

MASTERPIECE

A Stellar Lament of Lost Love

Hoagy Carmichael's *Star Dust*, with lyrics by Mitchell Parish, is probably the most-recorded song in history.

By John Edward Hasse

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Love is now the star dust of yesterday

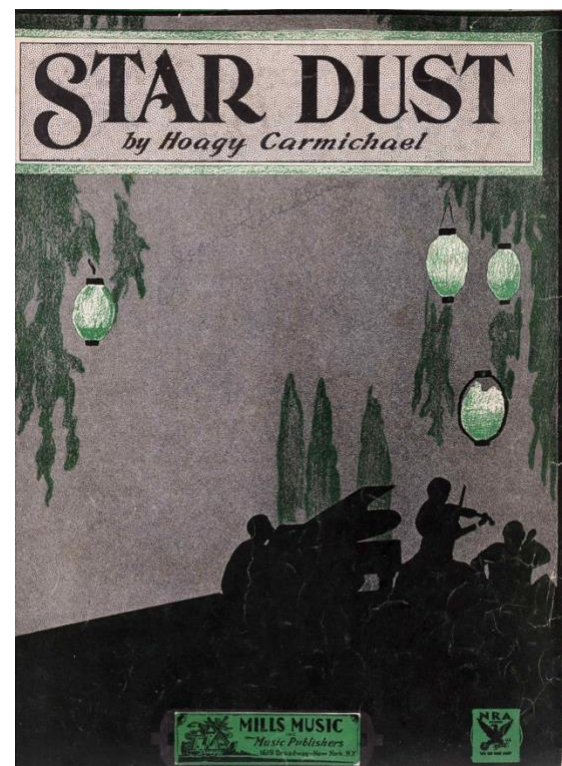
The music of the years gone by.

What is probably the most-recorded American song in history began as melodic fragments imagined by a former Indiana University student named Hoagland "Hoagy" Carmichael. When he finished fiddling with his wordless tune, he had the beginnings of an American classic, *StarDust* that surpassed his later evergreens such as *Skylark*, *Lazy River*, and *Georgia on My Mind* and stood apart from all other popular songs.

At the piano, he toyed with his ideas for months until the piece was first recorded by a group of his pals on Halloween in 1927. Carmichael was under the musical spell of the storied comet-in-the-sky cornetist Bix Beiderbecke, whose lyricism enraptured the young pianist. Like an elegant Beiderbecke improvisation captured in midair for all time, *Star Dust* has the fresh and spontaneous quality of a jazz solo. So striking is the melody line that it can be played naked—no harmonies—and stand as a remarkable statement.

The allure of *Star Dust* begins with its title, suggesting a magical quality. The song is brilliant because of its originality, artistry and adaptability to many musical voices, both instrumental and vocal. It became a standard because so many musicians, from Louis Armstrong to Frank Sinatra, and their audiences too, embraced its charms. In the canon of song, *Star Dust* is unique.

Initially performed as a midtempo jazz instrumental, it landed with a thud. Only after music publisher Irving Mills commissioned text from rising lyricist Mitchell Parish did



the piece have even the slightest chance in the hotly competitive popular-song market. Published with Parish's words in 1929, the song was at first ignored. But after recording artists started slowing the tempo and featuring a singer, more and more musicians were attracted to its dreamy, romantic qualities and the piece began its skyward ascent. Singer Bing Crosby's 1931 record firmly established it as a slow ballad.

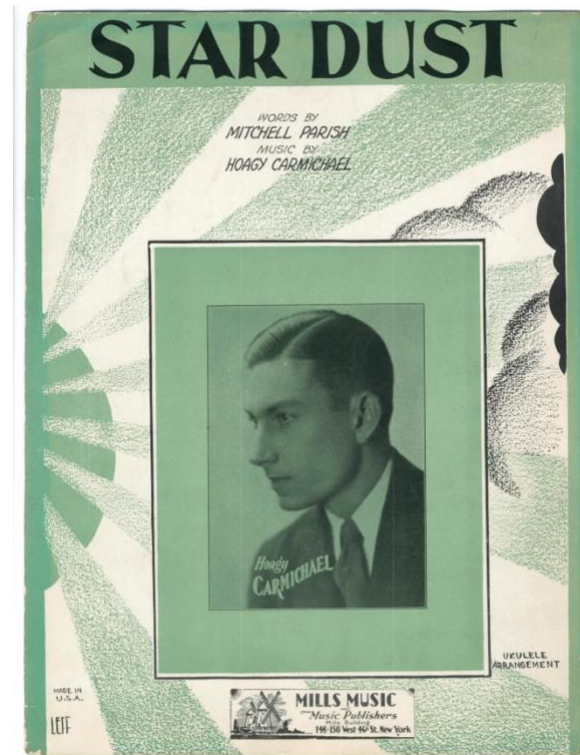
Carmichael's tune is delicate, intricate and strikingly original, with almost no repeated notes and few neighboring pitches. *Star Dust* offers small surprises at every twist, turn and graceful leap of the melody, making it easy to recognize but not easy to sing. No other song sounds like *Star Dust*.

Parish filled his poetic, lush lyrics with the amorous (heart, paradise) and the nocturnal (twilight, nightingale) to the point some would consider extravagant—but I believe his lines enhance the music's mood. We listeners are party to a private and personal plaint, introspective, intimate and reflective. The singer yearns for a former sweetheart, rousing our empathy, for who cannot identify with a failed romance?

Just as a theatrical script is only a promise until it is performed, so is a song. And this one has sparked countless interpretations—more than 2,000 recorded versions. For many years, reportedly it was the world's most-recorded song until surpassed by a hit from the U.K., John Lennon and Paul McCartney's *Yesterday*—another lament of lost love.

In the jazz tradition alone, *Star Dust* boasts more than 1,600 recordings. The song's melodic contours, its cardinal strength, also present its chief challenge for performers—the improvisation feels already built in, making it a little surprising that so many jazz artists have taken it up. Yet the piece has inspired many stellar solos, such as unforgettable ones by clarinetist Artie Shaw, trombonist Jack Jenney, trumpeters Clifford Brown and Wynton Marsalis, and saxophonists Ben Webster, Paul Desmond and John Coltrane.

Listeners today can sample and relish 90 years of renditions by some of America's greatest musical artists. It's as if a movie short had been made into thousands of versions, every one different from the next. Ella Fitzgerald and Natalie Cole each made resplendent renderings of *Star Dust*. But the song has been especially the domain of male singers, from Louis Armstrong, Billy Eckstine, Jackie Wilson, Mel Tormé and Michael Bublé to Marvin Gaye, Willie Nelson, Rod Stewart, Ringo Starr and Bob Dylan.



As do most songs of the era, *Star Dust* has two parts, a 16-bar introductory “verse” and a 32-bar chorus or refrain. The vast majority of performers have ignored the verse; of those who included it, Nat King Cole’s 1956 version is one of the best. In 1961 Frank Sinatra recorded only the verse of *Star Dust*, omitting the chorus entirely—a completely novel approach. His version feels incomplete with only its first part, yet it is nonetheless a work of art.

Star Dust has led to the naming of cafes, bars, books, movies, nightclubs and musical groups. The song has become an American icon, haunting the collective consciousness with its evocation of dreamy memories, its images of climbing stars, and its inimitable and poignant melody.

—Mr. Hasse is curator emeritus of American music at the Smithsonian Institution’s National Museum of American History. His books include *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington* (Da Capo) and *Discover Jazz* (Pearson).