

Back in Nagasaki Where the Fellers Chew Tobaccy

Nagasaki has long held a musical attraction for Western composers. While Puccini's "Madame Butterfly" is deservedly the most famous composition set in the Japanese port town, a tune entitled simply "Nagasaki" was a popular song covered by many of the big band jazz groups of the thirties and forties.

Penned in 1928 by the American musical giant Harry Warren and the lyricist Mort Dixon, "Nagasaki" was usually performed in an up-tempo manner. Introduced by the Friars' Society Orchestra of Paul Mares, the song was recorded under a variety of arrangements by the likes of Fletcher Henderson, Cab Calloway, the Mills Brothers, Fats Waller, the Quintet of the Hot Club of France, Red Norvo, and Benny Goodman. Doris Day sang it in the movie "My Dream is Yours," and Bill Robinson and Scatman Crothers tapdanced to it decades apart in the Cotton Club and on the television show "Sanford and Son," respectively.

In reality, the song has little to do with Nagasaki, other than as a reflection of the Western image of exoticism (eroticism?) associated with Pacific ports-of-call. It could just as easily have been called "Shanghai" or "Honolulu"—and, indeed, Warren later wrote melodies about these cities as well. The song's value lies not in its accurate portrayal of Nagasaki in 1928, but in the insights it offers concerning the development of music in America during the years of the Great Depression. When Harry Warren sat down at his piano sixty-six years ago, little did he realize that he would provide the excuse this writer needed to write about two topics so dear to his heart—Nagasaki and jazz!

While Harry Warren may be one of the most popular American musical composers of the twentieth century, he was not responsible for the words to his tunes. In the case of Nagasaki, that honor belonged to Mort Dixon. Luckily, jazz relies on considerable improvisation, and most performers have chosen either to eliminate the words entirely or to alter them beyond recognition. The following is the original first verse to "Nagasaki"—although I have yet to hear it sung in this exact manner.

*Hot ginger and dynamite
There's nothing but that at night.
Back in Nagasaki where the fellers chew tobaccy
And the women wicky wacky woo.*

*The way they can entertain
Would hurry a hurricane.
Back in Nagasaki where the fellers chew tobaccy
And the women wicky wacky woo.*

*In Fujiyama you get a mommer
And your troubles increase.
In some pagoda she orders soda
The earth shakes milk shakes ten cents a piece.*

*They kissee and huggee nice
By jingo it's worth the price.*

*Back in Nagasaki where the fellers chew tobaccy
And the women wicky wacky woo.*

I have never noticed any propensity among the men of Nagasaki to chew tobacco, and if I have ever seen Nagasaki women “wicky wacky woo,” I probably did not recognize it as such. I am also fairly certain that neither Mt. Fuji nor a pagoda can be observed there—even on a clear day. “Jingo” (as in “jingoism”) may be the most appropriate word of the entire verse, but do not dig too deeply for veiled references or subtle innuendos from a lyricist who ends three of four stanzas with “wicky wacky woo.”

The true strength of the song is, of course, in the music provided by Harry Warren. Warren has been described variously as the man most responsible for the “sound” of the thirties, and “the most successful songwriter in the history of motion pictures.” Born in Brooklyn, New York on December 24, 1893 and given the baptismal name of Salvatore Guaragna, Warren grew up listening to classical music. His musical introduction to Nagasaki probably came from listening to “Madame Butterfly” as a child, since he is known to have idolized Puccini.

In spite of his classical upbringing, Warren began his musical career at fifteen as a drummer in a carnival band. He later performed odd jobs for vaudeville theater and movie studios in New York before entering the navy in World War One. After his discharge from the navy, he became a song plugger for various music publishers. In 1922 he published his first song (“Rose of the Rio Grande”) in collaboration with the lyricist Edgar Leslie.

Warren was thirty-four years old when in 1928 he collaborated with Mort Dixon on the song “Nagasaki.” For the next few years he wrote songs for Broadway plays, but by 1932 he had made the move westward to Hollywood, where he began writing songs for movies. Warren was under contract to Warner Bros. from 1933-39, 20th Century-Fox from 1940-44, MGM from 1944-52, and Paramount from 1952-61. It was in this capacity that he wrote his most famous songs. These include: “Forty-Second Street” (1933); “We’re in the Money” (1933); “I Only Have Eyes for You” (1934); “Jeepers Creepers” (1938); “You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby” (1938); “Chattanooga Choo Choo” (1941); “I’ve Got a Gal in Kalamazoo” (1942); “There Will Never be Another You” (1942); “The More I See You” (1945); “On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe” (1946); “That’s Amore” (1953); and “An Affair to Remember” (1957). During his forty-five year career in Hollywood, Warren contributed 131 songs to more than seventy-five movies. He also received three oscars for his songs (eight others were nominated), and had thirty-nine songs make “Your Hit Parade.”

Many of Warren’s songs came to be recorded by a wide variety of young jazz artists in the thirties and forties. His works were especially popular among the big band or “swing” jazz groups of the day. “Nagasaki” was recorded by some of the biggest names of the day in the decade of the thirties. Fats Waller, the legendary jazz pianist, recorded an up-tempo instrumental version. Fletcher Henderson, one of the early innovators of jazz, did a version with Henry “Red” Allen on vocals and Coleman Hawkins on tenor saxophone in September 1933. “Nagasaki” was also a hit for the Mills Brothers, who sang the song accompanied by only an acoustic guitar. In July 1935 Cab Calloway placed his unique stamp on the song in a frenetic version, which is my personal favorite. A considerably more relaxed version was recorded by Django Reinhardt Et Le Quintette Du Hot Club De France in October 1936 in Paris.

While Red Norvo, the Trix Sisters, Judy Carmichael, and a host of others also offered their renditions of “Nagasaki,” the most famous band to perform the tune was probably the Benny Goodman Quartet, which recorded a live instrumental version in the Madhattan Room of the Hotel Pennsylvania in New York City in November 1937. The Quartet consisted of some of the finest jazz musicians of the day: Benny Goodman on clarinet, Lionel Hampton on vibraphone, Teddy Wilson on Piano, and Gene Krupa on drums. A decade later in August 1947, the Benny Goodman Sextet (Goodman, Red Norvo, Mel Powell, Al Hendrickson, Artie Shapiro and Louis Bellson) also recorded a version as part of a patriotic tribute in Hollywood.

In 1949 the movie “My Dream is Yours,” starring Doris Day and Jack Carson, showcased a number of Harry Warren songs in a story about a talented but unknown jazz singer (Day) and her discovery by a hapless talent agent (Carson). The musical highlight of the movie is an animated sequence in which Day and Carson are joined in song by Bugs Bunny, but Warren’s song “Nagasaki” also makes a brief appearance. In the “Nagasaki” scene, Day, wearing a Hawaiian grass skirt and accompanied by Hawaiian-looking musicians, sings with a colorful curtain of Mt. Fuji in the background. The setting provides further evidence that the song represents more of a Western stereotype of “Port-Anywhere-in-the-Pacific” than it does an accurate representation of Nagasaki. Day’s Hawaiian version of the song is mercifully cut short by a drink in the face from the wife of a drunken club patron.

“Nagasaki” continues to be performed today—pianist Dick Hyman recorded a live version of the song in New York in 1988—but it is more of a period piece than a true jazz standard. It represents a time (the 1930s) when jazz (especially big band or “swing” jazz) was still in its infancy, and popular American musical composers like Harry Warren wrote songs about exotic, far-away places to take people’s minds off their troubles. “Nagasaki” is only one example of a genre of music—which includes, among others, “Japanese Dream” and “Japanese Sandman”—that became part of the fabric of American life in the Great Depression years prior to World War Two. It is, of course, not a song about Nagasaki at all, but of America and American perceptions of peoples and places from days gone by.

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