

What it Means to Truly Love
On Carrie Jacobs-Bond's 1901 song "I Love You Truly"
by Nicholas Booker



Carrie Jacobs Bond with John Philip Sousa and
Mr. and Mrs. Herbert L. Clarke

One of the most iconic moments in Frank Capra's 1946 film *It's a Wonderful Life* is the scene in which a disheartened George (played by James Stewart) is led to an old fixer-upper house where his new wife Mary (played by Donna Reed) is waiting with a charming version of the honeymoon they almost didn't have. "Welcome home, Mr. Bailey," she says. He starts to ask how she did it but doesn't finish the sentence. They kiss. The record on the phonograph ends, but they don't notice because outside the window, their loyal friends Bert and Ernie (played by Ward Bond and Frank Faylen) [begin to sing a love song](#). To modern ears, the song may be unfamiliar, but in 1946, most viewers would likely have known it well. An enormously popular crooner ballad and dance tune in the 1930s and later, the song was actually published in 1901 by a largely unknown songwriter from Wisconsin who borrowed the money to fund her first major songbook from her friend, contralto Jessie Bartlett Davis. The songwriter was Carrie Jacobs-Bond, and even she may never have dreamt that her songs from [Seven Songs as Unpretentious as the Wild Rose \(1901\)](#) would reach the incredible levels of national popularity that they did.



Figure 1: Carrie Jacobs Bond in 1913

[Re-published on its own in 1906](#), “I Love You Truly” from the 1901 book went on to sell over a million copies. Fred Wasser of [NPR’s Weekend Edition Sunday](#) says, “If you went to a wedding this summer, odds are good that you heard ‘Have I Told You Lately’ or ‘Ain’t No Mountain High Enough.’ A hundred years ago, you would have heard ‘I Love You Truly,’ written by Carrie Jacobs-Bond.” Jacobs-Bond sang the song for Presidents Roosevelt, Harding, and Coolidge, and Metropolitan Opera diva Helen Traubel recorded [a widely distributed version](#) of it in 1946 for Columbia Masterworks. Hers was certainly not the only recording, however, as the song has been recorded by many other musicians including:

- [Elsie Baker \(1912\)](#)
- [Irene Pavloska \(1920\)](#)
- [Sophie Braslau \(1917 and 1928\)](#)

- [Dorothy Maynor \(1944\)](#)
- [Bing Crosby \(1934 and 1945\)](#)
- [Perry Como \(1948\)](#)
- [The Ink Spots](#)
- [Pat Boone \(2006\)](#)
- [Jolie Goodnight \(2013\)](#)

Though these recordings span multiple decades and several genres, many are remarkably true to Jacobs-Bond's original version from *Seven Songs as Unpretentious as the Wild Rose* in 1901. Something about this song has made it meaningful for many. Indeed, the actor, radio host, musician, and supporter of early American popular music Max Morath liked the song so much that he titled his 2008 book on Jacobs-Bond *I Love You Truly: A Biographical Novel Based on the Life of Carrie Jacobs-Bond*.

“Harder every time I say ‘good-by’ to you”

The song was written shortly after the sudden and surprising death of Jacobs-Bond's husband, Dr. Frank Bond. Jacobs-Bond describes the death of her husband this way: “The evening of his accident, as he was leaving the house to make a professional call, he turned from the door, and smilingly said, ‘Harder every time I say ‘good-by’ to you. But that’s the way it should be, and always will be. We know love is the greatest thing in the world because we’re lovers.’ These words were burned into my heart to live forever, for a few minutes later I heard from his dying lips, ‘My darling, this is death. But, oh, I want to live.’” Clearly, Jacobs-Bond felt the loss of her husband deeply, and it seems likely that she reviewed the events surrounding his death many times in her mind. Her description of the event may not be entirely factual, however.

PBS Wisconsin points out that Frank Bond did not die until 5 days after his accident. Nonetheless, Carrie Jacobs-Bond's vivid account demonstrates the sort of dramatic and romantic view of the world that evoked deeply affecting and emotional responses not only for her but for the many people who engaged with her music as well.

For Jacobs-Bond, her late husband was an important inspiration for her songwriting. In her autobiography *The Roads to Melody*, she says that she began to write songs again after his death "in the first place because I knew it would please him." Additionally, even though it was dedicated to Avery Bancroft Harris in *Seven Songs as Unpretentious as the Wild Rose*, Max Morath suggests that "I Love You Truly" may have been "truly written for Frank." This seems reasonable since Jacobs-Bond had already dedicated the song that she thought of as the better composition, "Shadows," to Frank. For Jacobs-Bond's supporters and listeners, "I Love You Truly" was perhaps just as inspiring, however. American music historian, writer, and composer Charles Hamm described the song as a "high class ballad" similar to some of the work of Irving Berlin. Early performances by Pavloska, Baker, and Braslau employ an art music (perhaps "high class") approach to the song marked by an operatic vocal style, a precise but expressive approach to pitch, sonorous tone, and clear pronunciation.

Jacobs-Bond herself described being exposed to European and American art music through playing Franz Liszt's music, hearing pianists like Madame Julia Reeve King, and attending operas such as Gioachino Rossini's *Semiramide* during her childhood. Yet, "I Love You Truly" contrasts sharply with Liszt's music and that of many other European and American art music composers in the standard canon of the long 19th century in the important area of complexity and challenge for performers. In

Notable American Women 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary, William

Lichtenwanger calls Jacobs-Bond an “author and composer of artlessly sentimental songs.” This rather cold view of Jacobs-Bond places her in opposition to art music composers, and it was shared by other critics of her work. Jacobs-Bond describes being emotionally hurt by a newspaper reporter writing, “Carrie Jacobs-Bond is a plain, angular woman, writes plain, angular songs and sets them to plain, angular music.” In contrast, the *Milwaukee Journal* praised her radio performances because of some of the very same qualities, calling them “simple, spontaneous and unaffected” in the context of a very positive review of her work. Though these viewpoints demonstrate that the uncomplicated aspects of Jacobs-Bond’s music were a point of disagreement between her fans and her critics, Jacobs-Bond herself clearly embraced these qualities. She wrote in *The Roads of Melody* that “sometimes songs (simple songs) like pins keep folks together.”



Figure 2: Carrie Jacobs-Bond’s 1916 Home in La Mesa, California known as “Nest O’ Rest”

“Unpretentious as the Wild Rose”

Jacobs-Bond’s philosophy of “keeping folks together” with her songs could be seen as guiding much of her work. A key word in the title of her 1901 song book is the word “unpretentious,” and her performances were reportedly consistent with her ideas on music that had this quality. Jacobs-Bond’s performances of her music contrasted in certain respects with more art music oriented performances by other singers. In *Notable American Women 1607–1950: A Biographical Dictionary*, James Edward and Janet Wilson James say that Jacobs-Bond “had no training or pretensions as a singer, but rather declaimed her songs in a deep voice with an expressive style that was more recitation than singing.” The *Milwaukee Journal* describes her performances on the radio as “half recitation, half singing” and says that “at times she pauses to interpolate a curious little laugh, or is it a cry? It comes before such lines as ‘Wondering when you’ll come again...’ and ‘Life with its sorrow, life with its cheer...’” The latter line is taken from “I Love You Truly,” and this performance style of speaking and singing demonstrates a connection between Jacobs-Bond’s music and other music by female composers in the late 19th and early 20th centuries.

Marian Wilson Kimber, a musicologist and Professor of Music at the University of Iowa, works to understand the music of female composers involved in elocution, a type of performance involving music (usually piano) and spoken word. In [a 2020 interview](#) on the podcast *Sound Expertise*, Wilson Kimber said, “I feel like I fell into an alternative universe when I started to work on elocution... the alternative universe I have fallen into is more female, less urban, you know, less about New York and Boston and these cultural centers... though it is more about Chicago which was where a lot of the

chautauqua acts came out from... So, it's more about really what went on regularly all over America in *not* New York and Boston." She says that people were really very "pro classical music" in the late 19th and early 20th centuries but that "what they think high art is is not necessarily what we think high art is." She goes on to say that "there's a body of repertoire that was the sort of standard repertoire for America that we would now call 'middle-brow...' There's a huge song repertoire by women and by Americans and other people that seems to me to have been pretty standard in the early 20th century that we now have no knowledge of... I feel like because we're (many music scholars are) dealing with a few men in New York and Boston, that really limits our view of what the whole world is." Wilson Kimber's comments here and her work with elocutionists are very applicable to Jacobs-Bond's radio performances which were "half recitation, half singing" as *The Milwaukee Journal* says. They involved spoken word to some extent like the work of elocutionists, and they may also have served similar purposes. In her book, Wilson Kimber quotes elocutionist Frieda Peycke as describing the aesthetic goals of musical recitation as "sincerity, naturalness, and life."

"Musical readings," Peycke said, "make a dramatic, romantic, and humorous appeal to the imaginations of all." If this was true for Frieda Peycke, it was also true for Carrie Jacobs-Bond. She described receiving hundreds of letters after performing on the radio including one from a grateful gentleman who told her, "the only comfort I have ever had is the radio." The appeal of these radio broadcasts certainly seems to have been widespread, and Jacobs-Bond also describes some imaginative listeners. In describing listeners guessing at the inspiration for her song "The End of a Perfect Day," Jacobs-Bond says in *The Roads to Melody*, "Of course, because you write songs that

are tender and sometimes songs of love, it does not follow, as so many people think it does, that every one of these songs is the result of a personal experience. People with imagination can have a lot of fun just thinking about things.”

“Home Songs and Songs that Touch the Heart”

The widespread popularity of “I Love You Truly” would undoubtedly have relied initially on the sale of the sheet music for performance by amateur musicians at home or in social settings. Jacobs-Bond’s consideration for the amateur performer is evident from the highly limited range of the vocal part, only a minor seventh. Additionally, the piano part is remarkably easy to play since it only ever employs one note at a time in small intervals in the left hand and primarily uses block chords played no faster than the eighth note (and at a relaxed *Andante con amore* tempo at that) in the right.

Jacobs-Bond valued the opportunity to write songs for the home. She said, “I felt glad to be a writer of home songs and songs that touch the heart, rather than a great musician, after all.” In certain respects, it is specifically because of the approachable, homey qualities of the music that it has been so meaningful to so many listeners, performers, and critics.



Figure 3: Carrie Jacobs-Bond, c. 1917

As is shown in the musical example below, this song is in AABC form, and the final phrase is the only one in which the singer ends on the home note (or “tonic note,” the A ♭ half note highlighted in the score below in blue). Prior to this, there has been a sense of something unfinished in the music as the piano part moves in eighth notes through the last held notes of the singer’s phrases in the two A sections and the B section. Additionally, the A and B sections may be thought of as calls, and the C section may be thought of as a response. In some sense, this may be a source of allegorical meaning. For the first three phrases of the song (A, A, and B), the singer calls out with no answer. In other words, the singing lover’s phrases finish with little in the way of a sense of musical rest or finality despite the declarative text. Finally there is a definitive, restful cadence in the final four measures of the song emphasized by a dramatic *rallentando* (marked “rall.” in the score, meaning “slowing”). At this point, the song seems to release its tension into a long awaited answer on behalf of the responding lover. This cadence is marked with a blue arrow in the musical example below, and the *rallentando* is circled. In a sense, the song embodies the nervous hope of a lover waiting for a response to a statement of love and adoration.

A ————— A —————

Andante con amore

p

I love you tru - ly tru - ly dear Life with its sor - row life with its
 Ah love, 'tis some-thing to feel your kind hand, Ah yes, 'tis some-thing by your side to

8 B ————— C —————

tear, Fades in - to dream when I feel you are near, For I love you tru-ly tru-ly dear.
 stand; Gone is the sor - row, Gone doubt and fear, For you love me tru-ly, tru-ly dear.

rall.

Figure 4: Vocal Part to “I Love You Truly” by Carrie Jacobs-Bond (1901)

The lyrics contribute substantially to this idea of calls and responses in the second verse of the song. As the lyrical narrative develops there, the listener is given little in the way of repeated words or phrases that might cause a sense of familiarity or comfort until the final subtle development of the song title, “For you love me truly, truly, dear.” It is the lyrical form of a response to the calls of “I love you truly” from the first statement of the AABC form in the first verse. It is not difficult to imagine that in the many homes which contained a copy of “I Love You Truly” in the first half of the 20th century, there would have been many lovers performing the song together or for one another. Considering Tia DeNora’s work on the meaning of music as co-created by the listener as well as the composer and performer in her book *Music in Everyday Life*, these lovers would have been experiencing the very subject of the lyrics even as they sang them, a process of novel co-creation engaged with the music.

In that sense, “I Love You Truly” is meaningful partly because it is, as Jacobs-Bond would say, “unpretentious.” While this meaning might seem subtle to us as we think about it 121 years after the song was first published, this “unpretentious” quality was likely incredibly impactful for non-professional musicians in the early 20th century. It was accessible to these musicians emotionally and in terms of the technical skill required to perform it, and if it were not, the song would not have been used in these exchanges between lovers nearly as much. It could not have been interwoven as often into parallel experiences to the love the song describes. Returning to that romantic honeymoon scene from *It’s A Wonderful Life*, one thinks of [Roger Ebert’s review of the film](#) in which he says it is “heart warming,” and that “even the corniest scenes in the

movie... work because they are so disarmingly simple. A more sophisticated approach might have seemed labored.” This description parallels ideas about the appeal of Carrie Jacobs-Bond’s song “I Love You Truly.” It is not challenging, complicated, or pretentious, and Jacobs-Bond suggests that it was never intended to be. At least some of its substantial potential for meaning comes from the idea that it “is a resource – it provides affordances – for world building” as DeNora suggests of music in general. While there may be those in the musicological community who would overlook this sort of music because of its “simple” character, it is specifically that quality which contributes perhaps most substantially to the meaning of this music. Were this not easy to play or were it not so readily available to non-professional performers, it would not have provided the “affordances for world building” that it has throughout its history. Were it not performed by lovers and for lovers like George and Mary Bailey in that famous scene from *It’s a Wonderful Life*, it quite simply would not mean as much as it does.



[Click here to watch "Janesville: I Love You Truly" from PBS Wisconsin about Jacobs-Bond's life in Wisconsin and Michigan and her contribution to American music](#)

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