

Hit Tunes A Century Ago

Review written by David Bittinger

Whatever types of popular music appeal to you, here's a reasonable guess about something you've not found appealing for many years: the way the music is commercially positioned and publicized. From payola and white covers of R&B records through ersatz acts (remember Milli Vanilli?), unmusical music videos, country and western supermodels, and (your choice here), pop music's growth as a business has been matched by its shrinkage in culturally intrinsic character and authenticity.

How did popular songs become popular a century ago? As phonographs were owned by many households, rich and poor, records were widely played. But songs were introduced primarily through performance, with professional concerts less common than "parlor music" home concerts using piano and widely distributed sheet music. New songs were lively word-of-mouth experiences that travelled easily through a culture not yet dominated by entertainment potentates and marketing. Compositions that resonated in people's experiences and emotions became hits; popularity was far less the product of commercial promotion.

In a new and appropriately novel CD, *Listening For Your Song*, accomplished vocalist Maud Hixson, accompanied by Rick Carlson's skillful arrangements and piano, presents songs from the early twentieth century that serve virtually as characters in books written by Maud Hart Lovelace. Beloved by a wide audience, these books vividly recreate experiences of her youth. Those experiences echo artfully in this recording partnership between Hixson and the Betsy-Tacy Society, which supports not just Lovelace's legacy but also songs worthy of crossing over a long bridge of popular culture.

The storylines of Lovelace's *Betsy-Tacy* books include the 20 songs in this CD (as well as many others) and were published between 1940 and 1955. Born in 1892, Lovelace wrote her last book in 1966 and lived to 1980.

Through the coming-of-age progression of these books, the songs performed and encountered by best-friend characters Betsy and Tacy serve as the soundtrack of an

adult world experienced by two sensitive and searching girls. The books follow the two growing up in the peaceful haven of a small Minnesota town during the century's first two decades—a peace abruptly interrupted by World War I.

One of this collection's songs, *It's A Long Way To Tipperary*, became, a couple years after its composition, a patriotic rallying cry of "The Great War" that reached from Europe to America's heartland. At a dinner party in Betsy's Wedding, the song plays on a phonograph as the guests dance.

" . . . but then in the midst of all the gaiety something pressed on Betsy's heart. For she had seen the British Territorials march off to war to that tune, just boys most of them, and many had not come back."

As Maud is an uncommon name today, one might wonder whether vocalist Maud Hixson was named for the author whose work inspired this CD. Hixson, a serious musical researcher as well as a prominent performer and recording artist in jazz and traditional vocals, apparently would prefer people focus elsewhere. She's noted that her mother grew up reading the Betsy-Tacy books, leaving the matter there.

If you recall, say, President Eisenhower or had parents who enjoyed singing old tunes, you'll recognize many of these expertly crafted, good-hearted songs. They range from enduring ballads like *Moonlight Bay* and *My Wild Irish Rose* to the jazzy *Alexander's Ragtime Band* and the droll domestic humor of *Everybody Works But Father*. One highlight is the moving *Tonight Will Never Come Again*; another is *You're Here and I'm Here*, an upbeat love tune by a young Jerome Kern.

The CD's opening vocal track, *The Cat Duet*, is singular, starting with its early 19th century origins. Its music drawn from a Rossini theme, the piece is performed with operetta-like enthusiasm by two "cats" (the second cat is performed by soprano Maria Jette). The only lyric is Mee-ee-ow! It's lots of fun but not easily described, though I can attest it's enjoyable even for people who hate cats.

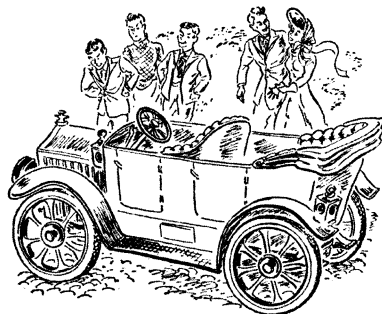
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From Our Guest Book

What an amazing year 2016 has been for us here at the Betsy-Tacy Society! We had such a lovely gathering for Deep Valley Homecoming, celebrating Maud Hart Lovelace's legacy with visitors from California to New York (and everywhere in between) joining us at Betsy's and Tacy's homes as well as other locations dear to us all. It was so wonderful to see you all and to meet many of you for the first time. We were also joined by friends near and far for private tours and public hours, welcoming many visitors whose love for Maud and the Betsy-Tacy books spans generations. The joy and happiness these visits produce is equally abundant for all ages. It is an honor for us to have the opportunity to give such a gift. Our 2016 guest book reveals that our visitors came from:

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|----------------------|----------------|
| Alberta, Canada | Nebraska |
| Arizona | Nevada |
| Arkansas | New Hampshire |
| California | New Jersey |
| Colorado | New Mexico |
| Connecticut | New York |
| District of Columbia | North Carolina |
| Dublin, Ireland | Norway |
| Florida | Ohio |
| Georgia | Oklahoma |
| Illinois | Oregon |
| Indiana | South Carolina |
| Iowa | South Dakota |
| Kansas | Texas |
| Maryland | Utah |
| Massachusetts | Virginia |
| Michigan | Washington |
| Minnesota | West Virginia |
| Missouri | Wisconsin |
| Montana | Wyoming |

We look forward to many more of you coming to visit us here in the coming year!



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Here's another example of how early-twentieth century popular songs significantly set the stage of Lovelace's stories. In *My Merry Oldsmobile* (published in 1905) is played at a dance in Betsy In Spite of Herself, as Betsy gambols with a fellow who owns a flashy Buick:

. . . the words of the song caused smiling faces to turn in their direction.

*"Come away with me, Lucille,
In my merry Oldsmobile . . ."*

"Only it isn't an Oldsmobile," he murmured in her ear.

With her youthful, bell-like soprano, Hixson performs these songs beautifully, glowing and gliding through the tales of longing, humor, success and loss. Carlson, a master of phrasing, melodic wisdom and shrewd asides, delivers understated arrangements that reflect the music's early-1900s sensibilities yet also have a contemporary jazz pianist's touch.

Listening For Your Song (a lyric from the CD's last track, *There's A Long, Long Trail*) can be heard as representing two appreciations of another era, from Lovelace's perspective and from ours today. Presenting these songs as fresh performance rather than nostalgic amusement, the production delivers something remarkable. It has the character of a confidant with valuable recollections and eloquence in their expression.

David Bittinger's commentary has appeared in All About Jazz, The Chicago Tribune, Chicago Sun-Times, Washington Post, St. Louis Post-Dispatch, Los Angeles Times, (St. Paul) Pioneer Press, Palm Beach Post and other publications.

Editor's Note:
Also of interest is the *Betsy-Tacy Songbook: Music from the Deep Valley Books of Maud Hart Lovelace and Maud's Music of Deep Valley: Musical Tribute to Maud Hart Lovelace.*

