Extended Essay

Subject: Music

“Summertime”: An analysis of the range of musical color across arrangements of Gershwin’s “Summertime”

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Abstract

Research Question: To what extent do the covers of George Gershwin’s American classic “Summertime” by Norah Jones and Janis Joplin expand upon the musical color of the original?

Abstract: Summertime, by George Gershwin and Dubose Heyward, is one of the most recorded jazz songs ever written. Its slow melody and descending baselines make it an ideal song to cover, giving the recording artist a freedom to adapt the song to his or her own personal style. Although there are defining aspects of the song that remain constant across different musicians’ covers, artists have changed the chords, rhythm, and timbre to evoke different reactions from the listener. This essay will explore the extent to which the song can be changed without losing its essence, drawing from arrangements by Norah Jones and Janis Joplin. I will describe how each of these recordings is unique, and show how the different artists adapted the song, including elements of their personal style into their recording of Summertime.

As well as listing the differences between each recording, I will discuss what remains the same. The song has a very distinct minor tone and I aim to pinpoint specific chord changes and rhythms that give it this characteristic. (172 words)
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Introduction

Research Question: To what extent do the covers of George Gershwin’s American classic “Summertime” by Norah Jones and Janis Joplin expand upon the musical color of the original?

The simmering, languid song “Summertime” first appeared in the 1935 opera *Porgy and Bess* by George Gershwin, and has since been covered by thousands of musicians (McKim). With music by Gershwin and lyrics by the poet DuBose Heyward, the haunting melody was first performed in the keening tones of an aria, as a lullaby from a mother to her child (Green).

*Porgy and Bess* was not a success in its time--it met with a less than enthusiastic reception--but it has since come to be recognized as an essential piece of American theatre (Wilson) (American Masters). In writing *Porgy and Bess*, George Gershwin made a statement by treating pieces of American culture, like gospel and folk music, the same way his contemporaries would treat classic art. Gershwin's serious approach to these themes argued that they were worthy of respect (Schmoop Editorial Team). Although *Porgy and Bess* was not initially a success, its subject matter and unique fusion of musical styles did ensure it a place in the public eye (Biography.com; “George Gershwin Biography”). These aspects, combined with the musical talent of George Gershwin, led to its later recognition as an American classic.

Since its conception in 1935 and its climb to the pantheon of great American art, musicians covering the piece have pushed “Summertime’s” musical essence to the very limit of its sound. Early covers by artists such as Ella Fitzgerald and Billie Holiday added a swing beat and played it in the style of the jazz ballad. Later recordings take inspiration from Spanish music, cool jazz, blues, and even psychedelic rock.

I will examine the original “Summertime” by George Gershwin, as well as two arrangements in contrasting styles, by Norah Jones and Janis Joplin. Through looking at the
musical tonality, rhythms, and style, I will analyze how they expand upon the musical flavor of the original.
1. “Summertime” by George Gershwin, featured in *Porgy and Bess*

Link to recording: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7-Qa92Rzbk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O7-Qa92Rzbk) (Amadeusvideolog)

Unlike its successors, the version that appeared in *Porgy and Bess* was sung in an operatic style. It also features less syncopation and swing than the jazz covers which became known as the most familiar version of “Summertime.” It also features a full orchestra, which lends a richness to the texture that subsequent versions lacked.

The song has a very distinct sound, with a minor chromatic tonality making it instantly recognizable. From the start, chords moving over small intervals create the image of a stiflingly hot summer day, and when the mournful vocals come in, it is clear that the living is *not* easy. When the second musical phrase—“[...] and the cotton is high”—ends on a leading tone, tension continues to mount. Throughout the song, this tension does not let up. Whenever a major resolution is introduced, it is quickly followed by a fall back to minor, denying a major cadence.

The introduction of the song features no swung rhythm. The orchestra switches back and forth between two minor chords, each a half-step away from each other, changing every half note. When the vocalist enters, she introduces a subtle syncopation that is partially masked by the rubato style in which she sings: on the words “and the livin’ is easy,” the emphasis is put on the eight notes that correspond with the syllables “the” and “-in” of “livin.” These fall on the “and” of beats two and three.
The syncopation is broken, however, as the word “high” features a strong beat on a downbeat. The syllables of the word “easy” continue to fall on downbeats in the next measure.

As the vocals begin, the background instruments hush to a pianissimo, and rest on their chords (0:10). They do swell up again at 0:27, and with the rise in dynamics comes a set of triplets, a figure that will return throughout the song.

One thing that is notable in the Gershwin version is the composer’s inclusion of notes outside of the basic chords, which lends a theatrical, dramatic aspect to the tonality of the piece.
In this example, the technique appears where the strings/woodwinds add ornamentation on notes decidedly outside of the tonality of the b-minor chord that the melody falls under; both A and Ab conflict with the rest of the measure. Gershwin does this deliberately, however, and makes sure that dissonant notes are offset by open intervals; thus the dissonant pitches do not come to the forefront of the listener’s attention. The song continues until 2:33, where a series of gospel-style chords brings it to a suddenly dramatic conclusion.

This piece is unique in virtually all of its characteristics. The instrumentation alone is not unique, but to use the instrumentation Gershwin did along with this style of music--gospel--makes for an unusual combination.

The form is typical of a gospel piece: repeating verse with no bridge or chorus characterizes it as having a strophic form. This is one of the elements of the piece that makes it appealing for artists to cover. Gershwin lays out a broad template giving performers ample room to tweak rhythms and change ornamentation.
2. “Summertime,” arranged by Janis Joplin

Link to recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=guKoNCQFAFk (Hayal Evi)

The American singer and songwriter Janis Joplin released her recording of “Summertime” in 1968. Her interpretation of the song pushed its sound to the limits as she included strong flavors of her psychedelic rock style. A descending bassline played on a fuzzy electric bass defines her cover, giving the recording a wasted, dulled tone reminiscent of the dark side of the drug scene the performer was surrounded with (Biography.com; “Janis Joplin Biography”). In many recordings of the song, a heavy atmosphere is created, and in the original this atmosphere is attributed to the tragedy of the events of Porgy and Bess: the soul-breaking circumstances of the characters’ poverty and despair. In “Summertime” by Janis Joplin, however, the atmosphere reflects the controversial and troubling events of the sixties and the feeling of hopelessness they caused.

At the very start of Joplin’s recording, a lurid, high-timbre solo guitar backed by the softly crashing cymbals of a drum set introduces the song. Already the Joplin version stands apart from the original: while in both pieces the tone of the song is introduced immediately by the background instruments, in the original it is through walking-pace chords moving up and down many times over, where in Janis Joplin’s version a twisting, deathly guitar solo gives the piece a singular movement that is not found in the original. This can be seen in the second bar of the example below, a rising line that starts on E:
Then, at 0:08, the electric bass begins its descending line that will return throughout the piece, complementing the high solo guitar perfectly. As a second, more distorted guitar joins the first at 0:24, the movement builds. Where in the original, the instrumental movement is limited to a narrow set of chords that give the piece a suppressed, confined mood, Janis Joplin has done away with this, replacing it with long, walking pace runs that give her version a wandering, untethered tone.

The introduction builds until at 0:38 Joplin enters, her raspy voice straying away from the rhythms and melody the listener expects, continuing the hazy mood that the intro introduced. She repeats the second syllable of the word, “time,” a change from the original version, in which “time” is held out in one note over a full measure. The comparison can be seen below:
At 0:40, the high intro guitar is replaced with a lower part that plays ascending arpeggio triplets that move down the scale, significantly altering the song’s tonality when at 0:44 they outline a G minor 6th chord, continuing the development of the song’s dark psychedelic tone. Then at 0:50, Joplin reaches the end of the first line of the song and the first musical phrase as the same guitar that was giving us the arpeggios marches onward into a rising line at 0:48. At 0:54, the line peaks as a high twangy guitar bends from the fourth note of the blues scale.
upward a half-step into the fifth note, here a c sharp. At 0:58, a muffled, distorted, and off-key burp from a guitar adds to the psychedelic mood.

At 1:05, the second phrase of the melody ends and the muted chords of the guitars suddenly switches to a blazingly intense guitar solo and Janis Joplin joins in the unexpected intensity. This solo quickly ends as suddenly as it began, and the song continues.

The song moves onward and the guitars’ distortion grows along with the overall intensity. At 1:52, a guitar in the middle of its line of music allows distortion to creep into its sound as it moves into a solo, and at 2:15, another guitar, blaring with distortion, dispenses with all pretense of clear tone. This guitar leads into the most intense solo section yet, disregarding melody and rhythm at 2:30 as all restraint is forgone.

At 2:38, the solo is over, and the switch from solo to chorus is one of big contrast. The song winds down at 3:50 before ending on a major Picardy third. Janis Joplin distinguishes her version of Summertime from those of other artists through a variety of techniques. Instead of sticking to the confined chords of the original, she gives her piece a languid, untethered sound by using long rising and falling lines from the guitars. A heavy, muted descending bassline from the electric bass accompanies a repeated figure from the high guitar, adding to the oppressive atmosphere. She uses sickly sweet chords to add to the deathly mood, and sudden changes from this sweetness to searing intensity in her voice and guitar to express the pain of the song. In short, she does everything she can to use the most alien distortion and tonalities of 60s rock to present a twisted, jarring version of a classic, deliberately turning beautiful into ugly.
3. “Summertime,” arranged by Norah Jones

Link to recording: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xJOTAWyEzal (Westdens)

Compared to the original, and in stark contrast to the recording by Janis Joplin, Norah Jones’ version of Summertime is cool and pure, with gentle intensity instead of oppressive weight. She starts her recording with the same type of chords moving up and down that appear in the original, but they move more quickly here, and are played alongside a shifting repeated figure in the left hand of the piano. At just 0:05, she moves from the chords in the right hand to an improvised variation of the still unheard verse. The repeated figure in the left hand continues the motion at this point.

Figure 7 (bluespianosheets.com)

Jones enters at 0:16, moving through the line with an altered rhythm, using syncopation to develop the tone of the. As she sings, the quiet left hand of the piano is punctuated by stabs from the right hand, as exemplified at 0:26. At 0:34, she shows blues style in her singing by switching out a low note with a high accented “of.” This is part of a larger theme in the song: in both the piano and her voice, Norah Jones moves subtly back and forth between a bolder sound centered around bluesy piano figures and stabs in her voice and a gentler sound based in cool, neutral chords, as shown at 0:45-0:50. She consistently alters the rhythm of the melody to fit her style, like at 1:00, syncopating the notes of the phrase without drastically breaking from the listener’s expectations.
At 1:26, Norah Jones stops singing as the melody transfers to the piano, moving into an extended solo. This section slowly sways from soft to loud, full of ornamentation on the main melody. She blends burbling piano lines, as shown at 2:12, with bluesy riffs, shown at 2:35 to continue the cool intensity of her recording. The sophisticated extended chords go well with the honky-tonk aspect of her performance, which shows up in trills she uses such as at 2:49. At 3:08, something interesting happens as the dissonance grows, accentuating the neutral chromatic tone of the song. At 3:35, the return of the focus in the piano to the melody signals the end of the solo section. The song slows to a sizzling final chord at 4:56.

In her recording of “Summertime,” Norah Jones brings out the blues and jazz in the song, leaving behind much of the pain and hopelessness that define the original version. She employs a repeating figure in the bass to keep the movement alive, while spicing the background piano with notes from the blues scale and extended chords. Where Janis Joplin changed the despairing emotion of the song into wild, agonized wailing, Norah Jones reduces it to a cool, neutral, and unassuming account of the lullaby.
4. The Versatility of “Summertime”

One of the aspects of Summertime that makes it so coverable is the nature of the melodic rhythm. While the lead instrument or voice part is written with melismas over multiple bars, the background instruments can do as they please to add complexity to the piece. This is something that was not taken advantage of in the original Porgy and Bess version: the soprano singer presents the melody very slowly, and the supporting instruments mirror this. This is not a criticism of that song--George Gershwin was undoubtedly aware of the atmosphere he was trying to communicate to the listener, and his execution of this is masterful. What makes the covers of this piece so interesting is that other artists saw the opportunity he had left them, and filled the backup instruments' parts with complex rhythms and harmonies. These artists have plumbed the depths of the musicality of “Summertime,” exploring the extent to which they can fill these parts with unique music without losing the atmosphere of the song.

Another aspect of Summertime that makes it open to interpretation is the fact that George Gershwin purposely included a range of musical styles in it, leaving a variety of avenues for exploration. Gershwin included aspects of American folk music, jazz, blues, and even Jewish traditional music in order to craft the piece. The way that this opens the song up for additional alteration is that it gives covering artists a starting point for writing their versions. For example, the blues in the piece gives Norah Jones a seed that she can use to arrange it in a blues style. In her version, she isolates that aspect of the song and plays it richly and boldly.
Conclusion

Both covers of “Summertime” manage to maintain an aspect of the original version at the same time as they present an original, inspired take on it. If asked the question, “which one is closer to Gershwin’s version,” I would turn to the message of the lyrics. If only given the words, an unknowing subject might guess that the song is a cheerful one. A description of a lazy summer day, when “the fish are jumping and the cotton is high” sounds idyllic. The music of the piece, however, directly contradicts this sentiment. This contrast is the defining characteristic of the original piece.

The reason that this matters in a comparison of Jones’ and Joplin’s versions is that Jones’ does not have the same stark contrast. Her version loses the anguished sound of the original in favor of a cool, neutral tone. Joplin’s goes in the opposite direction and amplifies the misery to an extreme. This does not, however, detract from Norah Jones’ version, as it was not written to be a copy of Gershwin’s version.

The covers of “Summertime” by Norah Jones and Janis Joplin each showcase a different aspect of the original by Gershwin. Where Norah Jones brings out the cool tones, Janis Joplin brings out the warm tones. While the two covers are remarkably different from each other, both are rooted in facets of the original; Jones’ in the use of neutral chromaticism and Joplin’s in the walking, oppressive chords. Each piece is a piece unto itself, and both demonstrate musical integrity and inspired arranging.
Appendix:

Appendix A - Melody and Chords from “Summertime,” written by George Gershwin

Score from El-atril.com arranged by author to highlight chords

Gershwin's "Summertime:" Chord Chart
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Voice
look - in', So hush little baby,

Chords
Bm\(^6\)  C\(^\#\)m\(^6\)  Bm\(^6\)  E\(^7\)  D  Bm

Voice
Don't you cry.

Chords
E  A\(^9\)sus  Bm
Jones' "Summertime:" Chord Chart

Voice:

Chords:

1. Gb, Ab6, Db, Amaj7(b5)/Db, Dbmaj7/C, Ab

2. Dbmaj7/C, Gb6, Ebm, Fm, Ebm, Ebm

3. Bb sus4, Bbmin, Ab6, Bbmin, Ab

Note: The chords are arranged according to the melody of "Summertime," showcasing the harmonization by Norah Jones. Each note or chord is accompanied by its corresponding letter or symbol in the music notation.
and your ma-ma's good lookin.

So hush little baby,

don't you cry.

Bbmaj7sus/C Bbmaj7sus/C
Appendix C - Melody and chords from “Summertime,” arr. by Janis Joplin

Score from musicnotes.com arranged by author to highlight chords

Joplin's "Summertime:" Chord Chart

Voice

Chords

Em
Em(maj7)/D#
G/D
Cm7♭5
C7♭5
Cdim7
C

Voice

Chords

Em
Em(maj7)/D#
G/D
Cm7♭5
C7♭5
Cdim7
D7
Am7
Am(maj7)

Voice

Chords

Am7
A7
B7
Cmaj7
Your daddy's rich and your ma, she's

so good lookin' babe. Think she's lookin' good now.

Hush, my baby, baby, baby, baby, baby, baby,
Voice

hon-ey, no, no, no, don't you cry,

Chords

Am\(^7\)  B\(^7\)  Em  Em/D

Chords

don't you cry.

Am\(^7\)  B\(^7\)  Em
Appendix D - Lyrics by Dubose Heyward

Summertime,
and the livin’ is easy.

Fish are jumpin’,
and the cotton is high.

Well your daddy’s rich,
and your mama’s good lookin’.

So hush, little baby,
don’t you cry.

One of these mornings
you’re gonna rise up singing.

Yeah, you’ll spread your wings
and you’ll take to the sky.

But until that morning,

baby there’s nothing can harm you.

So hush, little darling,
don’t you cry.
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Digital recordings:


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Scores:


