

“Stardust”—Hoagy Carmichael (1927)

Added to the National Registry: 2004

Essay by Richard Falco (guest post)*



Hoagy Carmichael



Original label



Sheet music

“The first World War had been fought, and in the back-wash, conventions had tumbled. There was a rebellion then, against the accepted, and the proper and the old... The shooting war was over but the rebellion was just getting started. And for us jazz articulated... what we wanted to say.”

--Hoagy Carmichael

“Star Dust” (1927) (later retitled “Stardust” in 1929)

First recorded at Gennett Recording Studio in October 31, 1927 by Hoagy Carmichael and His Pals. Lyrics added in 1929 by Mitchell Parish.

Hoagland Howard “Hoagy” Carmichael (1899-1981) composed one of the most popular and enduring jazz standards of the 20th century. “Stardust” has been recorded more than 1,500 times over a 90-year period, attesting to its stylistic flexibility made possible by the strength of its compositional structure.

BACKGROUND AND COMPOSITIONAL FEATURES:

Carmichael was himself a “hot piano player” and bandleader during his college years. He was a big fan and good friend of trumpeter Bix Beiderbecke and the Wolverines and booked them on his Indiana University campus. He later recorded with Bix Beiderbecke (1903-1931) with the Paul Whiteman Orchestra in 1927, and with smaller ensembles in NYC in 1930. Some authors attribute Carmichael’s melodic and harmonic concepts to his association with Bix. Carmichael proudly acknowledged the enormous influence of Louis Armstrong, whom Carmichael met through Bix in 1922.

In an interview with the BBC, Carmichael stated, “Well, I got the idea just walking across the campus one night, my university campus where I went to school. I’d just left the college hangout called the Book Nook, and I started whistling, and I whistled this opening strain of ‘Stardust,’ and I knew that I had something very strange and different.”

Composed when Carmichael was 28 years old, “Star Dust” (later renamed “Stardust”) is a 32-bar melody. The structure is a 16-measure verse followed by the 32-measure chorus melody with a slightly unusual A-B-A-C structure. The verse is often omitted in later recordings. The verse and chorus are recognizably different.

D Major was the original key, which some might consider an unusual choice, given that the transposed key for trumpet, clarinet and tenor saxophone is E Major, and when transposed for alto saxophone is B Major.

The 32-measure song starts on IV: G Major (2 bars) and moves to iv 6th: g minor 6th (2 bars), creating an intriguing harmonic opening progression. This is not unlike two very popular songs of the period: “After You’ve Gone,” composed by Turner Layton in 1918 (which was a major hit for Marion Harris in 1919), and “I’ll See You In My Dreams,” written in 1924 by Isham Jones.

Measures three and four reflect the strong melodic influence of Louis Armstrong, since Carmichael virtually quotes from Louis Armstrong’s “Potato Head Blues” recording.

ABOUT THE ORIGINAL RECORDING:

For his first recording of “Star Dust,” Carmichael chose the Gennett Studio in Richmond, Indiana (a subsidiary of the Starr Piano Company). It is assumed that the recording engineer was Ezra Wickemeyer. This was a very popular studio with “hot” musicians of the day, including the New Orleans Rhythm Kings, Jelly Roll Morton, King Joe Oliver, the Wolverine Orchestra of Chicago and Bix Beiderbecke. The studio was a “125x30 foot, board-paneled room in a single-story gray building.” The rather crude “acoustic treatment” consisted of draperies and other sound-absorbing materials hung on the walls.

After experimenting with several recording techniques, Gennett Recording Studio made a significant change that resulted in the technology utilized in Carmichael’s historic recording of October 31, 1927. Sometime in February of 1927, Gennett Recording studio eschewed older technologies which proved problematic, including the production of less durable disks. They signed a licensing agreement with RCA Photophone. The use of this new electric recording technique and the adoption of a modern, more durable recording disk, proved very successful. At this time, Gennett designed a black label which identified the newly adopted recording technique with the name “New Electrobeam” printed on each label. The original pressing of “Star Dust” carries this label.

Under the band name of “Hoagy Carmichael and His Pals,” Carmichael recorded his composition, “Star Dust,” at a medium tempo on October 31, 1927. He recorded two other compositions that same day.

The “Star Dust” recording band consisted of Hoagy Carmichael (piano) and members of the Emil Seidel Orchestra: Byron Smart (trumpet); Oscar Rossberg (trombone); Dick Kent and Gene Wood (alto saxophones); Maurice Bennett (tenor saxophone); Don Kimmel (guitar); Paul Brown (tuba); and Cliff Williams (drums).

SPECIFICS OF THE RECORDING:

The recording starts with a four-measure guitar introduction which is followed by the verse with a featured trumpet melody (16 measures). Next, alto saxophone states the song’s chorus melody with rhythm section only. This is followed by solo piano which is 33 measures in length. Measure five of the piano solo repeats the left-hand figure of measure four. This additional measure may account for the break with the 32-measure form and appears to be deliberate since this solo was performed similarly on one unreleased recording made that day, and also in subsequent performances. The solo piano loosely follows the form, is unaccompanied, and employs occasional “double time feel” (a technique often employed by Armstrong). The ensemble returns with a clarinet improvisation with full ensemble backing, and trumpet playing melodic fragments for the last eight measures of the form. The song ends with a tightly-voiced four measure ensemble coda (sans the New Orleans style final cymbal “splash”).

The tempo is approximately 132 beats per minute. (Most later recordings present “Stardust” at a ballad tempo).

PUBLICATION AND LYRICS:

New York's Mills Music published the song as an upbeat piano solo in January 1929 and renamed it “Stardust.”

Mitchell Parish, who was a staff lyricist for Mills Music (i.e. Irving and Jack Mills), was approached by Irving Mills and asked to write lyrics which were published in May 1929 by Mills Music. “It's a beautifully written piece of work, just a terrific piece of work,” according to US poet laureate Robert Pinsky.

OTHER VERSIONS TO NAME A FEW...

By most accounts, Carmichael's 1927 recording was not very popular. The first “hit” instrumental version of “Stardust” was recorded by Isham Jones in 1930, arranged by Victor Young and performed as a ballad.

Louis Armstrong, Jack Teagarden and Bing Crosby all recorded “Stardust” in 1931, with the Crosby recording the first vocal version to include the verse and chorus.

By the Big Band era of the 1930's and 1940's many of the most popular national bands of the era recorded their own arrangements of “Stardust.” Artie Shaw claimed that his October 7, 1940 Victor Records version of “Stardust” (arranged by Lennie Hayton) included “one of the first string sections used by a jazz group and [it] sold 16 million copies.”

“Stardust” proves to be just as popular in the 21st century with many new recordings produced by major name recording artists of all musical genres.

ABOUT CARMICHAEL'S LEGACY:

Carmichael authored two memoirs: “The Stardust Road” (1946) and “Sometimes I Wonder” (1965). “Stardust Melody: The Life and Music of Hoagy Carmichael” was written by Richard M. Sudhalter and published in 2002.

After his death on December 27, 1981, Carmichael's family donated his archives and personal memorabilia to Indiana University, his alma mater. The Hoagy Carmichael Room, which holds these artifacts, was opened in 1986. The collection includes a piano, music manuscripts, recordings, photographs, scrapbooks, and paintings. A virtual tour is available online at: <http://www.dlib.indiana.edu/collections/hoagy/intro/room/>

The original recording by Carmichael was inducted into the Grammy Hall of Fame in 1995. In 2004, this 1927 recording was chosen by the Library of Congress to be added to the National Recording Registry.

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*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of the Library of Congress.