

Retro Icons and Anachronistic Artists

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Drawing on American Popular Song as a case study, this essay will look into the growing phenomenon of stardom in contemporary music as seen through the lenses of nostalgia, 'anachronism' and 'retrology.' These last two concepts require elaboration. Following Andreas Huyssen (1995), I consider 'anachronism' an effect of curving towards the nostalgia end of the nostalgia/utopia continuum. Retrology relates to the way a cultural object appears to (re)order both chronological and remembered time. After considering these foundational concepts in more detail, I will use them to explore the positions of some classic and contemporary torch artists.

My first cue is taken from Jean Baudrillard (1996) who writes about three dimensions giving objects their value: synchronic, diachronic and anachronic. An object's synchronic value arises from its relation to other contemporary objects. Its diachronic value stems from its relation to other objects in time. Finally, for Baudrillard, an object's anachronic value arises from the temporal contrast between it and other objects. Thus anachronism emerges as much at the level of objects as it does at the level of behaviours and social structures. This conceptual concern is elaborated by Sverker Hyltén-Cavallius (2006, unpublished paper) who asks if it is possible to understand retrologies by way of Baudrillard's latter two dimensions: the diachronic and the anachronic.

By retrology Hyltén-Cavallius is referring to an active ordering, gathering, choice and exclusion of the past, present and future. Accordingly, an anachronic retrology should be one which orders a phenomena in ways that suggest a before and an after, older and younger, maybe also cause and effect. A diachronic retrology is one which creates connections: chains and places with the retrologist himself or herself somewhere in the chain. A diachronic retrology also works with diachronic links: it shows how it is by saying how it was. It tells who people are by pointing towards who they were. A diachronic retrology is focused on connections and contexts; it points towards affinities between particular events and phenomena (ibid.).

Anachronic retrology neglects, if we follow Hyltén-Cavallius' line of thought, to point out larger connections, and is instead interested in incidental and accidental chains in which the retrologist is seen *en passant*, as a guest in the entrance hall. If diachronic retrology aims at explaining and understanding then anachronic retrology is looking for feelings.

The field I want to look into concerns the re-emergence of the crooner / torch singer and the emergence of the anachronistic singer in contemporary pop music. Because the various styles of crooning and torch singing have never died, the category of retro crooners and retro torch singers has had many antecedents. Although it is commonly said that American Popular Song died overnight when Elvis and rock'n'roll took over centre stage, torch singers and crooners were still around, mainly in jazz, but also in pop. In pop one can think of Rosemary Clooney, Julie London, Nina Simone, Andy Williams, Jack Jones, Buddy Greco, etc. Such singers tend to be retrospectively described through the invention of a new meta-genre, one of last century's most exciting to my mind: easy listening. By trying to emulate the stylings of his favourite crooners Dean Martin and Eddie Fischer in some of his early recordings at Sun Records, even the king of rock'n'roll himself, Elvis Presley, could be considered a retro icon of sorts.

On the crooning side, a landmark album seems to be Kenny Rankin's *The Kenny Rankin Album*. Made in 1976, it was arranged by Don Costa, who in the 1950s had discovered Canadian pop crooner Paul Anka and

in the 1960s and 1970s worked as an arranger for Frank Sinatra. Somewhat later, folk rock/country rock singer Linda Ronstadt joined forces with Sinatra's main arranger on his famous 1950s output on Capitol, Nelson Riddle, to produce a trio of markedly retro-styled torch albums, beginning in 1983 with *What's New*. Observe that title: it says something important about the stance towards musical retroism in this field. This is not only a question of nostalgia, of immersing oneself in a world already gone that is never possible to relive or re-enter. In fact something quite contrary is taking place: the music is being updated and rejuvenated, something which becomes quite obvious with the retro artists considered here.

One can, of course, see the retro torch singer / crooner phenomenon as a form of fashion. To do this makes a connection which allows us to draw on discussions about retro made by several influential cultural analysts (for example see Kaja Silverman 1994, Elaine Showalter 2001, and Elizabeth Wilson 2003). Kaja Silverman's notes about retro as a form of pastiche in fashion are well known. According to Silverman (1994), retro reconceives the (patriarchal) past affectionately, but ironically and theatrically as a masquerade at the same time. Retro, for Silverman, gains critical distance from the tyranny of (this year's) fashion by denaturalizing settled gender identity, cycling waste, and laiming use values.

As an ironic style, retro (vintage) clothing was, as Elaine Showalter (2001) writes, the ideal feminist choice. Citing Silverman's essay she notes that it "inserts its wearer into a complex network of cultural and historical references." And yet it "avoids the pitfalls of a naive referentiality; by putting quotation marks around the garments it revitalises, it makes clear that the past is available to us only in a textual form, and through the mediation of the present."

Cultural critics such as Fredric Jameson and Sven Lütticken have also written about retro as a form of nostalgia; Jameson (1991) in the field of film studies, Lütticken (2004) also on music, film and art. With nostalgia, Lütticken asks, isn't it necessarily a case of a personal sense of feeling adrift in time, a longing for a bygone youth? Can there be, he wonders, such a thing as nostalgia for a time that no living being has lived through? His answer is a definite yes.

Retro can also be connected to certain utopian aspirations and promises, something which both Andreas Huyssen and Sverker Hyltén-Cavallius have discussed. Writing eleven years ago, Huyssen (1995) noted that society had recently witnessed an exhaustion of utopian energies in relation to the future. In his view this was a result of a shift of temporal organization of the utopian imagination from its futuristic pole toward the pole of remembrance - not in the sense of a radical turn, but in the sense of a shift of emphasis. Utopia and the past, rather than utopia and the year 2000; in our age of an alleged *posthistoire* and post-utopia that is what moves much of the art and writing that embodies the utopian imagination.

Sverker Hyltén-Cavallius (2002), who has studied Swedish retired people's musical events and competitions, talks about 'retrospective utopianism.' This could be described as an exploitation of the missing time-place which distinguishes nostalgia: the sought after and unreachable time-place which characterized the utopian spirit of the time-place being 'nostalgized.'

When I have been looking into the retro torch singers and retro crooners under consideration here something which strikes me is the fact that 'retro' often is used as a term reflecting cultural newness, a form of upgrading, rejuvenation and modernization. Retro thus works in ways pop music and pop culture have always been keen to do, emphasizing the new, the hot and the cool, often at the same time. In the contemporary world of an experience economy, or a catwalk economy as Orvar Löfgren (2003, cf. Löfgren & Willim 2005) has called it, the crucial question concerns this temporal span of novelty. The key moment occurs when one is a step ahead, when one is capitalizing the short time span that happens when you are able to identify the absolute new, and thereby find ways of staging, exploiting and controlling this fragile capital called "newness" or "being ahead." Paradoxically, the retro artists are a part of this kind of cultural logic too.

It should be noted that there are at least three distinct age groups of retro vocalists in the American popular song / jazz / smooth jazz field in more recent years. One is made up mainly of older artists with different stylistic phases in the careers, such as nightclub singers Elisabeth Welch, Tony Bennett, Bobby Short and Little Jimmy Scott. The other age group consists of singers born in the 1930s, 1940s and 1950s, such as Shirley Horn, Nancy Wilson, Shirley Bassey, Kenny Rankin, Diane Shuur and Susannah McCorkle. Even a younger singer like Harry Connick Jr, born in the 1960s, considering his popularity in the 1980s, could be seen as belonging to this group. The third age group is today's crop of younger singers for whom the crooning and torch singing styles initially have been a thing of the past. Or to put it another way: something old (American Popular Song) seems in this case, at least initially, to be something new.

The group I am interested in here is the third one. Younger female singers who could be considered retro torch singers include Diana Krall (born 1964), Norah Jones (born 1979), Madeleine Peyroux (born 1973), Jane Monheit (born 1977) and Corinne Bailey Rae (born 1979). Three of these singers (Jones, Peyroux and Monheit) are American, while Krall is a Canadian and Bailey Rae a British songstress. Some of these singers, especially Peyroux (and to a lesser degree Norah Jones) could also be put into the anachronistic camp due to the stylistic variety of their musical output.

As to the idiom of American Popular Song one should perhaps also note that strong, recurring themes of these songs and the chronotopes that they construct actualise metaphors of romanticism, modernity and urbanity (see Ulf Lindberg 2003, for example).

The retro torch singer I want to discuss is Norah Jones. Jones was considered responsible by influential radio DJ Nic Harcourt (2005) for single-handedly reinvigorating what was, at the beginning of the new millennium, a decidedly stagnant jazz music industry. Her debut CD *Come Away With Me* (2002) sold more than 14 million copies. Straddling somewhere between torch song and updated country and blues forms, it featured mostly newly written songs. Harcourt writes about a meeting with her in his radio program in LA: "I was struck immediately by her smoky voice and warm personality, and invited her back with her band a few months later on the day that her first album, *Come Away with Me*, was released on Blue Note. Everyone in the studio knew we were witnessing a special artist, but none of us could have predicted her huge success."

The public also carefully interrogated Jones' style. To quote a couple of customer voices from *Amazon.com* about *Come Away With Me*:

"She is instantly recognizable, blending shades of Billie Holiday and Nina Simone sounding like anyone but herself. Any way you slice it, she is a singer to be reckoned with."

"In 'Come away with me', Norah Jones sings sappy, overdone love songs. They're not so much romantic as melodramatic. Each song SOUNDS THE SAME. I worked at a job where my boss played this album OVER AND OVER. This album is supposed to have retro appeal, but it is an attempt to be blues from back in the day, and it doesn't succeed. The songs lack variety, and Norah Jones' singing style is grating rather than seductive."

A provisional evaluation of her persona would be that she projects an intimate style articulating the aura of older female torch singers such as Peggy Lee, Nina Simone and Billie Holiday. At the same time her small output consists of by far the smallest amount of old school standards of the whole group considered here. Her handling of the old songs is characterized by intimacy, warmth, melodrama.

If one looks at the male side of retro singing the field is also heavily occupied today. A handful of the best known of these retro crooners include Canadian Michael Bublé (born 1975), British Jamie Cullum (born 1979), American Peter Dinklage (born 1983), Australian David Campbell (born 1973) and Canadian Matt Dusk (born 1978).

Of the male crooners under consideration I want to discuss Michael Bublé, who made his entry into stardom from a position as wedding singer: he sang Kurt Weill's *Mack the Knife* at the wedding of Canadian ex prime minister Brian Mulroney's daughter Caroline in 2000. Mulroney introduced Bublé to Canadian born record producer David Foster, a multi-Grammy awarding producer and a Warner Brothers record executive, who signed him to his own label.

Again, members of the public joyfully struggled to position Bublé's style. To quote a couple of voices from *Amazon.com* discussing his *It's Time* CD:

"He is a cross between James Dean and Elvis Presley in appearance, but has the style and ability of Frank Sinatra and Bobby Darin ... Michael has the uncanny ability to nail each track with his signature style and making it his own."

"As Tony Bennett said 'Bublé has IT'. I love his style and sound and the way he makes even old songs sound brand new. Being a long time Bennett fan I was thrilled to learn that Bublé was going to record with Bennett on his soon to be released album and I'm looking forward to that too."

Bublé's aura draws on an impression of echoing, ventriloquing the Sinatra-generation, making the swingster idiom of the 1950s fresh and new again, by fusing old and new in a way which makes the distinction seem to vanish. This can of course be seen as a kind of a trick, making the impression that the newer musical styles have disappeared or never occurred in the first place. His handling of the old songs is characterized by exuberance, swing, playfulness and intimacy.

The retro icons can also be seen as standardbearers of tradition and of professionalization. Media narratives about Michael Bublé's rise to fame emphasise the role of his grandfather in introducing him to the music of the

swing era. It was his grandfather who, according to *AMG*, filled his grandson's ears with the sounds of the Mills Brothers, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, and others.

Bubl 's grandfather might stand in here as a root metaphor for the influence of grandfathers and mentors at large who in a sense are as important to the retro icon-phenomenon as the icons themselves (for some reason these mentors all seem to be male ones; cf. Silverman's note on the retro vs. the patriarchal). If we look at the production of retro icons in these fields – American popular songs, standards, old cabaret blues and also to some extent 1960s and 1970s evergreens – one can see a rather intriguing pattern taking shape. All these icons are nourished, produced and mentored by cultural grandfathers, as I would call them. Diana Krall is produced by influential producer and record boss Tommy LiPuma, Norah Jones was mentored by the now departed legendary producer Arif Mardin, Jane Monheit (another relatively new torch singer) is produced by Joel Dorn and Al Schmitt, Madeleine Peyroux by Larry Klein (ex husband and producer of Joni Mitchell), Michael Bubl  by famed producer and arranger David Foster (himself a prot g  of Quincy Jones), Jamie Cullum by well known producer Stewart Levine and Peter Cincotti – another new retro crooner – by producer legend Phil Ramone. These grandfather figures, born between 1931 (Ramone) and 1950 (Foster), have, surprisingly, many things in common. They come from roughly the same generation, they are generally from metropolitan areas, and they are jazz, pop and/or smooth jazz oriented. The majority of them also own or have owned small record companies; Blue Thumb Records (LiPuma), Chisa (Levine), Hyena (Dorn), 143 (Foster). They hold or have held important positions as executives and/or producers in the bigger record companies, LiPuma (Verve), Ramone (Sony/Epic), Klein (Rounder), Mardin (Atlantic/Manhattan Records), Schmitt (Verve, Sony), Foster (Reprise/Warner).

But the affinities go deeper than that. Some of them collaborated in earlier times. Two important retro albums made by Natalie Cole, daughter of famed crooner Nat King Cole – *Unforgettable* (1991) and *Take A Look* (1993) – were both collaborative efforts by producers Tommy LiPuma and David Foster. From Chisa and Blue Thumb records, two smaller southern Californian record companies active in the 1960s and the 1970s, many threads run together. The production of early smooth jazz by artists and groups, like Crusaders, Joe Sample (from the Crusaders), Hugh Masekela (co-owner of Chisa together with Levine), Minnie Riperton, Sly Stone, The Pointer Sisters, Roberta Flack, Donny Hathaway, George Benson, Michael Franks etc. indicates the importance of the 1970s smooth jazz and easy listening jazz idiom as a template for the retro icons of today.

It should also be noted that the concept of American Popular Song retroism has gained such momentum in the new millennium that several older, well known artists, most of whom were, earlier, not especially associated with the mode in question, are now making inroads into the standards terrain. On the crooning side, examples of this trend include Rod Stewart's as of now four volume opus titled *The Great American Songbook*, made between 2002 and 2005; Boz Scaggs' *But Beautiful. Standards Vol 1.* (2003); Michael Bolton's *Bolton Swings Sinatra* (2006); Brazilian Caetano Veloso's *A Foreign Sound* (2004) and Smokey Robinson's *Timeless Love* (2006). Perhaps a slightly more startling change of direction is exemplified by Athan Maroulis of Spahn Ranch fame (a band within the industrial/darkwave genre), casting him as a suave, sophisticated neo crooner in a musical duo setting with producer Skip Heller. The duo is called The Blue Dahlia after the famous 1946 movie based on a screenplay by Raymond Chandler. Two albums have thus far been released by The Blue Dahlia: *The Blue Dahlia*, in 2000, and *A Tribute To Frank Sinatra*, in 2001.

On the torch singing side notable examples of the new retro mode and mood among older singers are Bette Midler's *Bette Midler sings the Rosemary Clooney Songbook* (2003) and *Bette Midler sings the Peggy Lee Songbook* (2005), Carly Simon's *Moonlight Serenade* (2005), Rita Coolidge's *And so is love* (2005), Diana Ross' *Blue* (2006) and Gladys Knight's *Before Me* (2006, this latter one incidently being produced by none other than Tommy LiPuma!).

Considering retro crooning and torch singing as a distinctive form of temporal ordering one could as a conclusion of this specific mode of popular musical retroism note that it is related both to a clear sense of a cultural newness and an equally clear sense of a cultural past, the latter in the form of the well-known standards and the singing modes and the visuality associated with singers such as Frank Sinatra, Mel Torm , Tony Bennett, Ella Fitzgerald, Rosemary Clooney, Peggy Lee etc. The central trick or conceit in this kind of retroism is then, as neo-crooner Michael Bubl  has put it, to make the old sound new and the new sound old, thereby creating a fusion of sorts in which the parts are still in some way clearly discernable. The cultural past in which these styles are embedded also holds certain assumptions about the spectrum of feelings (romanticism, intimacy, daydreaming) and taste (highbrow to middlebrow) valued in this kind of temporal mode.

To explore the anachronistic mode the artist I want to discuss is British rock crooner Richard Hawley. Other contemporary artists with similar stylistic leanings might include American Madeleine Peyroux, Irish Mary Coughlan,

or indeed several longstanding musical icons with a stylistically diverse musical history. A provisional short list of artists which might be considered highly anachronistic could consist of Bob Dylan, Leonard Cohen, Tom Waits, Johnny Cash, Van Morrison, Nick Lowe, Joni Mitchell, Madonna and k.d. lang - all artists with quite extensive back catalogues, which might boost the anachronistic effect.

Richard Hawley, born 1967 in Sheffield, has a background in the British rock bands Pulp and Longpines. His self-titled debut was released in 2001 and three other solo records followed suit in 2002 (*Late Night Final*), 2003 (*Lowedges*) and 2005 (*Coles Corner*). In August 2007 his new CD, *Lady's Bridge*, is out on the market.

It is *Coles Corner* I will discuss here, because I think that his anachronistic leanings are most clearly articulated on this record.

The writer of the AMG review of *Coles Corner*, Thom Jurek, notes that the title song echoes pop/rock singer Scott Walker's vision of a world seen from outside as the protagonist's desire to enter becomes movement toward something unknown and unexpected. Jurek's characterization of the song *Hotel Room* is also worth mentioning: "Hotel Room is an old-school rock & roll crooned ballad that iterates the magical nature of a tryst that feels like it exists outside of time and space and the margins of the universe are demarcated by four walls and a bed the lovers sanctuary." The reviewer enumerates the different feelings and styles found in the songs: reveries, nostalgia, longed-for wishes, regret, sadness; the bittersweet mark of the beloved left on the heart of the left and lost; early rock & roll and rockabilly, country, traces of the vintage-1940s pop, jazz, and even some blues. They are all brought together in a seamless, nearly rapturous whole: "Hawley's guitar sound, ringing like a voice from another present era, steps beyond dimension to underscore the emotion and story in his voice."

One notes the radical temporal and spatial juxtapositions here: "a world seen from the outside", "something unknown and unexpected", "like a standard", "outside of time and space", "like a voice from another present era", echoes of ... stylized country story songs". Different markers of anachronism abound in even the short AMG review.

Hawley has recollected how he grew up with his father's record collection (cf. Bublé): "My dad has the best record collection ever, and it soundtracks my life to this day." He also avidly collects records himself and was featured in the August issue 2006 of the journal *Record Collector*; his collection consisting of around 7,000 vinyl albums. He says he loves old blues, rock'n'roll, country and rockabilly and is obsessive about the instrumental duo Santo & Johnny. Their best known song, 'Sleepwalk,' is a classic in early instrumental rock.

The anachronistic style of Hawley's *Coles Corner* has something to do with his way of singing in "the crack" or rift, where Sinatra and the 1950s crooning style (embedded in older styles such as the ones represented by Bing Crosby, Gene Austin, Rudy Vallee and Jack Smith, etc) meets Elvis, Roy Orbison, and the other rockabilly crooners and electric guitar led rock'n'roll of acts like The Shadows and Santo & Johnny. The "great rift" between pop and rock, between the softness of American Popular Song's romanticizing and the hard aggressiveness of rockabilly and rock'n'roll is exactly the place Hawley inhabitates in *Coles Corner*. As critic Peter Hepburn (2005) notes, it is difficult to think of any contemporary points of reference for the voice of Hawley, at least within the indie realm, but there are definite elements of Roy Orbison, Frank Sinatra, a bit of Johnny Cash and plenty of Scott Walker: "The way he sings is seemingly anachronistic as well, just lazing along, stretching out his phrases, and every once and awhile just stepping up and knocking a chorus out of the park (see 'Just Like the Rain')."

I think that the anachronistic effect is built into Hawley's songs and whole CD. Some of the individual songs defy easy categorization. It might be a question of fracturedness on the song level. A case in point is the key song 'The Ocean,' which can be seen as combining several different but related musical idioms from at least three different decades: the first being the cool swing crooning of Sinatra in the 1950s and 1960s (especially on the more orchestral cuts created by producer Gordon Jenkins), the second the guitar led instrumentals of the 1960s epitomized in the recordings by The Shadows and the guitar sound of Hank B. Marvin (the famous guitarist whom Hawley invited as guest on the *Coles Corner* CD accompanying the single side 'I'm Absolutely Hank Marvin'), and the third the bombastic orchestral 1960s and 1970s sounds of Scott Walker and Phil Spector (with his famous Wall of Sound). The end result is a strong sense of anachronism.

In conclusion, I have shown that retroism in crooners and torch singers seems to be about temporal transportations, or as one of the crooners, Michael Bublé, has said, making the old new and the new old. In the Anglo-American context musical retroism also seems to be about enacting a collective memory of sorts, a temporal imagination involving a return to a time and place that had more clearcut gender, racial and social divisions; a time of romance and relaxation - a great, good time-place. Above all there is a relatively clear concept of now and then upon which to build such retroism. One pole of the retro - anachronism dualism applied here would there-

fore correspond to the concept of diachronic retrology used by Hyltén-Cavallius (2006): a retrology focused on connections and contexts and pointed towards affinities between phenomena and things which happen.

If the restoration of retro elements in this case is made extensively enough, what results would actually provide a basis for an alternative jazz/pop/rock history/genealogy to the one emphasizing change, stylistic innovation, absolute newness and 'zero-making' (cf. Arvastson 2006) as key metaphors. Half forgotten or not so well known names from the history of pop, rock and jazz emerge as important in this field, for example the producers Tommy LiPuma, Stewart Levine and Al Schmitt; the singers Michael Franks, Roberta Flack and Kenny Rankin; the groups Crusaders and Manhattan Transfer, and the instrumentalists Hugh Masekela and Joe Sample.

Anachronism on the other hand seems to be about making the cultural and stylistic border zones between different genres, styles and eras fuzzy. The fuzziness also extends to processes of cultural and social hierarchizations (highbrow/lowbrow) in which anachronism refuses to participate. It seems to be about trying to create a certain timelessness, or a place outside time; in other words moving towards achronicity or kairos moments (for a discussion of kairos/kairology see Hedaa & Törnroos 2000, 2001, 2002).

What I have called retroism and anachronism might be seen as poles on a scale, a continuum with varying responses to movements between different time frames. One extreme of this retro–anachronism scale would correspond to the concept of anachronic retrology, which is characterized by its failure to point out larger connections as it is instead interested in incidental and accidental chains in which the retrologist is seen *en passant*, as an occasional guest, as Hyltén-Cavallius (2006) suggested. The distinction between retro icons and anachronistic artists is therefore constructed as a moving continuum between a diachronic retrology (aimed at explaining and understanding connections and contexts) and an anachronic retrology (looking for feelings and ultimately for rapture).

What seems to place singers in the diachronic retrology mode seems above all to be a question of accepting a master discourse of some kind, in the form of, first, influential mentors (living or dead) forming their musical and aesthetic outlook and, second, a general stylistic preference in e.g. the singing style modelled on an older style like crooning or torch singing. Anachronic retrology tries to evade this type of master discourse by staying clear of specific, style-defining influences, instead working within a more fluid or fragmented notion of cultural and aesthetic remembering. To use Kathleen Stewart's phrase, in this latter case one could also speak of accounts which "displace the dualism of 'objective' and 'subjective' views with the haunting double vision of a subject who is simultaneously *in* a world and subject to it, and yet moving *through* it with the power to fabulate it and give it form" (Stewart 1996: 74).

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