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The Shaping of Johnny Mercer
Part Five

Johnny, circa 1979. This was his favorite photo of himself. I took it. The occasion was a radio interview we did in the New York office of the Canadian Boadcasting Corporation.

One of John's distinguishing gifts as a lyricist was his power of social observation. He is unique in the scope of his ability to get inside the characters of the people who animated his songs including what, with a kind of inverted pride, is called the ordinary American or common man. Indeed, he could get inside French characters as well, as witness *Once Upon a Summertime* and *When the World Was Young*.

Cole Porter was incapable of this; when he tries, as in *Down in the Depths*, he reveals only his privileged position, as in the line "even the janitor's wife has a perfectly good love life." He feels his superiority to such people. John didn't. Alan Jay Lerner was a dedicated liberal, but he too grew up in wealth. He attended Choate with John F. Kennedy, then Harvard. When he tries to present "common" people in his lyrics, as in *Love Life* and *Paint Your Wagon*, he reveals nothing so much as his own lack of empathy for or understanding of them, and at times in these works he is embarrassing.

Lerner's liberalism was largely symbolical and intellectual. Leonard Lyons, in a 1959 column in the New York *Post*, reported an incident whose source could only have been Lerner himself. Lerner told a cab driver to go up Park Avenue. The driver turned up Madison, asserting the principle elaborated in the first line of the Declaration of Independence: "I'm as good as you," he said.

And Lerner replied, "No you're not. I'm younger, more talented, more successful, fulfilling greater responsibilities. Go up Park."

I believe Lerner did say that. It was like him. But by that very token, he would be incapable of writing a song in the "voice" of that cab driver. Lerner wanted to represent the cause of the "masses" but he didn't really know what it was, nor how to do it.

Yip Harburg was a stout liberal, and tried to "identify with" the common man. At their best, and his best is wonderful, his lyrics are decent speeches on behalf of the people and freedom, as in *The Eagle and Me*. But even in his Great Depression manifesto, *Brother, Can You Spare a Dime* (of which young intellectuals of the time made mock, for reasons that baffle me; it is a great song), he writes of big men who have fallen on lowly times. Howard Dietz doesn't even try for social statement; he is just, at a technical level, the best lyricist of them all.

But Johnny could have expressed that cab driver, even made a funny song out of his cranky pride. That power of social observation is evident in *I'm an Old Cowhand* and, later, though not much later, in *Hooray for Hollywood*, in which he pillories the cant and sham of the movie industry.

When I made my early trips from New York to California, in the 1960s and '70s, usually on assignments to write lyrics for films, I noticed how many arrestingly good-looking men and women, young and old, there were working in banks, waiting tables, pumping gas. The presence of the young people one could readily understand: they had come here from Iowa or Kentucky or Nebraska because they were so good-looking that they had been endlessly told: You oughta be in pictures. And they had come out to Southern California, as Johnny put it in *Hooray for Hollywood*, to try their luck. They were still waiting for the Big Break, waiting to be discovered on a soda-fountain stool as, they'd heard, Lana

Turner had been. But the attractive woman of fifty-five, the hostess in a restaurant? She was one of those who had tried her luck and failed and finally given up and married and, one hopes, found a decent life, albeit one haunted by disappointed dreams, in one of the countless pleasant bungalows of this peculiar landscape. This was probably true of the handsome sixty-year-old real estate salesman as well. And then it occurred to me: a considerable skimming of the most beautiful young men and women of America had been coming here since the days of silent films. Most of them had been forced to abandon their reveries of celebrity and pursue other careers and modest lives. And they had married and had children, and these children were themselves, being bred of handsome parents, good-looking, and so everywhere you looked in California in those days it seemed the people were preternaturally handsome: the carhops and surfers and coeds and tennis players and secretaries with lithe tanned bodies and sun-streaked hair. It gave Southern California a kind of artificial look. Even the cars were good-looking. A man from Michigan — where the salt from winter streets rots out the doors and rocker panels of automobiles — visiting Los Angeles for the first time, said, "I couldn't figure out at first what was wrong. And then I realized. I have never seen so many old cars in good condition." So too the people.

But Southern California, into whose being Johnny was now entering, was an unusual place before all these people and cars got here. That is part of what attracted the movie industry to it in the first place — the number of days of uninterrupted sunlight in a year, which in the era of black-and-white film with an ASA rating probably under ten, permitted more days each year of shooting. Even the "interiors" were shot in three-walled rooms open to the sky. The movie industry arrived, glamorized and advertised and ultimately deluded itself, and the Beautiful Young People followed. The climate, the most equitable in North America, was its principal attraction. And Johnny found California almost overwhelming.

First there is the size of it. If you leave Milan, Italy, at noon on a train going north, by midnight you're in Denmark. If you leave San Diego, California, at noon on a northbound train, by midnight you're not even out of the State.

California is a land of wildly disparate topography, from the grim desert below sea level called Death Valley to magnificent snow-peaked mountains, from agricultural valleys of incomparable fertility to the Mojave Desert. The Mexicans, from whom California was taken by infiltration and coercion but with little bloodshed — they had been made well aware of Gringo power in Texas — rightly saw it as two Californias, referring to the Southern coastal region as California del Sur. The Gringos who took it from them, partly on the grounds that if they didn't the Russians would, called it the Cow Counties. It was bald and arid land, on which it was thought that little but scrub could grow. When the gold rush finally played out, the men who had grown rich in placer mining looked around for places to put their wealth. It was so enormous they had set up their own banks — and an opera house and fine restaurants — in San Francisco by the middle of the eighteenth century. Some took their money and experience to Nevada and began silver mining. Others considered the Cow Counties.

It seemed to be worthless land. The Spanish land-grant holdings were enormous, based on the area required to graze one steer. And where the flora are sparse, it takes a lot of land. This ground was baked hard by the sun. Someone wondered if orange trees could be grown here, and a few were imported from North Africa. Dynamite was used to blast holes in the ground to permit their planting, and then the trees were watered. And oh yes, Southern California could indeed grow oranges. All that was needed was water. And if there was one thing the old placer miners knew it was hydrology: they had used water under pressure to tear the gold from the earth. And if the land had been taken from the Mexicans and the Indians who, when they were in the way, were eliminated — both by the Mexicans and their Gringo successors — the water now was taken, from the Owens Valley, from the Colorado River, anywhere it could be found. Vast irrigation channels, lined with cement, were constructed, and great real estate scams were set in motion in the Los Angeles basin. And the fauna were brought in, crassula argentea (the jade plant) from Argentina and all sorts of succulents from Africa, pepper trees from Brazil, the jacaranda trees from Brazil with their startling purple flowers, royal palms, fan palms, date palms, and various kinds of eucalyptus from Australia. They say in Southern California that even the weeds have been imported. It is probably true.

And all this imported plant life, nourished by plundered waters, grew into fantasy foliage, incomparable gardens of outsize roses and walls of crawling bougainvillea and lilacs that here have no fragrance. It became, even before the movie industry, a fantasy land of slicksters and shysters and just plain crooks whose descendants were already assuming the manners and mantle of aristocracy even when Mercer arrived.

Southern California is a strip of north-south land about two hundred and seventy miles long and, east-west, from a few miles to about a hundred miles wide "from the mountains to the sea," as they say. It is walled off from the east and, some would say, from all reality, by the San Bernardino and San Jacinto mountains. They shield it from the dust and hot winds of the desert, although not always — the Santa Anna winds get through at times — and the sea sends it mists to cool the gardens. "The land itself faces west, toward the Pacific, from which the winds blow with great regularity," the writer Carey McWilliams observed. "It is this combination of mountain ranges, ocean breezes, and semi-desert terrain that makes the 'climate,' and the climate in turn makes the land."

Southern California is the land "south of the Tehachapi." The Tehachapi is a range of mountains that runs east-west. North of that you are getting into the green hilly country where William Randolph Hearst's San Simeon castle, another lunatic fantasy, overlooks the ocean. The hills grow wetter as you go north until you are in the coastal fogs and the frequent rains of San Francisco.

Easterners who visit Southern California go away with the impression that it has two seasons, the wet and the dry.

Carey McWilliams captured it: "But this crude description fails to take account of the imperceptible changes that occur within the two major seasons. Actually, California has two springs, two summers, and a season of rain. The first spring — the premature spring — follows closely upon the early rains in the late fall. In November the days shorten; the nights become cooler; the

atmosphere clears (except when brush fires are burning in the hills); the air is stilled; and the land is silent. By November people have begun to listen for rain. The land is dry and parched and the leaves of the trees are thick with dust. The dry season has now begun to fray nerves, to irritate nostrils, and to bear down on the people. When the wind blows, it is full of particles of dust and dry leaves, of sand and seat.

"And then come the first rains, drifting in long graceful veils, washing the land, clearing the atmosphere: the gentlest baptism imaginable. The people have known to a moral certainty that these rains would come; they have been expecting them; and, yet, they are forever delighted and surprised when they appear. And the earth is reborn, the year starts anew, with the rains."

And so it was for John:

When the rains come in California, then as now, they are almost tropical. They came once a year, and then it seemed as if it rained for about a month. Steady, quiet downpours. No thunder. No lightning. Just a heavy, wet rain. It was more fun to put on boots or heavy galoshes, wrap up tight, and walk to the store under a wide umbrella, than it was to ride in the car. Safer, too. Although you had to cross raging torrents whooshing along around the corners and down the hills, you couldn't skid on foot. It was like being a kid on your way to school, skipping puddles, leaping the curbs and listening to the sound of the rain, which eliminated all other sounds. Hardly anyone was out, and it was therapeutic, walking along in a world all your own, bundled up tight and pitting yourself against Mother Nature. The good old L.A. sewer system!

It is a folly and a fantasy, Southern California. And it is real; in the movie industry that Johnny was becoming part of, fantasy *was* the reality.

Meaning no disrespect, Hollywood had its share of religious nuts, too. All the faith healers and Heaven-on-Earth sects seemed to gravitate there, to set up some sort of Nirvana or Valhalla in the euphoric climate that was free for all and surrounded by the beautiful mountains, deserts, trees, and hills that rolled down toward the ocean. They had plenty of followers, too, for it seems all God's children, like love, come in many strange shapes and sizes.

There, in strange shapes and sizes too, were the tragedies that life seems to hand out impartially to the swimmers who can't buck the tide — Paul Bern, Ross Alexander, Jean Harlow — sandwiched in between old tragedies, like the Fatty Arbuckle and William Desmond Taylor debacles, and the more recent Marilyn Monroe suicide and Sharon Tate horror story. Senseless. Terrifying. The ultimate dramatic catastrophes in the most dramatic of all towns.

But life went on as the make-believe went on. Even if it touched you personally, you would leave the cemetery of a friend and, before the ride back to town was completed, you were thinking, talking life's business again, planning the next move in your career. Not that anyone was coldblooded or coldhearted about it all. Show people don't like to be sad. They know the risks and they take them. There's no use dwelling on them. They prefer to laugh.

And they know the value of a laugh and a tear. After all, that's what the rest of the world pays them for.

One of John's odder qualities is in that passage. Like Evelyn Waugh keenly observing and then satirizing the high social class of which he was a part, John could stand apart to look at the show business world of which he was a denizen and see it whole, see it clear, see it for what it was, and then go on functioning in it.

Contrary to later impression, the music for silent films was not all performed by little old ladies in print dresses and flowered hats seated in front of battered upright pianos, or, in the major cities, organists addressing the keyboard and pedals and pipes of what used to be called the Mighty Wurlitzter. Some of it was, to be sure. But major motion pictures were often accompanied by full symphonic scores played by the large pit orchestras hired by the exhibitors. The coming of sound movies in 1928 brought that to an end. Scores could now be recorded and printed on the edge of the film itself. This caused devastating unemployment among musicians not only in America but around the world; but it brought employment in the Hollywood recording studios.

Some of the producers thought, since the music had been performed almost without interruption in the silents, that talking pictures too should be so accompanied. It took the persuasive powers of a number of the better composers to convince them that sometimes the dialogue and sound effects should be allowed to be naked. Nonetheless, to record the scores of 1930s talking pictures, large orchestras of superb musicians were assembled. And what do you do when you have any number of musicians sitting around on staff and on salary? You make musicals, and in the 1930s, the studios ground them out like sausages, the Fred Astaire and Ginger Rogers movies, the Busby Berkeley extravaganzas, and the kind of college musicals that gave Mercer his baptism of writing films. Some of these musicals were good, a few were superb, but a lot of them were awful. Good or bad, they required songs, and songwriters to make them, and the studio executives began importing songwriters from New York as fast as the Superchief could carry them.

Rodgers and Hart had made the move to the Coast, and then gone back east. The Gershwin brothers had moved west. George died in Los Angeles in 1937; his brother Ira stayed on until the end of his own days. Cole Porter was writing for movies. Most of these composers and lyricists, to be sure, retained their Broadway affiliations, but a few, among them Harry Warren, made the move and stayed.

Harry told me, "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. They probably bought the land for two dollars an acre."

In the twenty-five years from 1932 to 1957, Harry turned out songs for movies at Warner Brothers, Twentieth Century-Fox, Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer, and Paramount. He wrote something like 250 songs in that period, fifty of which became standards. He was the songwriter on a number of the Busby Berkeley musicals. Berkeley, who had been a Broadway dance director, first worked with Warren on the film *42nd Street*. 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*.

Harry's lyricist for many of his movie assignments was Al Dubin. The Dubin-Warren songs included *42nd Street, Shuffle Off to Buffalo, You're Getting to Be a Habit with Me* (which, I once told Harry, was the original dope song), *Shadow Waltz, We're in the Money, The Boulevard of Broken Dreams, I'll String Along with You, I Only Have Eyes for You, Lullaby of Broadway, About a Quarter to Nine, She's a Latin from Manhattan, Lulu's Back in Town, I'll Sing You a Thousand Love Songs, With Plenty of Money and You* (one of the true Great Depression songs), *Remember Me?*, and many more, including an oddment called *Flagenheim's Odorless Cheese*.

It is an estimable body of work, and Al Dubin, who was born in Zurich, Switzerland, on June 10, 1891, was an estimable lyricist, a round, heavy-set man with thinning swept-back hair. But he had some peculiar habits, and they were to work in John Mercer's favor. Harry, who was a deliciously cantankerous man, delightful in spite of himself, told the late film historian Tony Thomas:

"(Al) was getting more and more tired of working for Warner Brothers. He was always disappearing, and we would never know where he was. He did his writing away from the lot, and after these absences he would return with the lyrics."

Harry was on deadline for a song in the film *The Singing Marine* (1937). The song was to be called *Night Over Shanghai*. And Dubin was nowhere to be found.

"And Johnny Mercer happened to be on the spot."

John told *Crescendo International* magazine in London in 1974:

"Al Dubin was a real character. He'd often disappear for long periods and come back with his pockets stuffed full of lyrics scribbled down on tickets and dirty scraps of paper, all spilling out all over the place. Harry Warren wrote some of his greatest songs with Al, but there was one occasion when Harry was out on a job and Al couldn't be found. As usual, he'd temporarily gone out of circulation. So I was brought in to take his place. That was in 1937 for *The Singing Marine*; some of the songs were Al's, the rest mine."

Harry said, "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. 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!'"

John became the biggest songwriter in town. He wrote lyrics, and occasionally music as well, for ninety movies, including *Hollywood Hotel, Cowboy from Brooklyn, Going Places, Naughty but Nice, Blues in the Night, 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 *That Old Black Magic*), *The Harvey Girls, Out of This World, The Belle of New York, Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, Daddy Long Legs* (for which he wrote music), *Merry Andrew, Breakfast at Tiffany's* (which produced *Moon River*) and *Days of Wine and Roses*.

He was nominated for the Academy Award eighteen times, and won it four times.

In 1942, Mercer had an idea for a new record company. He had noted that there was all kinds of musical talent working in the movie industry but not making records. Indeed, some of the movie studios were opposed to their people recording. The major labels were headquartered in New York. Mercer thought a new company could take advantage of all this resident movie talent. He approached Glenn Wallichs, who owned a record store in Hollywood, and fellow songwriter Buddy De Sylva, by now the head of Paramount Pictures, with his ideas. De Sylva put up $25,000, Wallichs contributed an acute sense of business acumen, and John gave the company a deep creativity, an uncannily perceptive musical taste. They called the company Capitol Records.

Though it was launched in the early days of World War II, when there was an acute shortage of the shellac with which records were then made, in competition to the powerful RCA, Columbia, and Decca record companies, it was nonetheless an immediate success, rapidly making recording stars out of Nat King Cole, Betty Hutton, Stan Kenton, Peggy Lee, Paul Weston, Bobby Sherwood, Andy Russell, Jo Stafford, Kay Starr, Freddie Slack,

Ella Mae Morse, Nellie Lutcher, John himself, and more.

There are several stories about how Capitol found shellac for its pressings, but the one Johnny told me is this:

There was in San Diego a man who had a warehouse full of shellac and a son who led a very bad band. John signed the band to Capitol and made very good use of the shellac. The bandleader's name is forgotten.

In a business notorious for dishonest practices, Capitol Records gained a reputation for scrupulous probity. One of the important figures in the company was Mickey Goldsen, who headed its music-publishing division and now has his own company in Hollywood. Like everyone else, Goldsen mentions John's drinking. It is inescapable. He could be insulting when drunk. Mickey said:

"He had three stages. First stage, he was happy and singing his songs. Second stage, he was insulting even his best friends. He used racial slurs, he used ethnic slurs. And third stage, he would fall asleep in a corner.

"The next day, Ginger and he were going around making excuses and making amends.

"Two of his great friends were Bill Goodwin and his wife." Bill Goodwin was a famous radio announcer and film actor. His daughter Jill is married to Phil Woods and his son, Bill Goodwin, is the drummer in the Phil Woods group. Mickey said, "He insulted the hell out of Bill Goodwin. Called him a no talent. Things like that. The next day he called up and apologized."

The younger Bill Goodwin remembered: "In the neighborhood where we lived, there were a lot of people in show business. Jack Carson lived right behind us. Gordon and Sheila McRae and their kids were down the street. Marian and Mannie Klein were right across the street. The Shellys were right across the street: Marie DeSylva. David Shelly was Buddy DeSylva's stepson. He spent his whole life waiting for her to die so he could inherit. By the time she died, he was about fifty-five and had ruined his liver. He followed her almost directly.

"The Crosbys were three houses down. The guy next door was Jack Warner's personal secretary. We were very close to their kids, the Schaeffers. An elderly couple on the other side, he was a director at Warner Brothers. We were on Camarillo Street in Toluca Lake, near Cahuenga. The Mercers lived in either Beverly Hills or Belair. They were regular visitors to the house. Before we were born, there was a lot of hanging out in that crowd. Johnny and Ginger and Dad and Mom, and a lot of other people were very tight.

"Jill was born in '39, I was born in '42. I just came across, in my mother's effects, a book that is a photo record of a show they put on. It was apparently just before we were born. They put on a minstrel show, in '37 or '38. Apparently all the people in the show, it was a big party, were in makeup. Jerry Colonna was in it, Bob Hope was there, Joe Bushkin was playing piano in the band. Mercer, I think, was the interlocutor, in blackface. Mom was in the chorus line."

Jo Stafford recalls that the morning after a party, John was likely to send roses to his victims of the night before. Some of the Mercer insult stories are chilling; but some of them are funny.

According to one of them, Mercer at a party got into a confrontation with a prominent actor, aggressively saying, "You never could act." And then: "What's more, you're too short." At this point, he took a swing at the man who, to protect himself, gave Mercer a shove. John fell down. The actor, abashed about the incident, telephoned John the next day and *he* apologized.

"That's all right," John reportedly said. "I thought you were Alan Ladd."

In the version I heard, the victim was Richard Widmark, but I have checked with him, and he tells me it was not he. I have not been able to trace the story to its source.

Les Brown said, "I first knew Johnny in the early 1940s, when they were starting Capitol Records. We'd see each others at parties or jazz concerts.

"I always admired him immensely. To me, he was the consummate lyricist, and, as far as I'm concerned, in those days the hippest. Also a wonderful man — when sober. I never saw such a Jekyll and Hyde so far as alcohol was concerned. I don't know what brought it on. After a few drinks he went from being the sweetest man in the world to a nasty one.

"One time at our house in Pacific Palisades, he started getting nasty. There were a lot of people there and he was spoiling the party. My wife took him by the ear and said, 'Johnny, follow me.' She took him right out into the driveway and put him in his car and said, 'When you want to be nice, you can come back.' He came back after a while. He'd got rid of his nastiness."

Johnny's behavior became part of the legend of Capitol Records. Mickey Goldsen told me:

"Glenn Wallichs brought me out to California. We had lunch at the Paramount commissary, Johnny Mercer, Buddy DeSylva, Glenn Wallichs, and me. This was September 1943. Capitol Records had been in business two years. Buddy had been a tremendously successful writer. He had three hit shows working on Broadway at the same time. Three! And he was a top producer at Paramount.

"We were sitting there talking. Jackie Cooper was in officer's training at Great Lakes Naval Station. He got involved with a dame, and it was kind of a scandal. I said very innocently, 'Well, if you get involved with dames, you're gonna get into trouble. And Buddy DeSylva looked at me and said, 'You never know when it's going to happen to you.' I didn't realize it, but at that moment, his secretary was six months pregnant. There was a big law suit.

"There was a songwriter around Hollywood named Joe Greene. He wrote *Across the Alley from the Alamo*. I had taken the song and given him a big advance. In those days, $2500 was a lot of money. He came to me and said, 'I need three thousand dollars.' I said, 'What do you want to do, sell the song or what?' Well he ran around Hollywood telling people that I'm trying to buy him out. And the story got back to Glenn Wallichs.

"Glenn comes to me and says, 'Mickey, we've got to be so careful about what we do because we have Buddy and Johnny as our partners.'

"I said, 'Look, Glenn, let's be honest. Buddy is in a paternity

suit and Johnny was picked up for drunk driving the other day. And you're accusing me of trying to buy a song from Joe Greene?"

"Well, Glenn laughed. He said, 'They're picking on me when our partners are headlining.'"

I told Mickey, "The way I heard it, you said, 'Buddy DeSylva's in the newspapers for having knocked up his secretary, and Johnny Mercer's in the nearest bar insulting everybody, and you're questioning what I've done to the company's reputation?"

Mickey said, "It was something like that. Paul Weston probably told you the story. Funny part of it is that Joe Greene and I became the best of friends. He gave me another song called *All About Ronnie*.

"Glenn was a wonderful guy. We got along great. He owned Music City when Johnny first knew him. It was a big store, the biggest. That's where Johnny went in to get demos made and got talking to Glenn, and they said, 'We ought to have a record company out here.' That's how it started.

Paul Weston told me much about Capitol's early days, including the chaos of the company, which at first occupied small quarters over Glenn Wallich's record store. Wallichs would be on the phone, trying to make a distribution deal, while John would be playing the company's latest record at maximum volume. John's only interest was the music.

Paul eventually married Jo Stafford. Jo told me:

"We not only made records with Johnny, but we did radio shows with him a lot. The *Chesterfield Supper Club*, and then we did a summer replacement show for Bob Hope for Pepsodent called *The Johnny Mercer Music Shop*. And so we were together five days a week. Actually we did two a day. We did one at five o'clock for back east and one at eight o'clock for the west. We had some very entertaining eight o'clock shows, because the minute the five o'clock show was over, all the players would make a bee-line for a place called the Tropics, which was right across the street. A south seas bar with Palm Trees.

"But I never saw Johnny out of shape for a broadcast. He held back. We were on for twenty-six weeks at the end of 1944. December, '44. It did well, as far as ratings were concerned. The reason it went off, and I'd forgotten about this until recently because I just couldn't believe it, was because he sounded too black.

"Paul always said that when we were doing that five-day-a week radio show was the happiest time that he ever saw John. Five days a week, when John got up in the morning he knew exactly what he was going to do that day. And he loved the surroundings of all the musicians. And the whole atmosphere was conducive to happiness. And it really was. There was certainly melancholy there, all the time."

She added: "Don't you think it comes out in so many of the songs?"

"Even the happy ones," I said. "Paul told me once that Johnny was worrying about old age when he was in his twenties."

"This is the truth. The other night I was watching *Laura* and listening to the lyrics. It's an unhappy song. But there's a sense of loss, and always the trains in the night, there's even a train in *Laura*. And the lyrics to *When the World Was Young*. Oh Jeepers, where do you start? *Blues in the Night* is pure Americana. And *One for My Baby*. No one could ever sing that as well as John. I remember the first time I heard it with John singing it. No one else ever came close."

I mentioned John's little radio feature in which he would be handed, on the air, a newspaper, and would improvise blues lyrics on its headlines.

She said, "I've been at parties where, after a couple of hours, he would start singing the blues about everybody in the room. He probably had been thinking a little bit ahead of time, but he couldn't have been too far ahead, because he didn't know who he was going to see."

But one incident of this ability, recalled by lyricist Jay Livingstone, is chilling. Johnny was sitting in with a jazz group in a nightclub. Ginger was at a front table. John was drunk. He sang a blues in which he excoriated her viciously, reciting what he perceived to be all her failings. Jay told me that it gave him the strangest conflict of feelings. As a lyricist, he was breathless with admiration; as a man, he was horrified.

Composer David Raksin, with whom John had one of his most successful and best songs, *Laura*, said:

"Everybody who knew Johnny knew this about him. I didn't — until one evening my wife and I were with Johnny and Ginger at some supper club in Hollywood. Johnny was drunk and he got onto Ginger. As I later found out, this was fairly common. He was being so terrible to her, really horrible.

"I said, 'Johnny, I want you to stop that right away.'

"He said, 'And if I don't?'

"I said, 'If you don't, I'm going to knock your fucking head off.'

"I've always had the feeling that part of this had to do with the fact that when he fell in love with Judy Garland and Judy with him, Ginger wouldn't let him go, which was a blessing in no disguise at all.

"He could do that. He could turn on a dime. But with me he was always marvelous. It's sad. Ginger must in some way have understood that the root of this was some kind of crazy torment. I'm not excusing Johnny. But it had to be something terrible to make him say things like that.

"I think he was one of those guys from whom rage springs undiluted. All of a sudden it comes pouring out, and you've got to know it's hell in there. But otherwise, he was a darling man, I really loved him, he was wonderful. We worked together several times. Not long after *Laura* I was assigned to *Forever Amber*. It had a very complicated main tune. Johnny wrote a lyric for that. It never went anywhere, but it was an awfully good lyric, I thought, for such an impossible task. We did several others. I did a western. They were all nice. Johnny was very sweet about the whole thing. I think the tunes were probably not that good.

"In addition to his genius, there was a competence about that man. He was always cool. It was always this thing, whatever it was he could handle it. He may have gone home and sweated blood,

but you never knew it. It has something to do with being equal to impossible tasks."

One of John's closest friends, over the years, was lyricist Wolfe Gilbert, pronounced Wolfie, as noted. He was born in Odessa, Russia, on August 31, 1886, and died July 20, 1970. His second wife, Rose, was much younger than he. Now in her eighties, she lives in Palm Desert, California, a remarkably active and fascinating woman. She recalled:

"Those were wonderful, wonderful days.

"They used to put on shows for charities. There would be Johnny and Wolfe and Ben Oakland and Harry Warren and Harry Ruby and Bert Kalmar. Wolfe and Johnny were always the nucleus for this little group. Johnny called it *Wolfe's Follies*.

"We were at Harold Adamson's for a party. Johnny was three sheets to the wind. Ginger said, 'I've got to get Johnny out of here.' Now Ginger was not that steady herself. She said, 'He'll go for you, he won't go for me.' I said, 'John, come with me, dear. I want you to drive me home.' He said, 'Sure.' We were on our way out and we bumped into Bill Harbach. And Bill said, 'Where you going, Johnny?' Johnny said, 'I'm going to take Rosie home.'"

Bill Harbach, son of lyricist Otto Harbach, became a producer in television. He produced, among others, the Steve Allen show.

Rose continued: "I said, 'My husband's there and he knows I'm not going to go home. I just want to get Johnny in the car.'

"Bill Harbach said, 'Come with me. I know a great place we can get a drink.'

"John says, 'On 48th Street. Just off Madison Avenue. There's this wonderful place, and they owe me.'

"And we're in Beverly Hills!

"Johnny said, 'Come along, Rosie, you might as well have a drink before you go home.'

"I said, 'No, John, I want to go home. I have had plenty to drink.'

"He said, 'You're such a spoil sport. I'll just go with Bill.'

"I said, 'Johnny, this is Beverly Hills. You can't find Madison Avenue unless you fly.' And Johnny loathed flying.

"He said, 'All right. But I probably won't talk to you tomorrow.'"

John and Ginger, unable to have children, had adopted two of them, both from the state of Georgia, naming them Amanda and Jeff. Amanda now lives in Palm Desert; Jeff lives in Oregon. Amanda remembers the bitter fights of John and Ginger.

There were rumors of other women in John's life, including the liaison with Judy Garland. Garland's affairs were notorious, and her behavior more wanton than anything recounted in books about her. Mickey Goldsen said:

"Johnny was working with Judy Garland on *The Harvey Girls* during the war. Judy was a very attractive girl, and kind of friendly like, and Johnny fell madly in love with her. And one Sunday night, he was sitting with Ginger. They were in the den or something. He said, 'Ginger, I've got to tell you this. I've fallen in love with Judy Garland. I'm going to make it easy for you. But we're going to have to separate or something.' Ginger was stunned. They turned the radio on. Walter Winchell always came on Sunday night. He said, 'Flash. We just got word that Judy Garland and Dave Rose eloped to Las Vegas.'

"That's the story that I heard. It was all over town."

That indeed is the conventional version of the affair, which, curiously, isn't mentioned in Gerold Frank's biography of Garland.

According to Rose Gilbert, however, the matter was a little more complicated than that. I said to Rose, "I gather the Judy Garland affair went on over a period of some years."

She said, "Yes, it did. He really loved her. He truly did. That much I know.

"He asked Ginger for a divorce. That's what he told us, Wolfe and me. He told her, 'You can have anything you want.' He said he was going to marry Judy Garland. She said, 'I would like a trip to China. I would like to take my sisters on a trip to China. We'll go by boat. When I come home, if I still feel the same way, you can have your divorce.' He thanked her, got her on the boat, sent her and her sisters off first-class. Mid-way, I think it was, on the boat, she got infectious hepatitis. They sent her back by plane. They put her here in the hospital. She was at Cedars Sinai. I went to see her. You had to go in with a mask on. Very infectious. She seemed to be all right when I was there. Now this is hearsay from me; this is what my husband told me. He told me the doctor had told John that Ginger was going to die. And when John went in to see Ginger, Ginger said, 'Will you stay with me? I'm really frightened.

"He said, 'I'll stay with you as long as you live.'

"And that cut off the divorce and anything else."

There is little question that the affair took place. Ginger even told Amanda's son James about it.

Over the years, John's father — who had managed to re-establish himself in business — had slowly been whittling down his debt, which had originally been about a million dollars. He was under no legal obligation to do this: he simply felt morally compelled to do it. He died in 1940, still owing $300,000.

John always felt the burden of his father's debt. In 1955, he did something about it. Capitol had been sold to EMI of England, and John was many times a millionaire. Stopping off between trains in Chicago, he mailed a check for the remaining $300,000 to banker George W. Hunt in Savannah, asking him to discharge the last of his father's debt, though he was under no obligation to do so and his father had been gone for fifteen years. I told John one day that people had told me about this incident. "Is it true?" I said.

"Yeah," John said. "Did they also tell you I forgot to sign the check?"

George Hunt told an interviewer:

"It was in a plain envelope without return address. Inside was a personal check for $300,000 and a little note that wasn't even dated."

The note read: It has been my ambition since boyhood to pay off my father's debt in this venture, and I have thought that this would be appreciated by the certificate holders and would in effect clear the name of [my father's] company."

John tried to keep his name out of the transaction, but this was impossible. The story hit the local newspaper. Savannah was incredulous. One of its businessmen wrote John:

"The failure of your father's business was a clean failure, and I recall that he voluntarily threw all his personal belongings, even his automobile, into the pot. You are a worthy descendant of an honorable man."

A Baptist minister who had inherited certificates in the Mercer company wrote to him:

"I thought you'd like to know how the money from your generous act will be used. My oldest daughter is studying piano in New Orleans, and this will insure her completion of college work."

All this from a man who considered himself a failure. John's early ambition was to be a cartoonist or commercial artist, and he was a very good painter. He once said to me, "I tried to be a singer and failed. I tried to be an actor and failed. So I just naturally fell into lyric writing." It is an absolutely nonsensical evaluation of his life.

One of his friends was composer Alec Wilder, who like Johnny had a taste for liquor and a flair for despair. When John would be with him in New York, and they had been drinking, John would sometimes put his head down on a table and say, "Oh God, I should be dead."

Johnny never ceased to regret the sale of Capitol Records. Drunk, he would mutter, "We never should have sold the company." He saw Capitol, once the champion of all that was best in popular music, become the champion of the worst. Capitol's success was built largely on the sale of the records of Nat Cole and Peggy Lee. Long after rock-and-roll took over Capitol, Cole had occasion to telephone the company. An operator answered, "Capitol Records, home of the Beatles."

Cole hung up the phone.

Johnny went one day to the round Capitol building on Vine Street, which he and his partners had built. He gave his name to a receptionist. She said, "May I ask what it's concerning?"

A year or so ago, I had dealings with one of the young executives of Capitol. She knew nothing of the company's history. She had never heard of Johnny Mercer.

Yet John continued to have successes long after Capitol was sold, notably with film composers Johnny Mandel (with whom John wrote *Emily*) and Henry Mancini, with whom he wrote *Moon River, Days of Wine and Roses*, and *The Sweetheart Tree*. Mancini recalled playing the melody he had written for the film *Breakfast at Tiffany's* for Blake Edwards, who directed it.

Mancini said, "He loved it. He said, 'Who would you like to do the lyrics?'

"I went for the best. I knew Johnny Mercer . . . . So I called him.

"This was the low point of Johnny's artistic life. Illiterate songs were high on the charts . . . Johnny came to see me. He talked about the condition of the music business. We were almost ten years into the rock era, and he didn't have much hope for his kind of lyric or my kind of music. After I played him the melody, he said, 'Hank, who's going to record a waltz? We'll do it for the movie, but after that, it hasn't any future commercially.' I gave him a tape of the melody and he went home. "John called me one morning and said he had three lyrics to show me."

The third of these was *Moon River*. There have been more than a thousand recordings of the song, which John thought would interest no one.

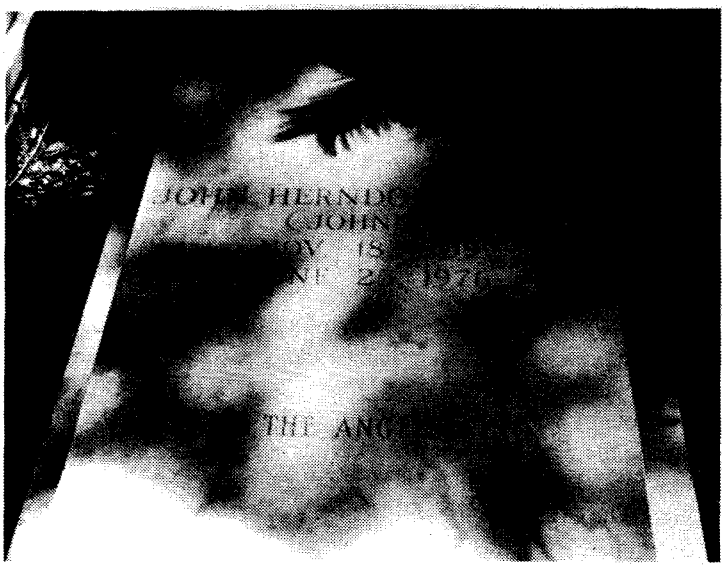
Nothing deterred his melancholy. Sitting in his studio work room in Belair, he wrote:

I am over sixty years old now. And when just the other day I heard Richard Frederick and Anna Moffo do a medley from Show Boat, *Jerry Kern's wonderful melodies, I pulled over to the side of the road, parked, and cried like a young boy.*

I sit here in California, writing these reminiscences in a heavy rain, thinking of the fires and mudslides, and it does seem as if the magic sunny land I knew has been "struck", like the movie sets it built, and has disappeared overnight, all its geniis gone back into bottles, leaving skyscrapers where the orange blossoms used to scent the wind.

John's last project was a musical called *The Good Companions*, which he wrote in London with André Previn. While he was working on it, he began to experience dizzy spells. His friends urged him to see a doctor, but he avoided doing so. Finally he gave in. Returning to California, he underwent brain surgery, and went into a coma. He was taken home from the hospital. His work studio at the side of his home in Belair was converted to a hospital room, and he was nursed around the clock, unable to speak. He died there on June 25, 1976.

He was taken home to Savannah and buried in Bonaventure Cemetery in a family plot where his father lies next to his first wife, Mary Walter, and his second, Johnny's mother, Lillian Ciucevich. Ginger died in 1994 and lies next to Johnny.



The headstone in Bonaventure Cemetery in Savannah. Photo by the author.