

## Music Made in America

By Dennis Knight

*Body and Soul, Summertime, 'Round Midnight, My Funny Valentine, What Is This Thing Called Love, Stella by Starlight, Autumn Leaves and Star Dust.* How about *Way Down Yonder in New Orleans*, or *In the Mood*. The mere mention of these great song titles probably leaves a medley of tunes flowing through your mind, and when you involuntarily whistle a few bars, those in earshot will in turn pick up the tune.

These songs are part of what I call the American Songbook, and they are jazz standards all. Jazz was uniquely born in America, and I believe it will live forever. Music historians will someday consider it just another part of the world's library of classical music. Indeed, Gershwin's *Rhapsody in Blue* and *An American in Paris*, and *Porgy and Bess* are already there. What is the work of the classical composer Leonard Bernstein's *West Side Story* if it isn't jazz? *Maria*, I just met a girl named *Maria*. You just have to let it waft through the concert hall of your mind.

I am quite overwhelmed in reviewing a list of the top thousand jazz standards. Those songs I mentioned go to the top, of course, but scroll down about sixty titles and you find *Tea for Two* and *Over the Rainbow*. At position ninety-nine is *Smoke Gets In Your Eyes*. There is *Bye Bye Blackbird* way down at number 126 or *April in Paris* at 130. I could go on and on.

Hundreds of composers are responsible for the great American songbook. The list includes Bernstein and the Gershwins, Richard Rodgers, Lorenz Hart, Duke Ellington, Cole Porter, Johnny Mercer and Jerome Kern. I won't even attempt a list of performers but I can't help but drop the names of Louis Armstrong, Ella Fitzgerald and even Bing Crosby.

What makes a song a standard? Wikipedia simply defines it as a tune or song of established popularity. Another definition I read says a standard is a composition that is held in continuing esteem and commonly used as the basis of jazz arrangements or improvisations.

I believe I have already accomplished a satisfactory definition. If the mere mention of a song title brings the lyrics or melody directly to your mind, it is a standard.

Jazz is a unique product of the American experience. It was born out of a mix of African and European music traditions, and its gnarly roots reach through the cities of America from New Orleans to Chicago, New York and Miami. It's the cool jazz of the West Coast, the avant-garde music of Miles Davis, the bebop of Dizzy Gillespie and the Latin jazz of Tito Puente.

The mere mention of any American standard such as *Willow Weep for Me* or *It's Only a Paper Moon*, will instantly put a song in a heart somewhere in Paris or Istanbul or Hong Kong. It is music truly made in America, maybe our single greatest export, and it puts the whole world on *The Sunny Side of the Street*.