AND THEN I DON’T FEEL SO BAD
Jazz, Sentimentality, and Popular Song

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In contrast to the canonical status of songwriters such as Jerome Kern, Irving Berlin, Cole Porter, George and Ira Gershwin, Harold Arlen, Johnny Mercer, and Duke Ellington, the work of Richard Rodgers and Oscar Hammerstein II has always occupied a somewhat ambivalent position in the pantheon of American popular song. Although the partnership between Rodgers and Hammerstein undoubtedly represents one of the most successful in the history of musical theater, their legacy from a jazz perspective is less unequivocal, with only a relatively small number of their songs becoming established as jazz standards. To cite only one key example, in addition to those songwriters named above, Ella Fitzgerald’s Complete Song Books (1994), includes two full albums by the earlier songwriting team of Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart, but not one song by the later duo. Indeed, Fitzgerald’s discography features only a handful of Rodgers’s subsequent collaborations with Hammerstein, a tendency that is similarly evident in the choices of many jazz instrumentalists.

The reasons are not hard to fathom: compared to the urbane wit of figures such as Cole Porter, Ira Gershwin, and Johnny Mercer, Hammerstein’s often square and solemn sentimentality appears to be the antithesis of stereotypical jazz “hipness.” Consequently, the critical response to jazz readings of Rodgers and Hammerstein songs has tended to find parody and irony in such readings, whether in Cecil Taylor and Sunny Murray’s renderings of “This Nearly Was Mine” or John Coltrane’s versions of “My Favorite Things.” But musical meaning is seldom so easily contained, and, in this chapter, I explore the charges of sentimentality, banality, and commerciality leveled not only at Rodgers and Hammerstein’s work but also at Fletcher Henderson’s populist—and critically reviled—repertoire of the early 1930s. Most often, such charges stand in contradistinction to claims of “authenticity” in jazz versions of such repertoire—a dichotomy which I refute, arguing that some work in jazz studies simply fails to engage with the sentimentalism that remains a fundamental characteristic of much jazz and popular music.

Still Dreaming of Paradise: Irony Versus Sentimentality

Based on several stories from James A. Michener’s Pulitzer Prize–winning book Tales of the South Pacific (1947), which addressed the lives of American servicemen and women stationed in the South Pacific during the Second World War, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s South Pacific premiered on Broadway in April 1949 (with Mary Martin and Ezio Pinza in the starring roles) and was released in a film version in 1958. The song “This Nearly Was Mine,” which appears late in Act II,
reflects the despair felt by Emile de Becque, the French plantation-owning protagonist, pondering what might have been, after having been spurned by the US Navy Nurse, Nellie Forbush, whose racial prejudices refuse to allow her to accept de Becque’s mixed-race children: “Now, now I’m alone, Still dreaming of paradise.” The song was a popular repertoire choice for male vocalists of the 1950s and 1960s and has received a limited number of jazz treatments over the years, including versions by Chico Hamilton, Don Shirley, the Art Farmer-Benny Golson Jazztet, Oscar Peterson, and Jimmy Smith.

In addition to these more straightforwardly jazz-oriented performances, the song was interpreted by the pianist Cecil Taylor, on his album *The World of Cecil Taylor* (1960), which was recorded in October 1960 for the Candid label. This performance raises some interesting questions with regard to avant-garde jazz musicians engaging with the standard repertoire and the critical response to such engagement. In an extended, eleven-minute trio rendition, Taylor bends the tune out of shape, refashioning it to his own purposes, in a manner that side-steps simple satire in favor of a richly nuanced reading which, for all its manifest disruptions and eruptions, retains considerable respect for both the overall structure and feeling of the song. But the nuance was lost on Amiri Baraka (then known as LeRoi Jones), who heard only irony in Taylor’s interpretation, with Rodgers and Hammerstein’s song conceived of as merely a satirical target. In his review of the album, Baraka stated:

the best tune on the album, “This Nearly Was Mine,” is a tune that under ordinary circumstances is one of the most terrifyingly maudlin pop tunes of our time. But Taylor seems to come to the tune with this in mind because he almost completely rearranges the melodic, harmonic and rhythmic devices of the tune and succeeds in making a music that is so personal and intimate as to give one the feeling that the original “This” never really existed, except as a kind of dyspeptic nightmare. . . . As another for instance, this same tune, “This,” as I said a frighteningly fragile piece of “midtown” fluff, Cecil has made into a subtle but genuinely bluesy blues.

*(Baraka 1968, 128–129)*

In sharp contrast to Baraka’s overly dismissive perspective with regard to the original song, Buell Neidlinger, the bass player on the session, had already made his feelings known in the liner notes to the Candid release, applauding both Taylor’s unique reading and the original vehicle on which it was based:

Cecil transforms ‘This Nearly Was Mine’ into a blue aria. Richard Rodgers wrote the melody for Pinza to sing, and I find it most moving. In this track, Cecil’s ideas and his playing demonstrate his ability to sing an interpretation.

*(Neidlinger 1961)*

But even more noteworthy than Neidlinger’s eloquent endorsement of the song is Taylor’s own response to Baraka’s critique, in an interview with Joe Goldberg for the book *Jazz Masters of the 50s*, first published in 1965. Goldberg notes Taylor’s “general dislike and distrust of the people who promote and write about jazz” and shows Taylor a copy of Baraka’s review of *The World of Cecil Taylor*, complete with his comments on “This Nearly Was Mine”: “Taylor looked at the review in stunned amazement. ‘Doesn’t that fool know,’ he asked finally, ‘that I recorded that tune because I like it?’” (Goldberg 1983, 216–217).

“This Nearly Was Mine” was subsequently given another unique reading by the drummer Sunny Murray, who could hardly be described as either a musical satirist or sentimentalist, known more for his groundbreaking and ferociously modernist free jazz drumming in the company of
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Cecil Taylor and Albert Ayler. Recorded in Paris in January 1969, the song appeared on Murray's album *Big Chief* (1969), which featured an international octet including American bassist Alan Silva (here playing violin). On the one hand, it might seem that Murray's satirical impulses are, indeed, front and center: the song is subjected to a ragged, dirge-like reading, the horns incessantly repeating the melody while Silva's hyperactive violin seesaws its way through two full choruses, over the churning accompaniment provided by Françoise Tusques's pseudo-rhapsodic piano, Beb Guérin's powerfully contrapuntal bass lines, and Murray's thundering drums. From this perspective, Murray's arrangement might be readily interpreted as a hip, mocking parody of a “corny,” “sentimental” Broadway show tune, and this is how it has been heard by many friends, students, and conference delegates for whom I have played the piece.

On the other hand, denying the strictures of a strictly satirical interpretation, the piece remains strangely affecting, bringing an entirely new vocabulary to Rodgers's poignant waltz, yet still offering an obliquely respectful and hesitantly tender reading of the song. Stuart Broomer captures evocatively the equivocal nature of Murray's version of the song when he describes it as “a wailing, hymn-like recitation that takes on the mood of a lyrical crucifixion” (Broomer 2009). The delicious ambiguity inherent in Murray's reading of “This Nearly Was Mine”—which runs the interpretive gamut from mischievous parody to expressive sentiment—has kept me coming back to this particular piece for forty years, relishing my own uncertainty and indecision with regard to its meaning, significance, and value.

More recent recordings of the piece by Chick Corea, Fred Hersch, Ethan Iverson, Paul Motian, Pat Metheny, and Dave King—all of which adopt a non-parodic, almost reverential approach—simply confirm the song's contemporary relevance as a vehicle for improvisation and deny Baraka's glib claims for its maudlin, fragile fluffiness. In his liner notes to his solo piano album, *Fred Hersch Plays Rodgers & Hammerstein* (1996a), Hersch offers a heartfelt tribute to his source material, thereby preempting any critical readings that might find irony or parody in his inventive interpretations:

> Rodgers and Hammerstein wrote the first popular music I ever heard. Long before I played (or even knew about) jazz, their songs were part of my musical world. From hearing original cast albums on our family's Philco to playing yellowed sheet music on my grandmother's piano to accompanying the fifth-grade choir in selections from *The Sound of Music*, I have always been drawn to the rich harmonies and timeless melodies of these songs and the way that they express universal sentiments so beautifully. (Hersch 1996b)

“*I Love Trees*: Irony Versus Sentimentality, Again

Based on the real-life story of the Trapp Family Singers, Rodgers and Hammerstein’s *The Sound of Music* premiered on Broadway in November 1959, with a Hollywood film version following in 1965. The show tells the story of Maria Rainer, a postulant nun at Nonnberg Abbey in Salzburg, who leaves the Abbey to take up the position of governess to the seven children of the retired Austrian Navy Captain Georg von Trapp. The story is played out against the background of the Anschluss, the German annexation of Austria in March 1938, and the musical ends with the Trapp family fleeing Nazi-occupied Austria. The original Broadway production of *The Sound of Music* ran for 1,443 performances, from 1959 to 1963. The film version was released in 1965 and went on to be the highest grossing film in the US in the 1960s. Richard Keenan notes that, by 2001, the film “had grossed (adjusted for inflation) $797 million, making it the third highest grossing film of all time” (Keenan 2007, 127).

In October 1960, motivated, in part, by the success of the Broadway show, John Coltrane recorded a version of “My Favorite Things” (1961), which went on to become one of his most popular
and well-known recordings. In common with Amiri Baraka’s perspective on Cecil Taylor’s version of “This Nearly Was Mine,” some observers have claimed to find irony in Coltrane’s interpretation. For example, arguing that “irony and parody are more central and expected means of aesthetic expression in the African American tradition” (Monson 1996, 225), Ingrid Monson suggests that Coltrane’s version “inverts the piece on nearly every level . . . it transforms a sentimental, optimistic lyric into a vehicle for a more brooding improvisational exploration” (1996, 116–117). Monson argues that the “effect of ironic reversal, or transformation of a ‘corny’ tune into a vehicle for serious jazz improvisation, is communicated by multiple musical parameters,” and she focuses upon “transformations of form, harmony, and groove in ‘My Favorite Things’ to illustrate the contrast between the Broadway and Coltrane versions of the tune” (1996, 106–107). Hence, in Monson’s analysis—and notwithstanding her various caveats with regard to essentialism—ironic signification is reserved strictly for African American jazz-based musicality, which is characterized as “serious” (1996, 107), “innovative” (1996, 111), “superior” (1996, 115), and “complex” (1996, 115), while white Broadway-based musicality is resigned to being only “vapid” (1996, 107), “corny” (1996, 107), “simple” (1996, 114), and “sentimental” (1996, 117).

The most immediate and obvious question to be asked here is why Coltrane’s transformations of the song must necessarily be regarded as “ironic.” Lewis Porter has argued that

Ingrid Monson makes the mistake of assuming that Coltrane wanted to dress this song up because he must have thought this tune was silly. Quite the opposite: He took the song seriously and saw things in it that the composer had not.

(Porter 1995, 19)

And, as Porter suggests,

Coltrane was under no pressure to record such a song. In fact, he told [French critic Francois] Postif, lots of people imagine wrongly that “My Favorite Things” is one of my compositions; I would have loved to have written it, but it’s by Rodgers and Hammerstein.

(Porter 1998, 182)

Quoting from the same interview, Ben Ratliff characterizes Coltrane as “giddy” in his enthusiasm for the song, which Coltrane describes as

my favorite piece of all those I have recorded. I don’t think I would like to do it over in any way, whereas all the other discs I’ve made could have been improved in some details. This waltz is great: when you play it slowly, it has an element of gospel that’s not at all displeasing; when you play it quickly, it has other undeniable qualities.

(Ratliff 2007, 59)

In Monson’s analysis of the original Broadway version of “My Favorite Things,” the word “sentimental” clearly functions in the pejorative, as an unquestioned claim of inconsequential triviality. The charge is one that is routinely leveled at The Sound of Music, and particularly the film version, which is commonly critiqued as a locus of popular culture sentimentality, with the general tone of such criticism captured in a random sampling: “romantic nonsense and sentiment”; “icky-sticky . . . square and solid sugar”; “fatuous”; “sickly sweetness”; “the purest schmatlz.” Characterizing it as a “sugar-coated lie,” film critic Pauline Kael dubbed the film “The Sound of Money,” while Julie Andrews’s co-star Christopher Plummer famously called the film “The
Sound of Mucus” and described working with Andrews as “like being hit over the head every day with a Hallmark card” (quoted in Gorsky 2013, 202).

But Rodgers and Hammerstein were no strangers to the accusation of sentimentality, a charge that left them thoroughly undismayed. In a 1958 television interview with Mike Wallace, more than a year and a half before the premiere of *The Sound of Music* on Broadway, Hammerstein had some interesting things to say about sentiment, which require no further exegesis on my part:

In my book there’s nothing wrong with sentiment because the things we’re sentimental about are the fundamental things in life: the birth of a child; the death of a child, or of anybody; falling in love. I couldn’t be anything but sentimental about these basic things. I think to be anything but sentimental is being a “poseur.”

And, responding to critic Kenneth Tynan’s charge that he and Rodgers, with their “love for trees and earth and the simple life . . . [had] forfeited the civilized virtue of mature wit and urban irony,” an unperturbed Hammerstein replied:

Well maybe I have. I’m not very interested in urban irony. I’m not that kind of man, I’m not ironic, I’m not very urban. I love trees. I hope I’ll never stop loving them. Trees, green meadows . . . who cannot love them? Doesn’t Kenneth Tynan like those? I imagine he does.4

Richard Rodgers was similarly unrepentant: in a 1968 interview, commenting on the film version of *The Sound of Music*, he stated:

It’s the most successful picture that’s ever been made and that’s very pleasurable. It isn’t just a question of money. What I enjoy particularly is what it has done for the un-self-conscious people of the world—the selfconscious ones sneer at it. It is sentimental, but I don’t see anything particularly wrong with that. I think people have been given a great deal of hope by that picture.

*(quoted in Nolan 1978, 225)*

In more recent years, Martin Gorsky has highlighted the extent to which *The Sound of Music* has been reassessed by a wide range of critical scholarship “alert to diversity of textual meaning and the complexities of spectator reception” (Gorsky 2013, 203) and encompassing a similarly wide range of interpretations: “as nostalgic imagining, weapon of imperialism, lesbian performance, and proto-feminist fable” (2013, 216). This has included, for example, revisionist approaches that situate Maria as a “contemporary countercultural figure with her Vidal-Sassoon-like unisex short hair, flat shoes and folk-style dresses . . . a spritely coffee-house troubadour, guitar case in one hand and carpet bag in the other” (2013, 204).

Hence, Gorsky argues, “by the new millennium the reduction of Maria to subservient drudge and the film to cozy sentiment had become less tenable” (2013, 205). Gorsky goes on to make his own provocative and insightful reading of the movie, suggesting that, rather than representing a sentimental, conservative bulwark against the apparently radical spirit of the swinging 1960s, the film might more accurately be regarded as a constitutive part of that curious decade: “The critics who initially decried the film’s sentimentality reasonably argued for a cinema more directly engaged with the present, but they also overlooked the serious intent beneath the sugarcoating” (2013, 216).
Incontrovertible Truths? Art Versus Commerce

The stereotyped false dichotomy that Monson’s analysis suggests—between, on the one hand, a hip, ironic, African American jazz aesthetic and, on the other, a corny, sentimental, white Broadway aesthetic—prompts two further observations that serve to offer a somewhat more accurate historical perspective on these thoroughly interrelated musical traditions. First, it needs to be acknowledged that the African American jazz tradition has no monopoly on irony and parody—both the Broadway and Hollywood musicals have been prime exponents of these techniques since their earliest days, in which contexts they are equally—or maybe more—“central and expected means of aesthetic expression” (Monson 1996, 225).

Second, and in sharp contrast to Monson’s claims for the centrality of irony and parody in the African American tradition—practices which, she suggests, “quite literally pervade jazz improvisation” (1996, 106)—I would argue that a non-ironic sentimentality has been central to their artistic practice—or, indeed, to the artistic practice of many of their contemporaries and peers. More significantly, however, I want to highlight the manner in which the disparaging of so-called sentimentality offers a curiously skewed version of jazz history, simply reproducing a formalist discourse of aesthetic autonomy and artistic “authenticity” which willfully ignores the rather broad and blurry borderline between constructed notions of “art” and “commerce.” James Koehne has noted the manner in which, adopting the “umpire’s role,” the work of “critics and musicologists . . . is littered with diatribes against the banal, the vulgar, the trivial, the sentimental and the simple” (2004, 124)—an observation that encapsulates rather neatly some aspects of Gunther Schuller’s analytical perspective in _The Swing Era: The Development of Jazz 1930–1945_. Although Schuller’s text remains a remarkable achievement, full of musical and historical insight, there is no doubt that he had his blind spots.

For example, Schuller bemoans Fletcher Henderson’s engagement with “the Tin Pan Alley pop tunes of the day”—which are dismissed as “ephemera” and “trivia”—and which included the songs “Malinda’s Weddin’ Day”; “I Wanna Count Sheep (Till the Cows Come Home)”; and “My Sweet Tooth Says I Wanna (But My Wisdom Tooth Says No)” (Henderson 1990)—and even Schuller acknowledges the “classic” nature of that title (1989, 323). Schuller similarly laments how “amazing and incongruous” it is to hear

one of the most forceful and original and virile soloists of the day, Coleman Hawkins, cheek by jowl in the same performance with some whimperingly puerile crooned vocal, the rest of the arrangements usually emulating white “sweet” (hotel) band styles:
Lombardo-ish saxophones, insipidly sentimental brass (both sections excessive vibratos were alleged to represent real sentiment), [and] chunky two-beat rhythm sections.

(1989, 323)

In an accompanying footnote, Schuller then launches into one of the aforementioned diatribes, indulging in more than a few gender stereotypes as he castigates, in scatter-gun fashion, the “phenomenon of the effeminately voiced crooners in popular music, both then and now, and the appalling taste that spawns it,” as well as the “falsetto warbling of thousands of rock groups.” For Schuller, in light of what he claims to be the “generally ‘macho’ outlook of the average American male consumer”—a questionable observation that deserves much unpacking—the popularity and success of vocalists such as these represent baffling problems, the “further explanation” of which he leaves to “sociologists and psychologists” (1989, 323).5

Hence, Schuller plays the “umpire’s role” here with incontestable certitude and a startling lack of self-reflexivity, enforcing the rules of the game in a manner that has no truck with gripping appeals or disgruntled petitions. But note that there are two sharply contrasting analytical modes at work here: an effusive celebration of “virility” and originality, linked to an “authentic” view of jazz as a durable art form (based, it must be acknowledged, almost solely on assessments of three-minute recordings); and an anxious, indignant condemnation of “effeminacy” and sentimentality, which are linked to an apparently worthless, evanescent commercialism. The vacillation between the twin poles of acclaim and censure offers a curiously unsatisfactory vision of the overall nature of the jazz world of the period and suggests little by way of a deeper understanding of the wide range of factors—musical, social, cultural, economic, political—that influenced that world.

It is fascinating to compare the fulminating invective in the previously quoted passages with the strikingly similar language that Schuller employs to praise the “virtually flawless solo contributions” by tenor saxophonist Don Byas to Count Basie’s “Harvard Blues” (Basie 2003), recorded in January 1942—a language that might readily be inverted to the cause of critique:

Perfectly constructed, it is simple and affecting, poignant and languorous. Playing softly with a sense of intimacy not often encountered in jazz, Byas places each of his notes as if they were a series of incontrovertible truths, Jo Jones all the while enveloping these lovely sounds with caressing cymbal swooshes.

(1989, 255)

Notwithstanding the gloriously extravagant language—for a man who values so-called “virility,” there is much poignancy, languorousness, caressing, and swooshing going on here—it comes as little surprise to discover that Schuller’s rampant formalism leads him to explain the “eerie beauty” of Byas’s “anguished moan” at the beginning of his second chorus in purely technical terms, with reference to Byas’s use of the Lydian scale, Schuller claiming that Byas is exploiting, un—or subconsciously, the momentary confluence of two diverse musical worlds: the classical modes (which go back to Greek antiquity) and the blue notes of jazz. For the Cᵇ head-tone of the scale . . . is both the blue seventh of the key of Dᵇ and the fourth degree of the related Lydian scale (of G⁰).

(1989, 255)

Whether Byas’s note choices represent “incontrovertible truths” remains a matter of debate. But one wonders why Byas, a highly skilled and harmonically astute improviser, might not have been credited with exploiting these techniques consciously, with Schuller’s “un-” and “sub-”
prefixes merely reinforcing the hoary old myth of innate African American talent. Moreover, in response to the indisputable rulings of Schuller—as-umpire, when one consults the recording in question one quickly realizes that a somewhat different series of interpretations is readily available to the listener. Yes, the Byas solo is a very fine example of the genre, but it is hardly the urtext of tenor saxophone solos. And what critical line-in-the-sand, one ponders, insulates its warm vibrato and breathy romanticism—not to mention the “affecting, poignant and languorous” qualities identified by Schuller himself—from being filed under the verboten category “sentimental”? The rhetorical machinations at work here are extraordinary.

In terms of Henderson’s repertoire choices, Schuller simply dismisses many of these song selections as “artistic lapses” that were undoubtedly desperate maneuvers to find a sustaining public beyond a small coterie of jazz enthusiasts. That is the only explanation of the distressingly trite pop material the band recorded (was forced to record?) in those early years of the thirties.

John Chilton offers a similar assessment of these pieces, arguing that the Henderson band appeared to “backtrack” at this time, “producing dull recordings of the indifferent commercial songs of the day” (Chilton 1990, 67). But when one surveys Henderson’s entire output from this period, it becomes clear that he was simply engaging in a set of practices that was commonplace among his contemporaries and peers: namely, exploiting the resources of Tin Pan Alley and Broadway in the context of a working band that required a continually renewed repertoire. The famous photograph of the Henderson band in Atlantic City in the summer of 1932, under a large sign carrying the name of the venue, Danceland, dramatizes that working context in a salutary manner, highlighting the fact that, rather than recording three-minute artistic nuggets for posterity, as critics such as Schuller and Chilton might have us believe, it was the quotidian provision of populist entertainment—often in the form of music for dancing—that was the primary component of the band’s day-to-day activities.⁶

In 1931, in what John Chilton describes as “a deluge of recording activity” (1990, 77), stimulated by their ten-month residency at Connie’s Inn in Harlem and the subsequent radio exposure, the band recorded thirty-six sides over twelve sessions. In contrast, following the end of their Connie’s Inn stint, Chilton has noted that 1932 was a “very ordinary” year for the Henderson band:

For a good part of 1932 Henderson’s orchestra worked in various theatres, playing week-long residencies as part of a touring show. As in years past, they also fulfilled engagements in the vast New England ballrooms, and played return dates at New York’s most famous dance hall, the Savoy.

(1990, 77)

In short, they spent many weeks on the road, with Chilton’s use of the expression “very ordinary” functioning as code to indicate that the band did not record much in that year. The recorded legacy of Henderson’s band in 1932 consists of only thirteen sides, recorded over three days in the studio, two in March and one in December. It becomes clear, then, that any assessment of Henderson’s work in the period 1931–1932 based solely on recordings will necessarily offer a partial, skewed account of the band’s activities.

In response to the dismissals of Henderson’s repertoire choices by Schuller and Chilton, Jeffrey Magee offers a refreshingly alternative perspective on Henderson’s recorded output in this period,
suggestion that any balanced perspective on these issues “begins with looking at the venue, not the recording studio, and seeing the extent to which recordings manifest one by-product of the band’s professional activity, not its chief focus.”

Connie’s Inn required a versatile band with the stylistic dexterity to shift quickly among numbers in a disparate repertory. Russell Procope recalled that the band played “tangos, waltzes, foxtrots, college songs, current hits, excerpts from the classics in dance tempos, just about everything,” and for Procope, that kind of versatility marked success. . . . In the early 1930s, then, the job—rather than a desperate need for one—led Henderson’s band to make records of current pop tunes among many other kinds of pieces. Recordings of Tin Pan Alley fare that sound like “severe artistic lapses” or “backtracking,” then, simply reflect part of the varied repertory demanded by the job. In fact, the recorded legacy is less lamentable for mixed artistic success than for its highly selective view of the band’s repertory and style. Among the records there are no tangos, no waltzes, no college songs, no dance arrangements of the classics. Together, the records comprise a detail from a broad canvas that we will never see.

(Magee 2005, 138)

Rather than lamenting Henderson’s repertoire choices for their opportunistic sentimentalism and crass commercialism, then, one might applaud them for their musical savvy and resonant topicality—the very same qualities that Coltrane exploited in his selection of “My Favorite Things” for his Atlantic recording in 1960.

Conclusion

One of the most problematic aspects of the pejorative dismissal of “sentimentality” is that such an accusation simply underestimates the extent to which sentimentalism remains a fundamental discursive characteristic of much popular culture, as is evident through several examples: the sentimental ballad is a cornerstone of folk cultures around the world, and, as David Metzer observes, the power ballads of contemporary rock music simply “attest to the longevity of sentimentality” (2016, 660); the Harlequin-style romance novel is founded on sentimental plots and storylines, and its popularity remains undiminished (estimates for the book sales of the late Dame Barbara Cartland range from 750 million to one billion); the stereotypical “Happy Ending” of the classic Hollywood film virtually defined—and, in many cases, continues to define—sentimentality in the public sphere; the “human interest,” kids-and-puppies stories at the end of local television news shows are grounded in sentimentality, serving to console viewers after the everyday horrors chronicled in the rest of the broadcast; the bellicose veneer of reality television—the confrontational antagonism, the mercenary egotism, the cruelly exaggerated pauses, the tearful exit interviews—offers only the thinnest of disguises for a mawkishly manufactured sentimentalism; and the world of sports is suffused with sentimentality, from the hushed tones of golf commentators assessing a “round for the ages,” to the aggressively fawning post-9/11 militaristic patriotism inherent in Major League Baseball’s addition of “God Bless America” to the seventh inning stretch.

And, as a final example, following Lady Gaga’s song medley at the 2015 Academy Awards ceremony, in celebration of the 50th anniversary of the film version of The Sound of Music, the sentimentalist spirit that is so central to contemporary popular culture guaranteed that the surprise entrance by the incomparable 79-year-old Julie Andrews would leave not a dry eye in the house. Not—to underscore one of my key points here—that there’s anything wrong with that.
I want to conclude by citing the work of the literary scholar June Howard, who makes a compelling argument for the need for a substantially revised approach to the question of sentimentality:

I believe that scholarly usages of “sentimentality” are more closely intertwined with everyday meanings of the term than we usually recognize, that they often rely on unexamined and untenable assumptions about the nature of emotion, and that intermittent slides into condemnation or celebration undermine their analytic value. We need to move on from arguments for and against sentimentality to the task of conceptualizing it as a transdisciplinary object of study.

(Howard 1999, 63)

Howard goes on to suggest that “characterizing something as sentimental should open, not close, a conversation . . . the appearance of the term marks a site where values are contested” (Howard 1999, 69), and her approach to the topic therefore offers a challenging agenda for any future work in jazz and popular music studies that aims to address issues of sentimentality, denying the cavalier dismissals summarized above and inviting a more complex and thoroughgoing engagement with this ubiquitous, inescapable, and profoundly human concept.

Notes
1. A useful definition of sentimentality can be found in The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory, with relevance beyond the field of literature: “For the most part a pejorative term to describe false or superficial emotion, assumed feeling, self-regarding postures of grief and pain. In literature it denotes overmuch use of pathetic effects and attempts to arouse feeling by ‘pathetic’ indulgence” (Cuddon 1992, 857).
2. Spoiler Alert: It’s okay, folks, Nellie eventually realizes the error of her ways, and they all live happily ever after.
3. For a detailed discussion of Taylor’s interpretation of “This Nearly Was Mine,” and Baraka’s critical response, see Harper (2015).
4. The video and transcript of the interview are available online, in the collection of the Harry Ransom Center at the University of Texas at Austin: www.hrc.utexas.edu-multimedia-video/2008/wallace/hammerstein_oscar_t.html
5. As Schuller extends his vitriol to include contemporary performers, he name-checks Boy George, and I must confess to the guilty pleasure of always having enjoyed the fact that “Boy George (singer)” appears in the index of Schuller’s The Swing Era.
6. The photograph is reproduced in Ward and Burns (2000, 191).

References


