

“ON MERCER”

***Rediscovering The Genius of
the American Songwriter, Johnny Mercer,
Giant Of The Great American Songbook:
[Up Close, Moving and Personal]***

by

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ONE: MERCER RESTART

My Johnny Mercer journey started — well, restarted — sometime in the 1990s, when I first read *“Roses In The Morning,”* browsing in a bookstore in Pittsburgh. This was the title of an essay in Gene Lees’s book, *“Singers and The Song.”* (Oxford Press, 1987). The title of the essay referred to songwriter Johnny Mercer’s ritual of sending a dozen roses in the morning to people Mercer had insulted the night before, when he was very drunk.

What first attracted me to *“Singers and The Song,”* however, was the cover: The iconic Frank Driggs photo of a young, skinny Frank Sinatra, standing on a stage, in front of a 1940s vintage microphone, in the midst (probably) of singing one of his signature ballads, arms down and out from his sides, palms up, head tilted to his left shoulder, eyes shut tight, wearing a tailored double breasted grey pinstripe suit with floppy grey bow tie, in full spotlight, against a black background, with only a portion of the accompanying white piano catching part of Sinatra’s spotlight. Whatever that venue, one could almost hear the bobbysoxers in the audience, squealing and swooning.

In the bookstore, I thumbed through the Sinatra essay and saw, immediately, that the chapter dealt with the *artistry* of the singer, and how Sinatra had revived the public's interest in America's greatest popular songs, and how Sinatra had also revolutionized the art of singing those songs.

Ah. An essay on Sinatra that didn't deal with all the usual sensational tabloid Sinatra stories.

In fact, all the essays in "*Singers And The Song*" dealt *primarily* with the *artistry* of such popular pop artists of the 1940s–1950s as, Edith Piaf, Peggy Lee, Dick Haymes and Jo Stafford, as well as Sinatra and Johnny Mercer. Sinatra, of course, was one of the singers of the book's title; Mercer was the song. Actually, Mercer was both: The song writer *and* the singer of his own (and others') songs. *Was he ever!*

But Gene Lees's "*Roses In The Morning*" essay was only peripherally about Mercer's mean-drunk episodes. "He was," writes Lees, "in my opinion, the finest lyricist in the English language, an exquisite craftsman and the one with the most personal voice." (page 44). Gene Lees then goes on to analyze the lyrics of two Mercer songs I thought I had always known: "*I Remember You*" (music, Victor Schertzinger), and "*I Thought About You*" (Jimmy Van Heusen, music). But Lees explicates the lyrics like the poem-jewels they are, and I suddenly realize their artistic worth, how they fit word to musical notation and how they tell the music's story — and I see and hear them, as if for the first time.

For most of my life, while Mercer was in my musical DNA, I had taken him, his songs, his singing, for granted. And Gene Lees' "*Roses In The Morning*" made me revisit the Mercer canon, and in a new way. One visit was at UNLV, the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. The other, sixteen years later, was to be at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, PA.

Two: Mercer @UNLV



The University of Nevada Las Vegas (UNLV), 1996. Musical Theatre Masters program, Robert Brewer, program director. Bob will direct our Mercer show, *“And The Angels Sing.”* Las Vegas choreographer Rick Pessagno will choreograph. I’ll be there to help conceptualize the show, act as a sounding board and sometime researcher. *“And The Angels Sing,”* of course, is the title of the 1939 Benny Goodman hit record; Martha Tilton, vocalist, music by Ziggy Elman, lyrics by Johnny Mercer. Bob Brewer, on a research trip to Savannah Georgia where Mercer was born and buried, discovers the title on Johnny’s tombstone in Bonaventure cemetery.

This is part of our Mercer introduction in the program for *“And The Angels Sing:”*

“Johnny Mercer was a great American songwriter.

“His ability to find the perfect words for an abstract melody — words that would “sing” and fit the music’s mood; his unique imagery; his innate musicality and lyricism, his poetic use of slang; his feeling for the quirkiness and pain in the American character, and for the jazz and blues that were natural components in his Savannah-born soul; his ‘down home’ sense of common sense mixed with a worldly sophistication; the infectious joy of his singing and performing; his intelligence; his humor. . .these are just some of the attributes that made Johnny Mercer an American original—a genius who was truly ‘a kind of poet,’ an accessible poet who touched American lives and who keeps on touching them.

“Johnny Mercer’s legacy of fifteen hundred songs (“Blues In The Night,” “One For My Baby,” “Skylark,” “I’m Old Fashioned,” “Come Rain Or Come Shine,”), fourteen Academy award nominations, and four Academy Awards (“Moon River,” “The Days Of Wine And Roses,” “On The Atchison, Topeka And The Santa Fe,” “In The Cool, Cool, Cool Of The Evening”) still remains unchallenged.

“Johnny Mercer was also privileged to have collaborated with some of America’s greatest composers: Harold Arlen, Hoagy Carmichael, Gene DePaul, Duke Ellington. Jerome Kern, Henry Mancini, André Previn, Arthur Schwartz, Harry Warren, Richard A. Whiting, to name a few. To these great composers, he owes a great debt, and they to him; for it is a startling fact that no matter the stature of the composer/collaborator, the resulting song is always a Johnny Mercer song!”

* * * * *

I think it was the Nancy LaMott album, *“Come Rain Or Come Shine”* that did it, enabled me to suggest some lesser known Mercer songs to the Brewer/Passagno, *“And The Angel’s Sing,”* collaboration. Prior to getting out to be part of the UNLV Mercer rehearsals, an actor in a musical of mine that was in production here in Pittsburgh, and who knew of my interest in Mercer, suggested to me that I listen to the Nancy LaMott/Mercer album. I did, and was introduced to 1) a stunning dramatic singer, Nancy LaMott (who, then, was fast becoming a

Cabaret star), and 2) to the world of Cabaret that, along with Jazz, were keeping The American Songbook alive — and to 3) the deeper, darker, sadder side of Johnny Mercer’s songs. (Nancy LaMott, alas, succumbed, at age 43, to uterine cancer in 1995.)

Three Mercer songs on the album were new to me: *“Whistling Away The Dark”* (Music, Henry Mancini); the posthumous lyric, *And When October Goes* (Music, Barry Manilow); and, *Talk to Me Baby, Tell Me Lies* (from the musical *“Foxy,”* Robert Dolan, music). The lyrics in two of them startled and moved me.

Here’s one: (Complete lyric) *“Whistling Away The Dark:”* 1969

*“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 poor 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.”*

From, *“And When October Goes:”* 1984

*“. . .The children walking home
Beneath a twilight sky.
Oh, for the fun of them,
When I was one of them. . .”*

And suddenly, those Mercer themes of a sad old heart yearning for dreams to come true and longings for a lost youth began to take hold (*“When The World Was Young”*—was to be another of his great song lyrics with those themes).

*“. . .When we played our Charade,
It was like children posing. . .”*
(from *“Charade.”* Music, Henry Mancini, 1963)

*“The days of wine and roses
laugh and run away,
Like a child at play. . .
(from “The Days of Wine And Roses,”
Henry Mancini, music, 1962)*

*“. . .Just like, well, maybe,
Like when a baby
Sees a bubble burst before its eyes. . .”
(from, “I Wonder What Became Of Me.”
Music, Harold Arlen, 1946)*

During the course of *“And The Angels Sing”* rehearsals, we discovered that Johnny Mercer’s daughter, Mandy, was living in Las Vegas. I spent a delightful morning with her as she generously talked about her Dad and her life with him. She recalled that neighborhood children would knock on the Mercer door at the Mercer Beach home on Lido Isle, Orange County, CA, and ask if the grownup Johnny would come out to play. Grownup Johnny often would. (During the course of writing this piece, I’ve reconnected with Mandy Mercer, who writes that, yes, in fact, “they called my dad, the Pied Piper of Lido.”)

All of these (then) lesser-known (to me) Mercer songs mentioned above (*“Whistling Away The Dark. . .” “And When October Goes. . .” “Talk To Me Baby. . .” “I Wonder What Became Of Me. . .”*), were included in the UNLV *“And The Angels Sing,”* as part of the 53 numbers that made up the final show. And what a show it was! The last part of our program notes tell it all:

“ But, ‘And The Angels Sing’ is more than a mere musical tribute to a great artist; it’s a story, Johnny Mercer’s story. By examining his musical words and placing them in a special order, we begin to get an impressionistic glimpse of Johnny Mercer’s complex nature—from his early days of accentuating the positive, to his autumn leaves’s days of wine and roses — a lyrical impression of an unattainable romantic vision he longed for and journeyed to find, beyond his Moon River. And it is all set against a backdrop of Johnny Mercer’s America.” “And The Angel’s Sing” is not about America, it is about Mercer IN America. It is Johnny Mercer’s story — simple, impressionistic, poignantly captured through his own beautiful words.”

* * * * *

The UNLV Musical Theatre MFA performers in the *“And The Angels Sing”* ensemble were formidable, very talented, disciplined and well trained. Had to be. It was non-stop singing and dancing, right through to the final curtain. Very little spoken dialogue. Even the less experienced 11-year old boy (son of a blackjack dealer, as I recall), who, in the show, was visible only to the Johnny character (the

child in Johnny), and accompanied Johnny on his journey, was a delight. Bob's direction and Rick's choreography were brilliant. The musical director, who also arranged each musical piece, played the score on a baby grand (stage left, as I recall) — and that one piano was all that was needed to accompany Johnny Mercer's musical story. After the Las Vegas performances, we took the piece to L.A. for a two-day run at the Odyssey Theatre in Santa Monica.

Three scenes in “*And The Angels Sing*” stand out in my memory: *G.I. Jive* (words and music, Mercer), in which G.I.s in a WW 2 Army barracks, danced with mops; *Blues In The Night* (music by Harold Arlen), that exploded onto the stage and became a battle of the sexes, and whose opening chords and opening phrase — arguably, the most familiar song opening in the American Songbook — brought applause from the audience; and “*Accentuate The Positive*” (music, again, Harold Arlen), built to a rousing gospel finish that brought audiences to their feet.

“*And The Angels Sing*” was a highpoint in my theatre career and is a show worth reviving. For a new production, I might recommend the elimination of some songs and the addition of others. But I would add only one *new* ingredient to the concept: Johnny Mercer's voice itself. (More on that voice later)

I loved watching every single performance of “*And The Angels Sing*,” never needed to leave the auditorium and pace the lobby during moments that weren't working on any particular night (my usual MO). I was entertained and strangely moved throughout rehearsals and the run. “Strangely,” because something strange was happening to me as I observed rehearsals and, each night, during performances, watched a journey of yearning and fun and lost youth that filled out the portrait of a man, Johnny Mercer, a genius, solely through his enormous musical/lyrical output. I could not define that “strangeness.”

But I came close to defining it. Then.

Closer now.

Three: Mercer's 1930s and 1940s

Before we had a phonograph in our Brooklyn “cold-water flat,” we had a radio. During the Great Depression and WW2 years, we listened to Disc Jockey Martin Block's “*Make Believe Ballroom*” on station WNEW. Simple format: Block pretended to be broadcasting from a ballroom and played the popular songs of the day. Taking the imaginative leap into that radio ballroom every week was a *must* tune-in for an American interested in popular songs.



Here's the lyric of the Glenn Miller song that would open each *Make Believe Ballroom* radio program:

*It's Make-Believe Ballroom Time,
Put all your cares away;
All the bands are here to bring a cheer your way.
It's Make-Believe Ballroom Time ,
And free to everyone;
It's no time to fret,
Your dial is set for fun*

*Just close your eyes and visualize, in your solitude,
Your favorite bands are on the stands,
And Mr. Miller puts you in the mood.*

*It's Make-Believe Ballroom Time,
The hour of sweet romance;
Here's your make-believe ballroom—
Come on, children, let's dance, let's dance!]*

The “*Make Believe Ballroom*” became so popular, according to google search, that when WNEW moved to a new studio on Fifth Avenue for Block’s broadcasts, they constructed a simulated ballroom—complete with chandelier and black linoleum. And we all — virtually the whole country — listened to the *same* recorded popular songs, and popular swing/dance bands, with their distinctive arrangements — their special sounds — and, above all (at least to me), we listened to the singers sing those songs on major recordings, including; *Peggy Lee, Helen Forrest, Frank Sinatra, Rosemary Clooney, Frankie Laine, Perry Como, Bob Eberly, Helen O’Connell, The Andrews Sisters, Bing Crosby, Russ Columbo, Dinah Shore, Doris Day, Dick Haymes, Tony Bennett* — so many others — and, yes, *Johnny Mercer*.

Also on radio, there was “*Your Hit Parade*,” that featured the Top Ten hits of the week, but with *live* performers, “Wee” Bonnie Baker, Dorothy Collins, Snooky Lanson, Gisèle MacKenzie, Andy Russell — and, yes, *Johnny Mercer*.

I had no particular interest in Johnny Mercer then, besides recognizing his singing style, which I liked, especially his singing the comic songs, like, *Strip Polka* (1942), an exuberant, sweet, naughty song (“*Take it off/Take it off/Cried the boys in the rear/—But she stops/And always just in time*”). Mercer had a great time singing that big-hit song, and we all had a great time listening to it. I didn’t know then, though, that Mercer had written *both* the words *and* music to the bouncy “*Strip Polka* .”

In fact, while I knew the lyrics of most of the popular songs of the day by rote, it was the melody that took hold. Then. The words gave the melody a title and a context, but they were incidental to the music. I’d hum the tunes, whistle the tunes: The tunes stuck. In some deeper way. Then. And I didn’t discriminate between the tunes. They were all worth a hum. The lyrics? Well, they obviously needed to be there, but it never occurred to me to explore what they were really saying, or how they worked with the music.

Until I listened to Sinatra sing them (*a theme for another piece?*). And until I started to go to Broadway musicals.

From Brooklyn, I’d take the “E1” and subway into *New York* (that’s what we, in Brooklyn, called *Manhattan*) and buy standing room tickets (or, if available, last row of the balcony tickets) at a Rogers and Hammerstein show (R&H’s *ALLEGRO*, was my first Broadway musical), or a Cole Porter show, or one of the great Dietz and Schwartz musical revues (Like their “*Inside USA*”) that were still running on Broadway in those days. The great songs that came out of those shows were often the hits that were recorded by the pop singers and would make the top ten weekly hits on *Your Hit Parade*, or be heard on *The Make Believe Ballroom*. And because I had seen the shows and saw a singer/actor on stage sing words that revealed character and situation and were important to telling the story, I listened to lyrics in a new way — a more discerning way — especially when I then heard them again, sung, week after week, on *Your Hit Parade*.

One of the hits played was a song called, “*Come Rain Or Come Shine*” (1946), I’d find out later that that stunning song came out of a Broadway musical I had *not* seen, “*St. Louis Woman*,” and that the lyrics were by the same Johnny Mercer of “*Strip Polka*” fame, and that the music was by Harold Arlen. Mercer and Arlen— two geniuses that would come to be recognized collectively as one of the greatest American songwriting teams.

Then there were the movie musicals. All the great American songwriters — Kern, The Gershwin’s, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin, Rogers and Hart, Harry Warren, Harold

Arlen, Richard Whiting — often wrote great songs for usually mediocre musical films; songs that became more popular than the films (outlived them, too) and, like the Broadway song hits, were played over and over on *The Make Believe Ballroom* and on *Your Hit Parade*; songs like Mercer's, "You Were Never Lovelier" and "I'm Old Fashioned," (Music by Jerome Kern — 1942) from the Fred Astaire/Rita Hayworth film, "You Were Never Lovelier;" the Arlen/Mercer, "One For My Baby, And One More For The Road" (1943), from the Astaire film, "The Sky's The Limit." And when those songs were played on radio they seemed to be aimed directly at you. At me. They talked to all of us, one at a time.

Four: Mercer and The American Songbook

After the UNLV "And The Angels Sing," and over the years, I begin to collect in earnest my Johnny Mercer CD collection and to read everything I can about Mercer and his place in the American Songbook. In fact, all the books I read then are *about* the Songbook, but *always* have a special chapter on Johnny Mercer. Then, he did not yet rate the special biographies (and TV documentaries and DVD's) that he was to rate in the future — today.



In any Mercer chapter of each book there would be a mention of a composer/ collaborator, which led to my reading a book like Edward Jablonski's, "Harold Arlen: Happy With The Blues" (Da Capo, 1968), and Jablonski's expanded edition, "Harold Arlen: Rhythm, Rainbows and Blues," (Northwestern University Press, 1996).

But my main book of that period was Max Wilk's, *"They're Playing Our Song: Conversations With America's Classic Songwriters"*, (Da Capo, 1991). What was unique about that book was that Max recorded conversations with so many great American songwriters who were then, still alive, Mercer among them.

I call the late Max Wilk by his first name because I had the pleasure of spending July, 2004 with Max at the O'Neill Theatre Center's annual playwright's conference. We were both Mentors to playwrights developing their new plays there. When we met on the registration line, I could not believe my luck: Max's book was my bedtime reading at the time! As we walked the beaches of Waterford, Connecticut, home of the O'Neill Theatre Center, Max and I would talk American Songbook talk and would improvise naughty lyrics to the great songs; but mostly, Max would fill in and elaborate on so many details he was not able to get into his book. He also gave me a cassette copy, which I treasure, of Jule Styne playing tunes from his shows on a concert grand and with a full symphony orchestra.

The chapters in Max's book, *"They're Playing Our Song"* were essentially his edited recorded conversations with the great song makers (or with collaborators and/or associates of the dead ones), with very little of Max's commentaries left in them, so that you were often left in his book with an extended songwriter's monologue, capturing the vocal and speech patterns and quirks of each song writer. Jule Styne's piece in the book, for example, is a virtual run-on riff, apparently catching the way Styne talked.

In the Mercer chapter, you could hear Johnny's southern drawl *in the writing*, with the same simplicity, direct diction (and imagery) you'd hear in his lyrics. One often also got insights into the art and craft and the mystery — *and gossip* — of song making in Mercer's own language:

"... I get lyric ideas from anywhere. Maybe from a billboard on the street, or something I read. An idea will hit me and I jot it down. I'm an inside-the-matchcover type of guy. They don't always come fast, believe me. I remember once Hoagy Carmichael gave me two tunes to set. Well, I struggled over them for a long time. Must have been a year before I got one; I called it 'Skylark.' I called up Hoagy and I said, 'Hey, I think I got a lyric for your tune.' He said, 'What tune is that?' He'd *forgotten* it!" (Page 133)

Here's one of Johnny's rare failures. In his own words (from *They're Playing Our Songs*).

"Couple of years ago they asked me to do the song for a picture called *"The Sandpiper."* I worked up a lyric and brought it in, and the producer turned it down.

He went and got another one — *“The Shadow Of Your Smile.”* Huge hit. That can be pretty depressing.” And when Max Wilk asks Mercer if he liked the replacement song, Johnny grins and replies, “Well, it sort of sounded to me as if it were about a lady with a slight mustache. . .” (Page 136).



Mercer seemed to write lyrics on any subject on a lot of match covers throughout his career. He even wrote one on *how he wrote songs*, in his typical, *“I just toss it off”* way:

LITTLE OL' TUNE (*complete lyric, words and music by Mercer, 1957, unpublished*)

VERSE

*I know a friend of mine,
And his bizness is writing songs.
It's a kind of a gift,
And I get a big lift
From the melodies and diphthongs.*

*We got to talkin' once—
I was curious as could be—
He explained what ya' do—
Let me tell it to you,
Just the way it was told to me.*

REFRAIN

(1)
First you write a little ol' tune, real easy—

*Not as hard as to play Parcheesi.
Real simple chords in the key of C,
A melody you can croon.*

*Next you add some little ol' words on to it,
Try to get some people who sing to do it;
Then if they say, "Boy, have you got a hit!"
You act noncommittal and say,
"Just a little ol' tune."*

*(2)
Now record your little ol' tune — just hum it.
Should you try and fancy it up?
Far from it.
Dub in some top tenor harmony,
Just "mi-mi-mi," as you croon.*

*Next you sing a baritone part from way back,
And a zoom-zoom bass, and then start the playback.
Then when they say, "Man! He's singin' quartet!"
You act noncommittal and say,
"Just a little ol' tune."*

Typical Mercer; easy, slangy, set to one of his own bouncy melodies. Delightful, fun rhymes: *Songs/Diphthongs* (not pure, but they work for me). And Mercer simply expects the listener to know what a *diphthong* is. Also, I love ("dig," Mercer would say) the following lines, "*And a zoom-zoom bass/and then start the playback.*" The entire song happens, sans seam: *Seamless*. The singing just extends the speech into song. His recording of *Little Ol' Tune*, on the CD album, "*My Huckleberry Friend*," is the only one that exists for that song -- as far as I know. More about the *seamless* Mercer singing chops later.

Five: Carnegie Mellon's Osher

Throughout my teaching career I taught playwriting and text analysis, my expertise, at the University level. But my real passion was always the American Songbook. Over the years, that passion grew. When I retired as Benedum Professor of Playwriting at West Virginia University in 2010, I was asked to teach a course at Carnegie Mellon's *Osher Institute of Life Long Learning*. I requested to teach an overview course on The American Songbook — as it turns out, a first step into landing totally in *Johnny Mercer* territory two years later.

A typical semester at Osher, was six two hour sessions. Osher accepted my subject: *The American Songbook*. I decided to use only recorded music and to

supply each student in the class with the printed lyrics of each track. I would compile from my iTunes collection twenty to twenty five tracks on a CD for each class: About 120 tracks over the six classes. I would structure each session like a two-hour musical revue.

In that period, I broadened my research and read every book I could find on the American Songbook (see a partial list at the end of this piece). One of the main books was Philip Furia's, *Poets Of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists* (1990, Oxford Press). This was a book that focused on the evolution of American lyrics and their creators — with detailed analyses of content, styles, brilliance and contributions of the usual suspects — including (in the final chapter of the book) Johnny Mercer. Two years later, when I focused fully on Mercer for another Osher class, I turned to Furia again in his Mercer biography, *Skylark* (St. Martin's Press, 2003).

But was my desire to conduct a class in the Great American Songbook just an excuse to wallow in nostalgia? I tested that notion by introducing to the class an old (non-Mercer) song that might fit my mood: "*Among My Souvenirs*." I had just retired and was feeling sad about the swiftly passing years. I remembered the song title, "*Among My Souvenirs*," and the melody, and the opening lines ("*. . . There's nothing left for me/ of days that used to be. . .*"), but had no particular emotional past associations with the song. "*Among My Souvenirs*" (*music, Lawrence Wright; lyrics, Edgar Leslie*) was written in 1927, and I discovered a Judy Garland version that was recorded in 1957 on Capital records, a version that moved me deeply. Garland's voice on that recording was pure and simple, free of the emotionalism that often characterized her later attacks on a song. Playing this song in the class led to a discussion about what a song was, and what was special about "*Among My Souvenirs*" particular placing of word to musical notation, to tell *its* story.

The students were mature intelligent people with a great deal of life experience and, while the songs were a strong part of their backgrounds, nostalgia was only part of a song's appeal. One student said it very well: "A song often says the thing I'm deeply feeling at the moment — but can't express; the song expresses it for me — and says it so well, and so directly." Of course. "*Among My Souvenirs*," a song written in 1927, was expressing what I was deeply feeling in 2010, as I retired from one stage of my life to enter another. And the song did it directly and was deeply felt by a young Judy Garland (with Gordon Jenkins' musical arrangement). So, perhaps this song (and all the songs to follow in the class) were partly nostalgia wallows; but *then* the craft and simple artistry of music and lyric caught my (our) interest and began to whittle away at the wallow. Here's the complete lyric:

"Among My Souvenirs"

*There's nothing left for me,
of days that used to be,
I live in memory,
among my souvenirs.*

*Some letters tied with blue,
a photograph or two,
I find a rose from you,
among my souvenirs.*

*A few more tokens rest
within my treasure chest,
And though they do their best
to give me consolation;*

*I count them all apart,
and as the teardrops start,
I find a broken heart
among my souvenirs.*

And because we had the lyrics in front of us, as we listened to the song, we began to explore how expertly syllable matched musical notation to create a jewel of a moment in this *Broken Hearted One's* painful reminiscence. Every word supports the overall image of a “*treasure chest*” of “*tokens*” — letters, photographs, a rose — “*souvenirs*” — *objects* that say, *a heart has been broken*. The gentle word “*rest*” says to me that all the tokens have been carefully (and lovingly?) stored and “*do their best*” to give the *Broken Hearted One* “*consolation*” (a word I questioned at first, but came to appreciate: It sings).

The language is of its period, of course — and deeply felt; and the universal feeling of loss transcends any sense of the language being dated. Only the phrase “all apart” seems a bit forced. The idea, I think, is that The *Broken Hearted One* explores each object, piece by piece, one by one — part by part, “*apart*”, in that sense. The lyricist lands on the word “*apart*” to set off the rhyme for “*start*” and “*heart*.” To fit the melody, he needs a two-syllable word, with the accent on the second syllable. “*Apart*” works for him and for the song, so he leaves it.

It occurred to me that *the treasure chest* of objects, in “*Among My Souvenirs*,” becomes an *objective correlative* — a literary concept the poet T. S. Eliot helped make famous in his 1920 essay on HAMLET, and means — *a prop or object that expresses a specific emotion*. The objects saved in *Among My Souvenirs* tell you all you need to know to fill in character background and, perhaps, backstory. And once that occurred to me, it further occurred to me that using something as compressed as a song lyric, that exposed a character’s moment of angst in the context of an objective correlative, might be useful for creative exercises in creating character and character development in playwriting and/or acting classes — an idea that picked up speed in me after the American Songbook

classes, when I confronted (but this time in more depth) the genius lyrics of the genius Johnny Mercer. So, stopping to explore words in this new way (for me)-- words that were originally written to be sung -- started with the 1927 song, "*Among My Souvenirs*," in the first Osher class of The Great American Songbook at Carnegie Mellon University in Pittsburgh, eighty three years after the song was first written.

I started the American Songbook classes with European operetta influences and discovered, to my surprise, that I *liked* operetta -- even went to see a Pittsburgh CLO production of Sigmund Romberg's THE STUDENT PRINCE (written in 1924). Glorious, soaring tunes, great voices -- awful comedy. The lyrics, by Dorothy Donnelly, matched the lush melodies, and were serviceable and touching. They also fulfilled, with some charm, the demands on lyricists of the day to be "poetic," far from the more natural speech approach that later lyricists (including Mercer) strived to achieve.

Here's one of "*The Student Prince* "songs ("*Golden Days*"):

*Golden days in the sunshine of our happy youth.
Golden days, full of innocence and full of truth.
In our hearts we remember them all else above;
Golden days, days of youth and love.*

*How we laughed with a gaiety that had no sting,
Looking back through memory's aid.
We will know life has nothing sweeter than its springtime,
Golden days, when we're young, Golden days.*

No *specific* objects in this song -- all generalities, but is still effective. The theme of lost youth has stayed a staple of songs through the ages -- especially through the songs of Johnny Mercer. Even the phrase ". . .*all else above*. . ." is still being used by lyricists. Well, with only five words in the English language to rhyme with "love" -- *shove, glove, dove, above* and sometimes *of* -- what else is an American lyricist, of any period, to do? Find other ways, of course -- *many* other ways -- to say, "*I love you*."

Some discoveries made in the six two-hour American Songbook Classes:

1) Besides writing his song masterpieces (which I play in the class devoted to him), Irving Berlin, in his early, lower NYC East Side days, wrote songs like, *The Yiddisha Ball, Marie From Sunny Italy, Abie Sings An Irish Song* and, *Hey, Wop, It's Seven O'Clock, Get Up!* From that early Berlin period, I play for the class, *Cohen Owes Me Ninety-Seven Dollars*. Funny. And a charming piece, in which the father, on his death bed, makes his son promise to get back the ninety seven dollars Cohen borrowed years before. And I fall in love all over again with Berlin's

***“I Love a Piano”* (“ . . .So you can keep your fiddle and your bow/ Give me a p-i-a-n-o, oh, oh/ I love to stop right beside an upright/ Or a high-toned baby grand”) And I’m awed by the simple genius of the closing lines of Berlin’s, *“All Alone”* “-- *Wondering where you are/ and how you are/and if you are/ all alone, too.*”**

2) Who knew? -- that the legendary “Red Hot Mama,” Sophie Tucker, had some jazz chops in her, as in her famous *Some Of These Days (I’m Gonna Miss You Honey)* signature number. But the song, which I recalled as being almost camp, is, under study, truly interesting and, structurally, a bit complex: The singer is both narrator of the tale and becomes the woman being left by the man going away, and Sophie shifts from singing narrator to singing *as* the character, *“I feel so lonely/Just for you only/For you know honey/ You’ve had your way. . .”*. Then the woman, who apparently is supposed to wait for the man, decides *not* to wait for his return. The man, hearing this, rushes home to the woman (apparently, to continue *“having his way”* with her); but it’s too late. The woman takes off. This time her refrain is gently sung as a sad revenge refrain. So the song is both narrative and drama *and* with a dramatic journey, and Sophie Tucker navigates through the structure skillfully, as narrator and character. At one point, she so rags the tune, that it almost becomes scat singing. Who knew?

3) In the class devoted to the songs of Jerome Kern, Sandy Stewart, a singer I didn’t know and discovered on a Jerome Kern CD compilation, startles me with her voice, musicality and arrangements. Turns out she’s the mother of jazz pianist Bill Charlap. Their daughter/son J.S. Bach arrangement for Kern’s, *Just The Way You Look Tonight*, is classy, classic and unforgettable.

4) In the Rogers and Hart class, I find a Tony Bennett magnificent Rogers & Hart CD collection and discover a Hart lament that becomes one of my Hart favorites, *“This Funny World (Is making fun of you).*” Suits my then mood—and world view.

5) A jazz stylist, Kathleen Landis, on a CD that weaves Gershwin songs through tracks devoted to Gershwin’s *Cuban Overture*, sings a sultry, seductive *“Do It Again.*” And you know exactly what she means by *“it.”* Her rendition of the Gershwin’s, *“Isn’t It A Pity,*” ain’t bad either. In that same class devoted to the Gershwin’s, I include a movement of George’s, *Concerto In F* and some *Porgy and Bess* tracks from the Louis Armstrong/Ella Fitzgerald *“Porgy”* CD. If I were doing the class now, I would of course include Michael Feinstein’s *“The Gershwins and Me,*” recently published and that includes a dynamite CD with priceless Feinstein commentary.

6) For the Harry Warren class (*“You’ll Never Know,” “The Lullaby Of Broadway”*), I discover that the hit song Beyoncé made famous at President Obama’s first Inaugural--*“At Last”* -- was composed by Harry Warren in 1941.

7) In the class featuring the popular songs of WWII, I discover that British legend Vera Lynn is one of the best singers of the classic popular songs I’ve ever heard:

Diction, vocal color, passion, power. Extraordinary. Talk about singer and song conjuring an era. . .

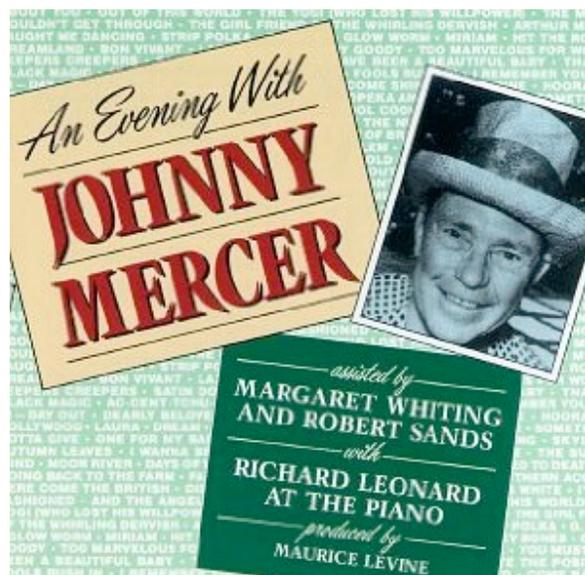
8) I find interesting CD collections devoted to the works of one single master (Berlin/Warren/Porter/Yip Harburg/Arlen/Mercer, of course), especially from the Susannah McCorkle sets that often feature obscure tracks of each composer (Jazz singer McCorkle, chronically depressed, alas, committed suicide in May of 2001 in NYC).

9) I become more proficient in designing two-hour classes into musical revue structures. Everything I learned, back in "*And The Angel's Sing*" Mercer UNLV days, I apply to creating each Songbook Class. For the classes, though, as opposed to the UNLV "*And The Angel's Sing*" stage musical revue that featured *live* performers, I have the luxury of using recordings of songs by the greatest entertainers America has ever known. In addition, the contrasts of early recording quality and the modern technical advances, from generation to generation, give the classes different sound environments, color variety, and make each class more interesting. Then there are the slow-to-fast tempos of the contrasting Kern-Berlin-Porter-Gershwin-Arlen-Carmichael-Warren-Van Heusen-Mercer tracks that give variety to each class, as well as the often knockout arrangements and bravura performance-highs from a Sinatra, Ella Fitzgerald, Spike Jones, Mel Tormè, Barbra Streisand, Mario Lanza, Tony Bennett, Michael Feinstein, among, literally, a hundred others.

10) I realize that I can easily expand this to a year's course, and include more American and World history within each songwriter's timeline: *History Through Song*. I am especially aware of this in classes devoted to the songs of WWII. I believe I even detoured to a songwriter like the German Frederick Hollander, whom I admire, one of the escapees from the Nazis, who fled to this country and wrote songs with American composers. It then occurs to me that I know of no Musical Theatre Program that has an extensive, exclusive Great American Songbook curriculum. Or, at the least, how the great lyrics of the great lyricists of that golden age of American Lieder can be used in actor and playwriting training. I decide to work on such a program.

10) And when I devote half a class to Johnny Mercer -- and play the 15 minute finale-medley from Mercer's March 14, 1971, YMHA Lyrics and Lyricists concert, and see how delighted and stunned the class is by the man's catalogue (so am I, revisiting it) -- I decide that if I ever do a Songbook class again, I will devote it all to him: To Mercer. Two years later (Osher at CMU again), *I do* devote the class to Johnny Mercer.

Six: The Mercer Class



There are some musical events I am sorry I was not part of in my lifetime: *Any Sinatra recording session; the first performance of Gershwin's "Concerto In F" (with George Gershwin playing piano with the New York Philharmonic); Tony Bennett's herculean 1962 Carnegie Hall Concert; the Tony Bennett/Bill Evans sessions; Any Jacques Brel live concert; any Mel Tormè/George Shearing concert – and Johnny Mercer's March 14, 1971, YMHA Lyrics and Lyricists concert.*

Before working on the UNLV *"And The Angels Sing"* show, my then agent, Gilbert Parker, gave me a cassette recording of the Mercer YMHA Concert. The famous Young Man's Hebrew Association in New York City produced (still produces) these concerts, devoted to famous lyricists of the day. Back in the 70s, that meant concerts devoted to (and presented by) lyricists Yip Harburg, Alan J. Lerner, Steven Sondheim, Sammy Cahn, Jerry Herman, Kander and Ebb, Sheldon Harnick, singing their own lyrics and talking about the lyric craft and their careers. I have cassettes of all those evenings, except (damn!) Yip Harburg. They are all wonderful. If you ever want to hear what a lyric is really about, hear it sung/spoken by the lyricist him/herself. I just located on iTunes the YMHA evening devoted to lyricist Dorothy Fields and, sure enough, Ms Fields, singing her own, *"I Can't Give You Anything But Love, Baby"* *"Hey Big Spender,"* *"On The Sunny Side Of The Street,"* *"I Won't Dance,"* and especially, *"Diga Diga Do,"* and *"He Had*

Refinement,”-- are delightful, and she tells the story of the lyrics much better than the trained *singer-singers* who assist her in the evening.

The March 14, 1971, YMHA Lyrics and Lyricists Concert, featured Johnny Mercer singing and narrating at the piano, and followed a biographical path through his career, with an assist on two songs from Margaret Whiting, at the top of her game. This is the list of the song medley in Part 1 (including some obscure pieces):

Out of Breath (and Scared to Death of You), I'm Going Back to the Farm, Fare-Thee-Well to Harlem, Pardon My Southern Accent, Here Come the British With A Bang Bang, Dixieland Band, I'm an Old Cowhand (From the Rio Grande), Bob White (Whatcha Gonna Swing Tonight?), I'm Old Fashioned (Whiting, solo), And The Angels Sing, I Thought About You, Out Of This World, The Yoga (Who Lost His Willpower), The Medium Couldn't Get Through, The Girl Friend of the Whirling Dervish, Arthur Murray Taught Me Dancing in a Hurry, Strip Polka, G.I. Jive, Glow Worm, The Pepsodent Commercial, Hit the Road to Dreamland (with Whiting), Bon Vivant.

The last 15 minutes of the concert consists of a closing medley of what Mercer calls his “Bread and Butter Songs.” Here’s *that* list:

Lazy Bones, Goody Goody. Too Marvelous for Words, Jeepers Creepers, Satin Doll, You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby, That Old Black Magic, Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate The Positive, Fools Rush In, I Remember You, Day In - Day Out, Dearly Beloved, Come Rain or Come Shine, Tangerine, Hooray for Hollywood, Laura, Dream, On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe, Something's Gotta Give, One for My Baby (And One More for the Road), In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening, Skylark, Autumn Leaves, I Wanna Be Around, Blues in the Night, Charade, Summer Wind, Moon River, Days of Wine and Roses.

Every so often I’d listen to the Mercer YMHA concert on my hour and fifteen minute ride down to West Virginia U and, over and over, I would replay the game of “*did Mercer write that one, too?*” When I played the YMHA Mercer concert for my CMU Osher American Songbook class in the year 2010, transferred to CD, there was the same reaction from the class: “*Did he write that one, too?*” There was a similar reaction when I used the Mercer medley of the CD to kick off the CMU Osher *Mercer* classes two years later, in 2012.

But there was something else developing in the first Mercer class, listening to that YMHA Mercer performance -- an exciting new discovery: The delight of listening to Mercer’s expressive voice and *his* delight in singing his own delightful songs--as much as the overall delight of rehearsing the delightful songs themselves. I had known that, of course, as far back as the UNLV Mercer experience, when I wrote in the program notes about “*the infectious joy of his singing and performing.*” But when I settled on the 25 tracks for the first Mercer

class, that Mercer voice began to take on an even more prominent place in my appreciation and love for the man and for his work. The voice began to enter my heart. First, I played a number of recordings of Mercer singing his own very distinctive *comic* songs, each with its own kind of inspired lunacy. Here are portions of two of them: “*The Bathtub Ran Over Again*” and “*The What-Cha -Ma-Call-It.*”

(“*Bathtub. . .*”*Music by Michael H. Cleary, 1934*)

*“Oh! The bathtub ran over again,
While I was lying there dreaming,
Lying there and dreaming of you--
Yes the bathtub, ran over, as tubs will do,
And the ceiling got soakin’ again;
The folks below began saying,
 “Dreamin’ ‘bout your baby’s okay,
 But the house is floating away!”*

(And here’s part of “*The What-Cha -Ma-Call-It,*” *Music, Gene DePaul, Dropped from the film musical, “Seven Brides From Seven Brothers,” 1956*)

*“You put the whoosy
On the whatsy,
Attach the whatsy
to the whoosy,
Connect the thingamajig
To the thingamabob,
and that will make the whatchamacallit go!”*

“Bathtub” was originally written in 1934, but I don’t know when it was originally recorded. I have it on the CD Mercer compilation, “*Pardon My Southern Accent,*” released in 1993. It’s a young, almost hay-seedy Mercer, mooning about his “baby,” while in the bathtub, and too love sick to turn off the water. Easy. Charming. Starry eyed. “*The What-Cha-Ma-Call-It,*” was from the album, “*My Huckleberry Friend, Johnny Mercer,*” released in 1974, two years before Mercer died. The song is Mercer having fun with made-up phrases people use when they can’t remember what an object is called. The lyric is a gem of a tour-de-force by a songwriter/singer who *loves, loves, loves* words and can take nonsense phrases people devise and make a kind of poetry of them and, while smiling (never smirking), gives the need its due, even admires it. And with his darkened, more mature 1974 voice, he swings his own tune in a — for me — *moving* way. It is that “moving” ingredient” in the Mercer voice that intrigued me, when I opted to pursue what was, in effect, a Mercer retrospective class.

Before getting to Mercer’s serious stand-alone songs and stage-musical songs, I had intended to include the following two comic songs written and recorded by

Johnny Mercer: *“Pass The Bones To Henry Jones, ‘Cause Henry Don’t Eat No Meat”* (singing a duet with Nat King Cole), and his solo recording of *“Personality.”* I always loved Mercer’s renditions of those two songs and always assumed that the lyrics were written *by* him — they seem so quintessential Mercer. They’re not. *“Pass The Bones. . . ,”* I discover, has words and music by Danny Barker and Vernon Lee; *“Personality”* has music by Jimmy Van Heusen and words by Johnny Burke (and the Mercer-like refrain: *“When Madam Pompadour was on a ballroom floor/Said all the gentlemen ‘Obviously,’The madam has the cutest . . . personality,”* seems pure Mercer: Smart, literate, gently risqué. But, no; Mercer did not write it. His recording of the Van Heusen-Burke *“Personality,”* however, helped make that recording a hit: *“What did Romeo see in Juliet?/Or Figaro in Figarette?/ Or Jupiter in Juno?/ You know!”* I guess I also thought Mercer wrote that one because in a later lyric, the *“you know”* phrase appears again in his lyric for *“Satin Doll”* (music, Duke Ellington/Billy Strayhorn): *“Telephone numbers, well you know, ‘Doing my rhumbas with uno. . . .”*

When I wrote Mandy Mercer-Neder, asking her about her father’s singing, she wrote back, “I don’t know what he thought about his singing, but he would rather perform than write.”

And he recorded many of his own song hits throughout his career and, because he was one of the most popular singers of his day, he made hits for other songwriters. He recorded those hits as lone soloist, and with others: Margaret Whiting, Judy Garland, Bing Crosby, Bobby Darin, the Pied Pipers and other groups — even, in the 1940s with *The Crew Chiefs*, an all-GI vocal group (*“I’ve Been Floating Down The Old Green River On The Good Ship Rock And Rye,”* lyrics by Bert (“Three Little Words”) Kalmer, music, Joe Cooper — as well as demo recordings with André Previn (from Mercer/Previn’s last stage musical, *“The Good Companions,”* and from the Mercer/Dolan musical, *“FOXY,”* that starred Bert (*the Cowardly Lion*) Lahr.

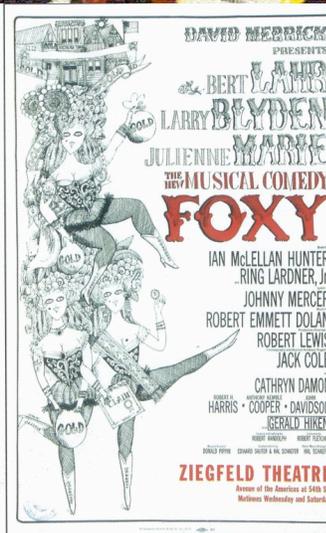
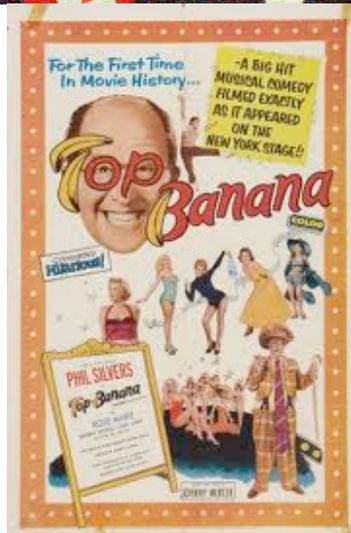
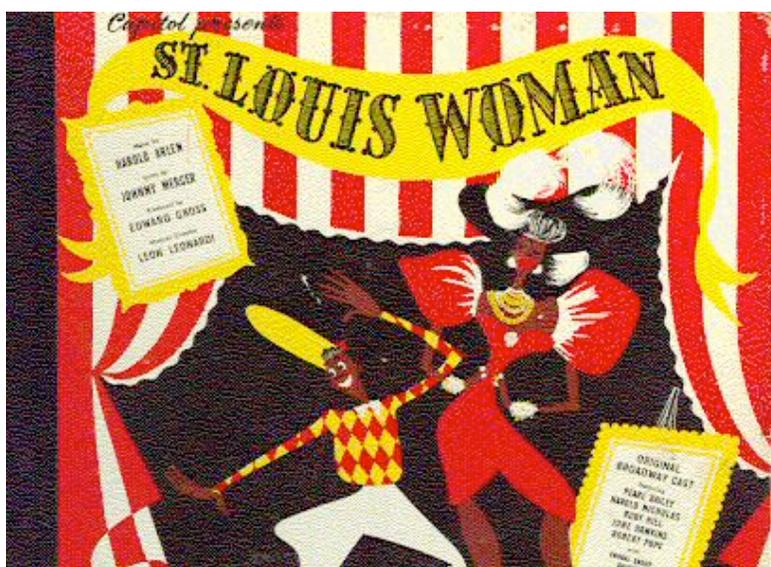
The range of Mercer’s taste, in what songs to record, was extensive and varied, and are songs, I think, Mercer loved and perhaps wished he had written. On one album, *The*

Very Best of Johnny Mercer, there are a total of 62 tracks of Mercer singing from every period of his recording life, with songs ranging from Frank Loesser’s, *“Baby, It’s Cold Outside,”* and another favorite of mine from Loesser’s first musical *“Where’s Charley,” “The New Ashmolean, Marching Society, And Student Conservatory Band.”* (Mercer was often partial to long titles in his own songs: *“On The Atchison Topeka And The Santa Fe,”* — The Harvey Girls, *“The S. S. Commodore Ebenezer McAfee The Third”* — Foxy.) In addition, there are Mercer vocals of the Dietz and Schwartz, *“I Guess I’ll Have To Change My Plans,”* and The Gershwins’, *“Embraceable You,”* and a funky, very bluesy, *“St. Louis Blues,”* and a driving, devotional, *“Ring Them Bells,”* and another song I thought Mercer

had written (but didn't) "*Zip-a-Dee-Doo-Dah.*" And they are all first rate recordings and all are infused with Mercer's joy of singing.

But it is when I include in my overview of Mercer's talents, his songs for the theatre, that I confront the serious side of his voice — and his often overlooked expertise as a musical theatre lyricist.

Seven: Mercer And Musical Theatre



I had always accepted the usual view of Mercer as not being successful as a Musical Theatre lyricist. This was his own view. He was most comfortable, he'd say, writing the single song — of taking an abstract melody, coming up with a title and going away to find the right words to make that melody tell a concrete story.

Still, Mercer continued writing for the stage almost until he died. He seemed to have a need to create lyrics specifically fashioned for characters functioning in the context of a dramatic event. His one great regret as a lyricist was that he never wrote a “classic” Broadway musical — one that would be revived over and over again. For the CMU Osher Mercer class, I at least wanted to illustrate Mercer’s versatility and to include his musical theatre work. What I discovered was that he *could* be a superb — and varied — stage musical theatre writer. “*Come Rain Or Come Shine*” was written specifically for the all-black musical, “*St. Louis Woman*” (1946: Music, Harold Arlen) and was a hybrid— a song that could (and did) exist *outside* the show’s book needs, and that became an immediate recording hit and standard that all the great singers recorded — but was a song (a love duet, actually), too, that *did* come out of — and fulfill — the needs of specific characters in a specific stage moment— between the characters Della and the lucky horse-racing jockey Little Augie (. . .*but, don’t ever bet me/ cause I wanna be true, if you’ll let me. . .*”). The difference between this stage musical love duet and, say, the “*If I Loved You*” duet from Rogers and Hammerstein’s “*Carousel*” (and this might not be a fair analogy), is that “*If I Loved You*” is a complete dramatic scene, full of discovery and subtext, and ends, emotionally, a long distance away from where it starts. “*Come Rain Or Come Shine*” lacks those theatrical layers and journey.

But another musical number in “*St. Louis Woman*” — Lila’s monologue — is a superb, integrated, musical theatre song, full of emotion, pain, rage, and is at once a resolution of a previous event and that prepares us for Lila’s shooting of her lover, later in the piece. It was never meant to be plucked out of the show to become a standard —though Dinah Shore recorded an excellent version and Barbara Cook’s version —the one I used in the class — is thoroughly dramatic and renders all the despair and emotional colors needed for the stage moment. It was meant to do one job: musically reveal a particular character in one particular moment of a particular show. Here’s the complete lyric:

I HAD MYSELF A TRUE LOVE

*I had myself a true love,
A true love who was something to see.
I had myself a true love
At least that's what I kept on telling me.*

*The first thing in the morning
I still try to think of a way
To be with him some part of the evening,
And that's the way I live through the day.*

*I had myself a true love,
But now he's gone and left me for good.
The Lord knows I've done heard
those back-yard Whispers*

Going 'round the neighborhood.

***There may be a lot of things I miss
A lot of things I don't know,
But I do know this:
Now I ain't got no love,
And once upon a time I had a true love.***

***In the evening, in the doorway,
While I stand there and wait for his comin'.
With the house swept and the clothes hung,
And a pot on the stove there a-hummin'
Where is he, while I watch the rising moon?
With that gal, In that damned old saloon!***

***No, that ain't the way that it used to be!
No, and everybody keeps telling me. . .***

***There may be a lot of things I miss,
A lot of things I don't know,
But I do know this:
Now I ain't got no love,
And once upon a time I had a true love.***

The unbearable pain and murderous rage in Barbara Cook's reading of "*With that gal, In that damned old saloon!*" -- and how she makes a complete drama out of the two words, "*May be*" is what dramatic singing is all about.

And in that same "*St. Louis Woman*" there is a scene at a Wake where individuals and the ensemble sing:

"LEAVIN' TIME"

***"A Woman: A baby's born, he starts to crawl—
He's like a young saplin' growin' tall.***

***2nd Woman: And just as sure as he must climb,
Everybody has his own leavin' time.***

Ensemble: Everybody has his own leavin' time.

***Sinner, sinner,
Take a helpin' hand
Reachin' out to you!***

*Raise up your head
An' seek the sky—
The sun an' moon,
Both is riding high.
But just as sure
As day must climb,
Everybody has his own leavin' time."*

Some in the class said that the piece reminded them of "*Porgy And Bess*." It does have that kind of dramatic musical heft. In one section of the piece, Harold Arlen takes one of his musical detours, a hands-clapping riff that Mercer -- a former Episcopalian choir boy from Savannah and influenced by the black churches he observed there -- sets with these words:

*Yes, yes, you better be ready,
Yes, yes, the Gospel done said.
Yes, yes, you better be ready,
When they fits that halo
Over your head!*

The number concludes with the specific mention of the man whose wake is being mourned and condemned:

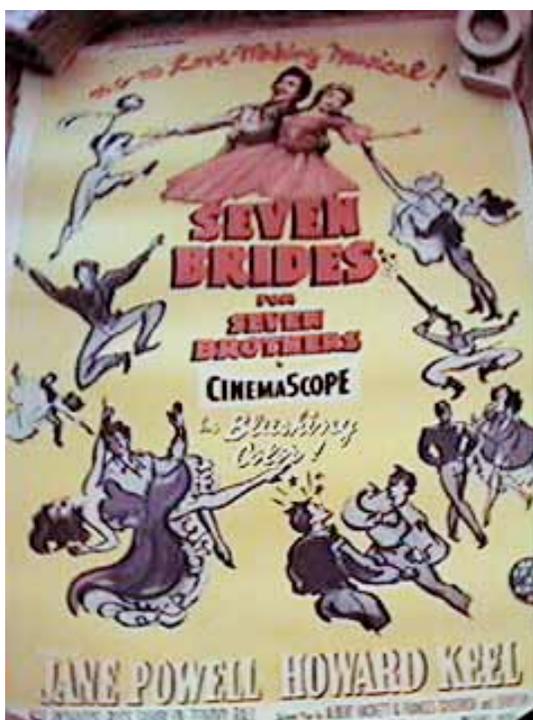
*Chorus: Brother Biglow Brown,
Got his just reward—
Brother Biglow Brown
Gone to meet his Lord,
 Everybody has his own leavin' time.
 Everybody has his own leavin' time—
 Fare thee well!*

And it is in this scene that we find out that it was really Lila who shot the character Biglow Brown and why. The musical/lyrical needs of an integrated scene have been met—through song.

Certainly, I agree with Mercer that he was more at home with the isolated song in a scene — especially the lighter or comic song. But this is what I took away from the Mercer class: Mercer *could* — *AND DID* — write well, the integrated songs, scenes, production numbers, whatever the needs for the *stage* moment. He had integrated moments in his other stage musicals, "*Texas Little Darling*," "*Lil Abner*," "*Top Banana*," "*Saratoga*," "*Foxy*" and his last musical, "*The Good Companions*."

I would not have been surprised if Mercer had been uncomfortable in the rough and tumble, often insane, collaborative effort needed for a stage musical (like a new number overnight to replace one that wasn't working in the out-of-town tryout and/or for one of the previews!) — especially when the books had problems -- as they often did for Mercer's musicals. But Mercer delivered the

integrated goods when needed, and under pressure, and often the shows had respectable runs (but not, apparently, for the ages). Also, Mercer may not have had the more violent and deep, in-your-face chops needed for theatrical shenanigans — he was very much the southern patrician gentlemen. On the other hand, if he had been able to create for the stage while in the midst of one of his legendary drunken confrontations that seemed to erupt from, by all accounts, some deep pit of unhappiness in him, he might have had a dollop of the right killer-instinct balance required for stage collaboration.



And Mercer, teaming with composer Gene DePaul, *did* write the film “*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*” — in my opinion, the best original and integrated film score since the “*Wizard Of Oz.*” Had he still been living today, Mercer might have been delighted to discover that “*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers*” had been turned into a stage musical that continued to have a life *on stage* in various revivals, over several continents, and is still running. Somewhere. On the other hand, the stage musical “*Seven Brides For Seven Brothers*” added songs by other writers and Mercer might have frowned on that. Mercer, apparently had been outraged, years before, when several Harold Arlen/Ted Koehler songs from the old Cotton Club days were added, without Mercer’s knowledge or okay, to a new quasi-operatic version of “*St Louis Woman,*” re-named, “*Blues Opera,*” and then “*Free and Easy*” (1959), “*Free and Easy.*” opened as far Off-Broadway as you can get — Amsterdam, The Netherlands. The journey of the musical “*St Louis Woman*” to the opera “*Free And Easy,*” to its ballet version, during the final days of the *Dance Theatre of Harlem* (2003), is a saga of ego clashes, racial politics, book missteps and lousy timing — a true story worthy of its own musical.

Eight: The Mercer Singing Voice

All the voices of the great singers of the golden age of the American Songbook were distinctive, immediately recognizable. In addition to the vocal fingerprinting of each artist (Crosby, Sinatra, Tormè, Bennett, Louis Armstrong, Jo Stafford, Doris Day, Lena Horne, Billy Holiday, Dinah Washington, Margaret Whiting, Ella Fitzgerald, among many, many others — immediately recognizable from their first notes), I suspect that this was also partially due to the development of the microphone that did not require the singer to project and/or distort the voice beyond a more conversational effort, so that his/her singing voice was a non-pushed extension of the speaking voice. An interesting and larger issue, I realize; one that deserves further exploration (especially if you include the strange business of “miking” in the Theatre, where the live actor is wired and amplified, while *still* projecting to those on stage and to the live audience in the old fashioned “putting-it-out-there” way, causing some kind of aural disconnect experience. To *this* audience member anyway). With Mercer, that *non-pushed speech-singing*, was his essence, and, was immediately recognizable; it was merely Mercer chatting (in song) with each listener. I always knew that, of course, but, again, it was the darkening color and deepening emotional range of Mercer’s speech-singing that surprised me.

In the album notes for the CD *“My Huckleberry Friend: Johnny Mercer Sings The Songs of Johnny Mercer,”* Composer and Musicologist Alec Wilder writes: *“As for the singing performances of these lyrics, I can only say that in many instances I prefer John’s interpretations to those of all but the greatest popular singers.”*

In his memoir, *“Did They Mention The Music?”* Henry Mancini writes (with the assist of Gene Lees), *“Johnny Mercer was one of the finest demonstrators not only of his songs but anybody’s songs. He had a captivating style. I sat down in that huge soundstage and played, and Johnny sang ‘Days Of Wine and Roses,’ in the best bullfrog voice with a crack in it and the jazz inflection that was always there somewhere. . . . And there was Jack (Lemmon) with a tear rolling down his cheek, and Blake (Edwards) was misty eyed. . . .”* (Contemporary Books, 1965, page 112)

This is how Mercer coached Margaret Whiting in her first hit record for Capitol: *“Moonlight In Vermont”* (Lyrics, John Blackburn, music, Karl Suessdorf, 1944. A song noted for its lyrics not being rhymed, and for each verse being a haiku)

“Mercer told her to talk the lyric out as if it were a poem. For the opening line, ‘Pennies in a stream,’ he told her to imagine a New England snow-covered landscape as winter turns into spring.” ‘Now describe spring,’ he told her. ‘It’s coming from the cold into the first day of thaw. I can see little green things.’ ‘I was beginning to see it,’ said Whiting, ‘Johnny led me through the four seasons.’ Then he told her to visualize falling leaves in a New England autumn for ‘falling leaves of sycamore.’ ‘What I want from you are four qualities,’ he said, ‘four

seasons. You've got 'pennies in a stream' -- that's not literal -- that's the wonderful glittering look of metal when sun hits water. . .I want you to give me the four seasons. Crunchy cold. Then warm. The first smell of spring. . .and just think of the images." (From Philip Furia's Mercer bio, "Skylark" -- page 141)

And Johnny's images in his own lyrics ranged from the simple. . .

*"I took a trip on a train
And I thought about you.
I passed a shadowy lane
And I thought about you.*

*Two or three cars parked under the stars,
A winding stream. . .
Moon shinning down on some little town,
And with each beam,
Same old dream. . ."*

("I Thought About You:" Music, Jimmy Van Heusen, 1939)

. . .to the more fanciful. . .

*"Your lips where like a red and ruby chalice,
Warmer than the summer night.
The clouds were like an alabaster palace,
Rising to a snowy height.
Each star its own Aurora Borealis,
Suddenly you held me tight,
I could see the midnight sun. . ."*

(Midnight Sun: Music, Lionel Hampton & Sonny Burke, 1954)

. . .to the even more fanciful. . .

*". . .Then I hear the song
That only India can sing.
Softer than the plumage
On a black raven's wing;
High, upon a minaret I stand
And gaze across the desert sand
Upon an old enchanted land.
There's the maharajah's caravan,
Unfolding like a painted fan,
How small the little race of man. . ."*

*(Mercer's words set to the music of
Nikolai Rimsky Korsakov's, "Song of India," 1953)*

. . .or to the spring fecundity of barnyard animals. . .

***“All the henfolk are hatchin’
While their menfolk are scratchin’
To insure the survival
Of each brand new arrival.
Each nest is twittering,
They’re all baby sitting,
Spring, Spring, Spring!***

***“In the hole, though the gopher
Seems a bit of a loafer,
The industrious beaver
Puts it down to spring fever.
While there’s no antelope
Who feels that he can’t elope,
It’s Spring, Spring, Spring!***

***“To itself each amoeba
Softly croons, ‘Ach du lieber,’
While the proud little termite
Feels as large as a worm might.
Old poppa dragon fly
Is making the wagon fly,
It’s Spring, Spring, Spring!”***

***(“Spring, Spring, Spring:” Music Gene dePaul,
from the film “Seven Brides For Seven Brothers,” 1956)***

. . .to almost mystical, impressionist images. . .

***“A summer wind
Came blowing in across the sea.
It lingered there to touch your hair
And walk with me.
All summer long we sang a song
And strolled the golden sand. . .
Two sweethearts AND the summer wind.”***

(“A Summer Wind:” Music, Henry Meyer, 1969)

I assumed I’d be using the Sinatra hit recording of “A Summer Wind” when I introduced to the Mercer class his English versions of his foreign song hits (including “Autumn Leaves,” “When The World Was Young,” “Once Upon A Summertime”). But when I listened again to Mercer’s own recording of “A Summer Wind” on the “My Huckleberry Friend” CD, I discovered that it was much more moving than Sinatra’s, and I used Mercer’s recording in the class.

Which led me to listen again, more closely, to “My Huckleberry Friend.” Mercer’s renditions on that album, especially, of “Autumn Leaves,” “The Midnight Sun,”

“Come Rain Or Come Shine,” “The Days Of Wine And Roses” and, of course, “A Summer Wind,” are beautifully sung and quite moving. In his rendition of his own “The Days Of Wine And Roses,” Mercer (of all the singers I’ve heard sing this song — and they all have, and well, more fully suggests in this recording the existential qualities in the piece: “. . .through a meadow land/ toward a closing door/ a door marked ‘never more,’/ that wasn’t there before. . .” This is a line I tend to use more and more as the years peel away. (I’m always amazed when I come across an existential idea in an American popular song. This, for example, is from the Schwartz-Dietz “Dancing In The Dark,”: “. . .We’re waltzing in the wonder of why we’re here/ Time hurries by, we’re here, and gone.”)

The ***“My Huckleberry Friend”*** album combines two separate CDs made by Pye Records in England, two years before Mercer died. I assume, therefore, that it was made when Mercer was in England for the rehearsals of his last musical, ***“The Good Companions”*** (Music by Andre Previn), from which Mercer recorded one of his most beautiful demo’s, ***“Little Lost Dream”*** — a song that was dropped from ***“The Good Companions”*** before it opened. Mercer’s demo of ***“Little Lost Dream”*** is not on ***“The Good Companions”*** cast recording — though Mercer’s demos of ***“The Pleasure Of Your Company,”*** and ***“I’ll Tell The World”*** from that same show, are on that cast recording. Mercer’s demo of ***“Little Lost Dream,”*** however, singing only with piano (presumably Previn playing) is on ***“The Very Best Of Johnny Mercer”*** album. Surprisingly, Mercer did not make a recording of one of his (and Previn’s) most beautiful ***“Good Companions”*** ballads: ***“The Dance Of Life”*** (Previn, a superb jazz pianist, did record a gorgeous solo piano version of the song).

Together, ***“The Dance Of Life”*** and ***“Little Lost Dream”*** are the two late Mercer songs that, to me, epitomize Mercer’s most moving works and sum up his world view and, I think, final statements. And while they were written for a specific show and for specific characters in specific situations, like ***“Come Rain Or Come Shine,”*** they also exist independently from the show.

THE DANCE OF LIFE

***(Complete lyric, from the stage musical, “The Good Companions,” 1974)
Music, Andre Previn. Featured on the cast album, sung by Judi Dench)***

***The Dance of Life begins;
A thousand violins
Play softly in our ears,
The music of the spheres.***

***The Dance of Life says “Now.”
Come, hold me in the shadows.
We’ll find a way somehow,
To save the wasted years.***

*Our crystal ball on high,
Goes spinning through the sky;
Each twinkling spot of light uncovers
Lonely strangers, laughing lovers.*

*Let fortune call the tune,
We have our love to gamble on.
Turn on our friend the moon,
Come dance with me.
Come dance with me.
Our music ends too soon.*

And. . .

LITTLE LOST DREAM

*(Complete lyric, dropped from "The Good Companions."
Featured on the album, "The Very Best of Johnny Mercer,
Mercer Singing," 1974)*

Verse

*"Wishy-washy" — granted.
"Namby-pamby" — granted.
"Searching for the rainbow's end?"
— could be.
Lost my job — accepted.
Prospects poor — admitted.
What I want is unattainable.
Maybe even unexplainable;
I suppose I'll have to wait and see.*

Refrain

*I'm looking for a dream that got away,
Like a little lost sheep
I could never quite keep in sight.
I'm sure I'll come across it any day.
For I know it's somewhere out there in the night.
 She took me in her arms and kissed me sweetly,
 Most indiscreetly,
 And then it disappeared completely.
I only need the girl — I wonder who?
— To turn my little lost dream
Into a dream come true.*

The words of course are sad and filled with yearning (what the Germans call, sehnsucht; wonderful word (wonderful sound) I came across in a song by Friedrich Hollaender, “Eine Kleine Sehnsucht” (“Just A Little Yearning”). Hollaender, who, with Kurt Weill fled Nazi Germany to the US, wrote wonderful songs here, with Frank Loesser, among others. Mercer set “Sehnsucht” words to “Sehnsucht” melodies – but it is Mercer’s singing voice that gets to what I call “the center of pain,” of “Sehnsucht” in his songs – in “Little Lost Dream,” especially.

Of course, on “*The Good Companions*” cast album, Judi Dench in “*The Dance Of Life*” number, renders the character’s “center of pain” in the line, “We’ll find a way somehow/to save the wasted years,” and she does this by isolating the phrase “wasted years,” so that *what has been wasted* is deep and specific, as only Judi Dench can render a deep-seated emotion. Still, I hope someday to dig up a demo of Mercer singing “*The Dance Of Life*.” It would be definitive, I think (and possibly, unbearably heart breaking). It would have been recorded around the time the brain tumor he was to die from was beginning, I believe, to be evident, and might have deepened his “*sensucht*” mood. In the other demos of that period, even the up-tempo, lighter songs, seem to have a “Sehnsucht” coloring. To my ear.

It is very difficult to describe a voice through words an essay like this. In addition, my sense of “Sehnsucht” might not be other’s. On the other hand, we’re fortunate to have so may recordings of Mercer available, singing his own songs at every period of his career. And we can grab the full range – from jolly and whacked out, to the “Sehnsucht” of his later years.

And, of course, the exquisite words are Mercer at his – well – most exquisite.



Nine: On The Other Hand. . .

. . . *“The Dance of Life”* and *“Little Lost Dream”* — while filled with Mercer’s center of pain (in music, in content, and in singing voice) — they are also filled with the possibilities of success in the search, of the struggle *through* the pain which, of course, must always be there. The struggle is all, this mix seems to say.

“Let fortune call the tune,”
instructs the character in *“The Dance Of Life,”*
“We have our love to gamble on”

The belief in love, the betting *on* love, the hope *of* love, is essential — *was* essential — to the songwriter, especially the commercial songwriter of the golden age of the American Songbook — and Mercer was as commercial a songwriter as ever there was. The subject of *“love,”* for the commercial songwriter, was almost always at the center of the song; at least that *search* for love was where the journey of the song began. Because that is what all people, everywhere, were (are) concerned with, *longed* for (*long* for) — was worth *singing* about — *is* worth singing about — *love*, in all its aspects — including the fantasy that, obtaining it (*love*), will solve everything. At least for the moment. But, though *love* might be the specific search in a Mercer lyric, the listener can, and does, transcend and transfer that search to whatever search he/she aches for. The dream that has gotten away from me, for example, and that is *unattainable* (as I approach that Mercer *“door marked nevermore, that wasn’t there before”*), has nothing to do with love. Still, Mercer’s song speaks clearly to *“what is unattainable”* for me in *“Little Lost Dream,”* — at this moment. For me. But it’s in the music, too, of course.

In Mercer’s unpublished autobiography (1969), the manuscript of which is in the Johnny Mercer Collection at the Georgia State University, Mercer writes: *“There are certain writers who have a great feeling for tunes, no matter where they come from. I think I’m one of them. . . I need the melody first to suggest ideas to me. The composer’s emotion is his private business: what I try to do above all is to match the mood . . . “I simply get to thinking over the song, pondering over it in my mind, and all of a sudden, I get in tune with the infinite.”*

I don’t mean to suggest that *love* is the *only* subject the songwriter is solely focused on. Most songwriters often touch on other emotions, other themes -- even, at times, the theme of despair. Abel Meerapol’s *“Strange Fruit”* and Irving Berlin’s *“Supper Time,”* both about lynching in the South, as well as the ‘Yip’ Harburg-Jay Gorney, *“Brother Can you Spare A Dime”* are some examples. Mercer’s own, *“I Wonder What Became Of Me”* (1946),” is another example: *“Lights are bright,/Pianos making music all the night,/And they pour champagne / Just like it was rain./It’s a sight to see, But I wonder what became of me.”*

And Mercer's lyric chops on *"The Dance Of Life,"* two years before he died, are as Mercer-good as they get. The "dance" as a metaphor for life, is introduced in the very first line and in the very first words of its very first refrain,

*"The Dance of Life begins;
A thousand violins
Play softly in our ears,
The music of the spheres."*

And it all takes place on a ballroom in space, *"Our crystal ball on high/ Goes spinning through the sky,"* and the dots of light set off by the hanging ballroom crystal, *"uncovers"* the contrasting, *"Lonely strangers, laughing lovers"*

Then Mercer gives us the brilliant, romantic image,
"Turn on our friend the moon/ Come dance with me/ Come dance with me!"
and concludes with an existential coda:
Our music ends too soon."

And it is not just *anyone's* music, it is specific:
"Our music."

In *"Little Lost Dream,"* the singer is once again looking for the romantic songwriter's answer to happiness: the *"she"* — the *"dream that g arms and kissed me sweetly/ Most indiscreetly/ And then it disappeared completely."* And though the singer feels that *"What I want is unattainable/ Maybe even unexplainable"*, he's sure that he only needs *"the girl — I wonder who?/—To turn my little lost dream/ Into a dream come true."* Pain there, certainly — but hope to.



Ten. On the other hand. . .

When I listen to the 25 tracks on the “*Johnny Mercer, My Huckleberry Friend*” album — the album recorded in England two years before Mercer’s death — I realize that Mercer (perhaps with the help of an A&R person, but ultimately Mercer’s choices) selects from his catalog the *DOWN and UP* tempo songs. He still sees life as both. I’ve been concentrating, I know, on the *down*, because the late Mercer singing voice profoundly renders for me the depth of his sad songs’ sadness and “sensucht.” And I guess because they speak to my current view of my world. But the up tempo songs *are* there as well. And, with his mature voice, these songs render a profoundly *mature* joy, filled with *mature* high spirits: “*You Must Have Been A Beautiful Baby*,” “*Little Ol’ Tune*,” “*I Wanna Be In Love Again*,” “*Little Ingenue* (such a sweet song),” “*Something’s Gotta Give*,” “*Satin doll*,” “*It’s Great to Be Alive*,” “*The Whatcha-Ma-Call It*,” “*Too Marvelous for Words*,” “*The Air-Minded Executive*,” and one of my favorite of his whacky songs, “*Pineapple Pete*.”

PINEAPPLE PETE (Complete. *Music, Johnny Mercer, 1963*)

*Pineapple Pete with the luau seat,
He loves to sit and he loves to eat;
The sweetest guy you could hope to meet,
But it seems that his dinner goes to his seat.*

*Pineapple Pete started out on poi;
and when he started, did he enjoy!
He isn’t even a full-grown boy,
But he’s one-quarter avoird
— and half — dupois.*

*He went on to grapple
with Philadelphia scrapple,
With meatloaf and mustard
And cantaloupe and custard.
He ate so many starches,
He flattened both his arches.
And now no one is able
To pry him from the table —*

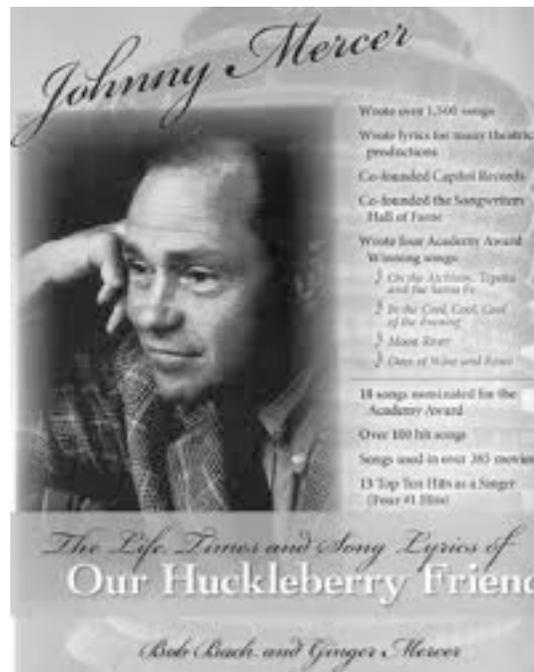
*Pineapple Pete has become so fat,
He’s got to stay seated where he’s at.
He can’t dig you so hurry out and meet
The world-famous eater,
With the enormous seater, Pineapple Pete.*

*While most folks are restin’
He’s chompin’ and digestin’.
While they’re busy surfin’.
He’s arfin’ and and he’s urfin’,*

**When they say “ Aloha” –
He holler’s out “some moah!”
A mouthful of papaya
Prevents him sayin’ “Hiya”;**

**Pete, I repeat, never watched his weight,
He keeps his eye on his neighbor’s plate,
And if you turn, or you miss a beat,
Man, you’re ten ounces thinner,
Cause who has your dinner
– *Pineapple Pete.***

And on “*The Good Companions*” album, Mercer makes a demo of one song and it and it is filled with his mature voice clinging to a joy in the world:



**“I’LL TELL THE WORLD”
(Music, Andre Previn (from the musical *The Good Companions*))**

**I’ll tell the world that it’s an elegant day
And what an elegant day I see.**

**I’ll tell the world that things are going my way,
And that’s exactly the way they turn out to be.**

**I get some grumbles and some gloomy remarks,
But I get beautiful smiles from people happy as larks.**

So, I'll tell the world that I'm on top of the world,
And that is just what the world tells me!

Eleven: Coda

In a month or so, I'll be making a pilgrimage to Savannah, Georgia, where Mercer was born and where Mercer is now buried in Bonaventure Cemetery — and where I'll try to get in touch with Johnny's "infinite" (I'm working on some musicals). Among other sights, I'll visit the actual Moon River — that "dream maker," that "heart breaker," and I'll pay my respects at Mercer's grave, the one with the inscription, "*And The Angels Sing.*" Mercer, in his over 1600 songs, wrote on just about every human endeavor, including the saying of goodbye. So, at that gravesite I'll get my chance to say a proper "Mercer goodbye" by quoting one of the master's best lyrics. Ever. Here it is:

**HOW DO YOU SAY AUF WIEDERSEHEN?
(Music, Tony Scibetta, 1967)**

How do you say "Auf Wiedersehen?"
To things you'll never see again?
The Wilhelmstrasse in the rain.
The day we ran to catch the train
That puffed along the river Seine. . .
Remember Paris?

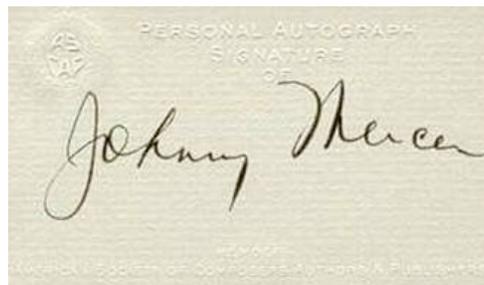
And best of all the Pyrenees.
Who could forget such memories?
That crazy trip, how typical of us,
To miss the bus — the plane, too!
How do you say, "Auf Wiedersehn," to these?

*The wild times, the small things,
The popular waltz of the day
It ended, as all things—
But when does the music go away?*

*Say Au Revoir but not good bye.
I've said it till I want to cry.
Perhaps the French could tell us what to do,
I wish I knew ah Liebschen
How do I say "Auf Wiedersehn" to you?*

How, indeed? RIP Johnny

Johnny Mercer
[Born, Nov 18, 1909 / Died, June 25, 1976]



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