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# Joseph Harkins' Senior Recital: An Exploration of Jazz and Popular Music

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### **A Reflection on Recital Repertoire**

Selecting repertoire for a performance can be both a joy and a struggle for any musician. Often times it is difficult to trim the length of a program, to decide on a musical style, or to choose music that is challenging yet attainable. Compiling a list for my senior jazz recital was no different. My thesis - exploring music from the singer-songwriter movement and infusing it with jazz - was freeing. It allowed me to select my favorite songs from the singer-songwriter movement and then begin the creative arranging process within this framework. Incorporating some of the key elements of jazz - harmonic sophistication, rhythmic interaction and syncopation, and improvisation - further inspired me to write my own composition for this project. I have included the original recital program notes below and added extended material that sheds light on my reasoning, personal connections, and creative process in arranging and selecting repertoire.

#### **I've Never Been In Love Before**

I was first introduced to this standard after buying the Fred Knapp Trio album, *How Deep Is The Ocean*. I immediately connected to the arrangement, and I particularly enjoyed its loyalty to the style of the great Oscar Peterson trio. This arrangement was contrived over the course of several JAH trio rehearsals and is meant to emulate both the Knapp and Peterson trio recordings. Our process: play, internalize, and reshape/refine - no written music!

Oscar Peterson is one of my jazz piano heroes, and I have enjoyed the challenge of trying to imitate and capture his sense of harmonic control, blues sensibilities, and swinging rhythmic feel. Over the course of my time at Western, I have worked to develop my jazz piano trio capabilities, and I felt that this tune best represented those efforts. *I've Never Been In Love Before* became a staple for my self-led music ensemble, JAH trio. We had the fortune of playing this standard for Grammy-winning pianist and artist in residence, Ed Simon. His feedback, along with the guidance of Professor Jeremy Siskind allowed me to continuously grow and apply new concepts to this great standard.

### **Bluebird**

As part of my Lee Honors College Thesis, I decided to explore popular songs from the singer-songwriter movement. The goal was to remain true to each composition while bringing tinges of jazz and popular song into play. "Bluebird" is my contribution to the project. I began composing the music sometime in January, and it has slowly evolved into the song you will hear today. Writing the lyrics was easily my biggest challenge, and I must extend a huge thank you to Jeremy Siskind for his helpful suggestions.

*Bluebird* represents several years of musical and compositional growth, and is also personally meaningful to me. I decided to give myself some basic compositional limitations for this piece: the music was written first, followed by the lyrics. The title, *Bluebird*, signifies the delicate nature of life. Though beautiful, it can be rather like chasing a beautiful bird in flight; similar to a goal or feeling that you can appreciate from afar, yet never quite attain. The lyrics close with a simple question, "Why does the bluebird fly away?"

## **Political Science**

I have the pleasure of performing this selection with the man who introduced it to me: Kellen Boersma. This is by far my favorite Randy Newman composition from his 1972 album, *Sail Away*. It will always bring back fond memories of the many “hangs” at 810 Normal Ct. with Lasse, Kellen, Stryz, and Co.

I chose this composition for several reasons. First, I wanted to include a duo arrangement with my friend and colleague, Kellen, an extraordinarily musical and intelligent guitarist. Secondly, this piece added some humor and pure entertainment after the contemplative nature of *Bluebird*. Thirdly, I have always enjoyed singing. Although I am not a serious singer, I felt that stepping outside of my comfort zone to sing in front of family, friends, and professors, would be both beneficial and memorable.

## **Don't Think Twice It's All Right**

Several months ago, I played a duo gig with Max Brown. At our rehearsal, Max taught me this Bob Dylan song. Our performance today is modeled after Brad Mehldau's take on this tune. Fun fact: Johnny Cash ripped off the harmony and even some of the melody from this song for *Understand Your Man*.

As mentioned above, the layout and feel of this arrangement was modeled after acclaimed jazz pianist Brad Mehldau's cover of this tune. Mehldau was one of the first jazz pianists to begin covering popular song. He continues to set the standard of effectively blending elements of jazz and the original work, without compromising the artistic and stylistic integrity of either. While

the simple chord changes of this tune are indicative of Bob Dylan's writing style, they are still complex enough to be a vehicle for improvisation.

Within the jazz idiom, piano and guitar duos are rarely heard. The rhythmic and harmonic capabilities of each instrument often clash, and both performers must be constantly aware of the range, timbre, and notes coming from each instrument. It was both educational and fun to work on this duo setting with Max. The highlight of our rehearsals was an excellent coaching with my thesis chair, Jeremy Siskind.

### **Still Crazy After All These Years / Memories of You**

Paul Simon is a popular songwriter known for interesting harmonic choices. While browsing through his many compositions, I was drawn to this one because of its surprising harmonic changes in the bridge and final refrain. *Memories of You* was composed by Eubie Blake, a stride pianist virtuoso. It will always be one of my favorites because of its simple, beautiful melody and use of diminished chords. Although there is no real musical or stylistic similarity between both of these compositions, I thought it would be fun to perform them together, solo piano.

From my first piano lesson at WMU with Dr. Steve Zegree to my final lesson with Professor Siskind, I have worked to develop my solo jazz piano playing. I felt that this mashup was relatable to my thesis as it combined popular song with jazz; it was indicative of my musical growth; and it represented my efforts during undergraduate study to better myself as a pianist. I have had the pleasure of playing many solo piano gigs, including a full time position on

Mackinac Island. Solo piano playing can be intimidating but equally rewarding, and it will be something I continually strive to master.

### **Chopin Etude Op. 25 No. 1**

There are always moments in one's life that one will never forget. Just shy of two years ago, I was working on this etude in a practice room when I received a phone call from my mother. My Grandpa Martin "Shorty" Pung had passed away suddenly. I put the tune away for a time, but decided to include it on my recital as a tribute to the man who always got me to my piano lessons on time. I will perform the etude in its original form, and with trio in a quasi latin style.

As a pianist with both classical and jazz backgrounds, choosing repertoire for a recital often means excluding favorite selections from various eras of music. However, I was determined to include an étude from the romantic era, composed by Chopin. A lone classical piano piece in a jazz recital is rather odd, so I arranged Chopin's melody for jazz piano trio.

After deciding to blend classical and jazz traditions, I turned to the work of a master jazz composer - Antonio Carlos Jobim - who himself was known for his love of Chopin and use of Chopin's harmonic concepts. I chose a quasi Latin/Bossa Nova style, in an effort to frame Chopin's melody within Jobim's easy going style.