

Occidental College Music Department
Junior Recital



Kailee Browning

voice

piano accompaniment provided by
Michael Stegner

Saturday, April 3, 2021

4:00 PM

Online

PROGRAM

I've Got You Under My Skin	Cole Porter (1936)
Vienna	Billy Joel (2005)
Black Coffee	Sonny Burke & Paul Francis (1963)
Banana Pancakes	Jack Johnson (1948)
Blowin' in the Wind	Bob Dylan (1965)
River	Joni Mitchell (1977)
Little Bitty Pretty One	Bobby Day (1971)
Skinny Love	Justin Vernon (2008)
Dog Days are Over	Florence Welch & Isabella Summers (2009)

PROGRAM NOTES

Porter, “I’ve Got You Under My Skin”

“I’ve Got You Under My Skin” was first introduced in the musical *Born to Dance*, which traces the turbulent love story of dancer Nora Paige and sailor Ted Barker. The piece itself is performed by neither protagonist; Lucy James, a rival dancer of Nora’s, sings it for Ted after he saves her dog from drowning. However, “I’ve Got You Under My Skin” has since become largely dissociated from the musical; it is now a jazz standard that has been covered by many artists, differing substantially in style, tempo, and affect. Despite the negative connotations of the phrase “under my skin”, this song describes the unshakeable nature of infatuation in decidedly positive terms.

Joel, “Vienna”

The inspiration for “Vienna” came from a visit to Joel’s estranged father in Vienna, where they saw an elderly woman sweeping the streets. Joel felt it was awful to have an old woman doing that kind of work, but his father countered that she was making a noble choice to benefit everyone rather than waste away at home. American culture tends to strip the elderly of their purpose and worth, but in older parts of the world, like Vienna, they remain useful pillars of the community. Therefore, there is no reason to fear getting old. In an interview with Howard Stern, Joel explained his message as follows: “You have an entire life to live. The lyrics, 'slow down you crazy child' - in other words, you have a whole life. We tend to put older people away, and it's all about young people. Well, wait a minute, why do I have this whole lifespan? What's the point of it? Some people will get there sooner, and some people will get there later. Slow down, you're going to be fine. No matter what you do, be good at it, and whenever you get there, you get there.” Joel further came to realize that he wrote “Vienna” to address his complicated relationship with his father. However, the idea of embracing life’s journey and ultimately, old age, is universally applicable.

Burke and Francis, “Black Coffee”

Little is known about the story behind “Black Coffee”, but it is nevertheless a quintessential jazz standard which has been covered by many artists. Above all else, this song is a lonely housewife’s lament; it personifies a woman’s experience of loving a man of questionable reliability. The repetitive melody and harmonic motion within the verses reflect the monotony of daily living. The bridge marks an emotional shift toward cynical contemplation on how gender manifests in the experience of love: the phrase “a man is born to go a-lovin’ / a woman’s born to weep and fret” is conveyed with bitter irony. The return to the verse is matched by an emotional return to the depressive listlessness established in the introduction.

Johnson, “Banana Pancakes”

“Banana Pancakes” has an ambience of lazy placidity, so it follows that Jack Johnson’s inspiration for the piece came in a similar manner: “my wife was busy doing something and I wanted to distract her, so I just started playing: ‘you hardly even notice when I try to show you this song it’s meant to keep you from doing what you’re supposed to.’ I’d play her that every time she’d get sidetracked and I wanted to just hang out. Later, it just shaped into a real song.” In addition to the lyrics, the casual nature of “Banana Pancakes” is reflected in the music itself; the limited range, the dynamic homogeneity, the lightly mumbled dictation, and the swung rhythm renders the piece easily accessible to an audience. In the words of Jack Johnson, “it’s just a real feel-good song and kind of silly, but I try not to discard the silly love songs.”

Dylan, “Blowin’ in the Wind”

“Blowin’ in the Wind” was hugely influential not only in Dylan’s career but also in the Civil Rights movement at large. It is a protest song which poses a series of rhetorical questions about peace, war, and freedom. Dylan put new words to the melody of an old slave song called “No More Auction Block”, and first performed it at Gerde’s Folk City in 1962.

He claims the songwriting process took him only fifteen minutes. Dylan had only written two of the three verses at the time of the performance (the middle verse came shortly afterward, but then couldn't read his own handwriting and made up new lyrics as he went along. The piece was published in his 1963 album "Freewheelin' Bob Dylan", but the cover released by Peter, Paul, and Mary earlier in that same year launched the song—and the songwriter—from obscurity to fame. It remains Dylan's most famous piece and has safeguarded his reputation as a civil libertarian. The draw of this piece is in its musical simplicity, its authenticity, and its ambiguity; the meaning of the refrain "the answer, my friend, is blowin' in the wind" is still contested, but lyrics as vague as these can be applied to virtually any movement. This song forces people to reflect internally and recognize, in Dylan's own words, that "some of the biggest criminals are those that turn their heads away when they see wrong and know it's wrong".

Mitchell, "River"

Though Joni Mitchell's "River" is far more about heartache than it is about the holidays, it has become a modern Christmas standard. Certainly, it's an anomaly within the genre which disrupts unwritten expectations of what Christmas music "should" be: the piece begins with a minor inversion of "Jingle Bells", and the first lyrics depict a seasonal scene of mirth which sharply contrasts the poignant yearning of the singer. In a 2014 interview with NPR, Mitchell spoke on the inspiration behind the piece: "It's taking personal responsibility for the failure of a relationship. And my generation — you know, the 'Me Generation' — is known to be a narcissistic generation, right? So it's really, you know — it's really that aspect of our inability — you know, 'I'm selfish and I'm sad.' Right? You know, people think that's confessional, but I'd say, you know, in my generation, you think that that's a unique personal statement?"

Day, “Little Bitty Pretty One”

Much like “Banana Pancakes”, “Little Bitty Pretty One” is first and foremost a silly love song. Little is known about the story behind the song; it was penned in 1957 by Bobby Day and made famous in a recording by Thurston Harris that same year. The emphasis here is not on the lyrics, but on the stacked harmonies and boogie-woogie rhythm. The piece has been covered by several artists since its publication, but the integrity of the original has been well-preserved with each new recording.

Vernon, “Skinny Love”

Secluded in his father’s log cabin in Wisconsin, Justin Vernon wrote “Skinny Love” in a deep depression, still recovering from a severe illness and a split from both band and girlfriend. Wordless melodies came first, guided by falsetto syllables, then opaque lyrics, expressed as a “small internal dialogue between me and the microphone”. The term “skinny love” has several meanings, but the idea addressed here is that of a relationship which is based not on love but on a codependent need for affirmation. Vernon explains that often, “you’re in a relationship because you need help, but that’s not necessarily why you should be in a relationship. And that’s skinny. It doesn’t have weight. Skinny love doesn’t have a chance because it’s not nourished.” Like “Blowin’ in the Wind”, the draw of “Skinny Love” is in its simplicity; the consistent rhythm and uncomplicated chord pattern allows the poignant lyrics to take center focus in the piece.

Welch and Summers, “Dog Days are Over”

There is no true consensus on the meaning of “Dog Days are Over”. In and of itself, the phrase “dog days” refers to a period of stagnation. Some argue that the song is about falling in love without realizing it’s happened. Others identify hints of domestic violence in the lyrics and maintain that the song is about escaping an abusive relationship. Notably, issues of intimate partner violence are present to other works

by Florence and the Machine, the band that made this piece famous. A third perspective posits that the song is about overcoming addiction. Because of the vague, idiosyncratic nature of the lyrics, the meaning of the song can be differentially molded by each listener. However, certain commonalities exist regardless of one's take. This piece includes a strange juxtaposition between positivity and violence; for example, the beginning phrase, "happiness hit her like a train on a track" contrasts a positive emotion with a negative, violent image. These contradictions continue through the rest of the piece; it is situated in a major key, which unwritten Western musical convention deems the "happy" modality, yet the lyrics set against the music are near-shouted warnings about survival. The steely undercurrent to this celebratory piece seems most fitting to an interpretation in which the dog days are over but the battle scars persist.