

“Let Me Call You Sweetheart”—The Columbia Quartette (The Peerless Quartet) (1911)

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Essay by David Sager



The Peerless Quartet

There are songs in the nation’s repertoire that are perennials; their tunefulness and lyric qualities seem timeless. And, it seems as if such songs were always part of American life. Such is the case with “Let Me Call You Sweetheart,” a product of Tin Pan Alley, composed by Leo Friedman (also known for “Meet Me Tonight in Dreamland”) with words by Beth Slater Whitson. With an uncomplicated rhyming scheme and predictable melodic contour, this song has endured for over a century with its unabashed, direct expression of love.

Surprising, however, the song was only recorded three times during the 1910s and then disappears from our view until the following decade. It was registered for copyright on April 2, 1910. Its first recording, an Edison cylinder by tenor Arthur Clough, appeared 11 months later. This was followed by two more: the Columbia Quartet, released in November 1911, and a solo version by tenor George Wilton Ballard, a cylinder for the U S Everlasting company.

On record, the song does not show up again until early 1924, as an instrumental by the Columbia Dance Orchestra. Slowly, as the song reemerges, recordings begin to appear throughout the 1920s. One, from September 1925, is a non-waltz jazz version, played with obvious affection by the Halfway House Orchestra of New Orleans. Country music pioneer Riley Puckett also recorded it that year, with a different opening verse. This very down-home rendition and a nostalgic, almost Barbershop approach by the Shannon Quartet, gave the song a new life and a mantle of permanence. Listening to these, it is easy to imagine that the song was one or two decades older that it really was.

It is not unheard of that a song does not catch on at first. But what remains to be explained is why “Let Me Call You Sweetheart” reemerged and became the standard it did. Frequently, in

such cases, it is because a new version would be copyrighted. Although, in this case, the copyright file cards do not bear this out.

The Columbia Quartette version, honored by the Registry, was in fact performed by the Peerless Quartet, led by tenor Henry Burr. Burr's distinctive forward-sounding, nasal voice quality gave the Peerless a unique and easily identifiable tone. It is decidedly old-fashioned to our ears, but remarkably void of embellishments and caricature that would be added later to make it sound old-fashioned.

The blend and balance of the harmonized quartet is rich and satisfying, providing us with an authentic taste of the music of the 1910s and a hint of an unaffected approach that would one day inspire nostalgic exaggeration.

David Sager works in the Recorded Sound Research Center of the Library of Congress. He is also known as a classic jazz trombonist and jazz historian. Sager has been twice nominated for Grammy awards for his album notes for historical reissues.