All My Tomorrows Today

Borges once remarked that the books that we read change us. It's also the case, as others have added, that upon revisiting the books that changed us they also change. Not only because we understand them better, have a more thorough grasp of what the writer was about, but because the books acquire a different meaning, more or less resonance in our lives. Since we have changed, the book (or the film, the song, the play) has also changed.

A few days ago, driving through the countryside in North Carolina on the way to my step-granddaughter's soccer game, Sinatra's "All My Tomorrows" came on Sirius. Relying on my wife to navigate the backroads (terra incognita to the car's GPS), I paid attention to the song for the first time. Maybe it was that I had recently turned 73 or that I was going to a soccer game where I would see Mary Anne's first husband and that made me think back thirty years to the beginning of our marriage, when all of our tomorrows were still ahead of us. Whatever it was, the lyric struck me in a way it had not before.

When we got home in the evening, I did a little research. Composed by Sinatra's go-to team of Jimmy Van Heusen and Sammy Cahn, the song was written for the movie *A Hole in the Head* (1959). In May 1959 the song was released as a single (with "High Hopes" on the flip side) and a month later was heard over the opening credits of *A Hole in the Head.* What's curious about the song's insertion in the movie is that even though the lyric establishes that the singer is addressing a lover – "as long as I have arms that cling at all, it's you I'll be clinging to" – in *A Hole in the Head* it refers to the relationship of Sinatra's character with his twelve-year-old son, to whom he says repeatedly that he has "lots of plans for tomorrow." The melody is heard again when Sinatra's love interest,

played by Eleanor Powell, shows up halfway into the movie, but the situation described in the lyric – one lover pleading with another to stick by him until things improve – does not apply to Sinatra and Powell's situation.

Ten years later, in January 1969, Sinatra put down another version. When he decided to take another crack at "All My Tomorrows" – recording a song more than once was not unsual for him – Sinatra must have realized that its placement in *A Hole in the Head* shortchanged its dramatic potential. Even if the second version was released by Reprise, the label he founded after leaving Capitol, "All My Tomorrows" redux is anything but a reprise of the earlier reading. Unlike what happened with better-known songs ("I've Got You Under My Skin" comes to mind), there is no attempt to replicate the Capitol version. Nelson Riddle's original arrangement, with its insistent flute figures, is light and uncomplicated. Sinatra's wistful reading of the lyric is the perfect match for the chart's easy-listening architecture. He sings like someone going along for a pleasant but inconsequential ride along one of the newly built interstates.

From the opening bars of the second recording, this one arranged by Don Costa, the contrast is evident. The voice has deepened, the tempo has slowed, and the intro consists of an oceanic swell of strings that conveys that this is an important occasion, an impression sustained by the crescendos that link the choruses and the final sweep of violins in the coda. At 4:36, it is fully a minute and a half longer than the 1959 recording. As James Kaplan points out, this version, recorded a few weeks after Sinatra's father's death, is "deeper and darker, sadder but wiser." Sinatra's far more committed reading of the lyric is captured in one verb: "cling." In the first recording he glides over the word. In the second one, he makes it the dramatic center, the crux of his interpretation. Every time

he pronounces it, he clings to “cling” as if by clinging to his lover he were clinging for dear life, and in a sense he is. “Just wait,” he pleads, but what if she doesn’t want to wait and drops him?

The imagery in the lyric is nothing if not hackneyed: after he “turns the tide,” the singer promises “dreams” and “rainbows” (though, as we will see, there may be a reason for his vagueness). Evaluated alongside the rest of Sammy Cahn’s corpus, I'd give it a B+. Not surprisingly, Cahn doesn’t mention the song in *I Should Care,* his autobiography, or reproduce it in the appendix with dozens of his other lyrics. Its best feature is that, with untypical restraint, Cahn avoids the temptation to be clever. But context is everything, or almost. This is a lyric that improves with the age of the singer. It’s one thing to sing about tomorrows in 1958, when you’re young and your career is going spectacularly well, and entirely another when you’re at the tail end of middle age and, because of the changes in musical tastes, you’re no longer busting the Billboard charts. This was Sinatra’s predicament in 1969. Two years later, after several commercially disappointing albums, including an ill-conceived stab at relevance with the words and music of Rod McKuen, he would call it quits. He was 55.

The first recording of “All My Tomorrows” was part of the compilation *All the Way* (1961), where it’s the next to last cut on the B side, right before “Sleep Warm,” a ballad that Dean Martin had used a couple of years earlier as the title cut of one of his LP’s. The second recording appeared in another “way” album, *My Way* (1969), which for the most part covered pop songs such as “Yesterday” and “Mrs. Robinson” that had little to do with the testamentary message of the title song, written by Paul Anka after learning that Sinatra was planning to retire. There is no “concept” behind *My Way,* but there is one

behind two cuts: the last cut on the A side, “All My Tomorrows,” and the head of the B side, “My Way.” If the two songs formed part of a two-sided 78, it would be a concept single. It is perhaps not accidental that they are the two longest cuts on the record, and that “My Way” also comes in at 4:36. The back-to-back or front-to-back contiguity brings out the pathos of “All My Tomorrows.” If the end is near, pledging all your tomorrows is a folly worthy of Don Quixote. Yet therein lies the poignancy of this performance: your promises are both empty and sincere.

In 1965 Sinatra starred in a retrospective TV special, “A Man and His Music,” and released the autumnal *September of My Years* (1965). I like to think of the 1969 recording of “All My Tomorrows” as the sequel to this album, just as this album is the sequel to the celebrations of high-living in high-fidelity of *Come Fly with Me* (1958), *Come Dance with Me!* (1959), and *Come Swing with Me!* (1961). Composed by Bart Howard (best known for “Fly Me to the Moon,” which Sinatra had recorded with Count Basie), one of the cuts on *September of My Years,* “The Man in the Looking Glass,” portrays a man pondering the signs of age on his face. He is no longer the “dopey guy” who couldn’t knot his tie, nor the love-sick “young Romeo,” nor the “middle-aged Lothario with a twinkle in his eye.” Instead, he is someone who worries about his sacroiliac. Melancholy reflections on the passage of time and the onset of old age recur in the other cuts. In “Don’t Wait Too Long,” he acknowledges that winter is coming and he has no time to waste. In “When the Wind Was Green” and “I See It Now,” he reminisces about his youth, as he does in the title song by Van Heusen and Cahn, where the speaker, having turned the pages on most of life’s calendar, finds himself “reaching back for yesterdays.”

Put “September of My Years” and “All My Tomorrows” together, and the aging man who a few years earlier had indulged his nostalgia is now living for tomorrow. As he did in the “suicide songs” of the 1950s, Sinatra here sings with the authority of failure, of someone who doesn’t “have a thing at all.” Since luck keeps passing him by, he knows that he is making promises he’ll never keep, as in another famous Sinatra ballad. But not out of fickleness, like the woman in “I Could Have Told You,” but because it’s too late to pretend that the best years of his life still lie ahead. Perhaps this is why he promises nothing more substantial than dreams and rainbows, that is, evanescent fantasies. And even those he has to “dream, beg or borrow.” When he asks her to wait, one can sense the helplessness, the hopelessness, behind the plea. In 1965 it was autumn; four years later, winter has arrived.

Even though “My Way” is by far the better-known song, “All My Tomorrows” speaks to me in a way that “My Way” does not. Sinatra used to joke that “My Way” was the national anthem, though it’s more accurate to say that it’s the anthem of old men who fancy that the lyric speaks for them. In truth it doesn’t speak for them, not for most of them anyway, as it didn’t also for Sinatra, who made his share of concessions and compromises along his way (most egregiously perhaps, excluding Sammy Davis Jr. from John F. Kennedy’s inaugural celebration because Sammy was married to a white woman). We’d all like to think that we chewed it up and spit it out, but more likely than not we were as often the chewed as the chewers. Completely devoid of hubris, “All My Tomorrows” gives voice to the chewed.

Sinatra had a hand in, though he did not lend his voice to, another significant recording of “All My Tomorrows.” Sylvia Syms, dubbed by Sinatra “the greatest saloon

singer in the business," included the song in *Syms by Sinatra* (1982), for which Sinatra directed the orchestra and Costa provided the arrangements. Foregoing theatrics, this time Costa opts for a spare, bluesy chart. It's Syms' voice, weathered but determined, that provides the theatrics. Her languorous vibrato positively aches. The emotion driving her interpretation is more than pathos, it's pain. And Syms certainly knew about pain. Having survived polio as a child, she had lost a lung to cancer and struggled with emphysema. Still, she continued to sing until the night she passed away – ten years after recording "All My Tomorrows" – on stage at the Algonquin Hotel.

She introduces small but decisive changes in the lyric. At the bridge, instead of singing, "With you there by my side / I'll soon be turning the tide," she sings, "With you there by my side / I'll keep on turning the tide." Unlike Sinatra, who doesn't return to the bridge, Syms repeats this sentence before launching into the last chorus, where she pledges not to dream, beg or borrow but to "steal, beg or borrow." What she intends to steal is not "all the dreams," as in the original lyric, but something concrete: love. Rather than helpless, Syms is willful. Rather than defeated, defiant. When she clings, she sticks. It may be that she hasn't turned the tide at all, that the tide will never turn, but she will not countenance it. Promising tomorrows as if there were no tomorrow, she fortifies Sinatra's despairing quixotism with a survivor's obstinacy.

I don't recall when I first heard "All My Tomorrows," but it must have coincided with my late-blooming interest in American standards, which dates from the 1990s, when I developed an unseasonal allergy to the music I had grown up with. Unlike sultry or cynical ballads by La Lupe or Lucho Gatica, the entries in the American Songbook had no memories attached to them. Since there was no danger that they would deposit me

back in the turbulent Cuba of my childhood, listening to them was enjoyable and stress-free. Even though many of them were older than 1950s-vintage *boleros,* they anchored me in the present, which was America. When I hummed a Kern melody or crooned (badly but with feeling) an Ira Gershwin lyric, Cuba was long ago and far away. As for "All My Tomorrows," it probably struck me as another pledge of everlasting love, sweet enough to be sure, but nothing to write to myself about. I heard it again in the years that followed, but it was not until a few months ago, driving to a soccer game, that the song got to me.

My experience as a listener parallels Sinatra's as an interpreter. When I first heard the song I was barely forty, as Sinatra was when he first recorded it. Now that middle age has passed me by, the song has become memorable, one of the *canciones de mi vida,* as one says mushily in Spanish. I don't tire of listening to it. What captivates me is the pledge of tomorrows at a time in your life when most of your tomorrows have already been lived. Facing the final curtain, you speak as if it's the first act. If it happens that tomorrow you're still around, you pledge again. You don't stop pledging tomorrows until there are no more todays.

The soccer game was uneventful. At least that's how it seemed to me, since I know nothing about the intricacies of the sport. But I was told that Isabelle, who plays left back, did exceptionally well and that the college scouts were impressed. "A rare talent," one of them reportedly said. This bodes well for her future. Unlike her grandmother and me, she has countless tomorrows to look forward to.