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A Death in the Family:
The Rise and Fall of the American Song
Part Two

When the United States entered World War I -- indeed, before it entered it -- its entire song industry mobilized to build up the will to war in the American public.

My Sweetheart Went Down with the Maine had been written to celebrate, or lament, an event that some historians still think was a fix to get the United States into a war of conquest with Spain, something like the contrived North Vietnamese attack on an overwhelmingly superior American naval force that gave Lyndon Johnson the excuse he needed to extract from Congress the power to enlarge the war. The best-known song of the Spanish-American war was *Break the News to Mother* (1897), another piece of work from that master of the lugubrious, Charles K. Harris. It was not a protest against the war but a bid for war sentiment.

The classic American song of World War I was *Over There* (1917), by George M. Cohan, a shout of bumptious confidence that the doughboys would end it all forthwith when they arrived in Europe. Cohan received a Congressional Medal of Honor for his patriotic songs, which included *You're a Grand Old Flag, (I Am) the Yankee Doodle Boy, There's Something About a Uniform*, and *Stand Up and Fight Like H---*. Close behind *Over There* in popularity were K-K-K-Katy, *When the Boys Come Home,* and Berlin's *Oh How I Hate to Get Up in the Morning*, which had the virtue of a certain realistic gripe about military life. Cohan's *Give My Regards to Broadway* had been published well before the war -- in 1904 -- but took on a war-song meaning. *It's a Long Way to Tipperary* and *Pack Up Your Troubles in Your Old Kit Bag*, two British songs, were adopted by American troops as their own.

The United States entered the war in 1917. In addition to *Over There*, the year brought *Good-Bye Broadway, Hello France; When Yankee Doodle Learns to Parlez Vous Francais; Joan of Arc, They Are Calling You; Good-bye, Ma! Good-Bye, Pa! Good-Bye, Mule; I May Be Gone for a Long, Long Time; When the Boys Come Home*; and Fred Fisher's *Lorraine, My Beautiful Alsace Lorraine.*

The patriotic optimism of the time is evident in *Keep Your Head Down, Fritzy Boy*; *I'd Like to See the Kaiser with a Lily in His Hand*, and *We'll Knock the Hell out of Heligoland*. An outrageous pun occurs in *We Don't Want the Bacon, What We Want Is a Piece of the Rhine.* Classic kitsch is encountered in *If He Can Fight Like He Can Love, Good Night, Germany.* That was not the longest title of the war. Nor for that matter was *Just Like Washington Crossed the Delaware, General Pershing Will Cross the Rhine.* Pershing, incidentally, never did: the distinction went a little over a quarter century later to some of the men in Patton's Third Army, under the command of Luther Hodge: they took the bridge at Remagen that German troops had somehow failed to blow.

A pro-navy songwriter turned out the somewhat petulant *The Navy Took Them Over and the Navy Will Bring Them Home.*

Even when in an effort at ethnic harmony in this time of national duress, the song industry tried to be complimentary to Italian Americans, it managed to be insulting. A song published in 1918 bore the title *When Tony Goes Over the Top.* Going "over the top", we should perhaps point out for younger readers, meant climbing out of the trenches and launching yet another futile rifle-and-bayonet assault on the German lines, usually with an appalling death toll. The lyric began, "When Tony goes over the top, he don't think of the barber shop," and ended, "When Tony goes over the top, keep your eyes on that fighting wop."

Love had its moment in *My Belgian Rose.* Perhaps the most beautiful song to come out of the war was *Roses of Picardy*, published in 1916 as sympathy for the French and bleeding Belgium grew steadily in America. In 1918, people stood around player pianos all over America and sang *Rose of No Man's Land*, with its throbbing lines, "Through the war's great curse stands the Red Cross Nurse; she's the Rose of No Man's Land." It was based vaguely on Beethoven's Minuet in G.

Of the same lachrymose ilk was *Hello, Central, Give Me No Man's Land.* A series of songs prior to that had exploited the new-fangled telephone, including *Hello, My Baby*, published in 1889, whose lines, "Send me a kiss by wire; baby, my heart's on fire," make it an early harbinger of contemporary commercial phone sex. *Hello, Central, Give Me Heaven*, by -- who else? -- Charles K. Harris came out in 1901. It is about a little girl trying to reach her dead mother in the great beyond. It inspired a number of Hello, Central songs, leading inevitably in 1918 to the attempt to call No Man's Land.

That year produced *Would You Rather Be a Colonel with an Eagle on Your Shoulder or a Private with a Chicken on Your Knee*? which probably was truly the longest title of the war; *There'll Be a Hot Time When the Young Men Go to War; They're All Out of Step but Jim; Oh! Frenchy; Keep Your Head Down, Fritzie Boy; If He Can Fight Like He Can Love, Good Night Germany*; *Till We Meet Again*, and *I Don't Want to Get Well (I'm in Love with a Beautiful Nurse).*

The year 1919 produced two songs celebrating, if that's the word, the recent end of the war, *How You Gonna Keep 'Em Down on the Farm (After They've Seen Paree)*, and *The World Is Waiting for the Sunrise*, by two Canadians, Ernest Seitz, a major concert pianist and teacher, and Gene Lockhart, later a prominent Hollywood actor. The song actually was written in 1918, but it succeeded commercially in the year after the war, and still later became a standard in the repertoire of jazz musicians. And 1919 also produced one of the best-known of American military songs, *The Marine Hymn*, which is actually not American at all: it is derived from a theme in Offenbach's *Genevieve de Brabant.*

Two interesting trends occur in the war years. A number of songs based on Negro spirituals come to the fore, including in 1918 *Deep River; Go Down, Moses; Nobody Knows the Trouble I've Seen*, and *Swing Low, Sweet Chariot*, and in 1919, *Oh Peter, Go Ring Dem Bells; Sometimes I Feel Like a Motherless Child*, and *Standin' in the Need of Prayer.* And on the hit list of 1918 one finds *Clarinet Marmalade, Original Dixieland One Step*, and *Ostrich Walk.* The Original Dixieland Jazz Band had played Reisenweber's Restaurant in New York in January, 1917, and become the first jazz group to make records. They were thus instrumental in launching a fascination with jazz in

the United States and, eventually Europe. Those three tunes were the most prominent in their repertoire. And the year produced a song called *Swanee*, a hit for Al Jolson with words by Irving Caesar and music by an unknown 21-year-old composer named George Gershwin. He would soon progress from writing songs to writing full-scale musicals and works for symphony orchestra.

If the best American songs came out of Broadway musical theater and the movies, it was because the best young composers gravitated to these media, which promised performance of their work and, if they made it, enormous incomes. No slot machine pays off like Broadway when the lemons at last line up. But it was always a gamble in which only the rich could indulge. Countless Hollywood movies have applied the Horatio Alger rags-to-riches fantasy to musical theater -- including *My Gal Sal (1942)*, a putative biography of Paul Dresser starring Victor Mature, that had little to do with Dresser's reality. Berlin seemed to embody it, but he was an exception.

Harold Arlen, the son of a cantor of modest means, became a professional musician at the age of 15; he was yet another exception. Possibly E.Y. (Yip) Harburg was too. I don't know what to make of Harburg's claim to an impoverished Lower East Side childhood; he at least got to go to college, City College of New York (CCNY), from which he was graduated at 20. The Gershwins were not rich, but not poor either. Harburg said that at least they could afford a piano: he said he remembered it being hauled up the face of their building. And he recalled listening to Gilbert and Sullivan records on the Gershwin family Victrola. Gershwin had good musical training, and his brother Ira, like Harburg, attended CCNY.

But there the litany of poverty ends. The press, I found, made a considerable to-do of Alan Jay Lerner's silver-spoon birth. This caused me to look into the lives of the major Broadway composers and lyricists of the golden age. One after another, they turned out to be from, at minimum, the upper middle class, and some of them from very heavy wealth. And far the majority of them were university educated.

Cole Porter was born to millions and married millions more. He went to Worcester Academy, took a BA from Yale, attended Harvard Law School, the Harvard School of Music, and eventually the Scola Cantorum in Paris, where he studied under Vincent d'Indy. Lorenz Hart's father was a grifter, but apparently a slick one, and the family always had servants. Hart was educated at private schools, including the Columbia Grammar School, which Alan Jay Lerner later attended. Hart met Richard Rodgers, who was also born to money, at Columbia College, as it was called in those days. Rodgers was educated at Columbia, New York University, Brandeis, Juilliard, and the New England Conservatory, among other schools. Jerome Kern's father had a contract to water the streets of New York City, and was wealthy. Oscar Hammerstein II was born into a rich theatrical family. Lyricist John La Touche was educated at the Richmond Academy of Arts and Sciences and Columbia College. Lyricist and composer Harold Rome went to Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, got a BA from Yale and then graduated from the Yale school of architecture. Vincent Youmans was the son of a wealthy hatter, grew up in Westchester, and attended various exclusive private schools. Hoagy Carmichael had a bachelor's degree from Indiana University and was for a time a lawyer. Johnny Mercer was born wealthy and went to a Virginia private school. His father lost his money when Johnny was twenty, but Johnny grew up with servants. Burton Lane, son of a successful New York real estate operator, was at Dwight Academy and had solid musical training. Lyricist Harold Adamson was educated at the University of Kansas and at Harvard, where, like Alan Jay Lerner, he wrote for the Hasty Pudding shows. Dorothy Fields, like Howard Dietz one of the finest of all lyricists, and like Oscar Hammerstein born to the profession, was the daughter of comedian Lew Fields of Weber and Fields fame and sister of librettist Herbert Fields. Arthur Schwartz was the son of a lawyer, graduated Phi Betta Kappa from NYU, and earned a master's at Columbia, after which he became a lawyer. His primary partner, lyricist Howard Dietz, graduated from the Columbia College school of journalism.

I admired Arthur Schwartz and certainly Howard Dietz, whose command of language perhaps exceeded in precision and surprise that of any other lyricist, from my earliest days. Arthur's catalog includes *I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan, Something to Remember You By, Dancing in the Dark, Alone Together, A Shine on Your Shoes, If There Is Someone Lovelier than You, You and the Night and the Music, By Myself, I See Your Face Before Me, They're Either Too Young or Too Old, A Rainy Night in Rio, Oh But I Do, A Gal in Calico, Haunted Heart*, and *Make the Man Love Me*, some of the most gorgeous melodies in the whole history of song.

One day I was descending from the ASCAP New York office in an elevator. A tall, dark-haired man and strikingly handsome man in -- I later realized -- his seventies struck up a conversation with me. We got onto the subject of songs, and as we left the building found we were both walking north. The conversation continued. The man was elegant, poised, vigorous, articulate, and spoke with a voice of such gorgeous baritone resonance that I can still hear it in my head.

Finally, as we waited for a stoplight to change, he asked my name, and I told him. He put out his hand and said, "I'm Arthur Schwartz."

I managed not to appear foolish, and sometimes after that when he was in New York City -- he lived his late years in London -- I would get together with him.

Arthur combined assurance and modesty in a curious balance, and his music was exactly like the man who wrote it: elegant, intelligent, urbane, and in exquisite taste. No one in the history in American popular music, with the one exception

of Jerome Kern, so embodied in his art the meaning of the word "taste". His melodies had the quality of utter naturalness, as if he had come upon them not so much by labor as by serendipity.

I asked him at some point, "How did you manage to combine careers of law and music?"

"Well, I didn't do them at the same time," he replied. I didn't know when I was starting to write music that I'd be very good at it. I wrote very little in the early years that made me think I should do it at all as a career, and so I decided to be a lawyer and have something to fall back on in case I didn't make it in music. And so I practiced law for four years. And Larry Hart was a man I knew quite well from camp days, when we were both counselors, and I had the luck of having him advise me. I would go to him every few months, at his house on 119th Street, and spend a day or a whole weekend with him, playing tunes of mine, and having him say, 'Well that's good, that's no good, don't leave the law now, Well let's think about it,' and at a certain point I played him enough stuff for him to say, 'I think if you want to take a year off and see whether you can make it, have you got any money?' I said, 'Yes, I've saved a lot of money.' He said, 'Well if you can support yourself for a year, why don't you do it. You can't make your way on Broadway and be a lawyer at the same time.' And I did it at the time he advised me to, and it did take me a little under a year to get the first job. I was twenty-eight.

"I never had any music lessons in my life at all -- of any kind. And when I told him I wanted to leave the law, my father said, 'How are you going to compete with Gershwin and Kern and all the other people when you haven't had any training?' And of course that worried me very much, because I was just an intuitive writer. I learned how to do everything -- not to orchestrate, especially, but I make my own piano parts and have all my life. Just learned how to do it. But I felt that it was very risky to try to compete with people. Rodgers was a thoroughly educated man musically, so was Cole Porter. My father was right. How dare I think that I could compete with them? With luck, I was able to.

I was curious about his work habits, particularly with Howard Dietz, being adamant myself -- as were Larry Hart and Johnny Mercer -- that the music should come first.

Arthur said, "Dick Rodgers has an old joke about that. When asked a thousand times which came first, the words or the music, he said, 'The check.' People who write together over many years, the way most of my collaborators and I have worked, mainly Howard Dietz and myself, the songs come in many different ways, sometimes from a title, sometimes from a tune, sometimes from a whole lyric, sometimes from a portion of a lyric. I'll never forget the time when Dietz and I were working on a show called *The Band Wagon*, a revue with Fred Astaire, and I thought we had finished the score. Howard and I had a suite in a hotel where we walked while he worked down to the MGM office every day, where he was a vice president in charge of advertising, and he said, 'We have this merry-go-round, and I'm not satisfied that we have a good merry-go-round song. We ought to write another one.' I said, 'I'm through. We have enough. We have a merry-go-round song.' We had written 'High and low, low and high, and the horses go up and down.'

"He said, 'No, no. We'll write one.' He had his coat and his hat in his hand, and he had a yellow pad. He said, 'What's the name of the girl who takes charge of this room, the maid?'

"I said, 'Louisa. Whaddya wanna know that for?'

"He said, 'Just a minute.' He wrote some words on a piece of paper, put it on the piano, and ran out to his office job. On his pad it said, *I love Louisa, Louisa loves me. When we rode on the merry-go-round, I kissed Louisa.*' So I said, 'That's too good, I have to write that.' And that became the first act finale, with the merry-go-round and the horses, and it was a great performance. That's one illustration of how freakish the writing of songs can be."

"Everyone comments," I told him, "on the supreme elegance of your writing, not just the music, but the lyrics by Howard Dietz as well."

"Well," Arthur said, "he's a prime lyricist and poet and a great wit. During the many years we've lived together working, he's said some of the funniest things. I told you, we worked in hotels. We used to have to move from room to room and from hotel to hotel because people complained about the music. And after the ninth or tenth move, we finally got settled in a place we thought we would not move from. Howard Dietz said, 'You know, Arthur, nobody ever complains about the lyrics.'"

Noting that he'd evaded my question, I pressed him: "Asking a man to define his own being and taste is difficult. But what is the source of the elegance in *your* writing?"

"Oh, I don't know that it's all that elegant," he protested.

"You must have heard it said."

"Yes. I think that every writer of everything, prose, poetry, music, anything, has his work reflect his taste and his personality. I think that's true of any writer you can think of who wrote novels or plays in the past or today. A personality is expressed in the work that comes out. I don't feel that I'm elegant, either. I don't mean that. I feel that I have an approach toward my work, and the work of other people that I like, which is of a certain kind. I don't say it's better than other kinds. I don't think I'm that special, I don't think I'm that original.

"What are your own favorites of your songs?" I asked.

"I think I like a lot of the songs that other people like. I do like *Dancing in the Dark*, of course; I think that's probably the best-known song I've written. I also like things that are not very important and not very well-known. I do like *You and the Night and Music*, I do like *By Myself*. Very much.

"I like many styles in other people's work. I like very much the kind of music I can't write and don't write. For example, one of my favorite songs is *I'm Just Wild about Harry*, by Noble Sissle and Eubie Blake, written about 1921, I think." (He was right; it was written for the show *Shuffle Along*.) I would have given anything to have written that. It's just a very

original tune. It goes on to phrases without repeat and has an ending that is unlike the beginning, and it has surprises. I also like *The Floradora Sextet* by Owen Hall and Leslie Stewart, and I've often said that that would be a great sort of thing to try to duplicate, that is, a piece of music and lyric which constantly goes from one melody to another without stop and yet is at the same time a unit." He sang the opening lines of the song, which was published in 1901, O *tell me, pretty maiden, are there any more at home like you. There are a few,* kind sir.' And it goes on and on. It takes about six minutes to get through it, and there are probably nine or ten tunes."

"The AABA song is comparatively modern," I said.

"Oh it is!" Arthur said. "But there are people who avoid it. And there are people who wrote AABA who wrote many other types of structure, including myself. Do you know a song of ours called *New Sun in the Sky*? 'I see a new sun up in a new sky, and my whole horizon has reached a new high, da-da-dum, so forth.' So you have 16 measures before you repeat. So it's half a chorus and half a chorus with a different ending. I don't try to write in any particular form. I once wrote a song with Frank Loesser for a movie, and after it was quite successful, I realized that the main strain was seven measures: *I'm Riding for a Fall.* I sounds like eight, but it's seven. And who cares?

"Ira Gershwin, with whom I wrote a show once, told me that when he and George Gershwin were writing *Girl Crazy*, they came across a song called *I'm Bidin' My Time* and they were going to have the next eight bars repeat. And it was Ira who thought that if it didn't and just went on, it would sound more like the folk song they were trying to write. The next year I was writing a show with Dietz a song called *Louisiana Hayride*, and I thought, subconsciously, 'If you don't repeat, and go on to the next phrase, it will seem more like a folk song.' So we left out the repeat. I'm fascinated with novel structures.

I asked Arthur about the difference between theater songs and those written directly for the marketplace, for what used to be called Tin Pan Alley.

"You take songs that were very good popular songs, a song such as Smiles. That's a very fine popular tune." (Smiles was published in 1917.) "But if you heard that as a theater tune, you'd say, 'Well that's a little below the level of theater music.' There is a difference in style. I would feel that too about *Hello, Dolly.* I think that's one of the greatest popular songs ever written; it happened to be in a show. There is a difference between theater music and outside-of-theater music, and outside-of-theater music on the individual basis, although that is changing. It is different from popular-song writing, and it expresses the difference between the people who are writing theater music -- their personalities, their backgrounds, their tastes -- and the same elements in people who are not writing theater music. Style is the man; the man is the style."

The name of Harry Warren is sometimes invoked in support of the Horatio Alger ethos: son of immigrants, born poor (in Brooklyn, like Arthur Schwartz) growing up without education, somehow fighting his way to the top with only his raw and untrained talent. But again, the myth fades on closer examination.

Harry Warren was one of the most successful of all American song composers in that golden period. In the 15 years from 1935 to 1950, he had 42 songs on the top-ten list of *Your Hit Parade*, a network radio program that monitored the success of songs through a complex process of surveys. Next in success was Irving Berlin, who had 33 songs on that list in the same period.

"In 1938," Harry told me, not without pride, "I had two songs with Johnny Mercer, *Jeepers Creepers* and *You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby*, that were both on the *Hit Parade*, one and two." Harry neglected to mention that in 1941, he and lyricist Mack Gordon had four on *Your Hit Parade*: *There Will Never Be Another You, I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo, Serenade in Blue*, and *At Last*, the latter three hits with the Glenn Miller orchestra, all written for the film *Orchestra Wives*.

Warren wrote the music for two Broadway shows before going to Hollywood where, in the 25 years from 1932 to 1957, he turned out songs for movies at four major studios, Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century-Fox, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and Paramount. He wrote something like 250 songs in that period, 50 of which became standards. He was the songwriter on a number of the extravagant Busby Berkeley musicals. Berkeley, who had been a Broadway choreographer, first worked with Warren on the film *42nd Street* which, as it happened, was the film that also took Harry permanently to Hollywood. Berkeley's exaggerated choreography, with complex geometric patterns of dancers, was featured in two more pictures with Warren-Dubin scores and starring Dick Powell -- *Gold Diggers of 1933* and *Footlight Parade.*

Warren worked with some of the finest lyricists of his era, among them Al Dubin (probably his primary collaborator), Johnny Mercer, Arthur Freed, Ralph Blane, Ira Gershwin, Mack Gordon, Leo Robin, and Sammy Cahn. The list of his songs is quite amazing. It includes *You're My Everything, Shadow Waltz, Would You Like to Take a Walk?, You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me, 42nd Street, I Only Have Eyes for You, About a Quarter to Nine, The Lullaby of Broadway, September in the Rain, Remember Me?, I Know Why (and So Do You), Chattanooga Choo Choo, I Had the Craziest Dream, Serenade in Blue, I Found a Million Dollar Baby, The More I See You, You'll Never Know, This Heart of Mine, The Stanley Steamer, Shoes with Wings On, On the Atchison Topeka and the Santa Fe, Zing a Little Zong, That's Amore, An Affair to Remember, I'll String Along with You, Lulu's Back in Town, With Plenty of Money and You, It Happened in Sun Valley, At Last, I've Got a Gal in Kalamazoo, My Heart Tells Me, There Will Never Be Another You*, and *I Wish I Knew.* His various publishers printed about fifty million sheet-music copies of Warren songs, yet his name remained largely unknown to the American public, unlike that of Gershwin or Porter or even Arlen. "This is a cross I've had to bear," Harry said, kidding on the square, to actor and author Tony Thomas, a prominent film historian and biographer. "Even my best friends don't know who I am. I've never been able to figure it out. I guess

I don't look like a songwriter, whatever a songwriter is supposed to look like. At the Academy Award show in 1936, when they gave me an Oscar for *The Lullaby of Broadway*, I had trouble getting past the guard.

"I hardly ever hear a disc jockey mention my name when they play my songs, but they often mention the lyricist. The very first record I ever had was *Rose of the Rio Grande* in the '20s by Vincent Lopez and his band, and they left my name off the label. I've had whole albums devoted to my songs, and you usually have to read the liner notes to find out it's my material."

Harry's feelings about fame were ambiguous. If he complained about being ignored, he didn't like public visibility either. He once was induced by friends to hire a press agent, and when the publicist actually got Harry's name into a newspaper, he fired him. He said it was embarrassing.

A famous illustration of Harry's spleen involved Johnny Mercer. Johnny wrote *On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe* with Harry and recorded it in 1945 for Capitol, a label of which he was part owner. A record store in downtown Hollywood did a window display on the song, proclaiming on a poster, "Johnny Mercer's *On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe*". Harry was incensed, claiming Mercer was trying to take full credit for the song, and even sent his long-suffering wife Jo down to the store with a camera to get a picture of the window, which he planned to use in evidence in a lawsuit against Mercer. Nothing ever came of the lawsuit, of course, but Harry retained a certain prickly rancor toward Johnny ever afterwards. Various people, including Paul Weston, tell the story, but oddly enough it is with amusement and with affection for Harry.

"Harry took offense easily," Tony Thomas remarked to me recently, with a slight chuckle. "And once he did, he carried it for life. Don't forget, his people were from Calabria." Calabria is in the south of Italy. Among Italians, the Calabrese are known for intractable stubborness.

Harry was a great opera lover, with a particular penchant for Puccini, whose music strongly influenced his own. As pianist and composer Gene DiNovi, like Harry a Brooklyn Italian, notes, "Just look at his bass lines. Puccini." When I asked Harry if it was true that he was one of the more serious Puccini freaks, he said, "I hope I am. That's my idea of music." Harry was born December 24, 1893, when Puccini was 25, and still struggling to establish himself. Puccini's first successful opera, *Manon Lescaut*, was produced that very year. Puccini died in 1924, when Harry was 31 and an established songwriter. It is curious that with so strong a Puccini influence in his work, Harry should seem so American a songwriter.

I no longer remember how I came to know Harry. It was probably through Johnny Mercer, and if not Johnny, Tony Thomas. In any case, when I used to come out from New York to Los Angeles on some job or other, I would sometimes call Harry, and of course always called Johnny. Harry, a really dedicated connoiseur of Italian food, gave me a guided tour of some of the better Italian restaurants in town.

He lived on Sunset Boulevard in Beverly Hills, in a house at the end of a long lane walled by high shrubs. He had been there since Beverly Hills was a sleepy place, thinly populated. I always enjoyed talking to Harry, because he was living history, and indeed a chat with him was a journey to and through an America that no longer was. I had a long conversation with him one day in 1975. Harry was then 82, feisty and energetic and still writing melodies, though none of them turned up in pictures: his era was gone. His voice was rather high, with a touch of Brooklyn accent. He didn't quite say *woikin* for *working* but he came close. And there was an under-color of laughter in his voice.

"My father, Antonio Guaragna," Harry said, "originally went to South America. He was in Argentina when he was 21 years old. He was a bootmaker, made riding boots. And they wanted people in South America with different crafts. This was about 1871. He didn't like it. He went back to Italy and got my mother and my three sisters and my oldest brother, got on one of these boats that took like two months to come over here, and they cooked their own food in steerage. A lot of people died in those boats in those days, coming over. They landed in New York, didn't know anybody. It takes a lot of nerve to do that. And they weren't even chased out of any place, either. They wanted to come to America. He made boots here, because of course in those days a lot of people rode horses. He used to make all my shoes. My other two sisters and my brother and I were born here.

"My brother Frank used to deliver the boots and the shoes. We lived down at Columbia Heights. That's right under the Brooklyn Bridge, near the St. George Hotel. That's where I was born, Christmas Eve, 1893.

"The family name was Guaragna. My father changed it. I never changed it. I went through school with the name of Warren. We never lived in an Italian neighborhood. We were a very Americanized family. We didn't like being Italian in the old days, because they were picked on a lot, like they pick on the Mexicans now. They thought we just smelled of garlic, and that's all. Don't forget, the people who came over here came from little towns in Italy. They weren't educated, most of them couldn't read and write. I don't understand how my father did it, I really don't. "

Harry emphasized that the family was never poor. The house in Brooklyn Heights -- still a fairly fashionable neighborhood, with a spectacular view across the East River to lower Manhattan -- was large. Their father's custom boot shop was on the ground floor. Harry was drawn to opera, Italian folk songs, and Catholic liturgical music. His hunger for music, he has said, was insatiable. He sang in his church choir because, he said, he read well.

"We used to sing quartet, four-part harmony in our house when we were kids," he said. "I always wanted to write songs, I guess, as far back as I can remember. I learned to play piano by myself, I had no formal education. At first I was a drummer. My godfather had a band, and I used to go on tours with him in the summer. We worked with a carnival show up and down the Hudson River, into Connecticut and Massachusetts. I picked up the piano, and got to like to play

the piano much more than drums. And I finally got a job playing piano in Sheepshead Bay. I was also an assistant director for Vitagraph. I had so many jobs. I found out they needed a baritone singer for the Vitagraph Quartet. I went down and applied for the job and I got it.

"Then I got a job as a property man, and then as an assistant director. I used to play the piano for scenes there. I also played for ballroom dancing, because they had to have a tempo to dance to. But then they got a phonograph, and beat me out of a job. That's how I started. I started to play piano a lot, improvising, singing.

"The war came along and I went in the navy. When I came out, I tried to get into the music business. I met two fellows in Sheepshead Bay who were music publishers. So I said to them, 'I have a song I'd like to have you hear.' It was called *I Learned to Love You When I Learned My ABC's*. They said, 'Gee, that's a cute song.' Don't forget, in those days Woolworth's sold sheet music. The title page of the sheet music determined how it would sell. If it was a pretty title page, people bought it. They never looked inside.

"They were about to print it when they took the music counters out of the stores. The fellow said, 'Do you want a job here?' I said, 'Yeah.' He said, 'Twenty dollars a week.' That's how I got in the music business.'

"I did the first show of Billy Rose, *Sweet and Low*, which had *Cheerful Little Earful* and *Would You Like to Take a Walk*. That was a review. And I did a show for Ed Wynn called *The Laugh Parade*, which had *You're My Everything*. And I did another show for Billy Rose called *Crazy Quilt*. That had *I Found a Million Dollar Baby in a Five and Ten Cent Store*.

"My film career really starts with *42nd Street*. I did one before, in 1929, called *Spring Is Here*, an old Rodgers and Hart show. I don't know why they asked us to write extra songs for that. That always puzzled me. The people in the picture business didn't know anything about songs or show business. Most of them were dress-makers. Coat cutters.

"I remember Johnny Mercer and I did a picture for one producer who was a horse player. He had a list on his desk of all the tracks in the United States, and he'd call up his book-maker. He'd tell you to stop playing or singing until he called up his book-maker. In New York, it was later than here. He'd get the New York results first. In between these calls he said to me, 'You're the lousiest piano player I ever heard.' I said, 'If I played good piano, do you think I'd be writing songs? I'd play with an orchestra.' And he said to Mercer, 'You really stink as a singer!'"

"Since you're not enamored of these people," I said, "tell me, Harry, how a good New York boy got sandbagged into Hollywood and the movie industry?"

"It was easy. I was a staff writer at Remick Music Company. Remick guaranteed me, which I had never heard of before, $200 a week drawing account. I had been making $45 a week. I couldn't turn that down. It was good money, I bought a house. That was a lot of money. That was about 1924, or '25. It was all against royalties, which I never earned, by the way.

"Warner Brothers bought Remick, as well as Harms and Witmark, and paid in those days something like $4 million, which was a lot of money. My contract expired. Max Dreyfus, who had been the owner of Remick, sent for me. He always liked me, I don't know why. I liked him too. He was responsible for developing Kern, Gershwin, everybody. He had a great sense of humor, you know. Drank nothing but imported beer, had it imported from Germany. He had great taste. He had a big farm up in Brewster, New York, his wife raised Percherons, beautiful big horses."

Max Dreyfus is a comparatively unsung hero in the development of the American song. One of the major figures in the history of American music publishing, he encouraged and nurtured almost all the major show composers of the 1920s, '30s, and '40s, including Cole Porter. He would sign them to contracts and let them do pretty much as they pleased. In his ability to sense talent even in the formative stage, he was to songwriting what Maxwell Perkins was to novelists, and we shall not see the likes of either man again.

Harry said, "Max said to me, 'Your contract's up. What do you want to do about it?' Uncle Max, I used to call him. I said, 'What do I want to do about it, what do you want to do about it?' He said, 'We'll re-sign you.' I said, 'At the same money?' He said, 'Do you know you're overdrawn $40,000 already?' He whispered to me, 'I don't care about the Warner Brothers. I'm going to re-sign you for $500 a week drawing account.'

"I said, 'How about going out to California?' He said, 'I'll put that in the contract, that you'll have to be in California for six months a year, and while you're out there you'll have to get a thousand dollars a week.'

"I said, 'Fine.' And I signed the contract. Poor Max. He hated his job. He was now working for the Warner Brothers. He'd sold his company. He was in there as an adviser. He was waiting for the time when he could go back into business. According to his contract, he couldn't for ten years. He owned a piece of Remick, and also owned Harms, and T. B. Harms, which became Chappell.

"Well, I was sitting around doing nothing. Warner Brothers got the galley proofs of *42nd Street* and somebody thought it would make a good musical. They called up Buddy Morris, who was now in charge of Witmark, and said, 'Who have you got there who could write music for a picture like that?' Buddy gave my name.

"'And that's how I came to California. I *hated* it. I couldn't stand this place. It was corny then. It was nothing like New York. At least now it's a cosmopolitan city. You know, you couldn't get a good meal out here! The coffee was like black soup. Bernstein's Grotto and Victor Hugo's in downtown Los Angeles were the two best restaurants. But there wasn't any place to eat. I remember Gus Kahn, the lyric writer, and I went to a restaurant one night and ordered a steak and we couldn't cut it. I asked the guy for a sharp knife, he brought another, we still couldn't cut it. We went hysterical, we went berserk. Even the hamburgers were lousy. There were no delis out here. When we worked at the Warner studio in Burbank that summer, 1932, when I came out, there wasn't a

soul on the lot, except the two guys writing the script for *42nd Street*. We looked out our window, you couldn't see a thing for miles -- there wasn't a building."

"Why did they build Warner Brothers out in the sticks?"

"It was cheaper, probably. They probably bought the land for two dollars an acre. When I first came out in '29, the First National studio on Sunset Boulevard was the one where they did everything. They recorded everything on huge discs. I often wondered how they kept track of all that stuff. They didn't have tape, they didn't have sound on film even.

"I went to Fox in 1940. I did the last picture Shirley Temple made, called *Young People*. If you drove out the Santa Monica or the Pico Boulevard gate, you wouldn't even see a car -- nothing. Now it's a teeming city. You go to downtown Beverly Hills, you'd think you're in New York.

"But I wouldn't go back to New York now. As I kept going back, the more I disliked it. We always went back first class, because I was making good money, and we stayed in the best hotels. I still didn't like it. I wouldn't go back now because my friends are dead. There's nobody there I could even visit. All the publishers I knew are gone.

"I loved the train trips."

"Is that why you wrote two train songs, *On the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe* and *Chattanooga Choo-Choo*?"

"Also *Shuffle Off to Buffalo* and *Rose of the Rio Grande*. I didn't even know where that was. I had an old jazz tune that Bix Beiderbecke played called *Clementine from New Orleans*.

"I used to love that train whistle. There was nothing like the wailing of the whistle at night, and the clanging of the bell as you went through a little town and you're lying in your bunk. In the early days when I went back east, I couldn't wait until we got to the Hudson River to lift up the curtain and see the river."

"Johnny Mercer wrote a lot of train songs," I said.

"Yeah. He was great. He'd come up with great lyrics."

"Was he hard to work with?"

"No. He just didn't talk, that's all. He wasn't friendly. He'd sit there and stare at you. That's why I called him Cloud Boy. Cloud Number Five. He'd just sit there and stare at you, see. When we were working at the Metro lot, I asked about his wife. I said, 'How's Ginger?' I went to lunch, came back two hours later, and when I walked in he said, 'She's fine.' I said, 'Who's fine?' He said, 'Ginger.'"

I said, "Harold Arlen told me a story about Johnny. He said they were working on a picture at, I think, Paramount, and Johnny walked out right in the middle of a meeting and came back two days later and went on with the conversation as if nothing had happened."

"Harold had a great disposition," Harry said. "I don't have that kind of disposition. I get offended very easily. I don't know why, I shouldn't be that way. I guess the fact that I was the baby of the family, nobody could pick on me. But Harold laughed at everything. I used to say to him, 'Walk two Oscars behind me,' and he thought that was hilarious. We used to go to Palm Springs a lot in those days. If somebody said that to me, I wouldn't like it. But he laughed. I couldn't take John when I worked with him. Too bad we didn't have tape in those days. I could have given him a tape and he could have taken it to his house. Mort Dixon was like Johnny. A great lyric writer, but a big drinker. He killed himself. He'd sit there and look at you. He was another guy like Mercer, he'd come out with the whole lyric, you know, not just two lines, like Mack Gordon, who'd give you a line at the time. Al Dubin too. They always dug for a title. Once they got the title, the lyric was easy."

"If you haven't got a title, you haven't got a song," I said.

"I refused to work with Dixon. He didn't talk. We used to work in the office at Remick at night in New York, and he'd just sit there."

Mort Dixon is one of the forgotten lyricists. With Harry he wrote *You're My Everything, Nagasaki, Would You Like to Take a Walk?, I Found a Million Dollar Baby in a Five and Ten Cent Store*, and *Flirtation Walk*, and, with others, *That Old Gang of Mine, Bye Bye Blackbird, River Stay Away from My Door, I'm Looking Over a Four Leaf Clover*, and *The Lady in Red*. Harry, in common with Richard Rodgers and quite a number of composers, had little understanding of the vague associative process through which lyrics are written, often in great agony. One of the reasons I got along with Johnny Mercer is that we shared the knowledge of that pain. "I think writing music takes more talent," Johnny said to me once, "but writing lyrics takes more courage."

Harry, still on the theme of his impatience with lyricists, said, "I'd play the tune three or four times. I said to Mack Gordon, 'I can't keep playing this tune. I'm beginning to dislike it.' I made him get a piano player, I wouldn't do it. I only play a tune once. I don't want to play it after that. That's it.

I asked, "Did you find singers hard to work with?"

Harry said, "I was in the picture business from '32 to '69, I would say, and never had a singer say, 'I didn't like that song.' I never had that happen to me. I'm a lucky guy. Even when I did a picture with Bing, *Just for You*. We had nine songs in that picture. We wrote a song called *Zing a Little Zong*. He looked at the song and said, 'Fine,' and walked out.

"Al Jolson was another story. Jolson would never give the songwriter credit. He was a guy who liked to cut in on songs. He'd say, 'How about it, fellas, am I in on it?' I said, 'No sir. No chance.' We were up in Big Bear, working on the songs for a picture for him. Al Dubin and I had written *About a Quarter to Nine*. We were on the way back. Jolson had a town Mercedes. He always had some la-de-da stooge with him. He said, 'Gee, Al, I loved those songs. Who wrote 'em?' I said, 'Go ahead, tell 'im, we wrote 'em.' His days as a big shot were over. When I was struggling, I wrote a song with Irving Caesar. Jolson put his name on those lyrics. I got my half, but Irving Caesar didn't."

Jolson was notorious for this kind of extortion. His name is listed as co-writer on an enormous number of songs he didn't write, including *Avalon, California Here I Come, Sonny Boy, There's a Rainbow Round My Shoulder*, and *Me and My Shadow*. He was intensely disliked by songwriters.

I said, "You wrote songs for a lot of those band pictures, I remember. *I Had the Craziest Dream* came from a Harry James picture, *Swingtime in the Rockies*. *Serenade in Blue* came from *Orchestra Wives*. *Kalamazoo* is one. Where did that come from?"

Harry said, "When I played in the band with my godfather, we stopped in Kalamazoo. I must have been 15 years old. And there was an old wooden station there. I remember carving my initials on the wood. We were on our way up to Allegan, Michigan, a county fair we were going to play. They didn't even know what Italians were up there, never heard of them. All dirt roads. The farmers came up with their carriages and horses, with all this produce and chickens and cows. You'd think they were just coming across the United States in their Conestoga wagons. I remember a real old-time guy pulling a string out of his inside pocket, he had his money tied up there. Because the pick-pockets used to play all the carnivals, y'know. And also the fortune tellers."

"Also," I said, "you and Al Dubin wrote the first dope song -- *You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me*." The song, which was in the score of *42nd Street* in 1932, uses symbols of addiction throughout, including the line "as regularly as coffee or tea." Tea was a common term for marijuana at the time.

"Yeah," Harry said, completly unabashed. "We did." And then he flabbergasted me. He said, "Would you be interested in writing with me?"

"Yeah!" I said without a moment's hesitation.

He said, "I've got a tune I'd like you to look at." He got out a cassette recorder, sat down at his piano in his studio at the back of the property on Sunset Boulevard, and taped a tune for me. "Take it home and see if you can come up with something," he said.

Harry then suggested that we go for lunch at the Bel Air Country Club, one of his hangouts. After lunch we were heading down a sidewalk toward the parking lot when we encountered a certain famous singer who was coming in with his little daughter, a pretty girl no more than seven years old. The singer made a fuss over us, telling his daughter -- who I'm sure was less than enthralled by this information -- that Harry and I were songwriters, and telling her the names of the songs we had respectively written. Harry and I were embarrassed. Then the singer, known in the business as a bit of an airhead, said, "I'm getting ready to do a new album. I wish you'd both send me some songs."

We nodded non-commitally and took our leave. As we crossed the parking lot, Harry said, "You know, that guy only ever recorded one of my songs. Did he ever do any of yours?"

"Yep," I said. "Two of them. So I'm one up on you."

I opened the front passenger door for Harry. He paused as he was about to get in and shot at me, "Are you going to send him any songs?"

"Nope," I said.

"Right," Harry said. "Fuck 'im."

I still have the tape Harry gave me that day. I never found a lyric for the melody. Harry died in 1983, aged 90. Sometimes I look at that tape, even listen to it, the piano playing awkward and rocky but the melody beautifully contoured, as one would expect of a Harry Warren tune, and feel guilty. I would love to find a lyric for it, just so I could say I once wrote a song with Harry Warren, one of the last major figures of that era in songwriting.

So even Harry Warren did not come from poverty. And although Fritz Loewe would make much of his poverty he endured in his early professional years, his father was a star of Viennese operetta and Loewe was educated at a military academy and Stern's Conservatory in Berlin. He claimed to have studied with Feruccio Busoni -- which Kurt Weill did -- but I have gone over his history with Weill scholars, with conductor Maurice Abravanel, who knew him well, and with Andre Previn, who orchestrated *Gigi* (and like Loewe was born in Berlin), and none of us believes he actually did. Harold Schonberg of the New York *Times* told me he once heard Loewe play piano and realized that somewhere he had received very good training.

Two more of the best "American" songwriters were not American. Vernon Duke was born Vladimir Dukelsky in Russia, reportedly a direct descendant of the kings of Georgia, and educated at the Kiev Naval Academy and the Kiev Conservatory. He was a student of Gliere's, and wrote a considerable body of concert music. He arrived in the United States in 1929, when he was 26, and created a large catalogue of magnificent and very American songs, including *Autumn in New York, I Can't Get Started, Taking a Chance on Love*, and *Cabin in the Sky*.

The other example of swift cultural adaptation was Kurt Weill, born in Desau. In Berlin, where he composed the music for *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* and *Die Dreigroschenoper* (later presented in New York as *The Three Penny Opera*), his music was distinctly German, a reflection of the city's ominously decadent 1920s cabaret life, jagged and sardonic and as tough-minded as the Bertolt Brecht texts for which much of it was written. It is not "pretty" music. After Weill's emigration to the United States in 1935, his music becomes very American, subtle and elegantly contoured. There is no sense of the ersatz or imitative about it: his American music is as natural as breath, and very beautiful. One would search far to find a song more American than Weill's *Lost in the Stars, Speak Low*, or *September Song*.

Frederick "Fritz" Loewe never underwent this musical naturalization. Though he and Alan Jay Lerner wrote two of the most successful of all "American" musicals, *My Fair Lady* and *Camelot*, both were built on stories set in England; a third, *Brigadoon* is set in Scotland. There is nothing remotely American in the character of his music. Another Lerner and Loewe collaboration, the musical film *Gigi*, is set in Paris early in the century, when Viennese waltzes were in fashion in France, and Loewe's music for the picture echoes that style. When Loewe attempted an American theme, as in the bad stage musical and even worse movie *Paint Your Wagon*, he was lost.

(To be continued)