

“My Funny Valentine”--The Gerry Mulligan Quartet featuring Chet Baker (1953)

Added to the National Registry: 2014

Essay by Jeroen de Valk (guest post)*



Chet Baker (1929-1988) was a notorious drug addict and a womanizer. But first of all, he was a trumpeter and a great melodic improviser. On the spot, night after night, he could create fresh melodies on almost any given harmonic framework. Just check his trumpet solos on “My Funny Valentine,” a song he recorded countless times; no two of them are alike. He played these solos with a fabulous, instantly-recognizable mellow sound and an intensity that could be almost embarrassing at times.

He recorded “My Funny Valentine” for the first time with the Gerry Mulligan Quartet in a Los Angeles studio, in September 1952. The line-up that day was Mulligan (baritone saxophone), Chet (trumpet), Carson Smith (bass) and Chico Hamilton (drums). Then, almost a year later, on May 20th, the quartet--with Larry Bunker on drums--recorded a longer version, live at The Haig in Los Angeles. It was five minutes long, darker and even more expressive than the earlier “hit” recording.

The quartet had no piano--or guitar, for that matter. Why? In the liner notes to his first LP on the local label Pacific Jazz, Mulligan writes:

I consider the string bass to be the basis of the sound of the group; the foundation on which the soloist builds his line, the main thread around which the two horns weave their contrapuntal interplay. It is possible with two voices to imply the sound of or impart the feeling of any chord or series of chords, as Bach shows us so thoroughly and enjoyably in his Inventions. When a piano is used in a group it necessarily plays the dominant role. [...] The soloist is forced to adapt his line to the changes and alterations made by the pianist in the chords of the progression.

In interviews, Carson Smith usually credits himself--or is credited by Mulligan--as being the one who introduced the band, and Chet in particular, to “My Funny Valentine.” It’s a song a girl sang to her Valentine date who was neither beautiful nor smart, but whom she loved nevertheless: “Don’t chance a hair for me / Not if you care for me.”

But musicians who knew Chet as a youngster--trumpeter Sebby Papa, tenor saxophonist Teddy Edwards and the quartet’s original bassist Bob Whitlock, among others--remember

Chet playing the song by Richard Rodgers (music) and Lorenz Hart (words) before Smith's alleged introduction. It was already in his repertoire, they said; in LA, and even earlier in Berlin, while soloing with the dance orchestra of the 298th army band.

The background of the song is confusing. "Valentine" was premiered (and sung by Mitzi Green, who played the character Billie Smith) in the musical "Babes in Arms" (1937). But the song was dropped from the film version of "Babes" (1939) although none other than Judy Garland had recorded it for the screen. It was also recorded before Chet by Margaret Whiting, a hugely popular singer with an impressive parade of hits in the 40s and 50s, but her version didn't make it into the charts.

Other famous renditions: Frank Sinatra's on his album "Songs for Young Lovers" (1955); and Miles Davis's on the album "My Funny Valentine" (1965), both arrived after Chet's. As did the films "Gentlemen Marry Brunettes" (1955) and "Pal Joey" (1957), which both featured the song.

The only thing we know for certain is that Chet made "Valentine" into a jazz standard. And that he left out the verse, as almost everyone would do after him.

The first notable recordings from the Mulligan-Chet outfit date from August 16, 1952. On that day, Chet and Mulligan recorded two discs, "Lullaby of the Leaves" and "Bernie's Tune." The tender trumpet sound, the apparently hesitant phrasing, the extremely melodic lines—all these are distinctively here already. Record buyers liked what they heard on this double-sided single, and it proved to be a breakthrough for both horn players.

"My Funny Valentine," recorded the next month, became an even bigger success. It is interesting to note that on these earliest recordings, Chet still uses an old-fashioned vibrato. One hears the influence of Harry James—the first jazz trumpeter that Chet knew—and of the army bands.

More beautiful still than the hit version of September 1952 is the live recording from May, 1953. The trumpeter improvises here with burning intensity. After his first chorus, one can tell by the hesitant way Mulligan follows that it is as if he were thinking, "Well, what can I add to that?"

As mentioned before: Chet kept on playing "My Funny Valentine" at almost every concert he gave for the rest of his life. His various renditions can be found on dozens of commercially issued albums. But the ultimate recording may have been the one in Tokyo, 1987. He plays here with a synthesis of the strength of his youth and the depth of his later years, some of his skills assisted by the methadone he was taking, a medicine given to fight against withdrawal symptoms. (Chet was "clean" in Japan. His tour manager agreed: "He hated being clean, but never played better.")

Baker died in May of 1988.

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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.