

Facebook Tribute Johnny Mercer and HS

[Frank Gagliano](#)

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Johnny Mercer's songwriting genius ("*Blues In The Night*," "*One For My Baby*," "*Moon River*," 1500 others) keeps on bridging worlds. Out of the blue, a Mr. HS from the Netherlands, writes me that he had come across my website, and my essay, "*ON Mercer*," and wondered if I had an mp3 demo of the legendary songwriter Johnny Mercer, singing his own song, "*I wanna be around to pick up the pieces, when somebody breaks your heart.*"

Mr, HS, from the Netherlands, wrote that he had an incomplete demo of the song — one that he attached to his email to me, a track that fades out before the end. Like Hoagy Carmichael and Harold Arlen, and so many other composers of the Great American Songbook golden age, Mercer was a superb singer and interpreter of his own songs. The only recording I had of "*I Wanna Be Around*" was the Tony Bennett version. I wrote that I would try to find the Mercer demo — and DID (long, long story).

In the meantime, Mr. HS sent me Mercer demos from an apparently bottomless cache of Mercer tracks. All wonderful. But, with one, I almost had cardiac arrest: "*Whistling Away The Dark*:" A Mercer favorite of mine. I had on my iTunes wonderful versions of the song, by Johnny Mathis, Dick Haymes, Henry Mancini (he wrote the music) and, especially, Nancy LaMott (who couples the song with Mercer's existential, "*Days Of Wine and Roses*."") But I never dreamed Mercer himself might have recorded "*Whistling Away The Dark*." His version (darker, mature voice, diction clear) is simple and, to me, heart breaking.

Here's the Mercer lyric: "*Often I think this sad old world is whistling in the dark/ Just like a child who, late from school, walks bravely home*

through the park/To keep their spirits soaring/ And keep the night at bay/Neither quite knowing which way they are going/They sing the shadows away/ Often I think my sad old heart has given up for good/ And then I see a brand new face/ I glimpse some new neighborhood/ So walk me back home, my darling/Tell me dreams really come true/ Whistling, whistling/ Here in the dark with you.”

Mr, HS, from the Netherlands, and I, continue to exchange emails. He’s just sent me a wealth of Mercer demo tracks singing unknown, to me, early Mercer songs from, *“Mercer Sings Just For Fun.”*

In addition, Mr, HS, from the Netherlands, and I, are exchanging family stories, eye problems — comparing our politics. And every time he sends on a new unknown Mercer track, it is downloaded into my iTunes and that gets me to review, re-hear and re-glory in the genius of Mercer and all the magnificent singers and the genius songs of that golden age and that, now, get me through our dark year end.

Anyway. Thank you Johnny Mercer for finding me a friend from across the ocean, and for an end-of-year pause for sanity, and for the need —no matter how feebly— to keep whistling away the dark.

(Photos: 1. Mercer at keyboard 2: Album cover 3. FG at Mercer’s grave, Savannah, GA.



