

# Masters of mainstream

Donna Byrne, Dave McKenna, Gray Sargent and Marshall Wood interpret that Great American Songbook

By Chet Williamson

All music has its mainstream - a source from which the lifeblood flows. In jazz, the Great American Songbook has been a mighty river of inspiration for everyone from Louis Armstrong to John Coltrane.

But did you know that the Great American Songbook isn't a book at all and mainstream jazz has no real identity?

The Great American Songbook is not a published book. Instead, it is an unbound collection of songs played by musicians over the years that have become standards. The book includes works by such tune-smiths as Irving Berlin, George Gershwin and Cole Porter. Then there are Richard Rodgers, Harold Arlen and Duke Ellington. And Burton Lane, Vernon Duke, Hoagy Carmichael, ...

There is no register of names. There is no beginning. There is no index. For interpretation, see Frank Sinatra, Tony Bennett and Nat Cole, and Billie Holiday, Sarah Vaughan and Ella Fitzgerald,

jazz musicians who regularly dip into the reservoir of the Great American Songbook are often classified as "mainstream." The book may be the source for material, but the mainstream tag is too confining and may have no real meaning.

"I don't know what 'mainstream' is. I've never known," said trumpeter Warren Vache, a Benny Goodman alum. "What I play are good songs with harmonies that involve more than three chords with lyrics that say more than 'Let's do it in the road.' More than that, I don't know what to tell you.

"I don't think it is possible to find a word or idea the genre is so broad and so wonderfully open for invention. There really isn't a term that is going to tell you what it is in a nice, simple, complete, easy-to-understand sentence. Because the music is not complete, simple or easy to understand."

Four of the world's best interpreters of American song who have been called navigators of the mainstream movement: singer Donna Byrne and musicians Dave McKenna, Gray Sargent and Marshall Wood, perform together two shows at 7 and 10 p.m., Friday, June 28, at Old Vienna Kaffeehaus in Westboro.

Now that Rebecca Parris has left New England for greener pastures, Byrne just may be New England's premier jazz singer. Although this 46-year-old mother of three didn't begin singing in public until she was 27, Byrne has come a long way in a hurry. Besides a growing legion of fans, Byrne has become the darling of musi-

cians and critics alike.

Ask Vache, "She's a sweetheart," he said. "She's an absolutely talented, wonderful human being. But don't tell her I said that."

And Tony Bennett, who called her "one of the best young jazz singers in the country today."

As a vocalist, Byrne delivers her songs in brown paper packages tied up with string. Her favorite things are straight readings of tunes devoid of affectation. A little wrinkle here, A fold in the fabric there. It's the simple things in life, like snowflakes on your eyelashes, Byrne often articulates so that the lyric and melodic content stand out, not the singer. And in a world of highwire-act performances, her deceptively simple approach is refreshing. Her latest CD is *It Was Me*, on Daring Records.

"The thing that strikes me about Donna is that she's got a nice sound," said pianist Dave McKenna. "She's got great intonation. She's just a damn good singer, and a hell of a lady. She sings well all the time but some nights she really sings the hell out of a ballad. She is one of my favorite singers."



Donna Byrne

Deflecting the compliment back at McKenna, Byrne said, "He's been great to me, He's gone out of his way to create opportunities for me. For example, I was invited to a private party on the cape where Tony Bennett was a guest. Dave was the piano player at the party. He manipulated the situation so that I could sing in front of Tony Bennett."

When asked about the Great American Songbook and mainstream jazz, Byrne said, "Sometimes people think it is retro, old, corny garbage. I love the songs of Cole Porter, George Gershwin, Duke Ellington. ... I don't think the songs have been done to death. These songs are melodic and beautiful and poetic. I mean, *Hamlet* hasn't been overdone. It is classic.

It is wonderful. I think of these songs in that same way."

"I think it's getting to be a selling thing."



Dave McKenna

said local jazz patriarch Emil Haddad. "If you say jazz, you might have a little problem. But if you say you are going to play the American Songbook people are going to say, Well, they are going to play a lot of great old standards. Versus somebody coming in just to blow some jazz."

"I didn't start out classifying it," Byrne said. "I started out just where I am now. I sing songs that I like. That's it. Musicians said to me, 'You are a jazz singer.' I said, 'What does that mean?' They said, 'Well, you invent these melodies. You play with the time.'

"I change the time to play with it, to swing it. It's different every time, I change melodies and bend notes, and that's what

they call jazz: to interpret, to improvise. It's sort of a name that someone gave to me and I sort of thought, 'That was just fine.'"

"I'm 66, and I grew up with those tunes," McKenna added. "I think those are the greatest tunes - tunes written before I was born, up until 1950, '55. There are some good tunes coming out but not many written for piano players and singers. I resisted not only rock but modern jazz, when it stopped being melodic."

McKenna is the Ted Williams of jazz. He's a private, unassuming man off the field, but in the game he swings hard and graceful just like the Splendid Splinter.

McKenna's style is profoundly lyrical. His ideas string together perfectly. With an encyclopedic knowledge of songs, McKenna can sew an entire set of music together by association. A word, phrase, melodic motif or harmonic pattern will set up segues for him to tie it all together.

Besides his longtime association with Sargent and McKenna and other local luminaries, bassist Wood is nationally recognized for his work with Monty Alexander, Marian McPartland and the Concord All-Stars. An acoustic player who frames tunes like a catcher setting a target for a pitcher, Wood can handle anything thrown at him.

"Marshall is a magnificent bass player," Byrne said. "He just happens to be my husband. He has a real work ethic. He would approach a bar mitzvah or wedding with the same dedication as if he worked Tavern on the Green. He's a wonderful accompanist. He's learned with the best: Anita O'Day and Chris Connor."

Sargent is best known for his 25-year association with Illinois Jacquet. His work with the tenor titan has included recording, worldwide tours and a 1994 Carnegie Hall performance. Sargent has also gigged with Scott Hamilton, Ruby Braff and Roy Eldridge, among others. His guitar playing springs from the garden of Charlie Christian. A gifted melodic improviser, Sargent's solos are never fragmented. They tell completed stories.

"Gray and Dave are in that genius category," Byrne said. "It's almost like they are communicating in a language that nobody else can understand or access. There have been times when I've forgotten to come back in, when I was supposed to, because I've been so mesmerized by what I've heard."