16 years. Market share remains in the low single digits, with little hope for improvement; jazz venues are few and far between; and record labels show as much interest in promoting new artists as they do in supporting online music piracy.

Fear not, however, for jazz has a new savior. He doesn't look much like the last one. This one is old, white, and British, with a raffish grin and a well-documented taste for leopard-print spandex. But over the past 4 years, he's sold more than 13 million albums featuring nothing but the most standard of jazz standards. He has yet to appear on the cover of *Time*, but he has shown up on *Oprah*, *The View*, and the *Today Show*, and in glossy magazines too numerous to mention (though he declined to be interviewed for this article). And he's very, very sexy; just ask his adoring fans — or him, for that matter. His name, of course, is Rod Stewart. And he has a lot of people asking just what the hell is going on.

When Stewart, who turned 61 this year, recorded his first *Great American Songbook* album for J Records in 2002, he was hardly at the top of his game. His last album, *Human*, had been an unqualified bomb, and he was dangerously close to becoming yet another rock-star dinosaur. But *It Had to Be You ... The Great American Songbook*, a collection of jazz standards from the '20s, '30s, and '40s, arranged for string orchestra and rhythm section, proved to be his redemption. Boasting a Grammy nomination and better sales figures than Stewart had seen in years, *It Had to Be You* prompted a fleet of sequels; the third, *Stardust*, gave Stewart his first No. 1 album since 1979's *Blondes Have More Fun*, along with his first Grammy win. *Rolling Stone* magazine ranked his 2005 tour — which combined *Songbook* material with pop-rock staples like "Maggie May" and

"Forever Young" — among the top 5 grossing acts of the year, just above the Dave Matthews Band and well in front of Green Day and Bruce Springsteen.

Stewart's sales figures have inspired numerous imitators. Since embarking on this path, he's been credited with prompting a rash of standards covers by pop stars ranging from Blondie's Debbie Harry to Aerosmith's Steve Tyler. In some cases, Stewart has provided cover for singers who have long nursed a taste for these songs but didn't feel they could risk recording them until someone proved their renewed commercial viability. Motown legend Smokey Robinson first recorded "Speak Low" and "I've Got You Under My Skin" with the Miracles back in 1962, and has been singing standards at his live shows for more than a decade. Only now, though, has the climate seemed favorable for an entire album dedicated to the material. "This is a prime time, musically, to do something like this, because this music is very popular right now," says Robinson, whose *Timeless Love* features his own take on the standards-with-strings format.

Not surprisingly, the response to Stewart's engagement with songs penned by the likes of Cole Porter and Jerome Kern, and made famous by the likes of Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday, has been mixed. Jazz purists, in particular, contend that he's no match for his material. Yet there's no discounting those album sales. And, as is often the case when someone hits it big with jazz-oriented material, one cannot help but wonder if the increased attention paid to the art form might spur fresh interest in all things jazz, particularly among the kids. As Robinson says, "Many of my faithful fans are probably not so familiar with this music — but I hope that I can turn some people on to it."

Anything is possible, of course. But not everything is likely. And the nature of Stewart's success, in particular, illustrates why the recent spate of standards albums probably won't have much long-term impact on the popularity of jazz in general, at least not if jazz musicians ignore the real lessons that lie beneath the hype.

First, let's dispense with the notion that Stewart — or any pop singer, for that matter — is somehow unworthy of this material. The songs of the Great American Songbook may be considered a cultural treasure these days, but when they were first introduced, tunes like "Blue Skies" and "S Wonderful" were simply pop confections on the Hit Parade. "The thing about these songs that pop singers are singing is that they were popular songs in their time," says singer Dianne Reeves, a bona fide jazz diva whose standards-laden soundtrack to the Oscar-nominated film *Good Night, and Good Luck* has given her own profile a considerable boost. "Jerome Kern and Cole Porter weren't jazz writers — they wrote the music of their day. These songs became jazz standards only because jazz musicians picked them to perform. They were pop songs before jazz musicians took them over."

It was only as musical tastes changed, and the jazz repertoire did not, that these songs became niche items associated with a not-so-popular genre. And therein lies the real issue: How have Rod and his fellow popsters managed to make hay among the masses with material that jazz musicians peddle for pennies to the chosen few? True, Stewart and his ilk are famous to begin with, which automatically gives them a leg up on 99.9 percent

of their faceless jazz brethren. Yet Stewart, in particular, has benefited from clever marketing that, by its very nature, reveals why the current crowd of neo-crooners are unlikely to recruit vast numbers of new young jazz fans.

From the outset, J Records — whose mogul-president, Clive Davis, signed Janis Joplin to CBS Records, and went on to work with such megastars as Aretha Franklin, Whitney Houston, and Alicia Keys — eschewed the standard youth-based marketing plan built around MTV, VH1, and Top 40 radio. Instead, the label actively pursued an older demographic with TV commercials, appearances on network talk shows, and a "Great Performances" special on PBS. This is no way to capture a hip teenage audience. But it's a great way to capture aging baby boomers with buckets of cash. And that's the fastest growing segment of the record-buying public. According to polls conducted by the Recording Industry Association of America, while overall music sales are in decline, the percentage of music consumers who are older than 45 nearly doubled between 1992 and 2001. Younger consumers may be easily swayed by free Internet downloads and the joys of file-sharing, but older ones remain attached to the idea of owning something that recalls, however remotely, the cherished record collections of their youth.

SO MUCH for the idea that the current wave of pop crooners will produce legions of fresh young jazz fans. The people buying Stewart's albums aren't the youngsters that jazz advocates want so desperately to attract. They are their parents. And they are being wooed by a marketing machine that lies beyond the means of most ordinary jazz artists. "No one promotes jazz music the way they promote pop," Reeves says. "You've got to have juice. Stewart has this big Clive Davis machine behind him. How many jazz musicians do you see on Jay Leno?"

Still, the question remains: Why is anyone buying these records at all? The music itself is fairly prosaic. Stewart doesn't embarrass himself — the man has an attractive voice and seems to understand the lyrics he's singing — but he's no Tony Bennett. (The weakest links on the *Songbook* albums are the syrupy string arrangements and plodding rhythm sections, both of which conjure images of elevators and doctors' waiting rooms.) Nostalgia may be partly to blame. Few baby boomers grew up listening to either jazz or standards. Indeed, if they listened to anything in their youth, it was probably the same rock 'n' roll and R&B upon which Stewart cut his teeth. But many boomers retain vaguely pleasant memories of their parents having listened to Billie, Ella, and Frank.

It's just as likely, however, that these well-heeled, aging fans are drawn to what the material represents: sophistication, urbanity, and maturity — everything that pop music ostensibly lacks but that jazz has in spades. Just look at the packaging: Rod the Mod, a man formerly known for outrageous outfits and big hair, can be seen wearing an impeccable three-piece suit on the cover of his recently released four-volume *Songbook* collection. (Inside, things only get better, with Rod striking an Al Jolson pose in white tie and tails, and, in another photo, standing in front of — gasp! — a wall full of *books*.) This isn't "Do Ya Think I'm Sexy?" sexy. This is smart, stylish, Frank Sinatra sexy. And it sells. So, too, does Stewart's stage act, which has everything that jazz ostensibly lacks but that pop music has in spades: showmanship, playfulness, and a readiness to please. So

what if the string arrangements don't swing? Onstage, Stewart's willingness to drop his shirt off his shoulder continues to get a rise out of female fans. And he always kicks a few soccer balls into the crowd just to let people know he loves them. A jazz musician who chucked a football toward the back of the Village Vanguard would probably find himself on the receiving end of a reckless endangerment lawsuit.

It wasn't always so. At its inception, jazz was very much a popular music, rooted in dance, and designed to entertain rather than edify. Only through time did it evolve into a cultivated art form, the performance and appreciation of which requires considerable application and study. For those who know the tradition's ins and outs — who know when an improviser is paying homage to a renowned forebear with an apposite lick, and who can name a tune even before its melody has been stated — it is precisely that insider knowledge, and that knowledge of being an insider, that makes the music so addictive. Mastering the arcane mysteries of jazz provides a thrill as great as any in art, a thrill that is inextricably linked to the sense of self-validation such mastery affords. The French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu wrote a whole book, aptly titled *Distinction*, about how people use their tastes in music, art, and other aesthetic forms to advertise and valorize their own refinement and status. Bourdieu would have had a field day with modern jazz and its fans who proclaim their hipness and sophistication by waving the flag for an art form that does its best to exclude them.

Of course maintaining the fiction that being a jazz fan makes you special depends in part on maintaining the fiction that more accessible forms of music are mere pap. Hence the time-honored tradition of castigating jazz performers who presume to make their music more palatable to a general audience. In business circles, courting a broad spectrum of potential customers is known as "effective marketing." In jazz circles, it is known as "selling out." When Louis Armstrong became more widely known for mugging, jiving, and singing "Hello Dolly" than for blowing "Muskrat Ramble," he was accused of selling out. (Actually, he was accused of "Tomming," or pandering to crude white stereotypes of black folk — but that's another story.) When Miles Davis began playing with a wah-wah pedal and covering Cyndi Lauper tunes, he, too, was accused of selling out. Apparently, some of the greatest minds in the history of the music have sold out. On the other hand, it's hard not to detect a measure of perverse glee in the endless retellings of how Davis used to play with his back to his audience. There, God bless him, was a guy who was willing to tell his own fans to go fuck themselves.

Jazz musicians have internalized this Milesian posture to a striking degree, and in so doing have lost not only the willingness, but also the ability to make their music attractive to a broad audience — one composed of people who are neither equipped nor inclined to sit attentively while some stone-faced improviser spins chorus after chorus of deeply learned music. "What's a bit lost on our generation," says Tim Ries, a top-flight jazz saxophonist who also happens to tour with the Rolling Stones, "is the idea that when you're performing, you're putting on a show. And that doesn't mean you're selling out."

If jazz musicians and those who love them really want the music to thrive and grow, they'd do well to remember that most people do, indeed, want to be entertained. That

doesn't necessarily mean disrobing in public, kicking soccer balls into the stands, or prancing around in tights. But it certainly doesn't mean turning your back to your audience, either. A little less Miles, a little more Rod, and the music just might have a future.

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