

“After You’ve Gone”--Marion Harris (1918)

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Marion Harris

Marion Harris, a white singer known for singing jazz and the blues, was the first artist to record the 1918 Tin Pan Alley standard “After You’ve Gone,” written by the African American team of J. Layton Turner (composer) and Henry Creamer (lyrics). Harris might seem to be an unlikely choice to introduce a “Southern” song with a touch of “Negro” dialect but in 1916 she had her first hit with Victor Records’ very ethnic “I Ain’t Got Nobody Much” and had established herself as a first-rate interpreter of Southern blues and the up-and-coming jazz form.

Harris was born Mary Ellen Harrison in 1896 in the Midwest. Information about her early life is sketchy. It is believed she was born in rural Indiana but moved to Missouri as a child with her sister and her single mother. By 1914, she was singing in Chicago under the stage name Marion Harris (often misspelled as Marian) and appearing on vaudeville stages and in movie theaters. Legend has it that ballroom dancing star Vernon Castle spotted Harris and introduced her to Broadway producer Dillingham who put her in a minor role in his Irving Berlin musical comedy “Stop! Look! Listen!” (1915). She began her recording career in 1916 with her rendition of “I’m Gonna Make Hay While the Sun Shines in Virginia” on the B-side of Billy Murray’s “There’s a Little Bit of Bad in Every Good Little Girl.” The next year Harris had a hit with “I Ain’t Got Nobody Much,” establishing her as the first white female singer to find success singing the blues and jazz. On July 22, 1918, she recorded “After You’ve Gone” for the Victor label. The song not only went to number one on the charts but it is arguably the most famous song that she introduced during her 26 year career, that career included over 130 recordings (earning her the title “The Queen of the Blues”), vaudeville, Broadway, and radio. She died in a New York hotel fire in 1944 at the age of 48.

“After You’ve Gone” is one of the great crossover songs of Tin Pan Alley, meaning it was recorded by blues, jazz, Big Band, swing, rhythm and blues, and other kinds of artists. The music by J. Turner Layton (1894-1978) is rather sophisticated for a popular song. It is short

(only twenty measures) yet contains many chord changes, giving the piece some nimble musical surprises. Also, the music contains accents that are off the beat so that the effect is both bluesy and sprightly. "After You've Gone" uses the standard A-B-A-C pattern and has a blues tempo, yet Layton's music is very flexible and musicians over the past century have found the music very pliable and effective in other genres.

Lyricist Henry Creamer (1879-1930), like his partner Layton, was a performer in vaudeville before the songwriting team first received some recognition with "Sweet Emalina My Gal" in 1917 but fame did not come until the next year with "After You've Gone." Creamer's lyric has the tone of a blues torch song yet the singer has not yet been abandoned by a lover. Instead, he or she reminds the lover in a rather clear-headed fashion of how much the singer will be missed. There is no pleading or begging on the part of the singer yet the words are clearly full of emotion. Creamer does not use a thick Southern dialect but suggests African American speech from the South with such terms as "honey baby," "sweetie," and "babe," as well as the purposely ungrammatical "the bestest pal you ever had." Layton and Creamer were not trying to write another "Mammy" song, which were still very popular in 1918. Instead, they wanted to create a blues number with a touch of jazz. The newfangled style of jazz was slowly radiating from New Orleans and Chicago and the two songwriters were influenced by it. There is a bit of syncopation in the bridge section of "After You've Gone" and jazz musicians have always found the song ripe for improvisation. The blues element in "After You've Gone" is more obvious. Creamer lets the words "gone" and "time" sit on Layton's long notes, giving the lyric a wailing sound. There is something timeless about "After You've Gone" and, because it has been recorded and re-introduced to each generation since it was written, it surprises many that the song goes all the way back to 1918.

In addition to famous recordings by Sophie Tucker, Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, Al Jolson, Fats Waller, Lionel Hampton, Benny Goodman, Sidney Bechet, Charlie Parker, Eydie Gormé, Bobby Darin, Phil Collins, Anne Murray, Salvador Sobral, and dozens of others, "After You've Gone" has been sung in over a dozen movies and in six Broadway musical revues. Although Layton and Creamer wrote several other songs, most memorably "Way Down Yonder in New Orleans" (1922), they are most remembered for the durable standard "After You've Gone."

Marion Harris' 1918 recording of "After You've Gone" emphasizes the blues quality of the song and deemphasizes the Southern dialect lyric. She sings "only pal you ever had" instead of Creamer's very telling "bestest pal." She avoids dropping the final "g" in such words as "crying" and "denying." Creamer included that "g" in the lyric but most singers soften the words to "cryin'" and "denyin'." Harris does regionalize the word "doing" so that it rhymes with the later "ruin." In general, listening to the Harris record, one would not suspect that this song was written by two African Americans. This might have been intentional on the part of the singer and/or the record company. Regardless, it is a superb recording. The Victor orchestra seems to be small and subdued, more intent on providing a sing-song beat than dominant blues chords. Harris' voice is indeed bluesy but never slurred or swallowed as some blues singers sometimes do. She delivers the lyrics in a conversational manner but there is a touch of passion in her tone, holding on to the long notes just enough for subtle emphasis. Harris sings the first verse but not the second; instead she sings the refrain twice, yet the effect is not monotonous. It is a short refrain and the repetition both musically and lyrically is very effective. With so many

recordings of “After You’ve Gone” out there, it is interesting and even enlightening to hear this Harris record which started it all.

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