

The ignorant, repressive attack on Frank Loesser’s “Baby, It’s Cold Outside”

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In late November, a Cleveland, Ohio, radio station, WDOK, decided to stop playing the popular Frank Loesser song from the 1940s, “Baby, It’s Cold Outside.” In the song, as it is generally performed, a man encourages a woman to stay the night and she expresses concerns about what her family and the neighbors will think if she does.

Justifying the ban, WDOK host Glenn Anderson indicated he realized the song “was written in 1944, it was a different time, but now while reading it, it seems very manipulative and wrong. The world we live in is extra-sensitive now, and people get easily offended, but in a world where #MeToo has finally given women the voice they deserve, the song has no place.”

Radio stations in San Francisco and Denver and CBC radio in Canada followed suit. In each case, however, the dropping of the Loesser song encountered public anger and opposition.

A poll on the Cleveland station’s Facebook page indicated, at one point, that 94 percent of about 8,900 voters were in favor of keeping the song, with only 6 percent arguing it was “inappropriate.” Similarly, 95 percent of the 15,000 respondents in a poll conducted by KOSI in Denver demanded the song’s return, and the station complied.

In San Francisco, after hearing “from thousands of Bay Area listeners via polling, phone calls, emails and social media,” radio station KOIT “has concluded that the vast majority [some 70 percent] consider the song to be a valuable part of their holiday tradition, and they still want to hear it on the radio,” according to a news report.

The CBC too has decided to reinstate “Baby, It’s Cold Outside,” because “audience input ... was overwhelmingly to include the song,” said Chuck Thompson, CBC’s head of public affairs in a statement Tuesday. (Billboard reported that three versions of the song have seen “a bump” and streaming for the tune is up considerably.)

The campaign, such as it is, against Loesser’s song is preposterous and reactionary. It is also ignorant.

Loesser (1910–1969) was one of the great American popular songwriters of the 20th century. In addition to the Broadway musicals *Guys and Dolls* (1950), *The Most Happy Fella* (1956) and *How To Succeed In Business Without Really Trying* (1961), he wrote the lyrics (and often the music) for more than 700 songs.

That extremely varied list includes “Heart and Soul,” written with Hoagy Carmichael in 1938; “See What the Boys in the Back Room Will Have,” written with Frederick Hollander, which

Marlene Dietrich sang in *Destry Rides Again* (1939); the music and lyrics to the memorable songs in the 1952 Danny Kaye musical, *Hans Christian Andersen* (“Inch Worm,” “Thumbelina,” “The Ugly Duckling” and “Wonderful Copenhagen”); “Let’s Get Lost,” which jazz trumpeter Chet Baker recorded and which inspired the title of the 1988 documentary about the latter; and “Standing on the Corner” (from *The Most Happy Fella*), a popular hit in 1956.

Loesser, born in New York City to secular German Jewish parents, belonged to that remarkable collection of 20th century song writers and composers, many of them immigrants or the children of immigrants, who grasped so much about American life and contributed so much to its culture.

In his 2008 biography of Loesser, Thomas Laurence Riis writes that in the 1930s and 1940s, the songwriter “benefited from working with a string of excellent composers, not just the tunesmiths of his own generation,” but also Carmichael “and full-fledged symphonic specialists, including Alfred Newman (1900–1970), Frederick (or Friedrich) Hollander (1896–1976), and Victor Schertzinger (1880–1941). He met and befriended many experienced hands and never lacked for good examples of modern lyric writing. Verses from the pens of Lorenz Hart, Ira Gershwin, and Cole Porter were probably committed to memory on repeated hearings, and it is well known that Loesser most admired the phenomenally successful and prolific Irving Berlin.”

“Baby, It’s Cold Outside” began life as something of a trifle, a song that Loesser and his wife, Lynn Garland, performed at a housewarming party in New York City in 1944. The couple apparently meant to indicate it was time for their guests to leave. The song became immensely popular, and Garland later explained, “Parties were built around our being the closing act.”

The song takes the form of a conversation between two people, a host (male) and a guest (female). Each line is a statement from the guest, followed or completed by a response from the host:

I really can’t stay ... (But, baby, it’s cold outside)

I’ve got to go away ... (But, baby, it’s cold outside)

This evening has been ... (Been hoping that you’d drop in)

So very nice ... (I’ll hold your hands, they’re just like ice)

The guest is concerned that her father and mother will start to worry, but decides to have “maybe just half a drink more,” and, later, “maybe just a cigarette more.” She makes clear she would like to remain, except for what her family members (including brother, sister and “maiden aunt”!) and the neighbors will think, “I

ought to say no, no, no, sir ... At least I'm gonna say that I tried." Meanwhile he's suggesting excuses she might use, "No cabs to be had out there," "Never such a blizzard before," and so on.

There's nothing about coercion here. The guest's line, "Say, what's in this drink?," was a popular expression in the mid-20th century, including in various films. A character used the line, usually when he or she was doing or saying something daring, as a means of blaming alcohol for the unorthodox behavior. The "punchline" generally involved revealing there was little or no alcohol in the drink.

After years of performing the tune privately with his wife, Loesser sold it to MGM for the 1949 musical romantic comedy, *Neptune's Daughter*, starring swimmer and actress Esther Williams and Ricardo Montalban. The film is set in sunny California (and shot partly in Florida), and "Baby, It's Cold Outside" could hardly have been less appropriate, but it was a last-minute substitute for another Loesser song, which the censors objected to, "(I'd Like to Get You on a) Slow Boat to China."

In the rather silly film, Montalban sings the seductive number with Williams, entreating her to stay. Later, in a reversal of gender roles, the sexually aggressive Betty Garrett sings it more comically with Red Skelton, who would like her to leave his apartment.

"Baby, It's Cold Outside" is a sophisticated, charming song about the anticipation and excitement, and danger, of love.

Riis, in his biography of Loesser, suggests that the song holds a "unique place in Frank Loesser's career. It is a not too distant cousin of Mozart's celebrated seduction duet 'Là ci darem la mano' ('Put your hand in mine') in *Don Giovanni* (1787). It is a model of monomotivic development, which is to say he gets quite a long song by repeating a single short tune fragment for most of the dialogue."

"With one rhythmic idea," Riis continues, "'Baby, It's Cold Outside' uses the standard ABAC format of thirty-two measures and adds an unremarkable chord progression for foundation, yet its cumulative effect is so impressive that Loesser can be said to have built his little tune into a miniature dramatic scene, a *scena* in the operatic sense, in which two characters and the nature of their relationship are fully sketched with efficiency and emotional clarity. The call-and-response conversation of the characters is fraught with humor, danger, and suggestiveness. Yet it makes no judgments and allows the listeners to imagine what comes next and draw their own conclusions."

The song has been performed and recorded by dozens and dozens of performers. There were 8 recordings in 1949 alone. Later duos include Louis Armstrong and Velma Middleton, Ray Charles and Betty Carter, Steve Lawrence and Eydie Gormé, Bette Midler and James Caan, Lou Rawls and Dianne Reeves, Suzy Bogguss and Delbert McClinton, Zooey Deschanel and Leon Redbone, Rod Stewart and Dolly Parton and Lady Gaga and Joseph Gordon-Levitt (with Lady Gaga playing the aggressor!).

Dean Martin recorded a popular version of "Baby, It's Cold Outside." His daughter, Deana Martin, responded to the controversy over the song by suggesting that the female character in the song "is sweet, she's playing along with him. It's flirting, it's sexy, it's sweet, there's nothing bad about that song, and it just breaks my heart. ... I know my dad would be going insane right

now. He would say, 'What's the matter with you? Get over it, it's just a fun song.'"

Susan Loesser, the songwriter's daughter, also defended the song. "It's this flirty, funny, charming song," she told the media. "I've always loved it. ... My mother considered it their song. That's why she was crushed when he sold it to MGM for *Neptune's Daughter* ... But it won the Academy Award and she got over it."

The attack on Loesser's song, from one point of view, is laughable. But the social forces who have aggressively pushed the #MeToo campaign and the new Puritanism are no laughing matter. In the face of intolerable levels of social inequality and mounting resistance in the working class, the obsession with gender and racial issues within sections of the upper middle class, egged on by the *New York Times* and the Democratic Party hierarchy, only grows in intensity. Anti-democratic, repressive and instinctively censorious, this social layer will respond with fury to a movement of workers that threatens to upset the financial and political apple cart.

"Baby, It's Cold Outside" is not the only song or musical piece coming under attack. The Pogues' "Fairytale of New York" (1987), one of the most haunting popular songs in recent decades, has also been targeted. The song, again, includes a male and a female character. The pair hurl insults at each other and, at one point, call one another "slut" and "faggot," respectively.

Shane MacGowan, the Pogues' frontman at the time, who co-wrote the song with Jem Finer, said he wouldn't object to the anti-gay slur being bleeped out, but defended its use. "The word was used by the character because it fitted with the way she would speak and with her character," he told Virgin Media TV. "She is not supposed to be a nice person, or even a wholesome person. She is a woman of a certain generation at a certain time in history and she is down on her luck and desperate." MacGowan explained that the line was not meant to offend, but to be "as accurate as I could make it."

Such questions of artistic or psychological truth are not of the slightest interest to this crowd of petty bourgeois zealots out for blood.



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