

vol. 23

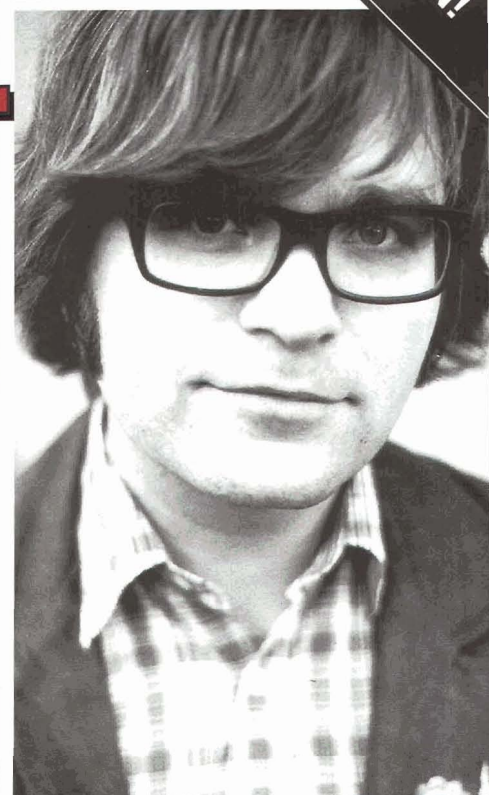
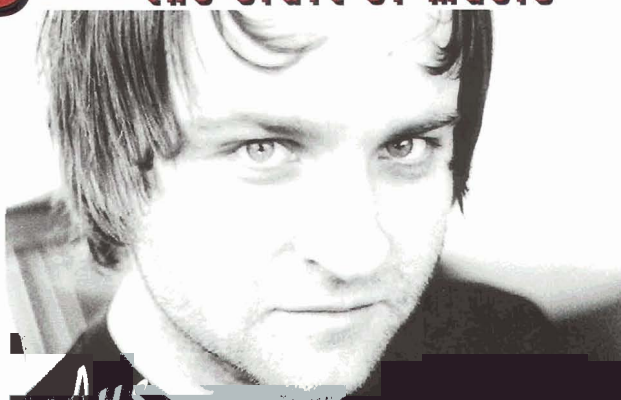
#3 "POEMS ARE POEMS. SONG LYRICS ARE FOR SONGS." -BEN GIBBARD

WIN A MARTINI!
pg. 90

American★ Songwriter

the craft of music

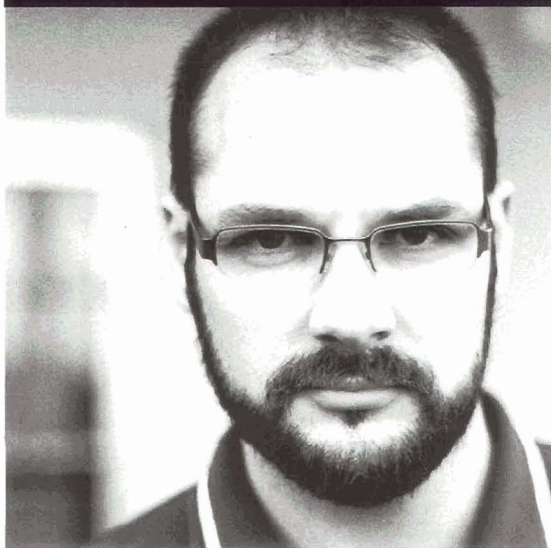
8 BANDS
to watch in
2008



plus

DEATH CAB FOR CUTIE

pg. 56



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EDITOR'S NOTE

Snoop Dogg & Sinatra: Kindred Crooners

Dear American Songwriter Readers,

Thanks for sending your personal experience, "Hotel Room Essays" in response to the previous issue's Editor's Note. There are many that are quite good; look out for one to be published in the May/June issue!

So, in between the political coverage on CNN, I caught a great interview with Snoop Dogg on Larry King Live that got me thinking. Snoop shared with Larry his affinity for Ol' Blue Eyes: "I would've loved to work with Frank," he revealed. Mr. Dogg even named his cat, "Frankie," after the singer. He came across as a man infatuated with the man, his music and artistic legacy—and he's not alone. I can totally imagine, if Sinatra were still around, Snoop pitching him on a swingin' version of "Gin & Juice." "Rollin' down the street/smokin' stogies/sippin' on gin and juice/laid back/with my mind on my money/and my money on my mind." Just sing it to yourself; it works...

Indie rock darlings Chan Marshall (a.k.a. Cat Power) and Sondre Lerche are no strangers to Tin Pan Alley study and courtship. Marshall recorded John Kander and Fred Ebb's classic "New York, New York" for her latest covers album, *Jukebox*—giving it an enjoyable modern assessment. Lerche, a Swedish phenom who was bred on the standards halfway around the world, writes and records original Tin Pan-inspired tunes with attention to detail, lyric and melody better than anyone of his generation...like it's going out of style.

As a style—or genre if you prefer—the Tin Pan Alley-infused song form has certainly lost its glamour with newer generations. But, it's my calculation that a good old-fashioned come back is in the cards in the upcoming couple of decades. If you're writing these kinds of songs, please, come out of the shadows, and make your-

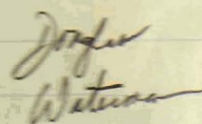
self known. There's still a market there, and I bet you didn't even know it. Great singers will always be around to record great songs. Though there are thousands of treasures in the Great American Songbook to choose from, there's plenty of room for new ones. They will remain relevant as long as we allow them to be.

Each issue, Paul Zollo's "American Icons" column helps recast some recognition on the old masters—the cream of the crop writers of the American Standards repertoire. But these are all too brief. We're all left wanting a little bit more. There's a lot of meat about their writing techniques, and lives, that needs to be remembered, celebrated and ingrained in the public's—songwriters', at least—consciousness. Jimmy Van Heusen (see this issue's "American

Icons") is no exception of the caliber of Tin Pan songwriter I'm speaking about. Not only did Sinatra record volumes of Van Heusen's best work, but the two were also lifelong friends and drinking buddies. (Be sure to check out the recent *Windy* Fair supplement issue article by James Kaplan, "The Songwriter: The King of Ring-A-Ding-Ding," exploring the relationship—both personal and working—between Sinatra and Van Heusen.)

The editorial staff at American Songwriter has been tossing around the idea of a "Tin Pan Alley" special issue for years now, and maybe it's time to dig in. PLEASE email any feedback you might have to dwaterman@americansongwriter.com. Let us know if this is something you'd be interested in. And, based on your response, we'll make a call on it. How about we slate an upcoming Death Cab for Cutie album—The Cole Porter Songbook—for 2005? Could be good...

Sincerely,



Douglas Waterman, Editor-in-Chief

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Jimmy Van Heusen

So dazzling was Van Heusen as a composer that after his death, lyricist Sammy Cahn—his most frequent collaborator—continued to write new words to his tunes. At a tribute to Van Heusen in 1991, Sammy recited new lyrics for his absent friend to the melody of their classic song, “But Beautiful”.

Paul Simon once said that a songwriter's supreme challenge was being complex and simple at the same time—writing songs with lasting depth that are also simple enough to be memorable. Jimmy Van Heusen was a master at this kind of song. His music was complex, with deeply rich chord changes any jazzman can embrace, but also possessed catchy, crystalline melodies of exceeding sing-ability. His songs were meant to be sung, not just listened to, and they were sung by the best, with Frank Sinatra and Bing Crosby at the top of that list. He wrote songs about hope for a hopeful time, such as the classic “Swinging on a Star,” and “High Hopes,” which JFK used as his theme song. In his hefty catalog of more than 800 songs, at least 50 of them are undisputed standards, including “My Kind of Town,” “Come Fly with Me,” “Here’s that Rainy Day,” “Love and Marriage,” “All the Way,” and “Call Me Irresponsible.”

He was Sinatra’s favorite composer, and he wrote some 84 songs for Ol’ Blue Eyes, most with lyrics by Cahn. His real name was Chester Babcock (the “Van Heusen” moniker derived from a billboard for Van Heusen collars), and Frank, who wore his pals as close as one of his custom-tailored suits, called him Chester Babcock. Frank also entrusted him with the frequent chore of holding his cash, and would flash him the signal of the cross when he wanted Jimmy to “duke” someone, whether a waitress, busboy, valet or other, usually about 150 bucks.

Jimmy was close to Frank because he and Cahn not only wrote the songs that suited his unique phrasing and his cash-

mere tone—they wrote songs that fit his persona. Both he and Sammy vicariously enjoyed the existence of Sinatra, whose



ability to live large was legend. They would write songs as themes for Sinatra’s movies, such as “The Tender Trap,” written to that title. They would write songs to open and close Sinatra’s albums. If Sinatra snapped his finger for a new song, they quickly delivered. Sammy would write the lyric first, and Van Heusen—decades before Elton John would instantly transform a Bernie Taupin lyric into a hit in mere minutes—would briskly craft a melody that fit the lyric, fit Sinatra’s style and stood as architecturally sound as Sammy’s perfect rhymes and cleverly crafted words. “If Sinatra wanted a song in the morning,” Sammy told me, “he’d get it in the afternoon. Seriously. We spoiled him.”

“Sinatra,” Van Heusen told the BBC, “he’s the greatest. Because he chooses his craftsmen and he let’s them do their job. He never masterminded or criticized a song.” Though his process with Cahn was almost always words-first, occasionally this would switch. While writing songs for the TV film of *Our Town*, Sammy adopted the title of the play’s second act, “Love and Marriage,” and asked Jimmy for a piano vamp. Van Heusen played him a major-chord progression that spoke of both romance and fidelity, and Sammy improvised the now famous opening almost instantly, “Love and marriage, love and marriage, go together like a horse and carriage.”

Van Heusen was born in Syracuse, N.Y., in 1913, the same year that Cahn was

born. His first job was as a DJ on a local station, during which he’d invite listeners to send in lyrics that he’d set to music. Recognizing his genius both with melody and with making lyrics sing, he moved to New York in 1928 to set up shop in Tin Pan Alley. His friend Jerry Arlen—brother of Harold—opened some doors for him, and soon he was writing songs for Harlem’s legendary Cotton Club. Like Irving Berlin, whom he idolized, he was gifted at writing songs that transcended race. His “Harlem Hospitality” was recorded by Cab Calloway and was his first published song. His grand-nephew Brook Babcock, who works valiantly to maintain Jimmy’s legacy, quotes him as saying, “When I saw my name on a printed song copy, I was then and there a songwriter forever.”

In 1939, Benny Goodman recorded a chain of his songs, starting with “Darn that Dream,” and his career was golden. With Johnny Burke, he wrote many songs for movies recorded by Bing Crosby, then the world’s most popular singer. Burke and Van Heusen, according to Cahn, were songwriting royalty, the original “A Team,” creating classics for Bing’s velvet voice. When Burke’s health began to flag, Jimmy teamed up with Cahn, and like Rodgers finding Hammerstein, another great songwriting team was born.

He remained a bachelor until he was 57, flew his own planes and, according to Brook, loved being the life of the party. “He was a night-owl,” said Brook. “He loved working to the wee hours in the morning, and was considered the go-to guy because he was usually available.” In 1961, Van Heusen was described by a newspaper writer as the opposite of a genius songwriter who locks himself away from the world to “create.” He was “charming, personable and witty, with laughing eyes and a great sense of humor.” He lived until 1990, recognizing the lasting value of his work by leaving his estate to his family, and also by leaving a lasting legacy of hopeful, shining songs to the world. —PZ