

Questions in Harmony  
Song Stories  
June 7, 2025

(In concert order)

Most descriptions extrapolated from Wikipedia.

### **Swinging on a Star**

Lyric by Johnny Burks

Music by James van Heusen

Arranged by Norman Luboff

1944

Songwriter Jimmy Van Heusen was at Crosby's house one evening for dinner, and to discuss a song for the film project "Going My Way." During the meal, one of the children began complaining about how he did not want to go to school the next day. The singer turned to his son Gary and said to him, "If you don't go to school, you might grow up to be a mule." Van Heusen thought this clever rebuke would make a good song for the film.<sup>[2]</sup> He pictured Crosby, who played a priest, talking to a group of children acting much the same way as his own child had acted that night. Van Heusen took the idea to his partner lyricist Johnny Burke, who approved. They wrote the song.

The song won an Academy Award for Best Original Song.

### **Today was a Fairytale**

Lyrics and Music by Taylor Swift

Arranged by Mark Brymer

2010

Do you remember what life was like when you were in middle school (junior high)? Emotionally those years can be tumultuous—ups and downs in everyday activities. Yesterday you had a best friend. Today the friend doesn't like you. It can be a very difficult time for young people because of the emotional roller coaster of growing teens.

At 11 years old Taylor Swift tried to get signed with record companies by taking her recordings of Dolly Parton and the Dixie Chicks cover songs. She was rejected by all the labels, which led her to focus on songwriting and learning to play the guitar.

When she was 15 years old, a new recording studio, Big Machine Recordings, took a chance and signed Taylor as their first client for the songs she was writing. She wrote from her own experiences, about her own truth, the ups and downs in her own life. Swift tapped into a previously unknown market—teenage girls. There was no one writing music teens could relate to until Taylor Swift came along..

She quickly became a star. She is currently the richest female entertainer in the world and the only one who gained such fame and fortune primarily by performing her own compositions.

When she was 20 years old Taylor had her first acting role in a movie called “Valentine’s Day” in 2010. Our sopranos and altos will sing the featured song from the movie, “Today was a Fairytale,” a song that recalls fondly a good date with another.

### **Tian Mi Mi**

Music: adapted from a 1940s Indonesian folk song

Lyrics Zhuang Nu

1979

It literally means "sweet honey." The song was recorded by the famous Taiwanese singer Teresa Teng in 1979. The lyrics were written by Zhuang Nu. It is said that he wrote the lyrics in five minutes upon learning that he was writing a song for Teresa Teng.

### **Christopher Robin is Saying His Prayers**

Music H. Fraser Simson

Lyrics A. A. Milne

Arrangeer Andrew Carter

1925

In the early 1920’s a poet and play wright took his young son to the London Zoo where his son became enamored with the tame and amiable bear, Winnipeg, who had been a mascot for England’s Army during World War I and was retired to the London Zoo after the war. This adoration of the bear inspired A.A. Milne to write the story of Winnie the Pooh and a small boy, Christopher Robin who was A.A. Milne’s real-life son.

As he grew older the real life Christopher grew to hate the fame that his father’s writings brought to him. The piece he hated the most was a poem called “Vespers:

which describes Christopher Robin saying his evening prayers. Christopher said it was the work that brought him more “toe-curling, fist-clenching, lip-biting embarrassment than any other” of his father’s writings.

### **With a Little Help from My Friends**

Music and Lyrics by John Lennon and Paul McCarty

1967

The Beatles recorded With a Little Help from My Friends for their 1967 album Sgt. Pepper’s Lonely Hearts Club Band album for drummer Ringo Starr to sing, thus the limited range except for the last note.

After it was released in the United States, Maryland Governor and future vice president Spiro Agnew lobbied to have the song banned because he believed it was about drug use.

We sing high notes with our friends.

### **Thank You for the Music**

Music and Lyrics by Bjorn Ulvaeus and Benny Andersson

Arranged by Jerry Estes

1977, this arrangement 2010

This song was recorded by the Swedish pop group, ABBA in 1977. It was also in *ABBA: the Movie* and became one of their standards.

### **Gigi**

Music by Frederick Loewe

Lyrics by Alan Jay Lerner

1957

The musical film, *Gigi*, won 9 Oscars in 1958, a record at the time. The film featured the songs “Thank Heaven for Little Girls,” “I Remember It Well,” and this song, sung by Maurice Chevalier and Loius Jourdan, which won the Academy Award for Best Original song of 1958.

### **You’re Just in Love**

Music and Lyrics by Irving Berlin

Arranged by Kirby Shaw  
1950, this arrangement 1993

“You’re Just in Love” is a counterpoint song, one where two equal and contrasting melodies are sung at the same time.

It was performed by Ethel Merman and Russell Nye in “Call Me Madam”, a musical comedy first performed on stage in 1950 in New York City. Ethel also starred in the film version in 1953 with Donald O’Connor.

Ethel told the composer, Irving Berlin, that she wanted to sing a song with “the kid” in the play, Russell Nye. Berlin went home and came back the next day with this song. When he played it for Ethel, she said, “That song is so good, we’ll never get off the stage.

### **Wild Mountain Thyme**

Traditional Scottish Folk Song

Arranged by Kirby Shaw

Wild Mountain Thyme, is from the early 1800s in Scotland and the lyrics date back to 1859. A later version in the 1950s, by Bob Dylan launched the song’s popularity in 1961.

In British folklore there was an old custom of young women wearing a sprig of thyme, mint or lavender to attract a suitor.

In the song a singer is anxiously seeking a lover, but what sets this song apart from most happy ending love songs is that is that if the true lover leaves in the end, for all the angst, the singer is confident that another lover will be found if this one doesn’t work out.

The song speaks of building a “bower” which is a garden boudoir, an outdoor bedroom.

## **INTERMISSION**

### **It's Only a Paper Moon**

There was a young vaudeville dancer born in London whose family had moved to Cleveland, Ohio when he was just a boy. As a young man in 1932 he went to New York City to see if he could make it as a performer in the big city. And he did. He landed a job as a dancer in a musical comedy on Broadway. One night after their show, one of his dancing buddies convinced him that they should go to the Vogue Club to “hear a pretty girl sing.” So they went that night after they got off work to go check out this beautiful singer.

The dancer walked into the night club and was immediately smitten. He described her voice as “a low, husky voice—soft and sweet.” She went home that night and told her mother that she had just met her future husband and described him as “not only very good-looking, but very neat and very warm.” From then on the dancer was at the Vogue every night, waiting to escort the girl home. Three months later they tied the knot.

Their marriage successfully lasted 69 years. They told people it was “love at first song.” The girl was Dolores Reade. The boy was..... Bob Hope. The song she was singing that night he walked in the night club was “It's Only a Paper Moon.”

### **What was I Made for?**

Music and Lyrics by Billie Eilish and Finneas O'Connell

2023

This ballad was written after a long-time writer's block for the movie “Barbie” by Billie Eilish and her brother, Finneas O'Connell. Eilish said, “I did not think about myself once in the writing process. I was purely inspired by this movie and this character and the way I thought she would feel, and wrote about that. And then, over the next couple days, I was listening and I was like, girl, how did this ... honestly, and I really don't mean this to come off a conceited way at all, but I do this thing where I make stuff that I don't even know is ... like I'm writing for myself and I don't even know it.”

### **When I'm Sixty-Four**

Music and Lyrics by John Lennon and Paul McCartney

Arranged by John Leavitt

1967, this arrangement 1999

“When I'm 64” was written in 1956 by Paul McCartney when he was 14 years old and was released on the “Sgt. Pepper's Lonely Hearts Club Band” album in 1967.

It's speculated that McCartney may have included the song on the "Pepper" album because his father had turned 64 earlier that year.

The recording was sped up to make Paul's voice sound younger. He said, "I wanted to appear younger, but that was just to make it more rooty-tooty; just lift the key because it was starting to sound turgid." In their early days the Beatles performed it when their amplifiers broke down or the electricity went off.

### **Kettle Valley Railroad**

Music and Words by Dave Baker

Arranger Larry Nickel

2013

The Kettle Valley Railroad was a subsidiary of the Canadian Pacific Railway that operated across southern British Columbia beginning in 1915. The line was built from Spokane to Vancouver, BC to supply mining operations in British Columbia.

Because it went over two high passes, the cost to keep it cleared of snow and the dwindling mine operations, forced it to be abandoned in portions beginning in 1961, with the surviving portion west of Penticton saw their last trains in 1989.

Much of the railroad's original 300 mile route has been converted to a multi-use recreational trail, known as the Kettle Valley Rail Trail. Ten miles of the track have been restored and the only steam operated engine in Canada takes sight seers up into the mountains for an hour long trip into the wilderness of the Canadian mountains.

The song reminisces about the beauty of the scenes and the power of the train that used to run through the Kettle Valley. Mentioned in the song are watering stops, towns and a pass along the route: Hope, Princeton, Penticton, Trail and Crow's Nest Pass.

### **Witch Doctor**

Music and Lyrics by Ross Bagdassarian

1958

This novelty song was written and recorded by Ross Bagdassarian under the stage name of David Seville. He recorded the song varying the tape speeds to produce a high-pitched voice for the witch doctor. This technique was next used in his song, "The Bird on My Head." His most known use of the technique was with his

creation of the voices on his virtual band, *Alvin and the Chipmunks*. “Witch Doctor” became a number one hit and rescued Liberty Records from near bankruptcy. It held the number one spot for three weeks in 1958.

## **Brindisi**

Music Giuseppe Verdi

Lyrics Francesco Maria Piave

1853

From the Italian opera, *La Traviata* (The Fallen Woman) is an opera in three acts. It is based on *La Dame aux camellias* (1852), a play by Alexandre Dumas fils, which he adapted from his own 1848 novel. The opera was first performed in 1853 at La Fenice opera house in Venice.

In the opera, Violetta Valery, a famed courtesan, throws a lavish party at her Paris home to celebrate her recovery from an illness. Gastone, a noble, has brought with him a friend, Alfredo Germont, a young bourgeois from a provincial family who has long adored Violetta from afar. While walking to the party, Gastone tells Violetta that Alfredo loves her, and that while she was ill, he came to her home every day. Alfredo joins them, admitting the truth of Gastone’s remarks.

Baron Douphol, Violetta’s current lover, waits nearby to escort her to the party. Once there, the Baron is asked to give a toast, but refuses, and the crowd turns to Alfredo, who agrees to sing a “brindisi,” a drinking song.

## **Unchained Melody**

Music by Alex North

Lyrics by Hy Zaret

Arranger Mark Brymer

1955, this arrangement 1983

“Unchained Melody” was written as the theme for a 1955 prison film “Unchained,” hence the song title. Over 1,500 recordings have been made by more than 670 artists, in multiple languages. The best known recording was by the Righteous Brothers in 1965.

Zaret chose to focus on someone who pines for a lover he has not seen in a “long, lonely time”. The film centered on a man who contemplates either escaping from

prison to live life on the run or completing his sentence and returning to his wife and family.

### **Sweet Caroline**

Music and Lyrics by Neil Diamond

Arranger Roger Emerson

1969, this arrangement 2021

Originally, Diamond claimed the song was written about President John F. Kennedy's daughter, Caroline, who was 11 at the time. Diamond sang the song for her 50<sup>th</sup> birthday celebration in 2007. In a 2014 interview, Diamond said it was written for his wife, Marcia, but he needed three syllables to make the song work!

### **How Can I Keep from Singing?**

Music Greg Gilpin

Lyrics adapted from a Quaker Song

2003

The lyricist of this hymn was known only as "Pauline T." It is frequently, though erroneously, cited as a traditional Quaker or Shaker hymn. The original composition is now in public domain and appears in several hymnals. Though the publisher lists it as a Quaker Song, it was not originally a Quaker hymn. Quakers have adopted it as their own in the twentieth century and use it widely today. There are two versions of this song. One is a slow, sweet reflective tune. We are performing the upbeat, gospel version.

### **Side by Side**

Music and lyrics by Harry Woods

Arranger Jay Althouse

1927, this arrangement 1992

Harry Woods was born with no fingers on his left hand. Nonetheless, his mother, a concert singer, made him learn to play the piano. While at Harvard, he sang in church choirs and gave piano recitals. After graduation he was a farmer in Cape Cod until he was drafted into the Army during World War I. After the war he settled in New York City and began his career as a songwriter. His first success was *I'm Goin' South* which was a hit for Al Jolson in 1923. He also wrote *Paddlin' Madeline Home*, *When the Red, Red Robin Comes Bob, Bob, Bobbin' Along*, *I'm Looking Over a Four Leaf Clover*, *When the Moon Comes Over the Mountain* and many others.



A volatile alcoholic, Harry once exchanged blows with a man in a bar after consuming a large quantity of alcohol. He had the other man pinned to the floor of the bar and was pummeling him with that hand with no fingers when a woman seated at the bar next to Harry's best friend asked, "Who is that horrible man?" The friend proudly announced, "That's Harry Woods. He wrote *Try a Little Tenderness*."