This episode of *One Track Mind -- Jazz for the Present Tense* is devoted to one of the most enduring tunes in the jazz repertoire -- "Lullaby of Birdland." It was composed by the British -born pianist George Shearing in 1952 at the request of Morris Levy, one of the owners of the jazz club Birdland. Founded in 1949, Birdland was named after saxophonist Charlie Parker (nicknamed "Bird"), who was seen as the figurehead of the modern style, a.k.a., "bebop." *At the end of this introduction, you'll be listening to two Shearing tracks, recorded 40 years apart.*

Shearing (1919 - 2011), the youngest of nine children, grew up in a poor family and was blind from birth. His exceptional talent was evident at an early age and he studied classical piano. In his teens, he was offered a scholarship to music school. But when he was 16, after hearing a recording of Teddy Wilson and other swing-era pianists, he committed himself to playing jazz. Rejecting the idea of attending school to study the classics, he chose to play in local pubs and was soon hired by traveling bands. Shearing moved to the US in 1947, where a quintet he formed, which you'll hear presently, soon brought him a substantial audience. Shearing's urbanity and sense of humor made him a popular guest on TV variety shows. He was asked by one late-night host if he had been blind all his life. Shearing quickly replied, "not yet."

When I interviewed him in 1981, Shearing told me that he wrote "Lullaby of Birdland." while having a steak dinner at his dining room table. The song uses the chord changes (i.e.,the harmonic progression) to a popular song from the 1920s, "Love Me or Leave Me." If you know the pop song and listen carefully to Lullaby of Birdland, you can hear the similarity in the harmony. Using the harmony from existing popular songs to create new melodies was a common practice in jazz from the 1930s through about 1950; these compositions were called contrafacts,. (see https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_jazz_contrafacts)

"Birdland" is a typical 32-measure composition like most popular songs of its day. It has the form A A B A, where each letter stands for a theme. The B section -- often called the "bridge" -- is the only one different from the other 8-measure themes (A). Listen for these themes, or musical statements, and it will help you understand the improvisation on them.

Link 1: George Shearing Quintet (1952)
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JvedkNU9TkI

Link 1 above is to a 1952 recording of the George Shearing Quintet, which used the somewhat unusual combination of vibraphone, and guitar along with piano, bass, and drums. This was the group that made Shearing's reputation in the U.S.; the quintet's mellow tone, classical influences, and lyrical style was an extension of Shearing's style on piano. The rhythm section and melodic articulation on this recording seems a bit dated (to me) but the solos swing in a more relaxed way. Best solo kudos go, in my opinion, to Margorie Hyams on vibraphone.. Shearing solos on one complete chorus (once through the tune's themes -- AABA). On the B theme and the third A theme of his solo, Shearing plays in the "block chord" style he popularized- in which the left hand doubles the melody of the right hand, again emphasizing lyricism. Shearing adds harmony

between the two melody notes. He told me that the whole effect was intended to emulate the sound of the Glenn Miller reed section on the keyboard.

This track is also on Spotify, which has a dozen or so Shearing recordings. If you use Spotify, I recommend listening to this band's recording of "East of the Sun (and West of the Moon)" and "I Didn't know What Time It Was," which are more enjoyable than "Birdland." But Shearing's composition has a special place in the jazz repertoire than deserves to be acknowledged.

Link 2: George Shearing Duo (1992) with Neal Swainson on bass.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7zJnoQiIqDU

Link 2 presents Shearing playing his "Lullaby of Birdland" in a 1992 concert, 40 years after the recording in Link 1. It's easy to hear the influence of modern jazz "feel" and harmony in this performance. Noteworthy here is the stunning double-timing of the bridge (the B theme) in his first solo chorus. In the second improvised chorus, you can hear the dense, rich chords played in blocks, which was a hallmark of Shearing's style. I find the 1992 version more relaxed and satisfying than the1952 version. Nevertheless, Shearing wrote a jazz classic recorded by many other musicians, especially singers. Versions by Sarah Vaughan and Nancy Wilson, with Shearing at the piano, are especially enjoyable and available on youtube as well as Spotify and iTunes.