

“Getting It Right... and Other Matters” by Roy Sander

Is it my imagination, or are cabaret singers getting increasingly sloppy with lyrics? I suspect this malpractice has long existed—it's just that I've been growing increasingly impatient with it. I'm not talking about going up in a lyric; anyone can have a momentary lapse. I'm talking about learning a lyric incorrectly and repeatedly performing it that way.

Frequently, it is clear that the performer has not thought about what (s)he's singing. With "Anyplace I Hang My Hat Is Home," one recently sang "howdy *neighbor*, so long friend" instead of "howdy stranger, so long friend." The song is about not remaining in one place for very long, so the changed lyric makes no sense. In doing "Losing My Mind," another sang "not going left, not *knowing* right." Where did *that* come from? Was he trying to improve on Sondheim? Singing "Gigi," someone sang "was I out yonder blinking somewhere at a star?" Of course, the lyric is "was I out yonder somewhere blinking at a star?", with *blink* rhyming with *brink* in the preceding line, "while you were trembling on the brink." The singer had obviously never listened to what he was doing.

Another sang "Love me *and* leave me" instead of "Love me or leave me." Where was his mind? I don't remember whether he was the same one who, doing that same song, sang "I have today and give back tomorrow" instead of "to have it today, to give back tomorrow." Or is the correct lyric "to have it today, *and* give back tomorrow" or some other variant? I'm not sure—I have not had time to research this. However, you can be sure that if I were going to perform the song, I would make time. As should all of these singers have done.

There are reasons beyond professional pride and respect for the lyricist that should give you incentive to get the words right. Quite recently, in doing "Autumn Leaves," instead of singing "Since you went away, the days grow long/and soon I'll hear old winter's song," the artist sang "...and *still* I'll hear..." Mind you, she might actually have sung "...and still *I* hear..." but I was so taken aback by the switch from *soon* to *still* that my attention was diverted. And that is one of the dangers of not doing the right lyrics: knowledgeable audience members will be taken out of the song and your interpretation. For however brief a period, you will have lost them.

I hasten to add that each of the errors I've cited was made repeatedly, so none was merely an accidental slip of the moment. What is more, none of the artists I've referred to so far, or the ones I'll allude to in a moment, is a rookie. All of them are pros, and all of them are quite talented. They have simply not been as diligent or as demanding of themselves as they ought.

Prepositions, adverbs, articles, and conjunctions seem to be especially problematic. Getting one of these small words wrong can alter the intended meaning, sometimes in subtle ways. For example, doing "Witchcraft," one performer invariably sings "proceed *to* what you're leading me to" instead of the original "proceed *with* what you're leading me to." The original preposition suggests a process, a continuation of what has begun,

whereas the changed lyric suggests getting it over with. In David Friedman's "My Simple Christmas Wish," I have heard a few people sing "while I'm still stuck here schlepping through my life *with* all of you." The correct lyric is "...schlepping through my life *like* all of you," which is nastier than the erroneous lyric—and lord knows, one quality the singer of that song must communicate is meanness. I even heard one performer sing "...schlepping *for* my life..." Attention must be paid.

One source of incorrect words is taking lyrics from other people's recordings, rather than from published sheet music. This is a bad idea. Grave errors have been made by some of the most prominent singers. Jazz Radio in Berlin persists in playing a recording of "I Could Write a Book" in which the artist sings "And the simple secret of *it all*// Is just to tell them that I love you a lot" instead of "And the simple secret of the plot..." Ghastly. (The only reason I'm not telling you his name is that I'm only 90% sure I remember which famous singer it is.)

Going to the Internet for lyrics is very iffy. The words given frequently reflect the version recorded by a particular artist, so be wary. For example, one Nina Simone web site lists a lyric for "You'd Be So Nice to Come Home To" as "while *that* breeze on high, *sings* a lullaby" instead of the correct lyric, "while the breeze on high/sang a lullaby". (Cole Porter generally did not make grammatical errors.) Another Nina Simone site would have you believe that the lyric is "While that breeze on *night*, sings a lullaby". Pathetic. Regardless of what errors Nina Simone may or may not have made, there is no excuse for *your* not getting it right.

(By the way, a number of singers tend to substitute "that" for "the," doubtless in an attempt to be cool or hip. For example, in doing "I'll Be Seeing You" not long ago, one sang "*that* park across the way". In fact, this practice is neither cool nor hip. What it is is tacky.)

Fake books are aptly named; they are not a trustworthy source of lyrics. A singer/pianist recently sang an incorrect word in "Lazy Afternoon". He told me afterwards that he had gotten the lyrics from a jazz fake book and could tell from the meter of the music that a word was missing from the lyrics—so, he stuck in a word that he thought might make sense. It kind of did, but it was wrong.

Which takes me to the point that even if a revision does not alter the meaning of a song, you still have an obligation to respect the lyricist's work and talent—even when the lyricist him/herself got it wrong. For example, Joan Osborne wrote "What if God was one of us?" instead of "What if God *were* one of us?", and that's the way it must be sung—though the error is enough to make any decent person shudder.

"Don't Rain on My Parade" is another case in point. A lyric is "Your turn at bat, sir, at least I didn't fake it./Hat, sir, I guess I didn't make it." I have always regretted that Bob Merrill did not write "...I guess I didn't make it./...at least I didn't fake it."—a more logical progression. However, for better or worse, it is the original lyric that must be performed. (By the way, to do it as written requires an acting choice that I have never

seen anyone make. Everyone sings the second line as though it followed the first logically, and had equal weight. Rather, the second needs to be treated as a separate thought, and a step down from the first.) Once I did hear it done the way I would have it: In the 1970s, at the original Ballroom, Estelle Parsons sang "make it/fake it". I was tickled pink, but I'd like to think she'd first gotten permission from Bob Merrill.

When I was speaking with a singer about the importance of being meticulous with lyrics, he asked whether it weren't more important to sing a song with passion and conviction. Look, of course a word-perfect but lackluster rendition won't do—but this isn't an either/or proposition. You must get both aspects right.

Finally, on the subject of respect for songwriters, don't attribute a song to a singer who had a hit recording of it. One singer introduced "A Rainy Night in Georgia" as a *Brook Benton* song. Not so. The song was written by Tony Joe White, not by Benton. Another common mistake is attributing a song to the singer whose rendition was the first *you* heard; this flaunts the limitations of your own knowledge. After performing "At Last," a singer said, "That was Etta James." The hell it was. It is a Mack Gordon/Harry Warren song. What's more, while Etta James's 1961 recording was successful, Glenn Miller and Ray Eberle had the original hit recording of this 1942 standard, and Ray Anthony and Tommy Mercer made it a hit again ten years later. If you haven't taken time to research the background of what you're singing, that's OK... but know enough to shut up and sing. (To make matters worse, both of these singers are also songwriters! I wonder how they would feel if people who performed *their* songs failed to give *them* their due credit?)

Here, There, and Everywhere

Quite a few cabaret artists seem to have a mistaken notion of how the cabaret stage ought to be used—and the larger the stage, the greater the potential for inapt choices. The core misconception is that performing songs from different areas of the stage is either necessary or desirable—that it will add variety to your performance or somehow make your show more interesting. That is so wrong. All it actually accomplishes is to make audience members move their heads or shift in their seats. Variety comes from the range of subjects, emotions, rhythms, and points of view expressed in your material, and interest comes from the quality of both your interpretations and your song choices.

Taken to extremes, this practice can be just plain silly. One fellow, whose show was otherwise quite wonderful, kept popping up in unexpected places: upstage left, downstage right, and various coordinates in between. It became a game: after the lights went down on a number, guess where he would be when the lights came up again for the next one.

Remember, Mabel Mercer sang all songs seated in a chair—and this in no way limited her effectiveness. And Julie Wilson, the greatest cabaret artist I have ever seen, performs from one spot—sometimes standing, sometimes seated.

(I realize that I referred to Julie Wilson as "the greatest cabaret artist I have ever seen" in my previous column as well. I will never forego an opportunity to so honor her. In fact, you can replace all of my columns, past and future, with a single piece of advice: *see Julie Wilson*.

I would go so far as to suggest that unless you have a good reason to do otherwise, you should sing every song from downstage center. Now, I recognize that such good reasons do exist—sometimes. For example, distancing yourself from the piano and the musicians and singing from, say, stage left, *can* contribute to a sense of isolation or introspection—especially if the lighting reflects this objective; however, this device can never substitute for your obligation to convey the appropriate mood through your interpretation. Or you might position yourself close to the piano if a number involves interplay with the pianist. For an up-tempo number or a comic song, you might want to move about the stage to perform to different parts of the audience.

And, yes, of course there are other potentially valid reasons not to stay downstage center. The point is that you should know *why* you have chosen to perform from a particular spot and you should be sure that your choice is dramatically justified. If your director tells you to "sing this one from here," ask him or her why. If (s)he can't give you a persuasive reason, put your foot down—or, rather, don't lift it up.

By the way, in speaking with a singer after her show some years ago, I observed that her interpretations were more centered when she sang nestled in the crook of the piano. She confessed that that was where she felt safest and most comfortable. I have seen similar, if not identical, phenomena with other performers. If you have a particular comfort issue—microphone in hand vs. mic in the stand, seated vs. standing, etc.—recognize it, and until you can work this constraint out, position yourself where you will be free to focus on your interpretations, rather than on combating discomfort.

Don't Cover It Up

While it may be admirable to put your money where your mouth is, it is a mistake to do this with the mic. Doing so blocks the audience's view of one of your primary means of expression and communication: your mouth. It is like watching scenes performed behind a scrim in the theatre; a somewhat frustrating experience. There is another, more practical reason not to do this. Because of a variety of factors—less-than-ideal sound mix, loud instrumental accompaniment, poor enunciation, whatever—it can sometimes be difficult for the audience to make out the words. Being able to see the singer's lips can help enormously.

Position the mic nicely below your mouth, not in front of it. Pay particular attention to this when you are performing with mic in hand. I have seen several seasoned performers position the mic properly when it is in the stand, only to hold it smack in front of their chops when not using the stand.