

Jimmy Van Heusen (1913-1990) was a popular American composer acclaimed for his contributions to theater, film, and television. Born Edward Chester Babcock, he adopted his professional moniker (inspired by the Phillips-Van Heusen shirt company) when he began working as a radio pianist, singer, and announcer at the age of 16. In the early 1940s, Van Heusen relocated to Los Angeles, where he enjoyed a successful career writing for Hollywood movies alongside lyricists Johnny Burke and Sammy Cahn. A prolific yet underrecognized composer in the history of popular music, Van Heusen published more than 1000 works, many of which are part of the Great American Songbook. These pieces embody his trademark sound: catchy melodies, artful phrasing, and subtle chromaticism that capture the song's lyrical narrative and sentiment. In *Moonlight Becomes You*, I explore some of my favorite Van Heusen compositions, with a particular focus on his ballads.



I begin by revisiting two of Van Heusen's early commercial successes. The timeless jazz standard, "I Thought About You" (1939) was the first Van Heusen tune I learned. Inspired by a train trip that lyricist Johnny Mercer took from New York to Chicago, it features a winding melody that expresses the bittersweet yearning for a past romance. Similarly, "Darn That Dream" addresses the desire for unrequited love. The haunting ballad was introduced in the musical *Swingin' the Dream* (1939), and became a #1 hit for the Benny Goodman Orchestra (1940). Its chromatic melody and harmony were also appealing to jazz musicians throughout the 1950s and 1960s, including Thelonius Monk, Billie Holiday, and John Coltrane. In my rendition, I adopt an exploratory harmonic and rhythmic approach to convey the song's lyrical angst.

The next three pieces pay homage to Van Heusen's collaboration with lyricist Johnny Burke. A celebrated songwriting team, Van Heusen and Burke wrote hundreds of compositions over their two-decade partnership. They were also savvy entrepreneurs who co-owned the publishing firm BurVan, Inc. I begin with the standard, "Like Someone in Love," featured in the 1944 film *Belle of the Yukon*. Although it is often played as a ballad, I perform the tune as a lilting waltz to express its playful feeling of young love. I follow with the lighthearted ballad, "Imagination" (1940), which topped the charts with its catchy melody and wistful lyrics. The set concludes with "It Could Happen to You," penned for the film *And the Angels Sing* (1943). Pianist Ahmad Jamal (1955) and trumpeter Miles Davis (1958) would later transform the foreboding ballad into a bouncy swing tune and staple in every jazz artist's repertoire. I adopt a similar straight-ahead style, featuring bebop phrasing atop the song's fluid harmonic framework.

Next, I perform a medley of compositions associated with Frank Sinatra. Van Heusen wrote many of Sinatra's first hits from the late 1930s. In the mid-1950s, Van Heusen and lyricist Sammy Cahn helped revive the

crooner's career with tunes such as "Love and Marriage" and "Come Fly with Me." Off stage, Van Heusen and Sinatra were close friends sharing what Van Heusen described as a love for "women, booze, and airplanes." I begin with "Polka Dots and Moonbeams," Sinatra's first commercial hit, performed with the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra (1940). It later became a jazz standard performed by countless artists from Sarah Vaughn to Bob Dylan. In 1963, Van Heusen and Cahn collaborated on the Academy Award-winning song, "Call Me Irresponsible," from the film *Papa's Delicate Condition*. In my deconstructed arrangement, I balance the song's emotional dualities of self-loathing and love with the relaxed feel of Sinatra's swing classic. Finally, I close the set with the celebrated ballad, "Nancy with the Laughing Face" (1944). Although typically associated with Sinatra and his daughter Nancy, the composition was originally entitled, "Bessie with the Laughing Face," named after Johnny Burke's wife. It later became a symbol of hope for soldiers returning from WWII, who could envision their daughters or wives in the image of the innocent "tomboy in lace." I am honored to perform this piece alongside my partner Danielle Palomares, who captures the song's tenderness through her intimate vocal style.

The next two Van Heusen-Burke pieces were written for the "Road to..." films, a series of exoticist comedies produced by Paramount Pictures and starring Dorothy Lamour, Bing Crosby, and Bob Hope. "But Beautiful" is a heart-wrenching ballad composed for the 1947 film *Road to Rio*. My up-tempo version incorporates a syncopated Latin feel with mixed meter that accentuates the song's emotional ambiguities. This is followed by the title track, "Moonlight Becomes You," a stirring ballad originally sung by Bing Crosby in *Road to Morocco* (1942). A lesser-known work in the Van Heusen songbook, this piece features expressive phrasing and themes of romantic intimacy.



The process of making this album has put me in touch with Jimmy Van Heusen's musical and emotional world. To honor his influence, I close with two original compositions. The first, "For Chet," is a free improvisation dedicated to Van Heusen, affectionately known as "Chet" amongst his closest friends. This is my homage to his melodic craftsmanship and harmonic inventiveness. I conclude with "Wendy's Wish," a simple ballad that emerged after months of immersing myself in Van Heusen's music. This piece reflects many of Van Heusen's aesthetic sensibilities, including sweeping melodic phrases and unexpected modulations. I dedicate this song to my mother, Wendy Panikker, whose tenderness and hopeful spirit are echoed throughout *Moonlight Becomes You*.

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