Date & time: Monday, 14 March 2016; 4:30 p.m.
Venue: OEM1008, 10/F, OEN Hall Building, Ho Sin Hang Campus

“The “Stretchèd Metre of an Antique Song”: Jazzin’ the Food of Love

Mike Ingham

Bill Shakespeare never knew
Of ragtime in his days
But the high-browed rhymes,
Of his syncopated lines,
You'll admit, surely fit,
any song that's now a hit,
So this rag I submit.

—Gene Buck, Herman Ruby, and David Stamper, “That Shakespearian Rag” (1912)

The title of my paper is taken from the last quatrain of Sonnet 17 (“Who will believe my verse in time to come?”) and is chosen for its pertinence to the treatment of Shakespeare's verse in jazz vocal settings, notably those of the late Johnny Dankworth and his spouse Cleo Laine and more recently of Belgian female artiste Caroll Vanwelden. In fact, although the reference to “stretched metre” applies to both Dankworth's and Vanwelden's settings, it is Vanwelden's 2012 setting of Sonnet 17 that literally stretches the metre of this particular sonnet line, as well as many others. While some attention has been paid to the interaction of jazz, blues and ragtime forms with Shakespeare's work—notably Douglas Lanier's erudite article, “Minstrelsy, jazz, rap: African American music, and cultural legitimation”—jazz versions of the sonnets have been largely ignored. My paper begins to redress this lack of scholarly focus by assessing the assured legacy of Dankworth and Laine and the still-fresh contributions (2012 and 2014) of Vanwelden and her group. The presentation will be enlivened by relevant extracts from recordings of the song adaptations.

MICHAEL INGHAM is Professor in the Department of English Studies at Lingnan University, Hong Kong. He is a founder member of Theatre Action drama company in Hong Kong. He has published on Shakespearean adaptation, performance studies and stylistics and has had numerous publications in adaptation studies and cinema studies, as well as HK creative writing in English (City Voices and City Stage and Hong Kong: a Cultural and Literary History). His contribution on Shakespeare and Jazz is included in the forthcoming Cambridge World Shakespeares Encyclopedia, and his Routledge monograph on Intermediality in Film and Theatre will be published in 2016.

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