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The Shaping of Johnny Mercer Part Four

John used to tell the following story:

Two big Broadway songwriters went to the Shapiro-Bernstein publishing office about an hour before post time and sang this song:

With a C and an O
and an L and an O
and an R and an O
And an O and an O
That's how you spell Colorado!

They got a \$500 advance on the song from one of the partners who called the other partner and said, "Listen to this, Elliott," and sang the refrain.

"Fine, Louis," his partner said. "But unless you change the next-to-last O to an A, you won't sell many copies in Colorado."

The song-pluggers hung around Lindy's restaurant, called Mindy's in the Damon Runyon stories. John loved these people, men like Broadway Rose, Chuck the Jeweler, and Swifty Morgan.

Elmore White, who called everybody "Pally," and who had always just gotten a letter from Bing, would fumble for his glasses while reaching for his plug sheet, telling the waiter to "fill it up, Pally," indicating his coffee cup for the tenth time, and getting ready to do battle with the office drop-ins — fellows with songs to sell, or a hard-luck story — before he went out on his nightly round of the bands. Because of his false teeth, his wrist bands and knee bands, his double truss and his arch supports, he had a look of leaning into the wind. So it was only natural for his confreres to speak of him as "the man who walks uphill." He always had a joke or an anecdote to amuse you. He always had "one in the third," which usually ran out. And he was a good music man. He got his songs played.

Harry Link was another one-of-a-kind. He was reputedly a compulsive bender of the truth. It was no more possible for him to tell a straight story than it was to fly. They used to refer to one of the songs he worked on as It's a Sin to Tell a Link, and it was said that when they buried him his tombstone should read merely "Here lies."

But he was a powerful music man, a high-pressure salesman of the first rank. In a more lucrative business he probably would have

wound up a very rich man. However, he too suffered from the occupational weakness for the horses, and had to switch job affiliations more than once to get out from under the loan sharks who had him in durance, to put it mildly.

It was Harry who pestered Joe Venuti to play his song An Old Spinning Wheel in the Parlor so many times that Joe, who was working the Silver Slipper, finally said, "Awright, Harry. You wanna hear the song, tune in tonight from ten to eleven." Harry did, of course, and happily heard Joe play An Old Spinning Wheel for an hour straight. No breaks, no commercials, no other songs. Just An Old Spinning Wheel for one hour.

One night in New York, probably in Jim and Andy's, a bar that catered to musicians, John was telling me about those early days in Manhattan when he met so many of his idols. Along with Arlen and Harburg, he met Rube Bloom, J. Fred Coots, Walter Donaldson, Fats Waller and his lyricist partner Andy Razaf, Harry Woods, Sammy Fain, Willard Robeson, and Harry Warren, with whom he would eventually write some important songs. John still had that glow of wonder, all these years later. I have discovered that people who become stars always were star-struck in their youth, and something of that lingers later. I think a star is someone who occupied that position in your firmament of adulation when you were young. Later, you recognize great talent as it arises. But the stars of your youth always have a certain magic about them, even later, and I knew exactly what John meant about those early days in his career.

John had a budget of twenty-five cents a day to try to establish himself. He would take the subway from Brooklyn into Manhattan for five cents, for lunch buy two hot dogs and an orange drink for fifteen cents, and go home at night on the remaining nickel. Ginger, who was a skilled seamstress, was sewing buttons on leather gloves to augment their income.

Johnny was about to meet Paul Whiteman.

Whiteman's position in American cultural history has been obscured by jazz criticism, which has been notable from its earliest days for cant, special pleading, and a bitter partisanship.

When John met Whiteman, Bix Beiderbecke, one of John's heroes, was already dead, despite Whiteman's best efforts to keep him alive. Beiderbecke's life later "inspired" the novel *Young Man with a Horn* by Dorothy Baker, whose knowledge of jazz derived from her position as the girlfriend of one of the first writers about jazz, Otis Ferguson, Beiderbecke's champion. The novel, and the movie with Kirk Douglas based on it, posits an idealistic young

man working against his best aesthetic instincts in a “commercial” band, the torture of which leads him into alcoholism and his own destruction.

Baker — and the movie, yet another example of Hollywood’s inability to deal with jazz — did Whiteman more than disservice. It did him grave damage.

He was, to be sure, an easy target for satire. Big, rotund, with a pencil mustache and a pretentious approach to staging, he lent himself to caricature. The appellation “King of Jazz”, invented by his publicists, only lent an excuse for jazz critics to attack him. By his own statement, Whiteman did not know much about jazz. But he had a great love of it and a keen appreciation of its masters. He hired them, and he featured them; Joe Venuti, Red Norvo, Jack Teagarden, Frank Trumbauer, and Bix among them, along with such pioneering orchestrators and arrangers as Bill Challis and Ferde Grofé. When Beiderbecke’s alcoholism had reached a depth wherein he could no longer play, Whiteman put him on a train to his home town and kept him on full salary while he was gone. The Baker novel and Douglas movie to the contrary notwithstanding, Bix admired and loved Whiteman. I never met a musician who worked for him who didn’t. Joe Venuti once said to me, “Pops,” which was Whiteman’s universal nickname, “got jazz up out of the sewer. We’d been playing in toilets. He put it in the concert hall.”

Whiteman was *big*, both physically and commercially. He was the biggest bandleader of the 1920s, so successful that he had to establish farm-team bands to fill the engagement offers inundating him. In 1924, he staged the Aeolian Hall concert that introduced Gershwin’s *Rhapsody in Blue* to the world and forced even the *New York Times* to pay attention to jazz. That the piece was not jazz gave ammunition to the later jazz critics, but it was heavily influenced by it, and thus helped in a process the jazz critics called for: getting the music out of the cultural ghetto.

Whiteman had passed through career highs and lows. He had been through a low when John Mercer met him. Now he was on a comeback.

Network radio, which dated only from 1928, had in only a few years become a major force in the American culture. It was able to make commercial hits of serious art songs, like the best of those derived from musical theater. It was in some instances able to accomplish this virtually overnight, as John was about to discover.

In January, 1932, Whiteman began to broadcast “coast to coast,” as a phrase of the time put it, under the advertising sponsorship of the Pontiac division of General Motors. At the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago, an important broadcasting locale for bands, Whiteman had begun a search for new talent, which attracted aspiring performers from throughout the area, with consequent large audiences, even at this nadir of the Great Depression. The success of this caused Whiteman to expand the project to his radio broadcasts. Local radio stations would audition young talent just before the Whiteman band arrived in their city, and send the finalists to Whiteman for judgment. After a tour, the band reached New York for an engagement at the Palace on a bill with singer Russ Colombo and the comic team of Weber and Fields (father, as we have noted, of lyricist Dorothy Fields).

The New York auditions were held at the NBC studio, on Times Square in a building that housed the New Amsterdam theater, the very theater in which John had appeared with his little-theater group from Savannah. There were three hundred contestants that week. The winner of the contest would be given a single booking on Whiteman’s network Pontiac broadcast.

Ginger urged John to try his luck. Auditions are always traumatic, both for those who submit to them, who feel like cattle being judged, and those who must make the judgments, well aware that it is in their power to change an aspirant’s life or to dash someone’s hopes forever. John vividly remembered that hellish day of his own audition. One of John’s new acquaintances was Archie Bleyer, an established arranger and, later, producer who was important to the careers of many performers.

I wandered into the New Amsterdam theater — this was back in the days when it housed the Ziegfeld shows and was the nicest theater in New York — to find all types of men and women waiting to try out for the Paul Whiteman vocal contest. Cab drivers, truck drivers, porters, maids, waitresses, bus boys, college boys, young people both white and black (though not so many then) and older people too. As each one of them in turn would get up and sing, “All of me, why not take all of me,” or maybe “Just friends, lovers no more,” a voice would come over the intercom from somewhere up near the roof of the darkened theater: “Thank you very much. Next contestant, please.”

It wasn’t that the management was rude. It was just that there were so many AWFUL singers trying out for that one shot on the Pontiac radio program. Well, Archie Bleyer had graciously consented to accompany me. And as he was a busy man, and I didn’t want to waste his time, when our turn came and my name was called, we jumped up on the stage. He seated himself at the piano, I grabbed the mike, and we hit a tempo lickety-split! I mean, we were going so fast and so rhythmically that no one could have interrupted our chorus. No one did, in any event, and we were held for the finals, which meant the great Paul Whiteman himself would hear us the following day.

Well, he did, and I won a Pontiac Youth of America contest as a New York contestant. The prize was one air shot, singing with Whiteman. And no money. So what good was it?

A few days later, on March 29, 1932, the *Brooklyn-Queens Journal*, a branch of the *New York Evening Journal* that has long since disappeared, carried a story under the headline **John Mercer Can Sing in his Bathtub**. It is revealing in several ways. It read:

There’s one housewife in Brooklyn who doesn’t voice any objection when her husband begins to sing in the bathtub.

In fact, Mrs. John Mercer urges her husband to sing in the bathtub, the shower, the rain or any other places he wants to.

But, then, John Mercer does not emit a raucous, earsplitting howl when he vocalizes. For Johnny Mercer,

although he's "just turned 22," has acquired the art of singing heart-rending ballads with the pathos of one who has loved and lost innumerable times.

And John has that art down to such perfection that out of the half a hundred crooners, warblers, torch singers and mammy wanters who tried to convince Paul Whiteman that they were the greatest young singers in all America, John Mercer was selected as the winner.

As for the singing in the bath tub angle:

"Why, that's how Johnny happened to try out in the competition," Mrs. Mercer explained in her home at 932 Carroll street, Brooklyn, today. "You see, when I married him about a year ago he wasn't a singer."

"And I'm not now, either," he broke in.

But his wife overlooked the interruption.

"Aw, don't be so modest. I married him under the impression that he was a song writer. And he was — and is. But he used to go about the house and the office and the streets always singing to himself. And gradually I began to notice that he did have a beautiful voice.

"So when I read that Paul Whiteman was running an elimination contest in the N.B.C. studios for young singers I made John fill out an application blank. And that's all there is."

But that isn't all there is. Mrs. John Mercer is more modest about her husband than he is about himself. But that's probably because she's a new bride. She's only been married about a year, having first met John at a party at her home on Sterling Place."

You'll notice a discrepancy there. John always said he met Ginger when he tried out for *The Garrick Gaieties*. And it is interesting to note that the word "crooner" was already in use.

But there is something wrong with that story. It is "cute" to be sure, in both of the senses in which Johnny used that word. It is hard to believe that John had to wait for Ginger to inform him that he could sing. He had been singing all his life, in church choirs, in barbershop quartets, as a soloist with Dick Hancock's guitar, indeed just about anywhere he could. And given his intense ambition — driven perhaps by a yearning to compensate for his father's sense of failure — it is hard to believe that he had not picked up from his friends the intelligence that Whiteman would be holding these auditions.

Thomas A. De Long, in a generally scrupulous biography titled *Pops: Paul Whiteman, King of Jazz* (New Century Publishers, New York 1983), writes:

"The greatest talent to emerge in the New York auditions was . . . Johnny Mercer. He had just written *Lazybones* with Hoagy Carmichael. Paul signed him at \$75 a week to write special song material and comedy sketches."

This is not in accord with John's recollection, which is supported by that of Red Norvo. According to John, a friend of Archie Bleyer's offered to introduce John to Hoagy Carmichael, who had already written *Washboard Blues* and *Riverboat Shuffle*;

Mitchell Parish was just attaching his remarkable lyrics to *Stardust*. John said that Carmichael was one of his most important teachers. Carmichael patiently waited while John struggled to come up with acceptable lyrics to *Thanksgiving*. And then John gave him *Lazybones*, a lyric to one of his tunes. John said the title was derived from a line in another Carmichael song called *Snowball*: "You're Mama's little lazybones . . ."

An affinity between Carmichael and Mercer was a natural thing. Both were outsiders, exceptions among all the New York-born composers, lyricists, and publishers. Carmichael was born in Bloomington, Indiana, on November 22, 1899, which made him four days short of being ten years John's elder. Another thing they had in common was an adulation of Bix, who had died less than six months before in New York of pneumonia compounded by his alcoholism, on August 8, 1931. Louis Armstrong was furious at good-time friends who had kept Bix in liquor, and the jazz community was devastated by the news. The guitarist Eddie Condon, normally noted for a dour sarcasm, was in a bar when he heard the news that Bix was dead. "No he's not," he said. "I can hear him from here."

Carmichael so adulated Beiderbecke that he had acquired his mouthpiece — Carmichael also played cornet. He carried it in his pocket all his life, and after his own death, it passed to John, who kept it for years. One can wonder where it is now.

Bud Freeman, one of the dominant saxophonists of that era, told me that *Stardust* was not only like a Bix solo, it *was* a Bix solo. Others have refuted this, however. But certainly it reflects Carmichael's admiration for Bix.

At one point Carmichael and Johnny began work on a musical based on the life of Bix, but it was never to see completely. One song written for it, however, is one of their most exquisite: *Skylark*. It is uncannily like a Bix solo, even to the "fills" at the end of phrases.

In the Whiteman band when John auditioned for it and did his one broadcast for Pontiac was Red Norvo, the great xylophone player who would be known for his pioneer work on vibraphone, in his own groups and with Benny Goodman and, later, Woody Herman. Norvo, born Kenneth Norville in Beardstown, Illinois, on March 31, 1908, performed on a Whiteman radio show where he met singer Mildred Bailey, whom he married. Part Indian, and proud of it, she was born Mildred Rinker in Tekoa, Washington, on February 27, 1908. Her brother, Alton (Al) Rinker, was one of the three rhythm boys, with Harry Barris and Bing Crosby.

Norvo said that John took *Lazybones* to Mildred, always known as the Rocking Chair lady for the 1930 Carmichael song *Rockin' Chair*, which she performed. Bailey's influence is enormous, to this day. Her voice was high and light, and very in tune. Like her brother Al, she had a precise sense of rhythm, and a great swing. She subtly inflected lyrics to bring their meaning into *bas relief*, and you can hear her inspiration in the work of Frank Sinatra, Peggy Lee, Doris Day, and any number of singers who came up in the generation after her.

Bailey liked *Lazybones* and sang it on a nationwide broadcast. Within a week, it seemed — according to Red — just about every

singer in America was performing the song. It became one of the major hits of the Depression years, and won for Hoagy and John an award of \$1250 each from the American Society of Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), the performing rights society which collects and distributes to songwriters and publishers royalties for radio and other exposures of their works.

This was a fortune in those days.

"Mildred and I were living in Queens at the time," Red said. "Johnny called me on a Friday. He said he'd just got this check from ASCAP, and couldn't cash it. We told him to come out to our apartment. When he got there, Mildred told him to call Ginger and tell her to take a cab. She said we'd pay for it. Ginger came and we spent the weekend with them and on Monday morning, Mildred went to her bank and got the check cashed for him."

John testified that the success of the song got him his job with Whiteman a year *after* the Pontiac show audition. Whiteman heard it and called him. He asked John to form a new group along the lines of the Rhythm Boys. They had long since left the band, and Crosby was by then a singing star, on his way to becoming the biggest of his time, indeed the biggest in the whole era from 1890 to 1954, with his own regular radio show and 300 hit records.

John assembled a trio that included a fine pianist named Jack Thompson and Harold Arlen's brother Jerry, who sang rhythm songs well. After a week with the band, they were given two weeks notice.

Present when the trio got fired was the highly respected guitarist Dick McDonough. McDonough suggested to Whiteman that he keep Mercer on to sing duets with Jack Teagarden, who was in the band at the time. Texas-born Teagarden was a breakthrough trombonist. He had pioneered a style of execution on the trombone that gave it almost the fluency of trumpet, and he intimidated other trombonists. Glenn Miller and Tommy Dorsey, both young studio trombonists at the time, were in awe of him. Whiteman took McDonough's advice, and John went on staff with Whiteman for \$85 a week.

John sang duets with Teagarden and the other singers in the band and wrote songs with Matty Malneck, who played violin in the band and wrote arrangements for it as well. Between sets one night, in what they later estimated was about fifteen minutes, they wrote *Goody Goody*, which became a huge hit in 1936. Malneck would collaborate too with John on *Pardon My Southern Accent*. John also wrote parody material for Whiteman broadcasts on a show called *The Kraft Music Hall*. The Federal Communications Commission had not yet imposed its prohibition of the use of a sponsor's name in the title of a show.

On the strength of his Whiteman salary, John and Ginger moved into a better apartment in Manhattan. It enabled them to entertain friends and, since they did not face a long trek to Brooklyn, they could spend more time where the music was being played after hours.

And John retained his affection for the song pluggers. It was they, after all, who could get him hits. Their profession, he said,

came into being years ago, before there were any mechanical

aids like microphones and phonographs

They used to be as close to an entertainer as those small birds on rhinos or elephants or the pilot fish that accompany whales, but their original function was entertaining also. They would demonstrate a new song to whomever would listen, much in the manner of the buskers outside London theaters, and try to get the public to buy or sing the song they were promoting All over the country, not only at the side show in the Savannah Park extension, men were working — on the boardwalk at Atlantic City, at vaudeville houses in Chillicothe, in basements, at the music counters in dime stores — all plugging away at new songs each one hoped would sweep the country and make him rich. Hence the attendance on and solicitude shown a star. If Jolie-baby (Al Jolson) sang your song, it was an immediate sensation, while any leading headliners such as Van and Schenck, Sophie Tucker, or Jimmy Barton, could lift one from obscurity to a permanent place in the hearts of an unsuspecting public who thought all songs just happened because they had "a catchy melody."

Little did they dream of the skullduggery that went on backstage to knock one guy's song out of an act and get your own in; of the payola that those sweeter-than-light vaudeville stars got; or of the cut-ins, the kickback of the music business where a big entertainer got his or her name on a song as co-writer and — forever thereafter — a share of the royalties "either now in existence or yet to be invented." The lawyers had every contingency covered, then as now.

It has been said that a cynic is a disillusioned idealist, and it is a definition that fits Mercer. We see it here for the first time, his dawning awareness of the corruption of the business. When, later, he founded his own record company with backing from fellow songwriter Buddy De Sylva, it would become known for its infrangible integrity.

One of the most offensive — to songwriters — performers for demanding cut-ins was Al Jolson. Possessed of a gigantic ego and an unhesitating willingness to take credit for another man's work, he was seen as the king of the cut-ins. Harry Warren, then a busy New York song plugger and composer, later to be one of Johnny's finest collaborators, detested Jolson.

The 1928 song *Sonny Boy*, so closely associated with Jolson, bears four names as writers: Jolson, Ray Henderson, Lew Brown, and Buddy De Sylva. But Jolson wrote neither a note nor a word of it. It was entirely the work of Henderson-Brown-De Sylva, and they wrote it as a joke, on a bet among themselves that it was impossible to write a song too corny for Al Jolson. (The term "corny" is said to have been the coinage of Bix Beiderbecke, a contraction from corn-fed, meaning bucolic, countrified.)

They took the song to Jolson. He loved it and recorded it, and got his cut-in. Henderson, Brown and De Sylva were able, as they say, to laugh their way to the bank.

I can't be certain who told me that story, but I'm pretty sure it was Johnny.

Hanging around stars the way they did, like satellites around

planets, the pluggers always had a place to congregate and have a "cup o' jav'", some lox on a bagel, or a short beer while they bemoaned their luck or lack of it with their latest "dog".

"Hey, Mouse! What ever happened to that song you were working on last month, Everything You Said Came True?"

"Everything You Said Came True came back!"

Meaning that the dealers had sent back the copies, and the publisher was stuck with a lot of returns.

They used to gather every day for lunch and the morning line. Most pluggers are inveterate horse players and nothing pleases them more in life than horse talk, except song talk. Coming to the restaurant, they would stop on the pavement outside to make their daily bet with Libby the bookie. This particular stretch of pavement on Broadway was known as Libby's Beach, as the sun occasionally shone there between tall buildings. Then they'd go in to gossip about the happenings of the night before, who won the fight at the Garden or the fourth at Aqueduct, or what band leader was making it with what vocalist — usually female, but not necessarily.

When I worked in bands I'd sit with them between sets and when I wasn't working I'd go along to catch the various openings or closings, often as far as Philadelphia or Washington. Without realizing it, I too was a plug, in a small way, since I might record or sing one of their songs on a [radio] guest shot. So I often tagged along and got to know them all, and became fast friends with most of them.

Sad, but most of them are gone now, along with almost everything else.

It was Paul Whiteman's idea, or so John thought, to play him and Jack Teagarden off against each other as a kind of musical Amos and Andy.

Amos and Andy was the name of a fifteen-minute nightly radio show. All the characters in its stories were black; but the actors who played them were white. A later generation of black Americans excoriated these shows; a still-later generation has re-discovered and in some cases credited them with portraying blacks simply as people. If the lawyer in the show was a slick shyster, he was no more so and no worse than one encountered in white society, and Amos, who drove a taxi, was a gentle and earnest and somewhat naive figure. Charles Correll and Freeman Gosden not only played the two main characters, they wrote the show, and it was so popular that one risked an irritated hang-up if you tried to call someone during its early-evening presentation. When the show eventually found its way to television, black actors were employed, and a some black actors today credit it with opening the way for them. But it remains a controversial show.

Johnny admitted that Whiteman's use of him and Teagarden in that way in the long run worked to his benefit, for an assistant director in Hollywood who heard the band's broadcasts was a fan of *Amos and Andy*. He thought John might be a suitable writer for a low-budget college musical to be made at RKO. John, suffering from jaundice, had left the band during a booking in Pittsburgh and was spending much of his time in bed when the offer from Hollywood arrived.

He made one last effort to get his friend Dick Hancock in (or "on", as musicians say) the Whiteman band, but Mike Pingatore was at that time firmly fixed to the guitarist's chair. John prepared to make his second train-trip to California; there would be countless more in his future.

So it was goodbye to my new-found musician friends and all the side men who were to turn into leaders, Benny Goodman, Jimmy and Tommy Dorsey, Artie Shaw, Glenn Miller, Claude Thornhill; to Dick McDonough and Jerry Colonna. Farewell to the Spirits of Rhythm, Dick Wells, and Pod and Jerry's, the Stork, 21, and all the celebrities I had begun to meet, Cole Porter and Buddy DeSylva, Lew Brown, Billy Rose, Joe Bushkin, Willie the Lion, and especially Irving Berlin.

It's all such a montage of work and drinking and nightclubbing and publishing rooms, writing all day and calling Ginger to tell her I'd be home late; or meeting her at some little pad where a few of our old friends were waiting to introduce us to new ones, that I can't get the sequence of events right.

Did Wingy and Bob Bach come up to the Biltmore roof or did we all meet at a recording session where George Simon was writing a story for Down Beat? It was a time of youth and excitement and the long shadows falling as I'd hurry home from Broadway, stopping to have a drink with some cats on my way to dinner before changing into my band costume for the night shift. Always writing, writing, writing. Half the songs I wrote I knew would never happen, but I didn't want to miss anything that might. If I had more time, perhaps I would have been more selective. But I've never been sorry, believing as I do that they seldom remember your flops, only your last hit.

I've had my share of both.

California was seen as a land of distant glamour in those days before the 747 and a four-hour trip across the continent. It was almost a nation unto itself, indeed very nearly became one, and its immigrant population sent gifts back east, boxes of dates packed in beautiful redwood boxes, and a picture of a car of the time driving through a hole that had been cut in a redwood or Douglas fir. It seemed a soft, benign, sunny land of ocean shore and palm trees and deserts and mountains, infinitely attractive, which of course is how the slick land developers wanted it to appear. And there was the music that came from there. John had, like so many young men of his generation, listened in the hard bakelite ear-phones of a crystal set to the San Francisco band of Art Hickman, to Harry Owens, to *Whispering; Avalon; California, Here I Come; Home in Pasadena; Orange Grove in California; and Linger Awhile*. They seemed to embody the distant, lovely state.

The Chief had a number of celebrities aboard on that trip, including Joe Schenck and Al Jolson. Johnny remembered the two of them having the waiters bring for their inspection a brace of dressed ducks, or pheasants, before ordering them cooked. This kind of affectation, this pretention, was in bad taste, John thought, and it bothered him; he would make his comment on it later in the song *Hooray for Hollywood*.

But at that time, "I kept my eyes and ears open and my mouth shut, for Ginger and I were heading for a chance of a lifetime, and I wanted to be as big as my small talent might allow."

He always remembered passing through orange groves and gardens filled with enormous cabbage roses, and, coming into San Bernardino, the big blue mountains — land of Lake Arrowhead and Big Bear — with snow in its crevices and dried watercourses. It was an experience he would have many times in the future, for he always crossed the continent by train.

In Pasadena, he met the producer who had sent for him, Zion Myers. Whatever image of movieland power he carried in his head was promptly shattered. Myers was a very small man — John estimated that he weighed about 130 pounds — with gray pallor. And the movie John was to write would have a minuscule budget. It was about a man who late in his life decides to get the college education he'd missed. It sank under the weight of Hollywood cliché and bad taste. The lead role was played by George Barbier, supported by Buddy Rogers, Dave Chasens, a young pantomimist who gave up performing to open a famous restaurant, and Johnny. The costumes and sets were trite and the music inadequate.

Yet John liked Zion Myers, who was always patient, courteous, and seemingly unperturbed. "The studio," John said, "gave him only left-overs and, suffering multitudinous setbacks in every department, he still kept cheerful while he watched his staff putting together one of the most old-fashioned college movies ever made. This in spite of the fact that he, or somebody, had been smart enough to have among the bit players and extras running around the campus both Lucille Ball and Betty Grable.

"Hollywood was like a boom city in those days, and even I got better offers from other producers on the same lot the day after the picture opened. But if Zion wanted me, I wouldn't desert, and we did another picture right away before my RKO contract ran out."

That loyalty was another of John's characteristics.

John may not have liked the picture, but his hometown newspaper did. It bore a one-column headline and a story reading:

**Johnny Mercer,
Savannah's Own,
On Screen Here**

Tune tickles and just plain old Southern pride will course with quickened pace the veins of Savannah's music lovers and cinema addicts next week when Savannah's own Johnny Mercer — of "Lazy Bones" and "Pardon My Southern Accent" fame — makes his screen debut in the city of his birth.

For Johnny is coming to the Lucas not a full-fledged star, but nevertheless a featured player in the summer's hottest musical comedy number, "Old Man Rhythm." It's headlined for three days, starting Monday, at the deluxe house with the mountain air.

Johnny achieves double distinction in his first appearance on screen. With charming little Evelyn Poe, he renders a number you'll be whistling when you leave, "Comes the Revolution, Baby." That's not all, either, for Johnny wrote

the lyrics for the entire show, which seethes with campus romance and rhythm.

This sparkling, collegiate picture, which is full of catchy songs and humorous situations, will replace that "down-in-the-dumps" feeling with a giddy lightness of heart, it is declared.

It sounds as if it were a press agent's plant, but whoever wrote it, the item must have made John squirm. And read it he assuredly did; it is inconceivable that Dick Hancock or his cousin Walter Rivers or one of his other friends and relatives would not have sent it to him.

He went to work on another B picture, another college picture — such films were common at the time, perhaps because college education was still something of a novelty, and the studio executives, little educated themselves, saw it as something giddy, romantic, and wonderful. Meantime, elsewhere on the RKO lot, some A-grade musicals were being made, including *Follow the Fleet* with a score by Irving Berlin. The latter starred Ginger Rogers and Fred Astaire.

John met Fred Astaire, who showed him a tune he had written. Always known as a dancer, Astaire was sometimes seen as a dilettante when he ventured into composition. In fact he was a more than passable pianist; and many songwriters cited him as their favorite singer, despite his tendency to dismiss this facet of his own abilities: he sang a song as written, with intelligent interpretation of its meaning. John took the tune away and returned with a lyric titled *I'm Building Up to an Awful Let Down*.

A Savannah newspaper — again, the clipping is faded and tattered; the end of it is missing — carried a story under the following one-column headline:

MERCER, GENIUS OF MUSIC, AT HOME

AUTHOR "LAZY BONES" AND OTHER BIG SUC- CESSES VISITS PARENTS

Johnny Mercer, author of "Lazy Bones," "Here Come the British," "Pardon My Southern Accent," and scores of other popular songs published recently, returned for the first time in two years yesterday to be with his parents, Mr. and Mrs. George A. Mercer. He lives in New York.

He is still the likable, modest chap that he was when he left Savannah in 1928 . . . despite the fact that he has become noted as a lyric writer at the age of 25.

Christened John Herndon Mercer, he is not likely to be called "Mr. Mercer" more than once by anyone, for his charming manner soon prompts even a stranger to call him "Johnny."

Confessing that he loved Savannah and wanted to return here when he made enough money, Johnny declared "it was easy for a Southerner to write 'Lazy Bones,' his

biggest hit by far.

He exploded the popular opinion that one makes enough on a single "hit" to retire. "The best writers can hope for is approximately \$5,000 or \$6,000," he said, and mentioned a few songs which had probably netted their authors this figure. The composer and the lyrics writer split two ways, he explained.

Johnny wasn't able to explain what had prompted him to write the lyrics of some of his favorites. "You see a word somewhere which suggests a title, or just think it up," he declared.

Of the songs which he has written, he likes "P.S. I Love You" best. "Lazy Bones" brought him in the most money, but it wasn't as much as the average person thinks, according to Johnny.

He works with several composers because so far he hasn't found a single person who writes tunes fast enough for the number of lyrics he turns out.

Johnny has an average of one song published each month, but he writes about four times this number. Usually the words are written by him after someone else has completed the tune, although the process is sometimes reversed, it was learned

Some day Johnny hopes to write a novel, and his "pet ambition" is to write a movie story and then act in it. Like a good many other young men, he likes to play golf, fish, and read, although his present routine doesn't allow much time for such activities.

He is under contract with Paul Whiteman . . .

The rest of the clipping is missing.

If he was twenty-five at the time, the year is 1934.

In December, 1939, John wrote a guest column for the magazine *Swing*, long since vanished. He described the writing of *P.S. I Love You*:

"I recall one time when my wife Ginger was away on a trip and I naturally desired to write to her. Taking pen in hand, ol' massa Mercer wrote a long letter dealing with just the sort of trivia that occurs to one lonely for another. There it was completed and I read it over. I'd written many a love song, and I read it over. I'd left out the real reason I started the letter. So below the great message, I scrawled "P.S. I Love You." Immediately, the thought of that phrase as a song title struck me and I dashed off what later, thanks to forgetful me and lucky fate, became a hit tune."

He assuredly didn't "dash off" that lyric. John intensely disliked writing lyrics first, and for the most part refused to work that way. Other lyricists have come to the conclusion that the music should be written first. Cole Porter, who wrote both words and music, would find his title, build his melody out of it, and then complete the lyric.

When lyrics are written first, the music often seems wooden, a little academic, tending to *recitativo*. And once when John and I were discussing this, he said, "I've lost a lot of good lyrics by turning them over to composers." Lost them, of course, because

he could not bring himself to tell the composer the music was no good; he preferred to lose the lyric. It is a virtual certainty that John got the title *P.S. I Love You*, and turned it over to composer and arranger Gordon Jenkins, an alumnus of the Isham Jones band, who wrote the music. After that, I am certain, John finished the lyric. Gordon is dead, and I cannot ask him.

There is something of significant interest in John's version of how that song was written. He started out to write what was intended to be a love letter, and then described nothing but trivia. At the end he wrote "P.S. I Love You." It seems like an afterthought, and a dutiful one at that.

John described the writing of his next important song in an interview.

"Between movie assignments, Ginger and I took a trip down to Savannah in a little car," he said, obviously referring to the sojourn noted by the newspaper. After that they headed for California.

"We took three days out of six just to cross Texas, and I saw all those guys down there in those spurs and ten-gallon hats driving cars around. They struck me as kind of funny and so I thought maybe I should put it all in a song."

The song, *I'm an Old Cowhand*, is noteworthy for several reasons, quite aside from the ingenuity of the writing. John had from the beginning a flair for incorporating current vernacular into lyrics, but in this song we first encounter his capacity for wry and sly comment on the society around him. And America was changing quickly. Asphalt was covering the gravel of city streets and country roads; rural electrification was well under way; network radio had in a few short years become a pervasive medium of entertainment, and of cultural education; and old ways were dying. Unfortunately copyright law precludes my quoting the lyric in full, even for the sake of analysis.

The music to the song is Mercer's own. It is clever, catchy, and perfectly suited to the material.

In the Paul Whiteman band, John had become friends with tenor saxophonist and arranger Fud Livingston. Through his offices, John said, he was able to get the song to Bing Crosby. Crosby by now was a big star, and though they had met, John clearly was not able to approach Crosby directly. The timing was good, because Crosby was about to make a light comedy film called *Rhythm on the Range* with Martha Raye, the tragic Frances Farmer, and the now-forgotten comedian Bob Burns. Burns played a peculiar slide instrument, supposedly home-made out of old tubing and a funnel. He called it a bazooka, and the name was adopted in World War II for the first shoulder-held rocket launcher. It still has that generic meaning, though the origin of the term is forgotten.

Crosby liked the song, sang it in the film, released in 1936, and recorded it. It became a hit. John believed that this song and *I'm Building Up to an Awful Letdown* saved him from failure and obscurity. And then the song he had written with Matty Malneck, *Goody Goody*, became a hit that year, though it had been written earlier.

The competition that year included *Easy to Love*, *The Glory of Love*, *Goodbye*, *I Wished on the Moon*, *Is It True What They Say*

about Dixie?, It's D'lovely, I've Got You Under My Skin, Let Yourself Go, Let's Face the Music and Dance, The Night Is Young and You're So Beautiful, There Is No Greater Love, Pennies from Heaven?, There's a Small Hotel, These Foolish Things, The Touch of Your Lips, Twilight on the Trail, Until the Real Thing Comes Alone, The Way You Look Tonight, When Did You Leave Heaven, and When My Dream Boat Comes Home.

John loved Hollywood in those years.

Hollywood was funny, really idyllically so, with lots of people in the same business all making big money and living in that gorgeous country with nothing to do between pictures but play tennis and golf and look at all the pretty girls passing by.

I suppose the fellows back in Savannah thought we picked the oranges off the trees and threw them at passing Indians, but it was even better than that, because in the commissary at lunch or walking down the studio streets, you could see Carole Lombard or Claudette Colbert. Sylvia Sidney lived right around the corner. Ann Sheridan, Martha Raye, and dozens of other beautiful girls might be having a drink in Lucy's or going in full makeup to the Vendome, or maybe getting up in some little supper club and singing.

Hollywood was never much of a night town. Everybody had to get up too early. Musicians always had some little pad they could fall by late at night to see each other or sit in, and to introduce some new player or vocalists to the crowd. But the movie people were in bed with the chickens (or each other) long before curfew. Sebastian's Cotton Club and the Coconut Grove were about the only two places you could hear any big musical acts until later, when the Palomar opened, and still later the Palladium.

The miniature golf craze was still with us, and on almost every corner there were fad buildings built in the shape of something or other: a hot dog on a roll, a bottle of milk, a puppy, a boat, all patterned, I presume, after the Brown Derby, which was the superstar of Hollywood gimmick buildings

What is now one huge town was then only little villages, and we'd drive from one to the other to catch a sneak preview. And what a thrill when a "biggie" — not just one of the B pictures — opened. Since each of the major studios made about twenty big ones and sixty run-of-the-mill pictures a year, there was hardly a night when something wasn't being previewed somewhere, in Glendale or Inglewood or Cucamonga or Tarzana. Then maybe a snack at the Brown Derby or Armstrong Schroeder's for the indigestion special — something light, like a limburger and raw onion sandwich.

Everybody was young and vital and interested in their work. Talented people from all walks of life and from every nation in the world, all there to get the gold at the end of the rainbow and the fame spilling off the silver screen — there for the taking, only needing a beautiful or a funny face, a parlor trick, or a sexy body to catapult its owner to riches and notoriety.

If Johnny was himself star-struck, and he always was — he

wrote these observations when he was more than sixty years old — he was also skeptical of the sham and shabbiness of the movie industry, the unabashed mendacity of the great dream machine by the Pacific. This would eventuate in one of his keenest social observations in the lyric form, the clever *Hooray for Hollywood*, which he would write a little later with composer Richard Whiting. It should be done — should *only* be done — as a fast vaudeville two-beat, like Berlin's *There's No Business Like Show Business* and the Dietz-Schwartz masterpiece *That's Entertainment*.

Aside from the sardonic observation, the song is notable for another reason: John's capacity to write very long lines in song form without losing clarity or the listener's understanding. *Days of Wine and Roses*, which of course came much later in his career, consists of only two sentences. But *Hooray for Hollywood*, which is much more complex, contains only four, and the first half of the song comprises only one. Again, copyright law prohibits my quoting it in full for analysis. It rhymes Shirley Temple with Aime Semple Macpherson, for example.

Shirley Temple was at the zenith of her childhood career, and Aime Semple Macpherson's evangelist crusade ended in a personal scandal. Sally Rand, whose performances are decorous and even modest by today's standards, covered herself as she danced with huge feathery fans behind which, the audience was expected to believe, she was nude. "Pan" was commonplace argot for the face. And it flows naturally out of the word "panic." Ballyhoo meant inflated and noisy publicity and advertising. But John extends the word by telescoping into it another noun, rendering it an adjective, a Joycean elision with the word "hooey," a term for which in our own scatologically inarticulate time we use a harsher word. To find a use of sound like that Mercer shows here, one must look to the French lyrics of Charles Trenet.

The song is, in language and content, very much of its period, again showing John's capacity to capture the language of the time he was passing through, its *zeitgeist*, if you can put up with that word.

One final point.

By John's time in the profession, the better lyricists were abandoning the coy inversion of natural sentence order for the sake of rhyme, although Ira Gershwin continued it long after it had come to seem affected and awkward. John almost never does this; indeed, this song contains the only example of the practice I can find in all his work: the line "can be a star made." It's sufficiently clever in a humorous context to pass muster.

Anything works if you can bring it off.

John always could.

(To be continued)

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