

# The Jazz Stylings of Jack Nebergall

## Through the Eyes and Ears of a Non-Harpist

by Glenn Griffith

Jack Nebergall was an extraordinary musician and harpist, a generous and caring individual with a wonderful, playful sense of humor. When I first met Jack, I was immediately struck by his infectious and vibrant personality. When Jack entered the room, you knew it. His vitality and zest for life were clearly apparent in his voice and body language. He loved life.

Jack was one of several harpists of his generation to broaden the scope of harp playing to include current popular music and popular music from earlier in the century, including songs from Broadway stage productions and Hollywood films. Today the playing of popular music on the harp is quite common and is taken for granted as part of a working harpist's repertoire. Because of his extraordinary musical skills and his enthusiasm for playing and teaching, Jack influenced a generation of pop players yet to come.

Jack was widely respected in the harp community for his unique ballad style of playing which was rich with tall chords and strong melodies and colored with his own personal flair.

A point to keep in mind is that although Jack read music quite well, he didn't write out his arrangements. Jack played by ear. He might approach a song in a similar fashion each time he played it, but he did not work out his arrangements beforehand and play them note for note. Each time he played a song, it might be similar to how he played it the last time, or it might be quite different than he had ever played it before. Jack had wonderful ears and played music as he heard it in his head. This is one thing that made Jack a unique voice in the harp world. His approach is one of the reasons his music was unique to him.

For purposes of analysis, the arrangements to be discussed are taken from his one known solo LP recording, *Ain't Misbehavin'*, soon to be available on CD. Some of these are published arrangements. In their published form, they are shortened to a single statement of the melody, whereas in performance, Jack would play various repetitions.

### SONG STRUCTURE AND FORM

Form, the art of combining musical ideas into a unified whole, is the structural design of a musical composition. A majority of American popular songs use either an AABA or an ABAB song form. The A section is the main theme, and the B section is a departure from the A section. In more recent popular music, AAB, verse, verse, chorus, is used quite often. Jack uses several approaches regarding overall form in his arrangements. The following approach is common to several songs. First, Jack will play a *rubato* introduction, usually not too long, maybe only two to four measures. Then comes the main body of the arrangement as he plays the song, usually an AABA or an ABAC song form. He will then D.S. (*del segno*) back to the B section of an AABA song, or to the second half or second A of an ABAC song form. When Jack plays a D.S., repeating back within the form of the song, he plays an arrangement similar to what he played before, but he does not play it note for note. For his ending, he might simply ritard or stretch the last several bars of the song. He will often add a deceptive or colorful chord, delaying the final tonic chord. Sometimes he will resolve to the tonic chord, play a chord to pull the listener away from the tonic, then lead back to I, the tonic chord.

In "Who Can I Turn To," Jack plays a short *rubato* introduction. He then plays the ABAC song form in a free tempo style, repeats back to the second half or second A section, then plays the song out with a brief ending. This arrangement is rich with tall, lush chords.

Jack's arrangement of "She's Funny That Way" begins with a descending arpeggiated introduction. This is followed by the AABA song played in a free style. The A sections are orchestrated with tall full chords. In contrast, the B section has a very thin orchestration. At the end of the song form, Jack returns to B and plays the song out. On the D.S., the bridge is orchestrated more fully than it was the first time. Incidentally, this arrangement of "She's Funny That



Way” is a good example of a little known or nearly forgotten tune being brought back to life through a good arrangement played by an engaging performer.

Jack’s rendition of “My Ship” does not include an introduction. Instead, he starts right with the tune. The form of the song is AABA. In the A section, he plays the melody with harmonized rolled chords. At the B section, he moves the tempo ahead while using a bass pedal point under the melody. After the bridge, the following A section is played like the original two A sections, not using the built-in extension from the original song. He takes the D.S., going back to B and plays the song out in a similar style. This time, when Jack plays the last A section, he uses the extension to the song as his ending. His playing style, starting with a light delicate touch, then building intensity throughout the song and finally returning to the lighter touch, is most effective.

As a general observation of Jack’s playing, the listener notices that in the repetition of a song, on the D.S., Jack might move the tempo a little more or play with a fuller orchestration than the first time through the melody. This gives a feeling of increased momentum and intensity through the arrangement.

Occasionally, Jack repeats the entire song instead of repeating just the second half as we see in his arrangement of “Tenderly.” Jack begins this tune by playing a two-bar descending melodic pattern over a I-VI-II-V harmonic pattern for an introduction. He plays through the ABAB song form in a free tempo style, then returns to the top of the song form, this time repeating the entire song. On this repeat, he plays the melody slightly faster, pushing forward at times, pulling back at times, somewhat like the ebb and flow of ocean waves.

The song form of “The Shadow of Your Smile” is ABAC. Jack plays the melody in very free, flexible time. The song form is played once, then Jack takes a D.S. back to the second A, and repeats the second half. One of the approaches that makes this arrangement unique is the material used for the introduction and ending. The song is in common time or 4/4, but his introduction and ending are based on original material in 3/4 time. This provides contrasting material to the song and gives a pair of “bookends” to the arrangement. He also uses this 3/4 material for a brief interlude before the repeated D.S. Jack is also playing *près de la table*, to get a guitar-like sound. This unique melodic timbre sets this arrangement apart from the other songs. Tremolo chords, or *bisbigliando*, produce cascades of shimmering sound for the ending. All of these techniques come together creating a wonderful fresh sounding arrangement.

In the next three arrangements, Jack uses both *rubato* playing and *a tempo* playing to achieve a feeling of

development. “Ain’t Misbehavin’” starts with the first A section played in a *rubato* style, then Jack sets the tempo and plays the second A, B and last A section in tempo. Melodically speaking, except for the *rubato* A section, Jack does not actually play the melody on the following A sections, but implies the melody with his chord voicings. This is the only example in which he does not clearly play the melody. He is usually true to the melody, albeit in his own inimitable free style. Once through the form in the Fats Waller tune, he takes a D.S. back to the bridge where he has the bass player play the melody. On the last A section, Jack resumes playing the melody. The combination of *rubato* and *a tempo*, using bass on the melody, and Jack’s own style of stride playing, makes this a very nice musical arrangement.

In “Summertime,” Jack starts out in *rubato* style, then establishes both the tempo and mood of the piece with a minor key accompaniment. He then plays the tune of “Summertime” in tempo. When Jack gets to the last melodic phrase of each chorus, he pulls out of tempo, in his own dramatic style, then resumes the first tempo for the second chorus. He pulls the tempo back again on the last phrase of the second chorus and returns to the original feel of his introduction.

For his arrangement of “I Can’t Get Started,” Jack plays a *rubato* introduction, then plays a whole chorus of the tune, AABA, in *rubato* style. At the end of the first chorus he extends the tune, then establishes an easy “2” feel vamp, setting the mood for the second chorus. Jack then plays the tune again in this light and easy feel. He pulls the tempo back toward the end of the last A section, then ends in a style reminiscent of the introduction. His use of pedal slides in the inner voices of the harmony are especially beautiful. This arrangement highlights Jack at his best.

To appreciate Jack’s approach to the following arrangement, a discussion of the concept of verse and chorus in popular music is in order. In recent popular music, the use of repeated verses followed by a chorus is the most common song form. This differs from older standards and Broadway songs where the main body of the song, regardless of its form, is preceded by a verse in *rubato* style that sets up the song. These verses are sometimes sung, sometimes spoken, sometimes played or with a combinations of the three. Sadly, many of these verses are lost or all but forgotten until every now and then, somebody uncovers one of these gems and brings the verse back to our attention.

In “The Boy Next Door,” Jack plays the little known thirty-six bar verse to this Broadway tune as an introduction to the main body of the song. He then plays through the ABAC song form twice, extending the end of the song.



To create a medley, Jack combines two simple arrangements of "The Very Thought of You" and "I Only Have Eyes for You." A two bar *rubato* introduction sets up this medley. He plays both songs in a free tempo style. The first is an ABAC song form, the second is an AABA song form. Undoubtedly, in live performance, creating medleys was and is a common practice, especially while performing background music in a restaurant or hotel lobby. The playing of medleys is especially effective in combining several requests for patrons.

## MELODY

Melody, the succession of musical tones forming the horizontal nature of music, is probably the most recognizable aspect of music for listeners and should be the main focus of any musical arrangement. Jack approaches melody in a vocal-like style. He does not improvise around the melody like a jazz player might, rather he plays the actual melody. His specialty is a *rubato* flexible tempo, ballad style of playing. He prefers to deliver the song as a solo singer might, but orchestrated on the harp. His melodies are always in the top voice of the accompaniment, not buried in the middle. Jack plays the melody in the right hand and uses right hand fills during sustained melody notes and between phrases.

This is the way he heard tunes, and he had the technical ability to play in this fashion. This style is somewhat busier than most other harpists choose to perform. On the printed page, it is often difficult to separate the melody from the melodic fills in Jack's arrangements. But when listening, it is very clear to hear the melody separately from the fills. As a general approach, most pop arrangements involve the performance of the melody and (left hand) accompaniment only, not filled with as many right hand fills or moving inner lines. Usually, this is all that is needed. As players develop more technique, they play more involved arrangements. By starting simply, a player may develop a personal performance style that develops along with an advancing sense of harmony and technique.

Melodically speaking, Jack would most often play single note unison melodies. He is also very fond of melodic octave displacement, as the melody is played in one octave and intermittently jumps up an octave for a note or two and then returns to the original octave. This is especially obvious in "Tenderly." On occasion Jack will play the melody in octaves. This can be heard in "I Can't Get Started." Another of his melodic techniques is to harmonize the melody in thirds. The harmony note is a major or minor third below the melody based on the key or the accompanying chord. Although a harmony note of a major or minor sixth below the melody can

## Jack's own words, taken from some of his clinics.

"I'm not really a jazzman."

"I'm used to being a complete orchestra. When you do any style, whether ballad or jazz, use the whole harp. Don't limit yourself in range."

"Let the sound ring out."

"Start using your ears. Let your ears dictate the music, not the written page."

"I try to play the harp like a singer sings. A singer has to take a breath when singing. The music has to breathe, too."

"You don't have to fill in every bar."

"John Q. Public thinks glissandos are the greatest thing since sliced bread. To me they are hokey, but effective if you put them in the right spots."

"Play whatever you think sounds good."

"Add something of your own."  
[to your arrangement]

"Start developing a style of your own in playing pop harp."

**P**atricia John

*For the Harp*

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be a good harmonization choice, he rarely uses this interval for harmonization. Jack usually plays the melody in the third or fourth octave on the harp, rarely playing it in the higher octaves. An exception of this can be heard during the D.S. of "Summertime." For a melodic effect, Jack will sometimes use pedal slides for chromatic melodic lines instead plucking each note individually. Another special effect sometimes used is *près de la table* as was noted earlier in his recorded arrangement of "The Shadow of Your Smile." For some reason, this is not indicated on the published arrangement, but it is how he performed it.

## MELODIC FILLS

Any melodic playing in the right hand, other than the melody itself, comes under the heading of "melodic fills" and serves as a musical complement to the melody. Melodic fills, while not interfering or obscuring the melody itself, can provide musical interest when the melody is not active. A fill can echo the melody, usually in a different octave. For example, to create a melodic fill, the right and left hands can work together to play arpeggios that span several octaves. While there is no end to the possibilities of right hand fills, Jack often used ascending single note scales, rolled chords, and broad arpeggios as fill material.

## ACCOMPANIMENT

The accompaniment, or background, weaves the harmonic structure and a basic rhythmic pulse into a unified structure. It can establish the rhythmic pulse of metered music or the ebb and flow of free tempo, *rubato* playing. Consisting of a bass line or bass note progression, harmonic support to the melody and melodic fills, the accompaniment provides harmonic support to the right hand melody and fills. The accompaniment can create the overall mood for an arrangement. In "Summertime," an evocative minor atmosphere is created in the accompaniment preceding the melody and is used as background accompaniment when the melody is introduced. At times, through the use of arpeggios, the left hand and right hand are combined to form the accompaniment. This happens most often during sustained notes of the melody and at the end of phrases when the right hand is free of melodic playing. At the bottom of the accompaniment are the bass notes, most often the roots of the chords. The accompaniment can be very full, spanning multiple octaves, or can be orchestrated in a middle or high register, creating a lighter texture. There are infinite possibilities for orchestration of an arrangement. As Jack did, players should develop their own style of accompaniment based on their technical ability and their own musical taste.

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**Example 2**  
**EMILY** C6/9

The musical score for 'Emily' consists of two systems. The first system covers measures 39 to 42. Measure 39 has a treble clef with notes G4, A4, B4, C5 and a bass clef with notes C3, G2, C3, G2, with a chord symbol A4. Measure 40 has a treble clef with notes G4, A4, B4, C5 and a bass clef with notes C3, G2, C3, G2, with a chord symbol Ab. Measure 41 has a treble clef with notes G4, A4, B4, C5 and a bass clef with notes C3, G2, C3, G2, with a chord symbol A4. Measure 42 has a treble clef with notes G4, A4, B4, C5 and a bass clef with notes C3, G2, C3, G2, with a chord symbol Ab Db. The second system covers measure 43, which is a C Major 9 chord. The treble clef has notes G4, A4, B4, C5, D5, E5, F5, G5 with fingerings 2, 4, 1, 2, 1, 2, 3, 1. The bass clef has notes C3, G2, C3, G2, C3, G2, C3, G2 with fingerings 1, 2, 1, 2, 3, 1. A fingering diagram for the bass clef shows a sequence of notes C3, G2, C3, G2, C3, G2, C3, G2 with a bracket and the number 4, and a final note C3 with the number 1.

uses a Major 6/9 voicing. The notes of this chord are F, the root, A, the third, C, the fifth, D, the sixth, and G, the ninth. Jack voices the chord, from bottom to top, F, C, G, A, C, D, and G. In this example Jack resolves to F 6/9, the I chord or the tonic chord in the seventh bar, then plays a IV dominant chord, a B-flat 13th chord in the eighth bar and returns to the tonic chord in the next bar. Both the IV dominant as shown above or a V dominant chord would work well as an additional chord. They both want to resolve back to I or tonic.

[N.B. Another possible progression to use in this situation is the flat sixth chord. In F, you would play F-Major, then D-flat Major, then back to F. This works well because the tonic note in F, an F, becomes the third of the D-flat chord, then back to the I or tonic of the F chord.]

*Example #2* demonstrates another favorite ending of Jack's. Here, instead of using a IV chord or a V chord to extend the ending, he uses a flat II chord. In "Emily," which is in C-Major, Jack uses a D-flat altered dominant chord as the extension chord. For the voicing of the I chord in measure # 41, Jack uses a C 6/9 voicing in the following manner: starting from the bottom, C (root), G (fifth), C, E (third), A (sixth), D (ninth) and G (fifth). Looking at the notes of the next chord, we see, starting from the bottom and going up, the bottom

note is a D-flat, the root of the chord. Next is an A-flat, the fifth of the chord, followed by another D-flat. These three notes give a full rich foundation to the chord. Next from the bottom is an F, the third of the chord. C-flat or B-natural, the dominant seventh of the chord, follows. These notes completely define the dominant chord sound. Above these, he adds some color to the chord. Next is an E-natural, which is a raised or sharpened ninth. The next note, a G-natural, is the sharp eleventh. So the harmonic progression of the last four bars is C-Major 6/9, to D-flat dominant, back to C-Major 9.

The third example is an introduction to a standard, "The Shadow of Your Smile." This is an interesting song, harmonically speaking. The song is in the key of G-Major and ends on a tonic or G-Major chord in the seventh measure of the last phrase. But the first phrase of the song is in the relative minor key of E-minor, making it possible to think of it as a sad song (minor key) that ends optimistically (major key). Jack's introduction begins in G-Major. The first chord is an A-minor chord, or the II chord in the major key. The next chord is a D seventh or the V chord in G-Major. This is a typical II—V pattern in any key. In the third bar, he returns to the A-minor, then instead of playing the D seventh, the V chord of G-Major, he plays a B



Example 3

# The Shadow of Your Smile

(INTRO)  
Freely

The musical score for the introduction of "The Shadow of Your Smile" is written in 3/4 time and E minor. It consists of two systems of music. The first system has four measures. The first measure contains a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a bass line. Chords are indicated as Am7, D7, Am7, and B7 +5. The second system has four measures. The first measure has a treble clef with a melodic line and a bass clef with a bass line. Chords are indicated as A F#m7, B7 b9 +5, and Em. Performance markings include 'rit.', 'R.H.', and 'L.H.'.

seventh, the V chord of the relative minor key of E-minor. This then establishes the sound of the minor key in the first part of the song. It should be mentioned that the first four bars of the song itself is a II-V progression in E-minor. So in his introduction of just five and a half measures, Jack has already implied the mixed major/minor harmonic flavor of this song.

Example #4, Jack's arrangement of "Emily," in C-Major and with the song form ABAC, shows how Jack used pedal slides in different ways. The first example shows beat four in the very first measure of the introduction. The chord is an A dominant seven with a flat ninth (B-flat). He slides between F-sharp and F-natural, a 13th to a flat 13th slide. He uses the same slide in measures #30 and #32. In measure #32, he slides from the natural 13th, down to the flatted 13th, then back up to the natural 13th. In measure #16, he slides from the flatted ninth to a natural ninth on the D dominant 13th chord. This happens again in measure #22 on a G 13th chord. Although Jack did not use it in this arrangement, pedal slides would work going from a natural fifth, to the flatted fifth, and back again. Another possible pedal slide to use with a minor chord is natural five, up to sharp five, then up to the sixth. This could also be done in reverse order. Pedal slides

can add some interesting inner movement to an accompaniment, but they should be used sparingly so as not to dilute their freshness.

This then is a glimpse into the musical world of Jack Nebergall. We have looked at his overall approach to form and arranging, his reverence for learning the original chords and harmonic structure to each song, his vocal-like melodic approach, his musical choices guided by his ear and heart, his sparing use of special harp techniques and effects, his flowing introductions and endings. Jack did not consider himself a jazz performer. He did not re-harmonize a tune the way most jazz pianists do, but played the song with a version of the chords he heard when learning the tunes, often from the original recordings. Generally speaking, they were the original chords, or the original chords with some inner alterations such as flatted 9th's, or flatted or raised fifth's.

If Jack were writing this article, he would encourage you not to copy his style of playing, but to develop your own musical voice and approach to playing pop music on the harp. Jack's arrangements should be learned but should not be played literally note-for-note in actual performance. Without question, Jack had his own approach to combining melody, fills, harp effects,



Example 4  
for Eleanor Fell

EMILY

JOHNNY MANDEL and JOHNNY MERCER  
arranged by JACK NEBERGALL  
transcribed by TONY KAYE

(INTRO)  
Very Freely

(A7b9)  
13-b13

(A)

(B)

(D13)  
b9-b9

and accompaniment. But certainly he followed certain basic steps, which are universal to all who seek to create individual versions of the standards.

The first four steps in the arranging process are quite simple. First, learn the song by ear. If you don't already know the lyrics and the melody of the song, find several recordings and learn the song. You should not perform music you do not know. Second, learn the form of the song. Most sections of a song are in eight bar phrases. The first section is the A section. The section that is a departure from the A section, both melod-

ically and harmonically, is the bridge or B section. One of the most common song forms is AABA. The A section is played, then repeated, followed by the B section, then the A section is played again. The second most common song form is ABAB. This has the overall feel of a two part song form. First is the A section followed by the B section as an answer or reply to the first section. Then the song starts over with the A section again. This is then followed by another B section that sounds more conclusive than the original B section, thus ending the song. Sometimes the second B section



Example 4 (continued)

The musical score is divided into three systems. The first system (measures 19-22) features a circled 'A2' above measure 19. Chords are E4, A4, and G13. The second system (measures 27-30) features a circled 'C' above measure 27. Chords are D4, C#, and F4. The third system (measures 31-34) features a circled 'G9' above measure 32. Chords are C4, Eb4, Bb, and B4. The score includes treble and bass staves with handwritten annotations for left and right hands and fingering.

is altogether new material, creating an ABAC song form.

The third step is to learn the melody on the harp. Play the melody and sing it at the same time. Use your ear to decide how the melody should be played. Don't just play the melody out of a book. Interpret it, as a singer would interpret it. And finally, become familiar with the harmony of the song. What key is the song in? Is it in major or minor? Where are the tonic chords? Does the song start on a tonic chord? Is the bridge in a different tonal area? Try to identify each chord in relation to the key. Look for I chords, V chords, IV chords, III and VI chords. Are there chords that are not in the key? Is there chromatic movement

from one chord to another? Are there any chords that are immediately identifiable with this song that might set this song apart from other songs? You can analyze a song with either traditional classical theory or a jazz theory approach. They differ only in terminology. They are looking for chord function, tonal areas, and the movement and direction of chords.

After following these preliminary steps, it is time to go to work on the actual harp arrangement. The first consideration is the so-called big picture. Decide on the road map or form of your arrangement and its overall style and tempo. Will it be *rubato ad lib*, or in tempo, or will it be a combination of both? Will you use an introduction or start with the tune? How many



times will you repeat the song form? How long should the arrangement be? How do you want to end?

Next to be considered is the head or melody. Since you have already learned the melody, write it down. Now work out a melodic bass line in the left hand. Connect the roots of each chord in a melodic fashion forming a secondary melody. Next add a left-hand accompaniment that will fit with your melody and left-hand bass. Now you can decide if you want any right-hand melodic fills. These lines should complement or imitate the melody. Please have the musical good taste to avoid using those flowing harp glissandos all the time. Think of them as a wonderful spice. Used at the right moment they will have a very pleasing effect. Use them too much and you will spoil the overall flavor of the piece.

In addition, orchestration, the art of arranging music to obtain contrast of color within the overall form of the arrangement, should be a consideration. An orchestration can be thick and full, or thin and transparent. It can encompass the entire range of the instrument or stay within an octave. A melody can be played in simple unison, in octaves, or with varying degrees of harmonic density.

Once the main body of the arrangement is worked out, it is time to think about the introduction and the ending. Decide on the ending first as the ending will leave a stronger impression on the listener. Perhaps some of it can be used as an introduction. Using similar material for the introduction and ending, often called "bookends," will give a good sense of commencement and completion to the ear. There are several techniques that are commonly used by pianists, guitarists, and arrangers for introductions. You can use the last section or last phrase of the song as an introduction. This can be the last two, four, or eight bars of the song. In using this approach, you should use a different arrangement for the introduction so that it does not sound just like the beginning of the actual song. You could play the introduction in a higher octave or with a much thinner accompaniment. You could just play the melody in unison or in octaves without any accompaniment. There is also an effective writing technique for composing original material for introductions and endings. Extract a fragment or portion of the melody. Try the first three or four notes of the song or the notes of a distinctive melodic phrase from anywhere in the song. You can keep these notes in the same key, transpose them, elongate them, shorten


them, anything you want. You could play these notes in unison, in octaves, in thirds, or in full harmony. It also sounds very good to repeat these melodies or melodic cells in a series of ascending or descending phrases. Don't be afraid to experiment. This is how you can invent your own original introductions and endings. The final step is to add your own personal approach to your arrangement. Choose the techniques and effects that you are comfortable with and remember not to over use any one effect.

Jack Nebergall's playing was as individual as he was and specific to his own technique and approach to playing. It was, like him, courageous and outgoing and unafraid. He could hear what he wanted to play before he played it, and he had the technical ability to execute what he heard. It was this individualistic approach that made his sound easily identifiable and loved by many. Jack Nebergall played what he heard and played it from his heart. It is what we as musicians should all aspire to achieve.

*Author's note: A collection of Jack's arrangements entitled Remembering Jack Nebergall is available from the Vanderbilt Music Company. Royalty proceeds from the sale of the collection go to the Nebergall Award of the American Harp Society Foundation. I would like to thank Vanderbilt Music for granting permission to use excerpts from Jack's book in this article.*

About the author:

*Glenn Griffith; B.M., M.M., trombonist, composer, arranger, holds degrees from Capital University in his hometown of Columbus, Ohio, and North Texas State University. He has performed in the bands of Clark Terry, Erskine Hawkins, Ray Anthony and Lionel Hampton.*

*While working on cruise ships, Glenn has circumnavigated the globe three times, and performed traditional New Orleans jazz up and down the Mississippi River aboard the Mississippi Queen and American Queen paddlewheel steamboats. Glenn now performs and teaches in Eugene, Oregon, where he lives with his harpist wife, Martha Maxwell Griffith, and their new son, Miles, born December 31, 2003. *

