

Life of a Song Music**How 'Cry Me a River' became Julie London's signature tune**

The classic torch song was inexplicably dropped from a film soundtrack before the singer picked it up



Julie London in the recording studio in 1957 © Leonard Mccombe/The LIFE Picture Collection/Getty Images

The 1953 US musical/crime movie *Pete Kelly's Blues* starred Jack Webb, Janet Leigh and Ella Fitzgerald, and was largely unremarkable except for featuring early-career performances from Lee Marvin and Jayne Mansfield. However, it inadvertently spawned one of the greatest torch songs in the musical canon.

Hollywood songwriter Arthur Hamilton was asked to write three songs for the film's soundtrack. He came up with "Cry Me a River", a lovelorn yet defiant jazzy ballad intended for Fitzgerald. "I had never heard of the phrase," Hamilton later said. "But it sounded like a good, smart retort to somebody who had broken your heart."

He initially feared that listeners might assume the song concerned a river in the Crimea. There was little danger of that. "Cry Me a River" was an exquisitely wracked, visceral moan, a vengeful cri de coeur for any soul emerging from a life-destroying romantic abandonment. "Come on and cry me a river," urged its pained protagonist, hell-bent on emotional reparation. "I cried a river over you."

It was a self-evident masterpiece, yet Fitzgerald's take on this peerless lachrymose lament was inexplicably dropped from the film's soundtrack. Hamilton offered it instead to jazz singer and US TV star Peggy King, but Columbia Records blocked her from singing it as they objected to the presence of the word "plebeian" in the song's lyric.

"Cry Me a River" was thus debuted by a former high school friend and classmate of Hamilton, a 29-year-old Californian singer and actress named Julie London. London was self-effacing about her own singing: "It's only a thimbleful of a voice," she was to tell *Life* magazine. "But it is a kind of over-smoked voice and it automatically sounds intimate."

Over-smoked thimbleful or not, London's sultry husk of a vocal, rich with hurt and dread, was perfect for "Cry Me a River". Released in December 1955, then sung by London in a cameo in the following year's Jayne Mansfield movie vehicle *The Girl Can't Help It*, it sold more than a million copies and was a US top 10 hit.

It became London's signature song. Although she released 29 albums of jazzy torch and swing songs, it was to be her only hit single. Its passionate depth and musical virtuosity have attracted countless artists over the decades like moths to a smoky flame.

Shirley Bassey gave it plenty of welly in 1959 with a stentorian version that sounded like a Bond theme in waiting. Ella Fitzgerald finally got to croon it two years later, and her tasteful, supper-club jazz take was nigh on immaculate.

As it became a standard, the track's reach and reputation grew. In 1963, it was track one, side one on Barbra Streisand's debut album and survived her shoulder-heaving dramatics and high camp. Joe Cocker, in contrast, scored a 1970 US top 20 hit by turning it into gravel-voiced bluesv boogie-woogie.

Sam Cooke, Dinah Washington, Elkie Brooks and Diana Krall's neatly faithful covers worked, and "Cry Me a River" was an obvious port of call for beehive-haired 1980s retro-soul star Mari Wilson. Aerosmith have also been known to unveil a surprisingly delicate live version.

In 1995, a cover by future *Coronation Street* actress Denise Welch was unexpectedly capable and even became a minor UK hit. But it is best to draw a discreet veil over Canadian singer Michael Bublé's overwrought, big-band desecration of 14 years later. Every nuance of the song was trashed: it was one of those things that you long to un-hear.

Ultimately, though, it is London's original piquant, perfect take on "Cry Me a River" that remains the peerless classic: a heartbreak torch standard that burns deep and hard and true through the ages. "Cry me a river/I cried a river over you", she sighed. It's impossible not to sigh with her.

We are interested to hear from our readers. What are the best — and worst — versions of 'Cry Me a River'? Let us know in the comments below.

[Copyright](#) The Financial Times Limited 2019. All rights reserved.

