

# Moon River

For Solo Piano

Henry Mancini  
(arr. Holden Mui)



*for Andrew*

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# Program Notes

Henry Mancini composed the song *Moon River* for the soundtrack of the movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. His lyricist Johnny Mercer drafted a few options for the tune, including the following:

*I'm Holly, like I want to be  
Like Holly on a tree back home  
Just plain Holly  
With no dolly  
No mama, no papa wherever I roam*

There's an almost tortured quality to the singer's continued insistence on the self. *I'm Holly, like I want to be. Just plain Holly. With no dolly, no mama, no papa.* Early on, the movie's female lead Holly Golightly, played by Audrey Hepburn, introduces us to a cat she lives with: "Poor old cat. [...] Poor slob without a name. The way I look at it, I don't have the right to give him one. We don't belong to each other." Later, in a farewell scene with her former husband Doc from whom she ran away, we learn she gave herself the name Holly: "Please understand. I love you, but I'm just not Lula Mae anymore." So the lyrics fit *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, and they fit Holly. Mancini thought so too.

Mercer wasn't satisfied, though, for which the world ought to be immensely grateful. The final version is as follows:

*Moon River, wider than a mile  
I'm crossing you in style someday  
Oh, dream maker  
You heart breaker  
Wherever you're going, I'm going your way*

*Two drifters off to see the world  
 There's such a lot of world to see  
 We're after the same rainbow's end  
 Waiting 'round the bend  
 My huckleberry friend, Moon River and me*

The word *capture* can mean both *describe* and *trap*. So Mercer's earlier draft captures Holly. It captures her obsession with names and autonomy and freedom; it captures her lack of family ties and her propensity to "roam." But Mercer's earlier draft also captures Holly, in that it freezes her in her present; it captures Holly, with its facts and concreteness and the way in which those limit the song.

Consider the following lyrics from the final version's first two phrases—*wider than a mile, someday, wherever you're going*. They evoke *possibility*. Whatever the moon river is, it might be as wide as the imagination stretches. The narrator might cross it decades from now. It could go anywhere. To describe Holly too well would be to trap Holly, such that the listener imagines "just" a woman, *just plain Holly*, instead of the freedom and possibility she craves. So to capture Holly, the song must not capture Holly. Mercer relinquishes the facts, *no mama, no papa*; relinquishes the spelling-out of her personality, *like I want to be*; relinquishes even her name. He gives us something surreal, something flighty, something aspirational, and in this way he captures her far better than anything grounded and concrete and true ever could.

Of course, that is why we have music—to capture what, by nature, cannot be captured otherwise.

Mancini thought that despite all the great vocalists who covered *Moon River*, Hepburn understood it best. In her rendition, listen for the rising intervals between *moon* and *river*; *I'm* and *crossing*; *dream* and *maker*; and so on. Imagine, as she lingers on *moon*, *I'm*, and *dream*, that she builds up energy, courage; that she wants to reach for something higher. Listen for how each effort results in a thin, wispy high note that slips back down afterward. What is aspirational is

somehow less material. (It is worth noting that the fullest, most concrete of those high notes occurs on *heart breaker*.) On *wherever you're going*, the melody moves more measuredly—an arpeggio rather than a single interval—yet still must recede. But on *after the same rainbow's end*, Hepburn takes a breath after that high note on *same*, the one she hits on *going*, then goes one higher. That *rainbow's end* is aspirational, lyrically and melodically.

Holden's arrangement does not feature the voice. But the piano is a vehicle for other dimensions of expression. His *Moon River* consists of three iterations of the melody—each with different harmonies, accompaniments, and characters, set in different registers. Between the second and third is an interlude. These iterations correspond to scenes from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*.

First, the melody appears in sparkling octaves over ostinato triplets. This section corresponds to the movie's opening. Holly Golightly exits a cab and walks by Tiffany's, a jewelry store she loves, which she later says feels like a place where “nothing very bad could happen to you.” So those octaves—simple, open, airy—have a childlike innocence to them. As the second verse begins, we move down a register, and the accompaniment increases in complexity: growing up, as it were.

After a key change comes the second iteration of the melody, which corresponds to the scene where the movie's male lead Paul Varjak watches Holly sing *Moon River* as she sits on her windowsill. So this iteration is like the human voice: lower, intimate, more free, in a single line rather than octaves. In the scene, the second verse is accompanied by the orchestra. Appropriate, given the lyrics—*two drifters, we're after*—and how they compare to the *I*'s and *you*'s of the first verse. As such, in Holden's arrangement, at *two drifters* the music becomes fuller, with thirds and octaves and inner voices.

Then comes a surreal interlude. A four-note motif emerges, initially alone. We hear it again, slightly higher. Then again, even higher, and it begins to interrupt itself. After a brief peak, the music winds down, until a moment of stillness.

All those *someday*'s, those *wherever*'s, those aspirations—they culminate in the final iteration of the melody, a brilliant orchestral transcription. In the corresponding scene of the movie, the closing, Paul tells Holly that her fear of being caged is itself a cage. “I’m in love with you,” he says, as she insists on fleeing to Brazil. “People *do* belong to each other, because that’s the only chance anybody’s got for real happiness.” Gone are the innocence of the opening, the ever-so-vocal freedom of the second iteration, the surrealism of the interlude; in their place comes *real happiness*, brimming with harmony, grounded by deep bass notes and arpeggios that traverse the keyboard.

*Moon River* is a song of contradictions. It evokes self-assuredness and uncertainty; childlike wonder and the wistfulness of old age. It is infinitely far and yet tantalizingly close—*the moon and its reflection in the water*. So it seems beautiful and appropriate to end with this last iteration and its corresponding dialogue, which declare not *someday*, not *wherever*, but rather *I love you, here and now*.

(Andrew Wu)



# Moon River

Dreamy (♩ = 104)

The musical score for "Moon River" is presented in a system of five staves. The first staff is a grand staff (treble and bass clef) in 3/4 time, marked "Dreamy (♩ = 104)" and "ppp". It features a continuous triplet eighth-note pattern in the bass. The second staff is an 8va part, marked "8va sparkling" and "pp", with a melodic line in the treble and a triplet eighth-note pattern in the bass. The third staff continues the 8va part, marked with a circled 8 and a slur. The fourth staff continues the 8va part, marked with a circled 8 and a slur. The fifth staff continues the 8va part, marked with a circled 8 and a slur, and includes dynamic markings "p" and "mp".

ppp

8va sparkling

pp

(8)

(8)

(8)

open

p

mp

25

*simple*

*p*

Measures 25-29. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over measures 25-29. The left hand plays a continuous triplet accompaniment. A dynamic marking *p* is present in measure 28.

30

*unhurried*

Measures 30-34. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over measures 30-34. The left hand plays a continuous triplet accompaniment. A dynamic marking *p* is present in measure 33.

35

Measures 35-39. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over measures 35-39. The left hand plays a continuous triplet accompaniment. A dynamic marking *p* is present in measure 38.

40

*8va*

*poco rit. ....*

Measures 40-44. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over measures 40-44. The left hand plays a continuous triplet accompaniment. A dynamic marking *p* is present in measure 43. The tempo marking *poco rit. ....* is present in measure 43.

45

*Singing* (♩ = 88)

*p*

Measures 45-49. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur over measures 45-49. The left hand plays a continuous triplet accompaniment. A dynamic marking *p* is present in measure 46.

51

51

57

*full*

*mf*

57

62

62

67

67

72

*poco rit. ....*

*a tempo*

*mp*

72

78

Measures 78-83 of a piano piece in A major. The right hand features a melodic line with a large slur spanning measures 78-83, including a triplet in measure 82. The left hand provides a steady accompaniment. Dynamics include *p* (piano) and *mp* (mezzo-piano).

84

Measures 84-89 of the piano piece. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur and a *mf* (mezzo-forte) dynamic marking. The left hand features a complex accompaniment with many beamed sixteenth notes. Dynamics include *mf* and *p* (piano).

Insistent (♩ = 96)  
like a bell

90

Measures 90-97 of the piano piece. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur and a *pp* (pianissimo) dynamic marking. The left hand features a complex accompaniment with many beamed sixteenth notes. Dynamics include *pp*, *p* (piano), and *pp*.

98

Measures 98-103 of the piano piece. The right hand has a melodic line with a slur and a *f* (forte) dynamic marking. The left hand features a complex accompaniment with many beamed sixteenth notes. Dynamics include *f*.

106

*vulnerable*

***ff*** ***mp***

114

*still*

***p*** ***pp***

123 *growing*

***ff***

**Brilliant** (♩ = 104)

127

131

135

poco rit. ....

138

141

a tempo

*mf*

8<sup>va</sup>

145

(8)

149

7 *tr* *8va* 7 3 5 6

152

*f* *mf* *8va*

156

7 *f* 6 7 6

160

*8va* 6 6 7 *ff* *f* 6 7

163

*8va* *sfz*

