

A Boy Named Charlie Brown

You've a Great Soundtrack, Charlie Brown!

Although fans in the rest of the country—and the world—had to wait until later in the month or even well into 1970, *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* had its world premiere on December 4, 1969, at New York's Radio City Music Hall.

It was only the third animated feature film to play that Big Apple institution—following *Snow White* (1938) and *Bambi* (1942)—since the theater opened in 1932. And even before *Charlie Brown* debuted, it boasted the largest advance sale (\$350,000) of any picture in Radio City Music Hall history. It grossed more than \$60,000 on its first Saturday, a one-day record. Despite inclement weather, people waited patiently in line to see the first big-screen appearance of Charlie Brown, Snoopy and the rest of the Peanuts gang. Every few hours, 6,000 more parents and children queued up outside the “showplace of the nation.”

Director Lee Mendelson remembers attending the premiere.

“I flew into New York for the opening,” he said, laughing at the memory. “It was snowing, and when I got to the theater...nobody was waiting outside. I freaked out!”

Mendelson subsequently discovered that everybody was inside already; the theater was packed.

Charlie Brown may have pitched his way into infamy by losing 184 baseball games in a row—that game was played on April 16, 1963, for those who collect stats—but the Hollywood box office results proved it: Ol' Chuck was no loser.

Consider:

- Television's December 1969 repeat airing of *A Charlie Brown Christmas* attracted more than 50 million viewers—roughly 56% of the viewing audience—even though the holiday special had been shown four times before. (Any of today's networks would kill for that level of audience penetration.)

- Veteran film critic Vincent Canby, writing in

the December 5, 1969, *New York Times* and charmed by a G-rated animated feature that “manages to include references to St. Stephen, Thomas Eakins, Harpers Ferry, baseball, contemporary morality, conservation and kite flying,” praised the film as “a practically perfect screen equivalent to the quiet joys to be found in almost any of Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts* comic strips.”

- Despite the fact that it played on only the one screen, *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* was the No. 1 grossing film for the week ending December 17, with a take of \$290,000. (It was followed by *Paint Your Wagon*, at \$220,100; and *Easy Rider*, at \$176,500.) *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* sacrificed its top spot seven days later, only because James Bond blew into town, in *On Her Majesty's Secret Service*. (Given the intensity of the late-'60s spy craze in general, and Bondmania in particular, even Charles Schulz's beloved characters were no match for the not-so-secret agent whose martinis were shaken, not stirred.)

- After more than two years (having opened March 7, 1967), the Off-Broadway musical, *You're a Good Man, Charlie Brown*, still sold out the house. As of December 1969, just shy of two dozen versions of the play in the United States and abroad had grossed more than \$6 million and paid profits of \$750,000 on MGM Records' initial investment of \$15,000. (The play was preceded by one of the first-known “concept albums,” released in December 1966 on MGM's “King Leo” record label.)

- The publisher Holt, Rinehart & Winston, having already sold \$8 million worth of *Peanuts* books—at a time when paperbacks were only \$1 a pop—took a chance with a hefty price tag on its newest *Peanuts* title: the \$7.95 book adaptation of *A Boy Named Charlie Brown*. The first printing ran to an impressive 100,000 copies.

- Jazz musician Vince Guaraldi's first two *Peanuts* albums, *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* (not the film score; see below) and the soundtrack to *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, had been steady sellers since their mid-'60s release, and no-

body—not Guaraldi, not Mendelson, and certainly not the label, Fantasy Records—could have imagined that both albums still would be strong performers more than 50 years later.

In every respect, the big-screen *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* was but the most recent example of Peanuts power.

A Man Named Vince

Musically, the *Peanuts* gang is forever associated with the trio jazz work of San Francisco-based composer/pianist Vince Guaraldi. “Linus and Lucy” – the free-spirited dance cue that erupts during *A Charlie Brown Christmas*, while poor Charlie Brown attempts to direct the Christmas play – has become an iconic theme on par with Monty Norman's “James Bond Theme” or Henry Mancini's “Pink Panther Theme.” Everybody knows Guaraldi's 3-minute cut, and it remains ubiquitously popular today, whether as a sheet music single – every novice pianist wants to take a crack at it – or a Smart-phone ring tone ... not to mention its continued appearance on *Peanuts* half-hour animated show re-broadcasts and home video platforms.

Guaraldi started his musical studies at age 7, taking piano lessons from his mother; by the time he attended San Francisco State College, he was already playing professional gigs. His first serious booking came as an intermission pianist at the Black Hawk nightclub, filling in for the legendary Art Tatum. It could be said that Guaraldi “arrived,” however, when – as a member of the Cal Tjader Quintet – he helped bring the 1958 Monterey Jazz Festival to a standing-ovation conclusion. By then, Guaraldi had recorded his first albums for Fantasy Records, and he also remained busy as a member of Tjader's various ensembles.

Guaraldi became famous for his Grammy-winning instrumental single, “Cast Your Fate to the Wind,” which helped put Fantasy Records on the map in 1962. As longtime Guaraldi fans are well aware, Dr. Funk's subsequent recorded output was woefully slim by the usual standards of jazz artists: scarcely a dozen or so albums

under his own name, but every one a gem.

Notwithstanding the high regard with which Guaraldi's *Peanuts* music is held, perhaps his greatest honor came when he was hired by the Reverend Charles Gompertz to write a modern jazz setting for the choral Eucharist, which was performed with a 68-voice choir and recorded live on May 21, 1965.

Guaraldi's participation with *Peanuts* began when Mendelson—also based in San Francisco—heard “Cast Your Fate to the Wind” on the car radio while driving home from a meeting with Schulz. Mendelson contacted *San Francisco Chronicle* jazz critic Ralph Gleason, who put him in touch with Guaraldi; Mendelson made his pitch, and Guaraldi agreed to take a crack at composing some jazz themes for Charlie Brown and his friends.

Mendelson loves to recount what came next, and he repeats this anecdote every time he makes a personal appearance relating to *Peanuts*: He received a call from Guaraldi a few weeks later; the pianist wanted to play something he'd just written. Mendelson, not wanting his first experience to this new music to be marred by the poor audio qualities of a telephone, suggested coming over to Vince's studio ... but Guaraldi couldn't wait.

“I've got to play this for someone right now,” Guaraldi insisted, “or I'll explode!”

Unable to resist this display of enthusiasm, Mendelson listened carefully for the next few minutes, and was enchanted. He thus became the first person to hear “Linus and Lucy,” which – no surprise – he agreed was perfect for Schulz's characters. The jazz pianist did not wait long to find a home for that new song; his first assignment was a documentary Mendelson was making about Charles Schulz and his comic strip, which was to be titled *A Boy Named Charlie Brown*. Mendelson had placed *A Man Named Mays* on NBC-TV in 1963, and it seemed logical to follow a documentary about the world's greatest baseball player ... with one about the world's worst.

The program followed Schulz around during what viewers could imagine was an average day: driving his children to school; answer-

ing fan mail; and sketching his even-then-enormously popular characters on camera, while explaining bits about their personalities. Live-action segments were separated by a series of color stills from the newspaper strips, illustrating each character's various quirks; these were further supplemented by short animated sequences of the gang playing baseball, Lucy pulling away the football as Charlie Brown attempted to kick it, Charlie Brown trying to fly a kite, and Snoopy pretending to be a vulture. In total, the animated sequences only ran a few minutes—“all I could afford at the time,” Mendelson wrote in his book, *A Charlie Brown Christmas: The Making of a Tradition*.

Guaraldi turned his songs for this never-aired TV special into an album for Fantasy Records, which logically was called *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* (although a close examination of the original LP more accurately reveals the title to be *Jazz Impressions of A Boy Named Charlie Brown*).

The album became a runaway hit, remains popular to this day, and represents one of the very few times a soundtrack was issued for a program that people never saw.

Because, believe it or not, nobody wanted to purchase and air Mendelson's valentine to Schulz and his characters.

(A few years later, by an unfortunate coincidence, all concerned decided to give the first *Peanuts* big-screen feature the same title ... a decision that has vexed music archivists ever since.)

A Boy Named Charlie Brown — the documentary — went no further than a screening at the San Francisco Advertising Club, where it was received with considerable enthusiasm. In the wake of an April 1965 *Time* magazine cover story on Schulz and the *Peanuts* gang, Mendelson was called by John Allen at New York's McCann Erickson Agency, whose clients included Coca-Cola. The soft-drink maker was interested in sponsoring a Christmas special, and Allen remembered the bits of animation from having viewed *A Boy Named Charlie Brown*. Allen wondered if Mendelson and Schulz had ever considered an all-animated *Peanuts* special, and Mendelson—seizing the

day—said certainly. Although the script had to be plotted in mere days before being pitched to Coca-Cola, *A Charlie Brown Christmas* made its planned debut that very Christmas.

A Boy Named Charlie Brown was updated and finally broadcast in 1969 as *Charlie Brown and Charles Schulz*. Although this program included many new sequences, reflecting the explosive growth of *Peanuts*' popularity in the late 1960s, it retained some of the 1964 show's original animation, along with an informative sequence on the publishing “experiment” that became the best-selling gift book, *Happiness Is a Warm Puppy*.

And – needless to say – it retained Guaraldi's music.

Happiness Is Being on the Big Screen

By 1969, *Peanuts* mania was cresting – even college students often were seen in colorful Snoopy sweaters – and the big-screen *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* would feature the most talent-packed and expansive soundtrack ever created for the series. Guaraldi wrote most of the instrumental music, incorporating numerous *Peanuts* cues that already were quite familiar, thanks to their exposure on various animated television specials: “Charlie Brown and his All-Stars,” “Air Music,” “Blue Charlie Brown,” “Oh, Good Grief” and (of course!) “Linus and Lucy.” These compositions were performed by Guaraldi and his band, along with additional orchestral accompaniment, all conducted by John Scott Trotter.

Trotter supplied a few of his own instrumental compositions, notably “Cloud Dreams,” “The Red Baron Strikes Again,” “Catatonic Blues,” “Blue Puck” (the “second half” of the sequence that begins with Guaraldi's “Skating”) and “Bus-wheel Blues.” Trotter also wrote the music for the spelling song, “I Before E,” the lyrics for which were supplied by animators Bill Melendez and Al Shean.

“It wasn't that we thought Vince's jazz couldn't carry the movie,” Mendelson recalled, commenting on this mix of musicians, “but we wanted to supplement it with some ‘big screen music.’ We focused on Vince for the smaller, more intimate Charlie Brown scenes; for the larger moments, we turned to Trotter's richer,

full-score sound.”

Trotter came by this assignment quite honestly; beginning with the third *Peanuts* TV Special, *It's the Great Pumpkin, Charlie Brown*, he arranged, conducted or “supervised” (the actual credit varied) all of Guaraldi’s music for these shows through 1975’s *You’re a Good Sport, Charlie Brown*. No doubt this relationship would have continued, but Fate dealt twin cruel blows: Trotter died October 30, 1975, and Guaraldi completed only one more television score—1976’s *It’s Arbor Day, Charlie Brown*—before he, too, left us.

Trotter’s name-brand fame began when he replaced bandleader Jimmy Dorsey on radio’s *Kraft Music Hall* show, hosted by Bing Crosby. Trotter, who was born on June 14, 1908, in Charlotte, North Carolina, debuted as Crosby’s radio orchestra leader on July 8, 1937, and soon was arranging and conducting Crosby’s albums, as well. Trotter arranged and conducted for Crosby for 17 years, during which time some of the orchestra leader’s musicians—notably trombonist Jerry Colonna and drummer Spike Jones—broke away and enjoyed successful careers of their own.

Trotter left Crosby’s employ in May 1954—their final recording together was “In the Good Old Summertime”—only because Bing reluctantly ended his radio variety show. The culprit was television, and Trotter chose to embrace this enemy; he immediately became the music director for George Gobel’s variety show, a position he held until 1960.

Fate re-united Crosby and Trotter professionally one last time for television’s single-season *Bing Crosby Show*, which aired from September 1964 through June 1965. After that, Charlie Brown came calling.

“I’m not musically educated enough to really describe what he was in music terms,” Crosby once said, of Trotter. “I just knew he was very good and had marvelous taste.”

A Visit from Stanyan Street

Aside from its instrumental underscore, *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* obtained the participa-

tion of pop poet and songwriter Rod McKuen, who was hired to write and perform songs for the film. The exact number requested varied, depending on the press release, from four to six; Mc-Kuen eventually delivered three songs that were used in the film. He sings the title track, “A Boy Named Charlie Brown,” as a solo at the film’s beginning and end; his hauntingly melancholy, gravel-on-asphalt vocal gets the movie off to a perfect start. His other two songs, “Failure Face” and “Champion Charlie Brown,” are performed by the young actors who voiced the Peanuts gang, within the storyline’s context.

It’s easy to forget, half a century later, how much of a force McKuen was in the 1960s, and the size of the coup involved in securing his participation in the film. The Grammy Award-winning songwriter and poet had, as of 1969, recorded more than 40 albums of his own songs—selling more than 100 million records—and had seen more than 900 compositions performed by other artists. His books of poetry—*Lonesome Cities*, *Stanyan Street*, *Listen to the Warm* and *In Someone’s Shadow*—had sold a whopping two million copies (in hardcover, no less) in not quite three years.

While *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* was under development, McKuen’s own big-screen career was hitting a crescendo. He had composed the enormously popular scores for 1968’s *Joanna* and 1969’s *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, and he earned an Academy Award nomination for the title song (“Jean”) of the latter.

McKuen wasn’t just a national institution at the time, then; he was a veritable force of nature. He was much admired by Schulz and was even mentioned by name in a *Peanuts* strip (October 3, 1969). McKuen, Mendelson and Trotter also were comfortable colleagues, having collaborated with Henry Fonda on an NBC television production of John Steinbeck’s *Travels with Charlie*. Mendelson also produced an NBC television special that featured McKuen.

“It was a joy,” McKuen said. “It was like working with family.”

“I was the first one out of the chute,” he remembered, thinking back nearly four decades. (To put McKuen’s early involvement in perspective, *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* first was an-

nounced in a short article in the March 3, 1967, *Daily Variety*.)

“The animation was done to the music, so I had to write my songs beforehand. Once I had a script, I knew pretty much where I felt songs should go. Actually, they wanted more songs, but I think sometimes too much music can drag something down.”

Indeed, a short article in the October 13, 1969, *Hollywood Reporter* bears this out, noting that “Rod McKuen has completed the words and music to six songs for Cinema Center’s *A Boy Named Charlie Brown*.”

McKuen appreciated Mendelson’s decision to follow the pattern of the primarily instrumental jazz scores he had established with the early Charlie Brown TV specials, which had eschewed the then-prevalent Disney model of cramming as many songs as possible into an animated project. “I just don’t like wall-to-wall music,” McKuen admitted. “Also, the whole jazz feel that Vince brought to it really was a character as much as Lucy or Linus.”

McKuen, who has cited Henry Mancini and Ennio Morricone as his soundtrack influences, also appreciated this chance to work with Guaraldi.

“I was a great fan of Vince’s, had been a fan even before ‘Cast Your Fate to the Wind.’ I’d followed all his work with Cal Tjader; I’d known Cal back in the days when I used to read poetry as a beatnik in San Francisco. Vince was an absolute joy to work with, because he was so knowledgeable.”

Instrumental versions of McKuen’s three songs also punctuate the on-screen action. “Vince would call and consult me about his variations on the songs for the background score,” McKuen said, “and I thought that was really generous. He didn’t have to do that; he didn’t have to use them as source material at all. But he felt that elaborating on the songs was part of his job.”

While two of the unused songs have been lost to the mists of time, McKuen remembers the fate of the remaining tune—“Something for Snoopy”—that was left behind.

“I never felt good about the lyric,” McKuen said.

“There are some strains of the music in the film, but not the vocal. It was, after all, a movie about Charlie Brown, and I didn’t want anything to detract from that.”

“Something for Snoopy” has not disappeared. McKuen released his own version of that track — along with his other compositions from *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* — on a soundtrack LP that also includes selections of his film music from *The Prime of Miss Jean Brodie*, *Me Natalie* and *Joanna*. The Stanyan Records album, released in 1970, includes two different vocal versions of “Champion Charlie Brown,” a different vocal interpretation of “A Boy Named Charlie Brown,” and instrumental versions of both “Failure Face” and “Something for Snoopy.”

Decades passed before the album was digitized, but it finally was released on CD in 2015, not long after the famed poet/composer died. A 1971 Pointer Publications music book, released in tandem with the film, features easy-piano arrangements of 13 selections from the movie, including all four of McKuen’s songs, Trotter’s “Bus Wheel Blues,” “I Before E,” Guaraldi’s “Lucifer’s Lady” (not available in any other Guaraldi music book), and even the Theme from the Third Movement of Beethoven’s Sonata in C minor, Opus 13, as arranged and adapted by Guaraldi.

Although McKuen was lucky enough to get the occasional hit while writing for a film—“Jean” being the best example—he never set out to compose a song score with that thought in mind.

“It’s nice when a song stands alone, away from the film ... but if it stands apart too much, you haven’t done your job. It’s more important that it become a part of the film. Your songs shouldn’t draw attention to themselves.”

McKuen continued to perform the title song to *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* when he appeared in concert.

“It’s funny, because I thought ‘Champion Charlie Brown’ would be the popular song, but people seem to really prefer the melancholy of ‘A Boy Named Charlie Brown.’ I do it every concert; it’s one of the songs I have to do. If I don’t, the fans scream.”

And the Oscar goes to...

Even though *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* debuted in 1969, the film received a single Academy Award nomination the following year (1970), in the category of Original Song Score. (The Academy’s two or three music categories have changed names repeatedly over the years.)

“We got a call from the Academy,” Mendelson remembered, with a laugh, “and they said, We have good news...and we have bad news. The good news is, your score has been nominated for an Oscar.

“The bad news is, you’re up against The Beatles and *Let It Be*.”

At a nominees luncheon, Mendelson found himself seated at the same table with Paul and Linda McCartney.

“I wanted to talk about The Beatles,” Mendelson said, “but they only wanted to talk about Charlie Brown!”

Mendelson, Guaraldi, McKuen and the rest of the gang all attended the show (“If you’re a nominee,” McKuen said, “you go!”), but—unlike many of the others in the nervous audience—they had absolutely no anxieties.

“We were totally relaxed,” Mendelson said, with a shrug, “because we knew The Beatles would win.”

Which they did.

“What’re you going to do? The Beatles had never been nominated before,” McKuen echoed. “I didn’t mind losing to them at all. Nobody likes to lose, but it blunts it a lot when you lose to professionals, and it’s their turn.”

If Charlie Brown had to be beaten, there’s no shame in coming second to The Beatles.

Security Is a Thumb and an LP

The soundtrack to *A Boy Named Charlie Brown* was issued on LP at the time of the film’s release by Columbia Records (OS 3500), then the music arm of CBS. The LP was not a music album, though, but a “story of...” concept album that featured the film’s dialogue over virtually every selection of music—some of it even recorded specially for the album, as the film itself proceeds for long stretches without dialogue. This storybook concept had some value before home video, when there was no other way to “take home” a movie; these days, however, such a presentation serves no function.

For the most part, the OST LP employed the film’s existing music cues, sometimes in the same places, sometimes re-tracked behind newly recorded narrative “bridges” that described primarily visual action. New versions of a few cues were recorded specifically for the LP, and were not heard in the film; you’ll find them on this CD as Tracks 30 and 31.

To the delight of *Peanuts* and Guaraldi fans everywhere, this premiere CD has been produced from the original music-only session masters (on 1/2” four-track tape) before the narration was overlaid (save for a bonus track). The result is a beautifully restored score for *A Boy Named Charlie Brown*: a long-awaited treasure from the peak of Guaraldi’s all-too-brief recording career.

Derrick Bang, February 2017

Author of

Vince Guaraldi at the Piano

Rod McKuen was interviewed on February 15, 2005

Lee Mendelson was interviewed on February 26, 2005.