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The Shaping of Johnny Mercer
Part Two

John, like everyone else, was steeped in the songs of World War I, though since it was to be the war to end all wars, it did not bear that name. It was known simply as the Great War. The music industry mobilized to instill a will to war in the American public, and of course to make a little money on it.

The classic American song of World War I was *Over There* (1917), by George M. Cohan, a shout of naive and earnest 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 complaint about military life. Johnny Mercer would echo its sentiment in the next war in a song called *G.I. Jive*.

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.

The United States entered the war in 1917. Veterans of the Civil War were plentiful in the country's parks, sitting on benches, their beards growing longer and whiter.

In addition to *Over There*, the year brought *Good-Bye Broadway, Hello France; When Yankee Doodle Learns to Parlez Vous Français; 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;* 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 of the Third Army, commanded by John's distant cousin George S. Patton. 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" 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 phone sex. *Hello, Central, Give Me Heaven*, by 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; 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 during the years of World War I. 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 became 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 twenty-one-year-old composer named George Gershwin.

The year 1919 brought something else to America besides the influenza pandemic: Prohibition, the so-called Volstead Act. During the war, a temporary Prohibition Act had been passed to save grain for use as food. But in 1917, the Hobson resolution to pass an Eighteenth Amendment to the Constitution received the necessary two-thirds majority vote in Congress. The Amendment, prohibiting the manufacture, transportation, and sale of alcoholic beverages — which man had been making since before the misty beginnings of history — was ratified on January 16, 1919, and went into effect on January 16, 1920. Its effect of course was that of all unpopular prohibitions: it corrupted the forces of law enforcement and made criminals rich and powerful.

It launched what F. Scott Fitzgerald, rightly or no, called the jazz age, and Johnny was one of its creations. He was eleven when the Eighteenth Amendment went into effect, and he looked up, as boys at that age always do, to those just a few years older than he. They danced the fox trot, the girls bobbed their hair, rolled their silk stockings down to a point just above the knee, which was revealed by their short skirts, the boys carried hip flasks of liquor, and a favorite pastime was necking under the stars in the rumble seats of roadsters. John would always remember the death toll from drinking. You would come home from a dance or some other event and learn that two beautiful young people not out of their teens had been in a wreck, and might not live, and if they did live could be disfigured or crippled for life.

Cars were fewer and mechanically not so advanced then. One of the wondrous things to me was the Vanderbilt Cup race, which for a time was staged on a track which curved within five miles of our summer place.

All we young boys — cousins and friends — would pile into the back of a pick-up truck or a Ford touring car and go with a picnic lunch to watch the daredevils of the day put the snorting steel monsters through their paces. Ralph DePalma, Barney Oldfield, Louis Chevrolet, and the unlucky Bruce Brown, killed within a year, would careen around the steeply banked but imperfectly engineered turns at the unheard-of speed of sixty miles an hour — a mile a minute! — and down the straightaways in clouds of swirling dust or the dry fine powder stirred up from the oyster-shell-surfaced road until they and the spectators were covered from head to foot.

I was enthralled. I can still see Barney Oldfield, with his racing cap pushed back on his forehead, his face grimy with oil and grease except where his goggles had been, smoking a long black cigar, his linen duster flapping in the breeze as he leaned over his noisy engine to see if its parts were working harmoniously. How our blood pounded as they came, specks in the distance, roaring toward us, then kicking up rocks and gravel as they took the sharp turn. It's no wonder we little fellows were cautious as we peered from behind a tree. We were no more than five or ten yards away.

Whenever a band came to play in the area — at a school, at the Pavilion Hotel, sometimes out at the nearby resort area on Tybee Island — Johnny would be there. In later embarrassed memory, he would see himself as he stood close to the band, hands raised in front of him, playing an imaginary trumpet. His behavior was no different than that of young rock fans more than half a century later, whacking away at and fingering an unseen instrument, playing air guitar, as they came to call it.

Encouraged by his first timid effort at dancing, he continued, feeling that he could try anything. One of the memorable moments in this youthful dancing career was at the De Soto Hotel near central Savannah. It did not survive until the time when Savannah took stock of its architectural treasures and moved to preserve them. It was torn down a few years ago, replaced by an office building no more nor less undistinguished than countless edifices like it all over America.

Johnny entered a Charleston contest. His dancing partner at the De Soto was a buxom girl named Fanny, with round cheeks, a blush, and ready musical laughter. In her short skirt and rolled stockings, she swirled around him and, he remembered, they held the audience enthralled. He gave her the credit for their prizes, a scarf, a bottle of perfume, and the bantamweight championship of Savannah Charleston dancers.

Ah, Fanny, merci, mademoiselle, for an evening to remember, you playing Ginger Rogers to my bumbling Fred Astaire. If I was not becoming famous musically, I was becoming notorious as a fellow who would try anything.

The first time Johnny heard the song *Coquette,* written by Johnny Green, Gus Kahn, and Carmen Lombardo, he was drunk.

While my pretty little date was dancing with all the other fellows, I was outside weeping the maudlin tears of my first crying jag as I listened to that beautiful tune with its simple little lesson about youthful promiscuity. Music can still make me cry. More so than really sad things. I'm inured to those, expecting death and taxes, and taking them as a matter of course.

Three miles away across the water from Vernon View, "as the red-wing blackbird flies," is Montgomery, which was opposite Skidaway and just past Pettigaw. The Hancock family lived there. All of them were musical, all of them played guitar, and, Johnny said, harmony came naturally to them.

John said, "The father, before walking down the road one day — to find the rainbow, possibly — and never returning, must have taught his oldest all the folks songs he knew." What happened is that the elder Hancock, after siring a family in Savannah, divorced his wife, abandoned a successful business, and moved to New York City, where he built a second successful business, this one in children's wear.

John said the Hancock boys were seven of the most talented boys you ever met. John described Dick Hancock, who was close to his own age, as a red-haired freckle-faced fan of Eddie Lang and Cliff Edwards.

Dick and Johnny probably heard Lang, born Salvatore Massaro in Pittsburgh in 1902, when he recorded with the Mound City Blue Blowers, in 1924, though he is best known for his later association with violinist Joe Venuti. Johnny was then fifteen. Lang was an extremely original musician whose place in jazz history has been too casually slighted. He was one of the great formative influences on the instrument, and Johnny always said Dick Hancock played like him. In fact, Johnny said, "Dick could play as good as anybody on the records." Tapes of Dick Hancock, made in later years and now in possession of his nephew Jimmy Hancock, indicate that Johnny was not wrong; Dick Hancock was a very good musician.

Johnny and Dick were enamored of the playing of Bix Beiderbecke and Frank Trumbauer whose early recordings they collected. They were avid too about the Paul Whiteman band. History has not been good to Whiteman, partly because of the sobriquet King of Jazz, attached to him by publicists. But Whiteman's recordings were often of high caliber, particularly when they featured the jazz musicians he admired, Beiderbecke among them. Johnny and Dick liked the Rhythm Boys, a group that included Al Rinker and Bing Crosby who, before he became known as a romantic singer of ballads, was a skilled ensemble singer of brisk rhythmic novelties. Johnny and Dick listened to the records of Bessie Smith and Louis Armstrong, which they bought in shops in the black neighborhoods of Savannah. In that era, even records were segregated. Those made by black performers, known as "race records", were not available in the stores of white neighborhoods. There were few record stores as such in either white or black neighborhoods. Records were often sold in subsidiary departments of furniture stores.

When Johnny and Dick would enter these stores in black neighborhoods, they felt obliged to buy at least one record, since the white owners had posted signs intended to be read by blacks: *No Free Riders* and *Buy or Don't Listen.*

They were also fascinated by black church music. Near the Mercer summer home in Vernon View there was a small Negro church. Often on Sundays, they would walk down the country lane to that church and stand outside, listening to the singing.

The small church near Vernon View where Johnny and his friend Dick Hancock would go on Sundays, standing outside to listen to the singing. Photo by the author.

When the weather was good, Johnny and Dick would go by canoe or outboard motorboat to one of the innumerable docks along the river and the estuaries to summer parties. They would sing, accompanied by Dick's guitar or that of his older brother, although Johnny and Dick claimed to know all the new summer songs.

In the last analysis:

If you should ask me what makes me tick, I would say that it is that I am from Savannah. Savannah really is about all that's left of the Deep South. Two or three more wars, high-speed transportation, "progress" and social change have altered almost unendurably the old way of life. I am aware that a lot of people like *the change. Materially there has been vast improvement. But so much has been lost. I miss so many of the old ways, the old days. Maybe it's just being a kid I miss. But I remember Savannah in the old times, and I am overcome by a nostalgia nearly too strong to bear.*

John was right. Savannah, and the longing for it, defines him. This yearning for past times infuses his lyrics. Consider only *Once Upon a Summertime* and *Days of Wine and Roses.* What he loved, he said,

was not the heat, with perspiration running down your body and soaking your clothes; not the small-time morality with all its gossip, although I prefer it to today's morals; not the small inconveniences we suffered through; but the day-to-day living we had to do back then.

The manners, the courtliness, the consideration which was bred into all of us children. After all, we were the losers of the war and we hadn't much to offer in the way of material things. So it behooved us to put our best foot forward, which usually meant

taking time to be polite and kind to others, especially to visitors. Children were truly seen, not heard, and seldom spoke unless spoken to. In Savannah they reigned supreme, right next to Robert E. Lee.

In the city we had neighborhood gangs with romantic names like the Red Hussahs or the Confederate Grays and we'd carry on a sort of mock warfare with raids and sorties, as well as tournaments of games of skill and sports, such as softball and street football. We used to tunnel under back-yard fences, and even some dirt streets, which was dangerous since they were beginning to carry the new automotive traffic as well as the horse-drawn ice wagons that made the daily rounds, supplying blocks for the neighborhood ice-boxes then in use. It was fun hopping on and snitching scraps of ice. But it could smart, if the wagon took a fast turn and threw you off the back, and you wound up with a skinned elbow.

The day started early, at breakfast around the table, usually oatmeal and bacon with hominy or perhaps sausage and hotcakes. Then dad would drive the car down to the office, dropping us off at school if we hadn't the time to walk. Because we had help, there was usually someone to walk us to school safely, at least until we got big enough to make it on our own. Cars were becoming popular, and most of the dirt streets were being paved, so one had to be careful at intersections. But there was time to dawdle, playing along the way, getting to the schoolyard with time to spare before the big bell in the belfry sounded for the first class.

Savannah is a city of many squares, set along the thoroughfares every five or ten blocks.

John's memory failed him on this. Savannah is indeed a city of leafy squares. But they're not ten blocks apart. They are three blocks apart on the streets running east-west, four on those running north-south. But, as he said, the effect is one of living among trees, for which reason Savannah was called the Forest City.

John's school faced on one of these squares. Its grass had been worn thin and in places completely away by generations of children playing there at recess. But its trees were still there, and children racing with the abandon of childhood would now and then run into one.

John and his friends would begin on or about the Thanksgiving holiday to gather boxes and crates from neighborhood yards or the rear exits of stores or near factories. In those days, cardboard cartons had not become the common mode of packaging. Much of the forest land of North America had not yet been despoiled, and the packaging of preference was in crates made of thin slices of wood: oranges came in wooden crates, fish was shipped in wooden flats. And the boys would gather these as the year drew to a close, piling them up in the neighborhood square and setting them off in spectacular blazes, a remembrance perhaps of Guy Fawkes Day in England. *I don't suppose the siege of Atlanta,* John said, *had anything on Savannah at year end.*

Gangs of boys would roam from fire to fire, and sometimes someone would throw a blank cartridge into a blaze.

Once in a while some idiot might toss in a real bullet, not knowing where or in which direction it might explode. Much singing, bicycle and motorbike riding, as well as class or rival warfare took place and, I suppose, quite a little drinking as well.

One game, which John thought was probably indigenous to Savannah, was called half rubber, playing in the small parks or the dirt streets around them. Teams comprised two players each, and the bats were old broom handles. The missile was a bottle cap, usually Coca Cola or Orange Crush. Some of the boys became so skilled that they could make it shimmy in the air, dropping low before suddenly rising as it neared the batter's box. A bottle cap was hard to hit and a half-rubber ball, from which the game derived its name and which later replaced the bottle cap, even more so. The advantage of the game was that it required only three or four boys to play.

After Woodberry Forest, John went to work as an office boy in his father's business. He was seventeen that summer. He was delighted to be finished with school, have a job with a salary, and to be able to drive a car.

He said that it was in the course of that summer that he took his first drink, during an intermission at a country-club dance.

I had previously resisted temptation, but this one night, a girl took one too! What else could a self-respecting young man do? Promises to my Dad chug-a-lugged away with that drink. I was in for a lot of unsteady legs, retching in the bushes, and reeling beds and ceilings, before I would truly enjoy alcohol."

John attended night school during this period, taking a course in typing. Although I can find no documentation for this, somewhere in the shadows of memory I recall, from a conversation we had about typing, that he told me he had become a state champion in some typing contest. Certainly he became an excellent typist, and all his friends remember letters from him written on a portable typewriter, now among his memorabilia at Georgia State University in Atlanta. It had a cursive font, and anyone who knew John recognized the type instantly. His letters were devoid of typing errors and corrections. John was the only lyricist I ever knew who did his work on a typewriter. Other lyricists struggle with pencil or pen and paper, typing up the work only at the end of the labor.

At night, when I wasn't going to typing school, and on weekends, I was free and there was a lot to do in Savannah in the '20s. Blue Steele played at the Typbresa Pavilion and, a step up the beach and the social scale, you could go dancing at the Hotel Pavilion, where your friends were, or drive to the Saturday night dances at Barbee's, where the pretty girls were, or the Yacht Club, and a beautiful old place with a circular porch running around it called the Casino. Every one of these places is gone now, lost to fire, to creditors, and — some — to progress. Sad.

Going to these places required a date and, more than that, a

car. I was always in big demand for double-dating as, from age eleven — no driver's licenses were required then — I had a car to drive. Dad's or Mom's, but a car. According to the ritual, by about age sixteen, you'd make a date, get your linen suit from the cleaners, go by the bootleggers for a pint of corn whisky — or peach brandy, if you were just beginning to drink — then pick up the girls and drive to the dance.

Stagging it was even more fun, as all the dances were cut-ins. Besides, afterwards you and your friends were free to do a little singing, cruising around looking for trouble, and winding up at the railroad station or a roadhouse drive-in — drive-ins were rare in those days — for some food. It was all very innocent by today's standards, but it was exciting and dangerous enough then.

We sang so many quartet songs that I was constantly hoarse. None of us had heard of keys, and, as my boyhood soprano was just changing, I was forever straining for some high trumpet effect on Behind the Clouds *or taxing it to the limit on the top tenor part of* You Tell Me Your Dream. *It was always two octaves out of sight.*

The summers flew, the tunes and the times changed, and my friends all went in different directions, though not before setting me on the royal road to Tin Pan Alley.

Why me, of all the quartet singers under the South Georgia moon? Why should I be the one to draw the lucky musical number?

Charlie wound up selling paint in Florida, Walter in Birmingham at Reynolds Metal, Cliff married a girl in Paris. But I, the poorest singer of all in that 'old quartet that sang Sweet Adeline', got my wish to sing for my supper. Dick Whittington's cat went to London to look at the queen.

I went to Gotham to look for a job.

This is how it came about:

John moved from his job in his father's office to another in a brokerage house. His friend Dick Hancock got a job in a band on the City of Chattanooga, one of four boats owned by the Savannah line that ran to New York and back.

John, like so many of us, would associate a song with some special event in his life, in this case *Sometimes I'm Happy*, music by Vincent Youmans and lyrics by Irving Caesar. Written for a Broadway show called *Hit the Deck*, it was one of the hits of 1927, along with *Ain't She Sweet, Blue Skies* and *Russian Lullabye* (these two by Irving Berlin, whose name John held in awe; they would one day be friends), *At Sundown, Rain, Back in Your Own Back Yard, Chloe, Funny Face, 'Swonderful,* and *Strike up the Band*, these three by George and Ira Gershwin, *Girl of My Dreams, Just a Memory, Let a Smile Be Your Umbrella, Lucky in Love, Can't Help Loving that Man, Why Do I Love You?, Make Believe, Old Man River* (these four from *Show Boat*, (lyrics by Oscar Hammerstein II, music by Jerome Kern, with whom John would one day write), and *Thou Swell* and *My Heart Stood Still*, both by Richard Rodgers and Lorenz Hart; Hart was to be one of John's idols among lyricists. Another hit of that year was *The Best Things in Life Are Free*, by Ray Henderson, Lew Brown, and B.G. (Buddy) De Sylva. John would one day be partners with De Sylva in founding one of the world's major record companies.

Another hit that year was *Ramona*, music by Mabel Wayne and lyrics by Wolfe (always pronounced Wolfie) Gilbert, who had also written *Waiting for the Robert E. Lee.*

Wolfe Gilbert, though many years John's senior, would be one of the closest friends of his lifetime.

But it was *Sometimes I'm Happy* that John especially identified with that summer of '27. He had one of his recurring crushes, this time on a girl from New York with whom he danced at the Hotel Pavilion. The next evening he saw her off on a ship of the Savannah Line for her trip back to New York, and he promised he would come to see her before the summer was ended.

Dick Hancock was on deck that evening. John discussed the situation with him and together they planned John's trip to the Big Apple. Nor was the girl the only attraction in Manhattan. The Paul Whiteman band was working at the Paramount in New York, and Dick — whose job on the shipping line had taken him there and who had heard it in person — so praised it that John was determined to make the trip to sit in its audience. He wanted to hear the Beiderbecke solos, for Bix by now was with Whiteman, along with the Rhythm Boys. Another hit of that summer was a Whiteman recording, with the voices of Bing Crosby and Al Rinker, called *Mississippi Mud*. Its lyric, with its flagrantly racist condescension, makes any rational person squirm today, but it apparently bothered no one then.

With Dick Hancock's connivance, John planned to stow away on the S.S. Savannah for a flying trip to New York, hiding in Dick's cabin. John made the mistake, if such it was, of confiding his plan to his mother. And she discussed it with an uncle, who was a purser on the ship and knew the owner as, for that matter, did John's father, who would have been embarrassed by the scheme.

John, as planned, stayed in Dick Hancock's cabin through the calls of "All ashore that's going ashore." Music played, the whistle blew, the ship shuddered and began to move. Only when it was past the Savannah Light and well out on the ocean, heading north, did John emerge from the cabin and look around the deck.

A ship's officer approached and asked for his ticket.

John was promptly put to work. He soon realized that his uncle had "betrayed" him, informing his superiors of the boy's scheme, "so that I could safely work my way to New York without being clapped in irons or having to walk the plank. Looking back, I'm grateful."

The crew comprised Poles, Canadians, Swedes, and a few Greeks. They were not allowed on the passenger decks, except to wash them, one of John's jobs, along with scraping off old paint, repainting metal, and coiling rope. The crew's sleeping quarters were dirty, and no bed was ever made. The toilet was "too filthy to touch skin to" and John didn't use it once in the three-day trip.

Because mingling with passengers was forbidden, John never got a chance even to speak to Dick Hancock and his other musician friends. Nor did he have a smoke or drink. It was undoubtedly his first, and last, experience of hard physical labor. And then came the reward.

It was about five a.m. He was on deck, leaning on a rail as the cold wind from the ship's forward motion whipped his gray flannel shirt. The sun was rising behind the skyscrapers. The first view of Manhattan is something that no one ever forgets. *Ready or not, New York, here I come!*

John helped the crew secure the boat, waited until all the passengers had departed, bade his farewells to Dick Hancock and the boys in the band, and, suitcase in hand, descended the gangway and made his way not to some small and cheap hotel in the Bowery, like so many who had arrived in New York before him, but to a luxury duplex in the Fifties. His Aunt Katherine had relatives who had gone to Europe for the summer, and they had allowed his cousin Joe and his parents to stay there in their absence, and they welcomed him warmly. *And I was indeed glad to see them, though not half as glad as I was to see that bathroom!*

But the two main purposes of his journey were no more. The girl he had come to visit was away. He thought afterwards that she might have been frightened of someone so madly impetuous; or embarrassed; or merely indifferent. And the Paul Whiteman band had left the Paramount.

John had nothing left to love but New York itself.

The steam coming up out of the manholes, the noise of the traffic and the subways, the kaleidoscopic anonymity of the faces in the crowd, more than fulfilled any dreams I had had of it, and I wandered around for a few days like a peasant in Baghdad, or like Alice, fallen down a rabbit hole and finding so much to explore.

His cousin Joe, studying sculpture with Daniel Chester French, was busy in the evenings as well as the days. John was alone for two weeks, exploring music stores and theaters, small restaurants and athletic events and great rococo movie theaters with huge pipe organs and awesome statues. It seemed, he said, "like a fairyland to a stage-struck youngster from the sticks." He stared up at the buildings, walked Central Park, gazed at the river with its great ships landing and departing, and the myriad windows, glowing with reflected gloaming light as the day ended, then lit bright in the enclosing darkness.

One of the shows he saw was *Hit the Deck*. He was enchanted by such songs as *Hallelujah!* and *Sometimes I'm Happy*. He heard the Williams Sisters at the Paramount. One of their songs was a new one, *Sweet Sue*. The composer was Victor Young, and after the show, in a shop on Broadway, John bought a copy of the sheet music.

Little did I dream that I would one day know him and work with him at Decca Records and in Hollywood.

I didn't have much money but I saw as much as I could and I knew now that New York was for me.

John knew another girl in the vicinity. She lived in New Jersey. John called her and was invited to come over for the weekend. Her family was gracious to him, and their kindness, he remembered, restored a little of his self-confidence.

He knew he had to come back to New York and, consciously or otherwise, had begun to formulate plans for the move. The city had destroyed "any tolerance I might ever have had for the real estate or brokerage business, or for anything except something that had to do with music and the theater."

And so he went home, to work again for his father, in the reduced circumstances brought on by the Florida and Georgia land bust. With his two older brothers, he ran errands, collected rents, answered the telephone, and typed. And he listened to records, including one by Paul Whiteman that he found "modern and haunting." It was *Sugar*. Among the other tunes he ever afterwards associated with that summer were *China Boy* and *Clementine*, and Walter Donaldson's *Changes*.

And then came a small role in a little-theater play. "One day," John said, "two cute girls, both older than I, drove up to my house and honked their automobile horn, *aaa-OOO-gah, aaa-OOO-gah.* I thought they were there to see my mother. I was surprised and delighted when it turned out that they were looking for me."

One of the girls, Peggy Stoddard, told him she would be playing a role for the local group called the Town Theatre. Would he be interested in playing her younger brother, a boy of fifteen? Could he act that age? John was seventeen. "In about two seconds, I said I could. I would have done *anything* for her."

He became accustomed for the first time to stage make-up, struggled through rehearsals, the near paralysis known as stage fright, and went on. The play was a local success, and shortly after its premiere, a local paper reported:

O.W. Burroughs, who plays the lead in the Town Theatre production of "Hero Worship" in the Little Theatre tournament, will leave today for New York.

Mrs. Annot Willingham, director, accompanied by Mrs. Mabel DeLorme, left for New York yesterday. The others in the company are Mrs. Frank McIntire, who plays the part of the wife, Mrs. Heyward Lynah, who plays the part of the daughter, and John Mercer, who plays the part of the grandson. Mrs. McIntire will leave for New York tomorrow, accompanied by Mrs. Craig Barrow.

The Towne Theatre will present the play at a performance Friday night at the Frolic Theater. If selected as one of the prize winners, it will be repeated Saturday afternoon and Saturday night. The four plays considered best by the judges will be given at a matinee Saturday, and from these four the judges will select the one to receive the Belasco cup. This is awarded after the performance Saturday night.

The Georgia Society in New York will show their interest in the performance by buying seats for the Friday night performance.

The clipping is faded and tattered. It is impossible to date it precisely, and part of it is missing. And it is a little confusing. These final performances, according to John, were presented by David Belasco in New York "at the roof of the old New Amster-

dam Theatre on 42nd Street. It's now a porn film house." A group from Edinburgh, Scotland, took the prize with a performance of James Barrie's *The Old Lady Shows Her Medals* but the Savannah group won second prize, and John got some good reviews of his acting.

James W. McIntire, the son of Mrs. Frank McIntire, then a student at Exeter Academy, remembered: "I went down to New York to see it. And of course, they were very good. And Mother was an old lady in it. I hadn't seen her in about three months, and she had hair that was absolutely white. And I thought, 'Oh my Lord, my mother has aged so,' and burst into tears."

Also in the cast was Johnny's cousin Walter Rivers. By the testimony of many persons, Rivers was like another brother to John.

"(John) and Walter were so enamored of the success they'd had up there and how exciting it was," McIntire said.

John received gracious compliments from a handsome English actor with a regimental mustache. The man was friendly, told John he admired his acting, and offered his counsel and assistance should John ever need them. John was seventeen, and felt he was walking above the floor. As he was leaving the theater lobby, Elsie Ferguson — a major theater star of the time — kissed him. With his face still greasy with make-up, he was embarrassed. And then back to reality.

He returned by train to Savannah and a job at the brokerage firm Hentz and Company, putting up stock quotations. Two summers later, he was invited by friends to Lake Mahopac, New York. Savannah by now bored him. There was no music, no acting, and little if any fun, for the pleasures of childhood had lost their magic. Another employee of Hentz and Company said something that offended him — what, we do not know — and John saw no reason to compound boredom with insult.

A writer in London asked Johnny in an interview published in the February, 1974, issue of *Crescendo International*: "And you left home and came to New York just before the Crash, didn't you?"

John replied: "I had to, because there was just nothing I wanted to do back home. My brothers went into the family real estate business and I would probably have followed suit, but in those days I had a notion that I wanted to become an actor. And I must say that though I might easily have had parental opposition, I didn't have. My father was really marvelous. He helped and encouraged me and kept me in a little money when I first hit New York — not much, for he hadn't much, but enough. By this time, I'd long been producing my own lyrics, but it was tough getting anyone to listen to them."

Once, in one of our conversations, I said to John: "Have you ever figured out what makes us write songs?"

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

But that was not obvious when he moved to New York.

Mahopac lies twenty or thirty miles north-northwest of New York City, not far from Brewster and not far east of the Connecticut border. The countryside is rolling, the old farm fields alternating with deciduous woodlots. There are old homes, some of them pre-Revolutionary War, and it is altogether pretty country, New England in its general ambience. John spent two pleasant weeks there before he and his friends went in to New York one afternoon to buy tickets to *Rain or Shine*, which phrase would later turn up in one of the songs he wrote with Harold Arlen. And on Broadway he encountered the English actor Tony Brown. John confessed his intention to stay in New York and try to establish himself as an actor. Brown urged him to call him, promising to show him the ropes.

That night John and his friends saw *Rain or Shine*, which starred Joe Cook and Dave Chasen. Music was by Lewis Gensler, a successful composer for musical theater who is all but forgotten now, along with his songs. For John, the major thrill came from the presence in the pit orchestra of guitarist Eddie Lang — Dick Hancock's idol — and violinist Joe Venuti, childhood friends in Philadelphia whose duo recordings had made them major jazz stars.

The next day, John saw his two friends off on the train to Savannah, and moved into a midtown boarding house recommended by an uncle who was living in New York. Sustained by the modest amounts sent by his father, he began knocking on doors. He planned on staying in the Apple two months, after which, were he to fail to find an opening into his dream world, he would return to Savannah and the dull life he saw there.

He waited in outer offices. He talked to secretaries. He met producers and managers. Tony Brown gave him the names of two elderly women agents who operated from a shabby one-room office over the National Theater and Gray's Ticket Discount, where he was able to buy for half price seats for shows that were limping along. The two women must have been living hand-to-mouth, John thought, and the job they sent him on, which he got, was a walk-on in a Theatre Guild play that paid him $30 a week, of which $3 went to the ladies as their commission. *It certainly didn't pay their rent, but maybe it bought them stamps.*

Told that he had the job, John went home to his boarding house and a landlady whose daughter was an actress. The latter's advice was that given since time immemorial by disillusioned denizens of the theatrical professions. She told him to go home and forget it. His landlady was not quite so discouraging. As they celebrated with pretzels and beer — quite illegal in those Prohibition times — she gave him only this advice: "Always pay your bills, keep your collar and wristbands clean, and buy your clothes at Brooks Brothers."

It was at this time that John met Cheryl Crawford, later one of the most important theater producers in New York. At that time she was a casting director. "Due to her kindness," John said, "I learned a lot — not so much about acting but about actors."

Probably with Crawford's help, John got parts in two distin-

guished plays, Ben Johnson's *Volpone*, in which he played a Venetian policeman, and Eugene O'Neill's *Marco Millions*, in which he played a Chinese coolie. The actors and others in the company included Henry Travers, Imogene Coca, Margalo Gilmore, Dudley Digges, Claude Rains, and H.C. Potter, all of whom became prominent on stage and in film. The tour lasted six months, following the established Guild subscription circuit. But, John remembered, some of the friendships formed "lasted all our lives." And some of the girls married some of the older actors.

The company played Chicago, which John remembered for its bitter whistling cold, which no overcoat could shut out as he and his fellow cast members walked home at night.

The winter was cold in New York that year too. When John returned to his boarding house, expecting a hero's welcome from the landlady who had been kind to him, she told him that her actress daughter — John remembered her only as Miss Drake — had died of pneumonia while he was away. The woman told John she had decided to give up her boarding house and marry a long-patient suitor.

John took a small basement apartment in the West 80s with a young member of the company named Sidney Mansfield, who had also attended a Southern prep school. All John's clothes were stolen from it, and not long afterwards a man on the street tried to sell him his own clothes out of a trunk. He judiciously chose not to press the issue.

One night John came home to find his room-mate in bed with another boy.

I'm not a prude and I wasn't a prude then, but I couldn't see living in a ménage à trois *unless the third member were a girl. So, as pleasantly as I could I packed, left, and went home with three other guys in a five-flight walk-up on 72nd Street behind a big electric sign that flashed Coca-Cola in red neon all night long.*

We had a good time. One of them played piano, and that was enough of a bond for me. The other two were great guys and went on to become prominent.

My first room-mate, Sidney, I heard years later, was found bludgeoned to death on an Army post. His presence there was questionable, as he was a civilian. I guess he always did pick the wrong people. But what a tragedy. He was a sensitive man.

John was determined to succeed in New York, and there can be little doubt that his father's business reverses and consequent sense of humiliation acted as a goad. He was making the rounds of casting offices and chorus calls, going to parties in Greenwich Village with other young people striving too to get a foothold.

His brokerage background got him a job in a Wall Street company, running errands, punching holes in stock certificates, running between banks, after which he would descend into the roaring subway and, for a nickel, take the ride back uptown, climb the five flights of stairs to the apartment he was sharing, soak in a bath and, later, down some bath-tub gin.

Prohibition was still very much with us, and we knew a few bootleggers and a few cheap speakeasies. I was trying to learn to drink like a gentleman. There have been rumors that I never succeeded at that study.

We had as much fun as we could. We were young. We did a lot of our own cooking, we scrounged free meals from visiting relatives and friends, and now and then got a little money from home. Two of my roommates got work again in a touring Guild play. My third room-mate, who had a job with Squibb, and I couldn't afford the rent for the four-roomer. I got a job in The Black Crook, *a play by Dion Boucicault that was being revived in Hoboken, New Jersey. I took the ferry or the subway every day.*

That revival bombed in record time — two weeks without pay.

But he made a new friend in one of the members of the cast, Buddy Dill, who taught John a lot about living on little. He could, John said, do more with a dollar than anyone he had ever met. But he insisted on the importance of a good address, and so he and John moved into the Whitby, "haven of vaudevillians," and for the first week lived on oatmeal. They washed their own shirts in a sink and ironed the collars and cuffs with the bottom of an aluminum pot that had been warmed on their hot plate.

Then Buddy and John got parts in a play called *Houseparty*. Produced by George Tyler, it was a murder mystery with a college campus setting. Buddy got a fairly large part, but John's role was limited to running around the fraternity house with a tennis racket in hand. Buddy took John to a small Eighth Avenue restaurant called Ye Eat Shoppe, where they were able to get a dinner including excellent pie for thirty-five cents. "Buddy was really smart about money," John said.

What a marvelous guy. A marvelously natural actor too. A great fan of S.J. Perelman and a devotee of the Palace, where every week we'd climb (we did a lot of climbing in those days) to the top gallery to see Ted Healy and the Stooges (his favorite act) or Clayton, Jackson and Durante (mine) and other unforgettables, like Frank Fay, Herb Williams — "Hark! Them bells! — Professor Joe Brown, Herbert Timbery, Burns and Allen, Block and Sully, Jimmy Barton — the greatest drunk I ever saw: "with the swif'ness of the wind, I whirled aroun'" — Van and Schenck, Will Mahoney, the McCarthy Sisters, and so many more that I'd have to find some old Bills to remember them all. The big acts, like Jolson and the Marx Brothers and Joe E. Brown, were already in Hollywood, playing in their own musicals. But the last gasp of vaudeville was like a fireworks display, most dazzling just before the end. We learned a lot. And we loved it all.

(To be continued)

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