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Roses in the Morning

It is often difficult to recall where and when you met someone but in this case I remember exactly. I had arrived in Los Angeles from New York and called a friend to ask if we might have dinner that evening. She said she had to attend a birthday party for John Williams, then asked, "Would you like to go?"

"Since it's my birthday too," I said, "I'd love to."

It was John's thirty-sixth birthday. I remember that because everybody brought him thirty-six of something. Someone brought him thirty-six baby turtles, on whose fate we can only surmise, and someone else gave him thirty-six Black Wing pencils. Black Wings were the fad among composers in those days. This was before someone discovered IBM Electrographic pencils, which became the next fad. Then someone found that the IBM secret was in the lead. Now just about everybody uses Scripto pencils with IBM leads. Anyway, because of the three dozen Black Wings, I can set the year as 1968, when John Williams turned thirty-six, the date as February 8, and the time as shortly after eight p.m. That is when I met Johnny Mercer.

He was standing with Henry Mancini and a portly man who turned out to be Dave Cavanaugh of Capitol Records. I did not have to ask who he was: I knew that pixie grin from a thousand photographs. When I was in high school, he was a very big singing star, although to the day he died he was never sure of that. Mancini introduced us, saying, "Gene's a writer from the east." And Dave Cavanaugh said something about my lyrics. I said, "Well, Mr. Mercer, if I know anything about writing lyrics, I learned it from Cole Porter and you and Charles Trenet."

And Mercer said with a smile, "How'd I get in there between two queens?"

You learn not to embarrass your heroes with overpraise, and, after some brief expression of admiration for his work, I excused myself and went on about the party, a true Hollywood affair of conspicuous embracing, kissed cheeks, gushing compliments, and maneuvering for professional (and social, such as it is) advantage.

Two or three days later I got a note from Mercer at my hotel. He had called Mancini's office to find out where I was staying. He said that by coincidence he had the day after that party heard a song called *Someone to Light Up My Life*, sung by Vic Damone, on his car radio. He had bought the album to find out who had written the lyric, which happened to be mine. "That is some elegant lyric," he wrote. "It made me cry. I wish I had written it." Long afterwards, I learned that he treasured a telegram from Cole Porter saying almost the same thing about one of his own lyrics.

Thus began a friendship. Whenever John came to New York or I to Los Angeles, we'd booze and talk shop, sometimes about lyrics, sometimes about the corruption of the music business. "Whatever we do," he said once, "the publishers will always be two jumps ahead of us." I was warned against drinking with Mercer, told by various persons that he could turn suddenly — and articulately — nasty. It was notorious that he would get drunk at parties, turn vicious toward friends and strangers alike, and then, shaken by guilt and hangover the following day, send them roses. He was always cautious with Jo Stafford. She has bearing and presence. Nonetheless, once, as she arrived at a Capitol Records Christmas party, John, already well into the wassail, started in on her.

Jo said, "Please, John. I don't want any of your roses in the morning." That stopped him.

Some of the stories were funny but many were not, and some people came away from parties bearing an abiding dislike for Mercer. Carlos Gastel, who for many years was Nat Cole's manager, once told him off in a bar, saying, "Talent gives you no excuse to insult people." I know two or three people who despised Johnny Mercer. But I liked him, very much. Perhaps we shared the lyricist's paranoia, which John once expressed in one line: "You get tired of being everybody's lyric boy." He was referring to all the lead sheets brought to you by musicians who think lyrics are dashed off easily in idle moments out of ideas that come casually. Although John sometimes wrote quickly — *Days of Wine and Roses* was written in five minutes; *Autumn Leaves* in a car on the way to the airport — he sometimes had to sweat for a lyric, as every conscientious lyricist does, and *Skylark* took him a year. "Sometimes you get lucky," he said. "But not often." Asked what was the hardest part of writing a lyric, he used to say, "Finding the title."

Once I arrived in California to work on a project with Lalo Schifrin, rented a furnished apartment in Westwood, installed a phone, and called John at his home in Bel Air. He was away for a few days at his other home in Palm Springs. (He and his wife Ginger also maintained an apartment in New York.) I left a message with his answering service and went to work on my lyric assignment. John called a few days later and said in his Georgia accent, "Whatcha been doin'?"

"Looking for a rhyme," I said.

"Why didn't you call me?" he said. "I'da laid one on yuh."

"I did call you. You were away, remember?"

He invited me to dinner. I said that until I had this one song solved, I would be unfit company for man or beast. He told me to call him when the song was finished and we'd go out somewhere.

About twenty minutes later I got a call from a Harold's Liquor Store in Westwood, saying they had some Scotch for me. "I didn't order any Scotch," I said.

"Mr. Mercer ordered it for you," the man said. "A case of Glennfiddich."

"*How* much?" I said.

"A case."

"I'm only going to *be* here a month," I said.

"Do you come to California often?"

"Fairly."

"Well, we can send you two or three bottles now and you can get the rest whenever you come back."

And so it happened. Every time I came to Los Angeles on a job, I'd call Harold's Liquor Store. I drank John's Glennfiddich on and off for about three years.

And I kept hearing how saber-tongued he could be when he'd been drinking. Finally I asked a mutual friend about it. "It's all true," he said.

"It's never happened to me."

"Your turn will come," he said with a smile.

But it never did. Once I saw John starting to get edgy with a waitress at Charlie O's in New York. When she had gone to get us two more drinks I said, "John, why are you giving her a hard time? She's been perfectly pleasant to us, and you're being a son of a bitch." I figured the friendship might end there and then.

But John looked me evenly in the eye and said, "You're right," and when the girl returned he was cordial to her and as we left he gave her an enormous tip.

I was always amazed, in the years after our first meeting, how many of my lyrics he had learned. I of course had known hundreds of his all my life: undoubtedly I had absorbed principles of euphony and articulation from his songs, some of which I used to sing on my bicycle when I was a kid. And one pub-crawling evening we wandered around New York singing each other's lyrics.

I loved John's work. I loved it — even before I knew enough about the subject to understand that this was one of the reasons I loved it — for its perfect literate craftsmanship.

Every singer knows that the most singable vowels are *oo* and *oh*. In *I Remember You*, John used both sounds, and particularly the *oo*, throughout the song. It is an amazing lyric, so simple that its sophisticated inner craftsmanship could easily escape notice:

I remember you.
You're the one
who made my dreams come true
a few
kisses ago.

I remember you.
You're the one
who said, "I love you too —
I do.
Didn't you know?"

I remember too
a distant bell
and stars that fell
like rain,
out of the blue.

When my life is through
and the angels ask me to recall
the thrill of them all,
then I shall tell them
I remember you.

The bridge begins and ends with the *oo* sound. And it is used as an inner rhyme in *you too*. Very few of the words end with stopped consonants, and those few fall on short passing notes. All the other words end in semivowels and fricatives — *one, dreams, remember*. The liquid semivowel *l*, occurring here as a double *ll* — in Italian, the double *ll* is sustained longer than the single *l* — begins in the release and then recurs through the rest of the song: *bell, fell, recall, thrill, all, shall, tell. Shall-tell* is an inner rhyme echoing *bell-fell*. Am I reading things into the lyric? Hardly. You need only look at it: those things are *there*, whether Mercer thought about them or not. Indeed, it is doubtful that he gave conscious thought to these details. In the true artist, the mechanics of craftsmanship have passed into what we used to call, in the Freudian era, the subconscious.

Aside from craftsmanship, I love John's writing for its emotional warmth, a warmth always controlled by a fastidious restraint. He never overstated. Everything was subtle... "as if the mayor had offered me the key... to Paris."

We are accustomed to thinking the vast body of our best song literature came from the Broadway stage. This is true. But Mercer's work, a catalogue of about 1500 songs, was written mostly for movies. He wrote seven Broadway shows: *Walk with Music, St. Louis Woman, Texas L'il Darling, Top Banana, Li'l Abner, Saratoga, Free and Easy,* and *Foxy*. But he wrote lyrics, and occasionally music as well, for nearly thirty movies, and maybe more, including *Hollywood Hotel, Cowboy from Brooklyn* (for which he wrote *I'm an Old Cowhand*), *Going Places, Naughty but Nice, Blues in the Night* (which originally had another title; the producers changed it when they saw Mercer's lyric), *The Fleet's In, You Were Never Lovelier* (which score, written in collaboration with Jerome Kern, produced *Dearly Beloved* and the splendid *I'm Old Fashioned*), *Star Spangled Rhythm* (which gave us the haunting *Old Black Magic*), *The Harvey Girls, Out of This World, The Belle of New York, Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, Daddy Long Legs, Merry Andrew, Breakfast at Tiffany's* (which produced *Moon River*), and *Days of Wine and Roses*.

Mercer was born in Savannah, Georgia, and never severed his ties to that city. He was a Scot by ancestry, and had cousins in Scotland.

The south virtually exudes poetry, or at least it used to. Heavily populated by the Irish, who have been called a word-drunk people, and Scots, who rival them in a passion for imagery, the south has a language to which the black population has also made a substantial contribution. Sometimes one gets the impression that southern blacks, precisely because they lacked education but not intelligence, used their limited vocabularies more inventively than whites, to remarkably fresh and vivid effect. Mercer grew up surrounded by black people and he was at ease in the rhythms of their speech. Of all the awards he got in his life, he was particularly proud of one received in 1944: a black boys' club in Chicago voted him the outstanding young Negro singer of the year.

Whatever the historical reasons for it, southern literature — as represented by Thomas Wolfe, Faulkner, Carson McCullers, and many with Celtic names — has traditionally been filled with a rich poetry, and southerners, black and white alike, do not hesitate to use arresting imagery to express their visions of ideas and events. They are not self-conscious about it, not afraid of seeming "literary" or "poetic", as one would be in the stiff-jawed industrial north or the taciturn farm valleys of Vermont. And all Mercer's lyrics, at least in the use of language, were deeply southern.

But not in ways that limited them. Rather, they were southern in ways that made Mercer's diction free and flashing and open. "The clouds were like an alabaster palace..."

His songs tend to fall into three primary groups: his train songs; (*On the Atcheson, Topeka, and Santa Fe, Blues in the Night, I Thought About You*, and in a way even *Laura*); his French songs (*Autumn Leaves, Once Upon a Summertime*, and *When the World Was Young*, which embodies to a startling degree a French viewpoint, though John spoke hardly a word of French); and his southern songs, such as *Lazybones*.

Mercer seemed to feel that he had never really made it on Broadway. He may have been right. Some of his shows were successes, but none was a really substantial hit. The reason was perhaps in John. In writing lyrics for the stage, one must become the characters whose words you are creating; like an actor, you must slip into other identities, think and thus write in the tone and style of those characters. And John was always John, at once country boy and cosmopolite, southerner and American, American and internationalist, all fused into one complex and brilliant talent. Therefore he was truly in his element in films, where a personal style has often been valued more than a general

flexibility, whether in songwriters, directors, or actors. In his roots, he remained Georgian, remembering the littoral wetlands and the clouds of pink flamingoes and terns and gulls that used to be there, and the quick slithering alligators. "Now it's all freeways," he said with simple sadness one night.

John was an odd sort of duck, cantankerous and kind, humorous and morose, a compound of compassionate poeticism and personal bitterness. Very Celtic. The bitterness never colored his work; you will find no trace of it in his lyrics, although there is often a sardonic self-mockery, as in the lines, "when an irresistible force, such as you, meets an old immovable object, like me..." That's from *Something's Gotta Give,* a song he wrote, both words and music, for Fred Astaire to sing in *Daddy Long Legs.* It is not true that art is necessarily self-expressive, although it may be so by indirection and inadvertence. The great artist usually wants to express something other than the self, indeed craves to transcend the self, strains to rise about the paltry elements that inhere in all of us. Mercer's anger is simply omitted from the work, as a matter of professional taste.

What was he angry about?

John's wife, the former Ginger Meehan, a dancer in the Garrick Gaieties in New York when he met her, said once, "We've had a wonderful life. I don't know why Johnny complains."

Maybe I do. Recognition always tends to go to the composer, not the lyricist. Arthur Schwartz is better-known than his brilliant lyricist-collaborator Howard Dietz. There is a cult about Harry Warren's movie songs, but Al Dubin is rarely mentioned. People talk of Matt Dennis tunes but not of Tom Adair's wonderful lyrics. *Over the Rainbow* is thought of as a Harold Arlen song but is equally a Yip Harburg song. This is partly because music can be performed without lyrics but lyrics are never (or rarely) performed without the music. John filed a lawsuit before his death against the publisher of *Laura.* The song had come up for copyright renewal and John wanted a better cut of the pie. The publisher argued that they had in effect the right to throw out Mercer's lyric and have another added to David Raksin's music, written for the film *Laura.* It is difficult to imagine anything more idiotic than the superimposition of other words on so well-known a melody, the replacement of one of the best lyrics in the literature with something that would inevitably have been inferior.

Mercer argued that once a lyric has been added to a melody, the two have become inseparably wedded. The case was settled in the judge's chambers in John's favor — after his death. But what he wanted, a firm legal precedent that the lyric is a permanent part of the song — and by extension that the lyricist is not a second-class citizen — has not yet been established.

Kern was famous for treating lyricists shoddily. And Richard Rodgers' reputation in this regard was, to put the best possible light on it, very bad. ("Dick Rodgers," Dave Raksin has said, "was a swine.") Mercer hated all that, and he was sensitive about it, which is one of the reasons he liked to sing his songs: to put his imprimatur on them in the public impression.

John was "lyric boy" to Harold Arlen, Richard Whiting, Hoagy Carmichael, Harry Warren, Gene dePaul, Victor Schertzinger, Robert Emmett Dolan, Gordon Jenkins, Rube Bloom, Arthur Schwartz, Jimmy Van Heusen, and Johnny Mandel. He wrote the music as well as the lyrics to *Dream* and the aforementioned *Something's Gotta Give*, and he had a sure melodic instinct.

"But he never had any musical training," his wife said after his death, "and he was hesitant." That is unfortunate. Frank Loesser, another brilliant lyricist spawned by Hollywood, never had any training either, but he wrote wonderful melodies.

"I think writing music may take more talent," Mercer said to me once, "but writing lyrics takes more courage."

I agree with only the second half of the equation. Some of what Mercer wrote is better than the music that goes with it, although only a little of it; he worked with some enormously gifted collaborators.

John said once, "I tried to be a singer and failed. I tried to be an actor and failed. So I just naturally fell into lyric writing." I disagree with that evaluation totally, because he did not fail as a singer. Perhaps because he founded Capitol Records (with Glenn Wallichs and fellow songwriter Buddy De Sylva, then an executive at Paramount Pictures) and thus recorded for his own company, he may have felt he had not made it fair and square. But I loved his singing, which had great humor, and a lot of people did.

Hillaire Belloc wrote, "It is the best of all trades, to make songs, and the second best to sing them." A small framed copy of that maxim hung on the wall of John's studio, fifty or so yards behind his house, snuggled amid a canyon's foliage in Bel Air. But he never really saw it that way: he felt in his heart it was best to sing them.

One afternoon John and I were wandering around New York and I had a sudden urge to get one of our conversations on tape. I called the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation and asked for use of their Manhattan studio. John and I went by the office on Fifth Avenue, sat down at a table covered in pooltable green felt, forgot the microphone, and talked. Ultimately a broadcast was editted from that tape. It was lost for years and turned up recently. Hearing it was eerie, as if John were alive again.

"Have you ever figured out what makes us write songs?" I said. "Both of us — all of us."

"I don't know," he said. "I think it comes from a creative urge when you're little. Of course I was always stuck on music. I gravitated to songs because I loved music so much. I would like to have been an advertising man, I think I wanted to be a cartoonist, I was an actor. But all the time I was listening to songs, buying songs, writing songs. And I think that's what I was really cut out to do."

John believed that in most instances, the melody of a song should be written before the lyric. I share his opinion. Only a very few composers in history have been able to lift words off a piece of paper and make them sing. "I've lost a lot of good lyrics by turning them over to composers," John said once.

And that afternoon in New York, he said, "A tune writer has to know how to build up a lyric so that the laughs come through, and the lyric writer has to know how to baby that tune, when he gets a good one, to search and search till he gets the right lyric for it. You can ruin great ideas if they're written improperly. I find that there's a very strange alchemy about working too little or too much on a tune. Sometimes if you work too much and you're *too* careful, you lose the whole thing. But if you get a fine fire going at the beginning, and you control it, you can rewrite enough without rewriting too much. That's the best way to write, I find."

"What do you think of contemporary lyrics, as a whole?" The time, remember, was probably 1970.

"I think in the main, what we're going through right now is a lot of drivel. A lot of people who can't write are trying to write. And I think those who do write well are basing most of their stuff on a modern-day kind of hobo philosophy. It's a futility because of the war and because of crime and violence and everything. And it's built on an Elizabethan structure, and hill music, which is also based on Elizabethan structure. And so all these kids who are writing, like Simon and Garfunkel and Jimmy Webb and Johnny Hartford and the kids down in Nashville, most of them take the guitar and try to philosophize to a hillbilly tune with chords that come from 'way 'way ago.

"That's the general picture. Of course, there are many exceptions, including a guy like Alan Jay Lerner. I think Webb is a superior writer — I didn't mean to classify him with the others. And Bacharach is trying very hard to be different, *too* hard as far as I'm concerned, although I think he's gifted. I don't know. What do you think?"

"I pretty much agree. I like Webb's ideas. Why don't you record again?"

"I'd like to. I'm singing really not too badly, so they say. I think my voice is deeper. I think I know better how to sing in tune than I used to. I don't think anybody cares, that's the main thing."

"I think there would be considerable interest. You always did your humorous material. You never recorded your ballads. Why?

"I can't sing well enough."

"I don't agree."

"I could try it now. I think I'm a little better than I used to be."

Some time after that, John recorded two albums for Pye in England — and he performed a number of his ballads. These albums, never released in the United States, contain some of his best singing. His voice *was* deeper, and his intonation was improved.

"I don't think," I said, "that I've ever heard a song of yours that didn't have a payoff in the last line."

"Well, I think that's kind of the way you approach writing; if you're brought up in that school, you don't even *begin* a song if you haven't got an ending of some kind."

"Have you ever started out when you didn't know what the ending was going to be?" I said, and we both began laughing.

"Yeah, I *have*," he said. "Sometimes I *wound up* without having an ending!"

"That's a *desperate* feeling!"

"It is..."

"And particulary if you've got some good lines in there and you don't want to lose 'em, but you have to top 'em."

"That's right," John said and we laughed some more.

"Let me ask you about a couple of people you've worked with. One is Jerome Kern."

"Well, Mr. Kern was kind of the dean. He was the professor emeritus. He was the head man. And everybody respected him and admired him because his tunes were so really far above the others. He was new and yet he was classical in feeling. He had great melodic invention, he had great harmonic things. So he was at home with the professional composer. They respected him above all, he taught all of them something. The lyric writers liked him — if they could ever write with him. Strangely enough, he wrote with about ten or fifteen lyric writers, more than people think he did, although of course his biggest collaborator was Hammerstein."

"Well, there was Wodehouse, there was yourself..."

"Well I wrote one picture with him, and Dorothy Fields may have written two or three. He was a fascinating guy. He was small. He wore glasses. He had a prominent nose and a very quick, alert mind. He was terribly curious. Berlin has the same kind of mind. Porter too, although Porter's mind was a little more sophisticated, more effete. Kern was terribly interested in anything that went on around him. He loved to play Indications, he loved to play Scrabble. If you brought him a brand new game, he'd be like a child about it. He'd want to play that for a week. He'd give parties and they'd play these games. He collected first editions and had a fabulous library which he sold for I think about a million dollars. He also had a coin collection which he sold for a lot of money. He was interested in everything all the time. He interested himself in the book and in your lyrics and the costumes and the choreography just as much as he did in any other part of the show. And because he was so good, he had a kind of conceit about him. But he also, like most men of that much stature, had a kind of modesty about him too. I liked him very much."

"Was he easy to work with or hard?"

"He was hard to work with because his standards were high. With me, it was nothing at all, it was really fun, it was an enjoyable job. Of course, I didn't work that long with him. I didn't have a fight with him. If I'd had to write six or seven shows with him and he'd thrown his weight around, I guess he could have been a son of a bitch. But he wasn't."

"How about Harold Arlen?"

"Harold Arlen is a *genius*. I don't know what to say about him, except he doesn't write enough. He's been bothered by illnesses and the various mundane things of this world. But if he were writing like he wrote twenty years ago, I don't think you could catch up to his catalogue. I think he's been inactive so long that people have sort of forgotten about him. He's wonderful. I think he'd *like* to write. I think he probably *needs* to write, for his spirit, for his heart. He's a very tender, very sensitive man, and he writes so beautifully. It's... it's easy for him. It sounds terribly inventive to us, terribly difficult, what he does, but not to him. It's like turning on a tap. It just flows out of him. We did two shows together, *St. Louis Woman* and *Saratoga*, which is kind of a quiet score. Not many people know it and not many people have heard it. Maybe that's because it isn't too good. It wasn't a hit. We did about ten movies at Paramount. The songs that came out of them were songs like *Out of This World, Old Black Magic, Accentchuate the Positive, Come Rain or Come Shine*. We had a lot of songs that are people's favorites that you don't hear much, like *Hit the Road to Dreamland, This Time the Dream's on Me. Blues in the Night* is probably our best-known song."

We began talking about *Days of Wine and Roses*, written with Henry Mancini for the film of that name. This remarkable lyric consists of only two sentences. In them Mercer expresses the startled sadness of everyone's eventual discovery that time has slipped irretrievably away and some things have become lost forever, including the joy of naive discovery, and that one has begun to grow old. It is a brilliant lyric, a masterpiece of the form. In a way, it is typically Mercer. Paul Weston said once, "John was worried about time and his age when he was twenty-eight." When John recorded his *Summer Wind*, he tossed a line into the tag that is most interesting: "... old men pretend... my fickle friend, summer wind." Once John and I were walking down a street when two dynamite-looking chicks in their twenties passed us, going in the opposite direction. John and I both looked over our shoulders to watch them walking into their future and our past, chatting happily and oblivious of the darkness ahead. John said, "I'm still lookin' but they're no longer lookin' back." *Days of Wine and Roses* is about John's haunted preoccupation with time. It could be argued that the modern era in lyric writing dates from that song — in English, at least; the French have been writing songs in this manner for eighty years or more.

"You think so?" John said. "You see a thing in that song that I don't know if I see."

"A quality of abstraction."

"Yeah," he said. "Well, I'm not so sure it's purposeful on my part. I don't know whether when Dali painted his pictures, he did it purposefully or he just said, 'Well, I've just got to say something I feel here, and this is the best way to say it.' I'm not that sure it was all that intended..."

"Oh, I'm not saying that it is or has to be intended. I'm just saying that things you wrote there and ways you wrote there would not have been acceptable or understandable to the public of the 1930s."

"Well, I'll tell you, maybe I give them more credit. Irving Berlin said a long time ago, 'Johnny gives everybody credit for knowing

what he's talking about.' You don't write down to the ten-cent-store girl or anybody else. I don't. You certainly don't. And when I try to be literate, I just assume they know what I'm talking about. When I try to do what we're talking about right now, to get images — we did it in *Charade*. In the middle part, where it goes, *in the darkened wings, the music box played on*, I assumed they know what I'm talking about. I can't stop to say, 'You know, there's really not a music box, it's really the orchestra.' You take that to Andy Williams, who's really a fine, intelligent cat, and he says, 'There's always something in these songs I don't understand. But I'm gonna sing it anyway.'"

I took a photo of John that day. After he was dead, Ginger told me it was one of the few pictures of himself he ever liked. Maybe I caught him the way he saw himself. Or maybe, and this is more

important, *I saw him* the way he saw himself; or better yet that he let me see himself as he was. The relationship was that of two professional lyricists who enjoyed talking about the work to someone else who understood the mechanics of the craft, and somehow the ease of the relationship is in that photo, it is in the eyes, and that slight smile. There is kindness in those eyes, and laughter, and sadness. It's John, at least the John Mercer I knew. I never knew the other Johnny Mercer, that other fellow; I never met the man.

As the day faded into what the Brazilians call — magnificent term! — *tardinha*, the little afternoon, John and I went somewhere and had a few drinks and then dinner, and when we emerged into the streets it was late sunset. White windows shone on the faces of buildings that stood like black cardboard against a rose-colored sky, and high above those deep streets the purple clouds looked solid, carved, sculpted. We took a cab and suffered minor spinal traumae as we bumped over the pot-holes to some club in lower Manhattan where Jimmy Rowles, with whom John had written several songs, was working. John was just nuts about Jimmy's playing.

It is more than difficult to evaluate Johnny Mercer's effect and influence on the American culture. It is literally impossible. Unbeknownst to the politicians and sociologists and psychologists (even perhaps Julian Jaynes, who in *The Breakdown of the Bicameral Mind*, quotes and paraphrases Mercer), John infiltrated our minds, a benign alien capturing our very processes of thought. Sometimes when I am talking to college classes on lyric writing, I tell the eager young faces that I had an advantage over them: I grew up memorizing Porter and Hart and Dietz and Tom Adair and Mercer, these magnificently literate men who gave us, in collaboration with some very gifted composers, the common, everyday, garden-variety popular music of the period. One assimilated from them one's sense of the English language. They were glorifying and elevating it, not in inaccessible works of High Culture but in *popular music*. And Mercer was the best of them all. Paul Weston, who as music director of Capitol Records arranged any number of Mercer's hit records, says, "John did more things well than any of them. I think John had genius." Today, of course, we hear illiteracy rampant in popular music and in television commericals, since those who now write advertising copy grew up on the Beatles and Bob Dylan and have been conditioned to the defective and inarticulate use of the English language.

A chronological survey of Mercer's lyrics uncovers something interesting: John was remarkably in tune with the evolution of the American language. He used its slang with uncanny sensitivity and skill, and sometimes hastened the process by which vernacular finds its way into dictionary legitimacy. Like Cole Porter (who invented the phrase "See America first"), Mercer influenced the evolution of the English language. *Accent-chuate the Positive* became a phrase of American English, complete with black Baptist rhythmic emphasis. And "latch onto" (as in *latch onto the affirmative*) turned up by the 1950s in a New York *Times* editorial. He kept hearing the new language and using it (as in "cigarette holder, which wigs me", in his lyric to Duke Ellington's *Satin Doll*), and reflecting the unfolding historical atmosphere, as in his virtuosic song (written with music by Blossom Dearie) *I'm Shadowing You*, which humorously captures the youth rebellion of the late 1960s and the FBI and CIA inspired paranoia of America during that period. John rarely talked directly about politics, but that lyric reflects a shrewdly observant mind. A full evaluation of Mercer's effect on the American mentality and on the English language hasn't been made, and probably never will be.

But his lyrics were only part of his influence on America and on Twentieth Century music. Mercer was one of the three founders and the first president of Capitol Records, a company which had overwhelming influence for the good in the 1940s and later a comparable influence for the degradation of music.

The label was founded in 1942, during the dark days of World War II and in the midst of a serious shellac shortage. Where Capitol got its shellac was for a long time a mystery, but the answer is this: Mercer signed to the label a young man who led a dreadful band whose father happened to own a warehouse full of shellac in San Diego.

Mercer had no interest in the business end of Capitol Records. He was interested only in music, and in the *quality* of music. Once, during the company's early days, when its "headquarters" consisted of one small room on Vine Street, Mercer and Paul Weston were listening to some of their newly-recorded material. Co-founder Glenn Wallichs was on the telephone. Mercer liked to listen to music *loud*. Finally Wallichs said, "Johnny, would you turn that down? I'm on long distance, trying to line up a

distributor in Pittsburgh."

"Ah, to hell with that," John said. "Let's listen to the music."

Capitol was a superb company in its early years. Under Mercer's guidance, it signed Nat Cole, Stan Kenton, Peggy Lee, Jo Stafford, Margaret Whiting, Bobby Sherwood, and Andy Russell, probably the first Chicano matinee idol. It recorded the best popular music, and a good deal of jazz. *Variety* predicted that the label would fail in the face of competition from the big three, Columbia, RCA Victor, and Decca. But it did not fail, and proved that good popular music could make it *if* it could be exposed to the people.

Mercer operated on a strange philosophy, by today's standards. He believed that you shouldn't release a record unless you liked it. The idea of making a record for purely commercial reasons was beyond his comprehension, and the concept of regularly scheduled releases was alien to him. And the label — silver lettering and a picture of the capitol dome in Washington D.C. against a simple black background — was generating excitement throughout the United States and Canada. (The records could not be obtained at all in wartime Canada. We who grew up near the border used to slip over to Niagara Falls, New York, and Buffalo, buy them, and smuggle them back under the seats of buses or wherever we could find to hide them.) There was something *new* going on, and the young people knew it. Although it has become fashionable to denigrate Stan Kenton in recent years — and I am one of those who deplore Kenton's later pretensions — it should not be forgotten that the band in its early incarnation was truly different. The good instrumentals from big bands usually came out as the B sides of more commercial pop records. The Kenton band was noted from the beginning primarily for its instrumentals. And such records as *Artistry in Rhythm, Eager Beaver, Artistry in Bolero,* and *Opus in Pastels* constituted the underscore music for a generation growing up in the middle and late 1940s. Nor is it true that Kenton made *no* contribution to jazz. He introduced an enriched harmonic pallette, a powerhouse use of brass, an expanded application of players' technical resources, and a sort of dramatic approach to orchestral jazz that have been imitated ever since, sometimes by musicians who would deny to him any influence whatsoever.

Futhermore, Kenton was the single most powerful force in the development of the stage band movement in colleges and universities, which has had both good and bad effects on American music but has beyond question raised the level of American and ultimately world musicianship. Kenton did that. Mercer, in close collaboration with Paul Weston, gave Kenton his chance. We can only guess what would be the character of American music today had Mercer never lived; or if he and De Sylva and Wallichs had not founded Capitol, which, incidentally, was Johnny's idea.

Or consider the career of Nat Cole. Purely as a pianist Cole was one of the most important influences in jazz, being one of the main inspirations of both Oscar Peterson and Bill Evans. Under Mercer's control, Capitol pushed *a jazz pianist* as a pop artist. But Nat of course was a superb singer. To this day, I have never heard a singer with better time than Nat Cole. And that whispered throaty sound, coupled with his cultivated university-bred enunciation, began to influence other singers. Nat once told me a story of that influence. V siting Germany, he went one evening to a restaurant where a blond German singer and pianist was doing Nat's material and imitating him perfectly. Amused and faintly pleased, Nat went over to pay his compliments. The German did not recognize him and, Nat realized, spoke not a word of English: he was imitating the records phonetically.

Nat's influence extended beyond voice and piano into orchestration. Once Nat was walking along one of the circular corridors of the new Capitol building on Vine Street when a young man approached him and said, "Mr. Cole, I'm an arranger and I'd like to write for you."

Politely Nat said, "I'd like to hear some of your charts some time."

"You've already heard them," the young man said. "You've recorded them. But my name's not on them." And the young man told him for whom he had been doing his ghost-writing.

"And what's your name?" Nat said. And the young man told him, and that's how Nat came to hire Nelson Riddle, who later, in an association at Capitol with Frank Sinatra, redefined the nature of orchestral arrangement for singers.

It should be remembered, too, that Capitol picked up Sinatra when his career had almost died. His original label, Columbia, had let him drop. Sinatra's second career was even bigger than his first. Would it have happened without Mercer? Who knows?

The Jo Stafford records for Capitol became the longing-for-home songs of American soldiers all over the world during World War II and, later, Korea. Would she have become a solo singer had Mercer not founded Capitol? She had always considered herself a vocal group lead singer, preferred that kind of work, and actually disliked the public attention that went with "stardom" and solo singing. When she was still with Tommy Dorsey's band, Mercer told her, "Some day I'm going to have my own record company, and you're going to record for me." Had Mercer not founded Capitol, it is highly unlikely that her long string of hits, including *You Belong to Me, I Should Care* (composed by her husband, Paul Weston), *I'll Remember April, Shrimp Boats,* would ever have been recorded.

It has been said that an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man. It is impossible to measure the length of Mercer's shadow, given the penetrative influence of his lyrics and the way Capitol Records shifted the course of American music.

Mercer's lack of interest in the executive responsibilities of Capitol was the company's fatal flaw. He was interested only in making music, not in running a company. Mickey Goldsen, who was head of publishing at Capitol for some years, recalls a disagreement he once had with a songwriter wanting still another advance on one of his songs. Mickey could not in good conscience extend any more money to him. And so the man went to Glenn Wallichs and intimated that Mickey was cheating him.

Wallichs was disturbed. He and his associates prided themselves on Capitol's honesty (which alone made it a novelty in the history of record companies) and he called Mickey on the carpet. He said Mickey was hurting the company's reputation. Mickey blew his top. He shouted, "It's in the newspapers that Buddy De Sylva's got his secretary knocked up, and Johnny Mercer's down in the nearest bar insulting everybody in sight, and *I'm* hurting the company's reputation?"

Others were brought in to fill the deficiency caused by Mercer's cloud-nine indifference to business, including Jim Conkling, who had been a college classmate of Weston's. But John was never comfortable with the company's size and success. He would live to regret that.

In time, De Sylva became ill and wanted to sell Capitol. Mercer was a holdout. But finally, he and Wallichs and De Sylva sold the company to Electrical and Musical Industries (EMI) of England. And Capitol rapidly became one of the great whores among record labels, recording and marketing whatever offal its New Breed directors thought would sell. Gone were the company's sense of responsibility and its passions for innovation and music.

Nat Cole's sales had helped build Capitol. In the 1960s Nat made a telephone call to Capitol and heard the switchboard operator say, "Capitol Records, home of the Beatles." Nat, that most controlled and gentle of men, slammed down the receiver in

fury. Tony Bennett — who had a deep belief in the psychosomatic sources of illness long before the fad of holistic medicine — has always insisted that Capitol's treatment of Nat in the later years was the source of his cancer. Tony, very simply, believes that Capitol Records killed Nat Cole.

It must have been during that same period that Mercer went on business to the Capitol Tower, that odd building designed to look like a stack of records, which he and Wallichs and De Sylva had built. Some gum-chewing popsicle at a reception desk asked him his name. John told her.

"Who?" she said.

He repeated it. "And may I ask what this is concerning?" she said.

And John was as disturbed by that incident as Nat Cole was by that phone call.

"We never should have sold the company," he said to me on several occasions. And he was right.

In what no doubt should be described as the retirement years, John and Ginger travelled extensively. He worked in London, not entirely happily, with Andre Previn on a musical that never made it to New York. He started work on his memoirs, but the manuscript was sporadic and incomplete, and it was infused with a deep sadness. His trips were always by train and boat. He refused to fly.

After John's death, a rumor circulated that he had wanted desperately to work with Paul McCartney. The rumor, which must have come from McCartney's office, has no foundation: John despised Paul McCartney. One of the ironies of his career is that with the sale of various publishing companies, John's *Autumn Leaves* ended up in a company owned by McCartney, where it remains.

I learned that John was ill from, of all people, Harold of Harold's Liquor Store in Westwood. I dropped in one day to buy some Glennfiddich, the supply with which John had provided me having long since gone the way of all sauce. I asked Harold if he had talked to John lately, and he said that John, under doctor's orders, was on the wagon. Disturbed more than amazed by this news — John's concern for his own drinking is manifest in some of the songs, including *I Wonder What Became of Me, One for My Baby (and One More for the Road),* and *Drinking Again* — I called him and paid a visit to him and Ginger.

He made me a drink, and then started lecturing me about drinking! "But John," I said, "I like Scotch."

"Do you think I *don't*?" he said. "But if you'll drink in moderation, you can do it all your life, not end up like me, unable to drink at all."

Sensible though the advice was, I took it to be the moralism of the reformed. What I did not know then was that John had a brain tumor. What I do not know to this day is whether he knew it.

I also did not know that he was having a problem with his equilibrium. Once, in London, attempting to board a bus, he had what we can later see was a small seizure, and fell, hitting his head a hard crack on the pavement.

I did not see him for several months. And then Tony Bennett and Lena Horne performed in concert at the Schubert Theater in Century City. Afterwards, there was a reception for people in the profession, and I saw John and Ginger at the party. There was little chance to talk, due to the table-hopping and unceasing interruptions that characterize all such affairs. I said, "How y' feeling, John?"

"All right," he said, "except that I keep falling down a lot." He had once made a quip to me that he had had a lot of practice falling off bar stools, and I thought he meant he had been drinking again, as in the song.

Later, as the party was ending, John and Ginger were walking ahead of me. John fell. Ginger was trying to help him up, and he was struggling to gain his feet. I thought that he had, unobserved, put away a lot of liquor, and I was in a dilemma. Should I help Ginger help him up? If he had been drinking, would they be embarrassed by my intrusion? In the end I did nothing. I did not know that the brain tumor had grown and it was the reason for his falling. I only know that he fell that night, and I didn't help him. And that was the last time I ever saw him. It still bothers me a little.

The word went around that John was in the hospital. I called Ginger and got no answer. I called Henry Mancini, who said he had been unable to learn anything. Nor had Johnny Mandel, with whom John had written *Emily*. A strange silence surrounded him — at his own wish, as we found out later. When it became clear that John's illness was terminal, Ginger took him home. That studio at the back of the property in which he had written so many songs — and on whose wall, along with the Hillaire Belloc quote, hung a list of his failed projects, such was his melancholy — was converted into a hospital room, with round-the-clock nurses.

Like Hugo Friedhofer and like Ravel, John at the end was unable to speak — this master of words. And there in his studio, next to the golf course of the Bel Air Country Club, he died, in June, 1976. He was sixty-seven.

In the weeks after that, I discussed John with any number of his friends, including Mickey Goldsen, Michael Gould, Paul Weston, Jo Stafford, and Jay Livingston and Ray Evans. Songwriters Livingston and Evans said that in large measure they owed their careers to John: once, unable to take a picture assignment, he had recommended them. No one was fully able to explain John, not his talent, not his anger, not his melancholy. Ginger has never been able to explain him, and she was married to him from the time in 1931 when he was trying to get established on the stage in New York and she took sewing jobs to help keep them going.

He wrote an epitaph for himself in the lyric to *One for My Baby*. The song is much like a French song in that it is a sort of short story, a slice-of-life portrait of a drinker, in which the character goes through a common progression from stoicism to self-pity to aggression to exhausted depression, and the song might justly be interpreted as autobiographical, one of John's deft verbal sketches of himself.

> You'd never know it,
> but buddy, I'm a kind of poet,
> and I've gotta lotta things to say.
> And when I'm gloomy,
> you've simply gotta listen to me,
> until it's talked away.
>
> Well that's how it goes,
> and Joe, I know you're gettin' anxious to close.
> So thanks for the cheer.
> I hope you didn't mind my bendin' your ear...
>
> No, John. We didn't mind. We didn't mind at all.

Fingers Ten

Fingers was disappointed by the initial reception of his Keane Payne Quartet. The Bayonne *Bayonet* cut him to the quick, saying, "It is hard to see the point of this work. There is a section in the third movement (marked *allegro ma non troppo loco*) in which the high melody (?) line is carried by the cello while the bass

line is assigned to the violins. Though admittedly original, this procedure is odd, to say the least."

It would not be until the quartet was issued on Deleted Records two years later that the world would begin to take its true measure. For the present Fingers was in a funk. As usual, it was the Duchess of Bedworthy who offered the wisest counsel. She said he should immerse himself in some new project. She urged him to compose a song cycle, something serious, not mere popular songs, and even suggested the subject: some of the Canadian rural poets of the late Nineteenth Century, with whose works she had become enamored at the time of her *contretemps* with the RCMP. When Fingers read the poems, he immediately cast his depression aside and went to work, setting to music one by James McIntyre (1827-1906), written when the farmers of Ingersoll, Ontario, sent a seven thousand pound cheese to the Paris Exposition of 1897, where it shared honors with the Javanese music that so captivated Debussy.

ODE ON THE MAMMOTH CHEESE

We have seen thee, queen of cheese,
Lying quietly at your ease,
Gently fanned by evening breeze.
Thy fair form no flies dare seize.

All gaily dressed soon you'll go
To the great provincial show,
To be admired by many a beau
In the city of Toronto.

Cows numerous as a swarm of bees
Or as the leaves upon the trees
It did require to make thee please,
And stand unrivalled, queen of cheese.

May you not receive a scar as
We have heard that Mr. Harris
Intends to send you off as far as
The great world's show in Paris.

Of the youths beware of these
For some of them might rudely squeeze
And bite your cheek, then songs or glees
We could not sing, oh! queen of cheese.

We'rt thou suspended from balloon
You'd cast a shade even at noon.
Folks would think it was the moon
About to fall and crush them soon.

Fingers considered submitting the song to Florence Foster Jenkins but decided to write more of the cycle before determining how to dispose of it. He went to work setting another of McIntyre's poems, a praise of other poets:

We have scarcely time to tell thee
Of the strange and gifted Shelley,
Kind-hearted man but ill-fated,
So youthful, drowned and cremated.

Fingers was next occupied with one of McIntyre's sea poems, including this vivid quatrain:

An English ship when homeward bound
Near to its port was shipwrecked found,
For it had struck a sunken rock
And was slowly sinking from the shock.

Fingers then turned to the poems of John Gay (1810-1891), including:

O Mary, Mary, Queen of Scot
Your needlework is not forgot;
Three hundred years have passed, they say,
Your beautiful piece of tapestry is still in the hands of
Mrs. Thomas Dunn, of Nassagaway.

And this:

England, with all her faults, I love her still
Let men of no principle say what they will.
There are thousands of rotten Englishmen, I must confess,
Turn their back on their country and dirt their nest.
For my Queen and my country I've always proved true,
And my colours will stand by the Red, White, and Blue.

Finally, he set a poem by James McRae (1849-19[illegible]) complaining of deceitful devices used by women to embellish and disguise their figures:

How oft thus lay the secret way
In which the game is played: —
A shapeless mass, by name a lass,
Is artfully arrayed,
Is neatly bound with metal round
And trimmings wisely made,
And padded o'er with worthless store
To cover unbetrayed
The sad defects, which one detects
When nature is displayed.
With tender care they leave quite bare
What parts are fit to face,
Or please the eyes of youths they prize
No matter what their place.

Fingers played the song cycle for the Duchess and Park Benchley at a special social event at the latter's apartment. Some of the listeners were overwhelmed and sat in silence until Benchley led the way by acclaiming the works "marrrrrvellous," after which the applause was considerable.

Fingers made a demo of the songs and enthusiastically played it for Walter Wohlkarpitz at Honest Records. Wohlkarpitz said that he did not think the songs were "commerical enough" and told Fingers he was free to take them somewhere else. A similar verdict was delivered by other record executives. Finally, Fingers took the advice of a friend he had made during the Hotel Leonard engagement and applied for a Canada Council grant.

The Canadians, thrilled by this evidence that the Americans were faintly aware of their existence, offered Fingers the opportunity to record the songs in Toronto. Fingers immediately began looking for a Canadian artist to perform them. He soon learned that Deanna Durbin and Bobby Breen were retired. Ann Murray was unavailable, since she was only five at the time. Fingers settled on the Toronto Symphony, the Mendelssohn Choir and the St. Michael's Boys Choir. The Canada Council gave him a recording budget of half a million dollars, most of which he spent on overdubs.

Seven hundred thousand copies of the album were pressed and it can now be found in remainder bins from Pawtucket, Rhode Island, to Bondi Junction, Australia, sometimes selling for as much as sixty cents. In fact, a traveller recently reported coming across several copies in Cochabamba, Colombia, where the natives were using them as frisbees.