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The Shaping of Johnny Mercer Part Three

John became friends, on the basis of a mutual interest in music, particularly their admiration for Venuti and Lang, with *House-party's* assistant stage manager, Everett Miller. The friendship grew still warmer when Miller learned that John wrote songs. The show ran six months on "the subway circuit" in New York. John's salary fell from \$55 to \$35 to \$25 to \$15. Miller showed him eight bars of a tune that John was moved to write words for.

With the show's closing, Buddy and John moved into another hotel of faded distinction but with a good address. And John kept looking at Miller's tune, which he thought was "cute" — one of John's favorite words for something he liked or, when an almost imperceptible sarcasm informed his tone, didn't like.

Johnny had nerve, what denizens of the theater world called moxie. That becomes obvious in any examination of his early life. This nerve was in contradiction to a general insecurity to which every friend of his later years would attest. He was plagued by doubt. Yet he never let it stop him.

Eddie Cantor, one of the biggest stars of the period, was playing in *Whoopie*, a show about Indians at the New Amsterdam theater. As John passed the stage door one evening, he suddenly said to Buddy Dill, "I think I'll go in and play him some of my comedy songs." And Buddy, laughing, said, "Why not?"

A few nights later, with his material neatly written by hand — he had no typewriter, he remembered — he entered the stage door of the New Amsterdam and asked to see Mr. Cantor. He speculated later that the doorman must have thought he was a relative.

John entered a tiny back-stage elevator "with a lot of ladies who looked like Aphrodites and were just as naked". He found the language of these naked goddesses lurid. John knocked on Cantor's dressing room door and was told to enter. There, sitting in a flannel dressing gown, talking to his wife Ida, whom he celebrated in a song of that name, and a few friends was Eddie Cantor, the Broadway star. Cantor was known for his wide round eyes. They opened even wider when he learned John had got past the doorman and come up in the elevator with the half-naked "Indian" girls. John told Cantor he was a songwriter. Cantor told him to show him a song. John sang one for him, a putatively comic number called *Every Time I Shave I Cut My Adam's Apple*.

Cantor listened with a benign amusement, probably sensing the scope of the talent standing before him: some professionals are uncanny at detecting talent in its early stages of development. He

told John he was about to leave on tour. But, he asked, could John write six or seven more choruses of lyric for the song?

Could I do it? Could I do it! I went home and, before a week was over, I had put together about fifteen choruses. I doubt now, as I did then, that they were funny enough for a Broadway star. But I mailed them to him and in due time got replies. He wrote to tell me he hoped to get the song into the show. These letters actually sustained my determination to be a writer. Weren't they from Eddie Cantor? He never used the song, of course, but I never stopped writing songs, largely due to the encouragement of his kindness.

Christmas approached. John was desperately homesick. Two years in a row his mother sent him train fare, and he went home by coach. No one knew how discouraged he was. He was turning twenty and had nothing to show for his time in New York except a three-story walk-up apartment on Jones Street in Greenwich Village, where his clothes were piled in a corner. He maintained a brave front, sufficient to deceive the local newspaper which ran a short item about him, getting his father's name wrong.

JOHNNY MERCER ACTOR, VISITOR

Savannahian Is Enthusiastic Over Theatrical Outlook

*Johnny Mercer, son of Mr. and Mrs. Robert L. Mercer, returned this morning from New York, where he has just concluded an engagement with Eugene O'Neill's *Marco Millions* and Ben Johnson's *Volpone*. Mr. Mercer will spend several weeks with his parents, returning in the spring to New York, where he expects to enter stock.*

He is extremely enthusiastic over his new vocation and has optimistic things to say about the theater world, which he says recently reached the peak of the season. He admits there is an influx of bad productions, but speaks very encouragingly about the number of hits of the year and of theatrical conditions in general.

John remembered this as the darkest period of his life: "While the home-town talk was about how well young Mercer is doing on the stage, I was just about to go back on oatmeal."

John's friends Walter Rivers, who was also his cousin, and Buford Smith worked in a Savannah bank. The excitement of New York still had not left Walter Rivers, and the two young men decided to try their luck on theatrical careers in New York. They arrived on one of the ships of the Savannah line, and John met them, needing a shave, as he remembered, and wearing a shirt that had been turned inside out after four or five days of wear. He was living then in a one-room apartment up three flights in a building in Greenwich Village. They encountered a sink full of dirty dishes. Buford Smith lasted barely a few days; he booked passage home. Walter stayed on to share the apartment with John, but then he went home and got married to James McIntire's sister.

John was Walter's best man. "My father was an invalid," McIntire said, "so I had to come down from Baltimore to give her away. And (John) enjoyed the situation so that he went on their honeymoon (with them). I think he stayed till the bitter end — or the enjoyable end."

Walter stayed in Savannah, but his close relationship with John was not to end with their separation.

The Depression was at its deepest. Men and women sold apples on street corners and in New York City, men were sleeping in doorways. John was scraping by on the largesse of friends and relatives with jobs. He was studying drama with an actress named Arnot Willingham who, like he, lived in the Village.

She always had a kind word for me, or a bathtub-gin Tom Collins. It was to her apartment I often went to get free meals and to listen to Louis Armstrong records. All Mrs. Willingham's children were working, two daughters and a son, and when I had anything to offer, I'd bring it along — food, records, or a funny joke. It was years before I was in the chips enough to try and repay their kindness and hospitality.

On warm nights we'd go up on the roof, and in the winter we'd go out to one of the little Italian bistros so numerous in Greenwich Village in those days.

It was during this time that I met Ginger and that I switched from acting to writing. I had never stopped, really, and had notebooks full of titles and ideas, but no place to put them.

An actor friend named Tom Rutherford told John they were casting at the Theatre Guild for a third edition of the review known as *The Garrick Gaieties*. He was told that there was no need for more actors. What the producers needed were "songs and pretty girls." John phoned a friend, Cynthia Rogers, the prettiest girl he knew in New York, who was out of work. And he completed a lyric to the tune his friend Everett Miller had written. He took Cynthia and the song to the next day's *Gaieties* rehearsal, and both made it into the show. Cynthia sang the song on opening night.

"And," John told an ASCAP interviewer, "I met other guys who had songs in the show, like Yip Harburg and Vernon Duke. Later on, Harburg was very instrumental in helping me."

His friend Everett Miller had failed to tell him something important, namely that his father was Charlie Miller, who wrote "charts", as musicians call arrangements, for Jerome Kern,

Sigmund Romberg, and other major Broadway composers. He was also an executive of the T.B. Harms music publishing company, and through this connection Johnny soon had his first published song, *Out of Breath and Scared to Death of You*.

And a girl in the chorus attracted his attention, a Jewish dancer from Brooklyn. She was born Elizabeth Meltzer on June 25, 1909, and thus was five months older than John. In that period of American history, "foreign" and especially Jewish names invited opprobrium and closed doors. This was the reason that one of John's idols, Salvatore Massaro, changed his name to Eddie Lang. Elizabeth Meltzer changed hers to Ginger Meehan. It had a sprightly sound. *Garrick Gaieties* was her fourth show. John would bring ice cream and Coca Cola and hot dogs to her in her dressing room, and take her to movies. He said that she had eyes that crinkled when she smiled. Many of those who knew John and Ginger in their later years wondered what he saw in her. She was withdrawn, remote, and his friends found conversation with her difficult. But there was warmth in their relationship in the early years. His facial expressions in photos of the time suggest that he was in love with her.

John kept writing, and trying to sell his songs, waiting days on end in outer offices for appointments with publishers, travelling far on subways to meet some obscure melody writer who perhaps had a tune that could be developed into a hit.

When I had money, I'd take Ginger home to Brooklyn in a cab, and when I didn't, we'd take the subway. She never had any false pride or false values, thank God, and she knew what it was to work for a living. We didn't have much to talk about at first except Bing Crosby, whom she had known and whom I admired.

This passage is telling in two ways. Even then John could not find much to discuss with Ginger. And he does not say he "liked" Bing Crosby, only that he admired him. Ginger had more than known Crosby, she had dated him.

John became an habitu  of Walgreen's drug store in Times Square and the English Tea Room in the Fifties. There he met Morgan (Buddy) Lewis, a composer who in 1940 would have his only hit, *How High the Moon*, a favorite of jazz musicians because of its modulating chord patterns; Richard Lewine, who would succeed on Broadway as a composer and producer; actors Gene Raymond and Robert Montgomery, and other young people looking for the big break in theater. They would remain among John's friends a few years later in Hollywood.

The publication of *Out of Breath* by Harms opened the door of that company for John, and there he would catch fleeting views of George Gershwin, Vincent Youmans, Jerome Kern, Sigmund Romberg, Oscar Levant, Oscar Hammerstein II, Brian Hooker, a former assistant professor of English at Columbia University and lecturer on rhetoric at Yale, who wrote the lyrics for the Rudolf Friml operetta *The Vagabond King* (including *Only a Rose* and *Song of the Vagabonds*), Harry B. Smith, who had been a music critic for the *Chicago Daily News* and drama critic of the *Chicago Tribune* and had become lyricist to Victor Herbert, Sigmund

Romberg, and Jerome Kern, among others. Smith is all but forgotten today, but his lyrics include *Yours Is My Heart Alone* and *The Sheik of Araby*, written at a time when Rudolph Valentino in *The Sheik* had set off a fad for songs about the Middle East.

Harms was at that time ruled over by the Dreyfus brothers, Max and Louis. Louis was the businessman, Max the creative member of the team. Max Dreyfus had an incredible ear for talent, and he was responsible for launching the careers of a great many major figures in American popular music, among them Cole Porter and all those writers John saw whisking in and out of the offices at Harms. It is hard to estimate his influence in the development of classic American song; it would be even harder to over-estimate it.

John also met Herman Hupfeld, who wrote words and music for *As Time Goes By* and *Let's Put Out the Lights and Go to Sleep*; John would write a few songs with him, none of which is known today. Most significantly, he met Arthur Schwartz.

Arthur Schwartz was the son of a lawyer and graduated Phi Beta Kappa from New York University with a B.A. and LL.D. Then he took a master's degree at Columbia and practiced law for several years. Like Yip Harburg and Cole Porter, he didn't take up professional songwriting until his late twenties. His primary partner, lyricist Howard Dietz, who had a simultaneous second career as head of advertising and publicity at MGM, was one of the most scintillating of all American lyricists. His command of language exceeded in precision and surprise that of all but a few lyricists, Yip Harburg and Johnny among them. The songs of Howard Dietz and Arthur Schwartz include *I Guess I'll Have to Change My Plan*, *Something to Remember You By*, *Dancing in the Dark*, *Alone Together*, *A Shine on Your Shoes*, *If There Is Someone Lovelier than You*, *You and the Night and the Music*, *By Myself*, *I See Your Face Before Me*, and the remarkable *That's Entertainment*.

And so when Johnny says in that casually dismissive way of his that Arthur Schwartz listened with a critical ear to his early work, it is not to be taken lightly. Schwartz in his formative years practiced law while submitting his tunes to the criticism of Lorenz Hart and only began composing professionally when Hart thought he was ready. His advice to John goes unrecorded, but that it even happened is significant.

Schwartz was born to money. So indeed was Johnny Mercer, but the money had evaporated with his father's reverses and John had to struggle in New York. In this he was different from most of those composers and lyricists who overawed him when he encountered them in the Harms and other publishing offices.

Cole Porter inherited millions and married millions more. He was educated at Yale and the Scola Cantorum in Paris, studying under Vincent d'Indy. The son of a physician father and a wealthy mother, Richard Rodgers was educated at Columbia University, Juilliard, New York University, and the New England Conservatory of Music. Lorenz Hart, who grew up in a house with servants, was educated in private schools: Weingart's Institute and then the Columbia Grammar School, which Alan Jay Lerner later attended. Hart had just returned from a vacation in Europe when, in 1913, he met Richard Rodgers at Columbia. Howard Dietz graduated

from the Columbia College school of journalism. Jerome Kern's father held a contract to water the streets of New York City, and Kern was educated at the New York College of Music and in Germany at the Heidelberg Conservatory. Oscar Hammerstein II came from a wealthy theatrical family. Vernon Duke was born Vladimir Dukelsky in northern Russia, a direct descendant of the kings of Georgia, educated at the Naval Academy in Kiev and then at the Kiev Conservatory. Lyricist John La Touche was educated at the Richmond Academy of Arts and Sciences and Columbia College. Lyricist and composer Harold Rome attended Trinity College in Hartford, Connecticut, took a Bachelor of Arts degree from Yale, then was graduated from the Yale school of architecture. Vincent Youmans' father was a famous and fashionable hatter with stores on upper and lower Broadway. Youmans grew up in Westchester, and was educated at private schools, Trinity in Mamaroneck and Heathcotte Hall in Rye, then at the Sheffield Scientific School at Yale University. Hoagy Carmichael had a law degree from Indiana University. Burton Lane's father was a successful New York real estate operator. Lyricist Harold Adamson attended the University of Kansas and Harvard. Harold Arlen was an exception in that he was the son of a cantor who became a working musician at fifteen. Frank Loesser, born a year after John, had gone to City College of New York, and his brother Arthur became a noted classical pianist and head of the piano department at the Cleveland Institute of Music. E.Y. "Yip" Harburg had a BSc degree, and although he liked to make out that he had grown up in poverty, he went to college in a generation when that was not usual.

Harburg — whom I met through Johnny, as I also met Harold Arlen — once told me that even the Gershwins were not poor. "At least the family could afford a piano," he said. "I remember the day they hauled it up the face of their building."

Irving Berlin alone among these composers and lyricists rose from true poverty.

So the Broadway musical theater, despite notable exceptions in Berlin, Arlen, Harburg, and Johnny, has almost from the beginning been the playground of rich boys, and one rich girl: the wonderful lyricist Dorothy Fields, daughter of Lew Fields of the vaudeville team of Weber and Fields. If her position did not help her directly — her father, in fact, importuned his friends to help him keep her out of show business — she at least knew her way around.

Almost all these composers and lyricists were Jewish — Cole Porter, Hoagy Carmichael, Harry Warren (who was Italian), and Johnny were exceptions — as were most music publishers. They had European sensibilities and sophistication. And almost all of them, Porter, Carmichael, and Mercer again being exceptions, were born in New York City or its immediate environs.

Yip Harburg's son Ernie, a social psychologist and epidemiologist at the University of Michigan, collaborated on a book called *Who Put the Rainbow in the Wizard of Oz: Yip Harburg, Lyricist* (University of Michigan Press, 1993). His co-writer was Harold Meyerson, executive editor and political columnist for the *L.A. Weekly*.

The book notes that Ira Gershwin, Lorenz Hart, Oscar Hammer-

stein II, Howard Dietz, Harry Ruby, and Irving Caesar were all born in New York City to Jewish parents in 1895 and '96. Composer Jay Gorney, Yip's first collaborator, was also born in 1896, but in Bialystok, Russia, though his family moved to Detroit when he was ten. He graduated from the University of Michigan in 1917. George Gershwin was born in New York just a little later: in 1898. Hart, Hammerstein, and Dietz all went to Columbia College. So did Richard Rodgers, born in New York in 1902, and Arthur Schwartz.

Meyerson and Harburg write that what they call the class of '95-'96, in company with a few others, invented and set the standards of lyrics in what came to be considered an original American art form, the musical comedy. The hypothesis holds if the list is expanded to include a few persons born a little later and not necessarily in New York: Dorothy Fields, considered a major lyricist, was born in New Jersey in 1905. Cole Porter was born in Peru, Indiana, a little earlier than that distinguished group: 1891. Frank Loesser, eventually a composer as well as an outstanding lyricist, was born in New York in 1910.

The hypothesis that the musical is an original American art form is dubious: the lineage goes back to European operetta and far beyond that to Greek drama. The only truly American art form is jazz, and that too has roots elsewhere. But that a small group of Jewish males born in the same city in a twenty-four-month span, along with a few others including Mercer and Porter and one woman, Dorothy Fields, created the most brilliant body of lyrics in the history of the English language is indisputable. There is nothing in England to compare to it.

All these composers were to some extent — and in the cases of Gershwin and Arlen, to a very great extent — influenced by jazz. Thus, when its popularity was spreading around the world, the Nazis were not entirely wrong when they called American songs and performances degenerate Jewish-Negro music. Excising the word “degenerate” from the definition, one has to say that they were absolutely right, and in banning this music, they knew precisely what they were doing, futile though the effort proved to be. Even many of their own officers treasured secret caches of American music on records. Their overlords saw the threat implicit in the music's libertarian esthetics, and, in Yip Harburg's not-so-covert polemicism, the lyrics.

None of the composers and lyricists John was encountering had to wonder, as he did, where the next meal was coming from, and they knew their way about the Apple. College educated, with New York City street smarts, they had every advantage over this Savannah boy with soft Southern manners and naive ideals. By the odds and by the nature of the business, John shouldn't have “made it” at all.

But he was there, and he was making contacts. In time, he would write with many of these composers, including Harry Warren, Harold Arlen, Hoagy Carmichael, and Jerome Kern.

Among the contacts he made were Louis MacLoon and his wife, famous theatrical producers in California. They were on their way back to California after a trip to Europe where they had bought an operetta from the Hungarian composer and symphony

conductor Emmerich Kalman, who wrote *Love's Own Sweet Song* and *Play Gypsies, Dance Gypsies*. MacLoon's wife, who worked under her professional name Lillian Albertson, would write the book for an American adaptation of this operetta, and the MacLoon's were looking for a young American to write the lyrics.

A week later, the MacLoons, with John in tow, were aboard a train for Los Angeles. During the three days of the trip, John pored over a translation of the Kalman operetta, offered suggestions, and began looking for titles. Throughout his life, asked by interviewers what was the hardest part of writing a song, John would answer: “The title.” For the lyric would hang on it, and the phrase would almost always be heard three times in the course of the song.

John was immediately in love with the California sunshine, with the oleander, bougainvillea, and royal palms, and the roofs of half-round red Mediterranean tiles on Beverly Hills “cottages”. He was a guest in the MacLoon home, which had once belonged to Greta Garbo. The MacLoons joked that they hadn't washed the ring out of the bathtub.

The MacLoon's son, Eddie Albertson, who aspired to song-writing, introduced John to the miniature golf courses that were already a fad in California, the temple of Aimee Semple MacPherson, and the Brown Derby. He took him to the Cotton Club, where Louis Armstrong was performing, and to the Coconut Grove, where the Rhythm Boys were performing with Gus Arnheim's band.

John introduced himself to Bing Crosby, popular with young people but not yet the national idol he was to become.

I was impressed . . . by those opaque, China-blue eyes, and his manner and talk, at once warm and hip but with a touch of aloofness that was always there.

John was on his best behavior when he wrote that, but you can catch the feeling behind the description.

Also by his lack of hair. He was only a few years older than I — I wasn't twenty-one yet — but he was practically bald. After our talk backstage, I watched the act again and had only one fault to find. It wasn't long enough. Jazz was still a rare commodity in 1931 but all the kids were hungry for the music that the trio was putting down. Only a few seemed to understand it. The Williams Sisters, Roger Wolfe Kahn, Ray Miller, Red Nichols, and quite a few instrumentalists, but hardly any singers. That's why I wanted to hear more. I knew (the Rhythm Boys') records by heart, but wasn't interested in I Surrender, Dear. I wanted to hear more Wistful and Blue, more Old Man River, more Because My Baby Don't Mean Maybe Now.

The great Louis Armstrong was at his youthful peak, his prime, but those dumb customers at the Cotton Club didn't want to hear Struttin' with Some Barbecue or the Heebie Jeebies or Knockin' a Jug or Monday Date. What they loved was the suggestive Golfin' Papa, You Got the Nicest Niblick in Town. ”

There was a girl in John's life in Savannah. John's attraction to

women lasted all his life. But this one was apparently special. A fragment of a news clipping from a Savannah paper quotes him:

"My memory was of a girl who meant very much to me when I was at college." He presumably referred to Woodberry Forest. Either that or, faintly embarrassed by the limitation of his formal education, he was embellishing it a little. "We had dreams of a life together. And we probably would have married. But I also was dreaming of writing songs, and the impulse to compose made me restless. I loved a girl and I loved an ambition, and I was divided between the two.

"The girl could see that. She could see that I could not yield myself fully to any love until I had also yielded myself, in part at least, to my ambition. And so she allowed herself to drift away from me, and I threw myself more completely into my work. The girl heard less of me."

It is obvious from this clipping, and his own comments, that John still had this girl much on his mind in the months after he met Ginger.

When I departed Savannah, I left (her) with the understanding that we would somewhere, someday (like the lyric of the Carl Fischer song) be together again. So even though Ginger and I had formed an attachment, we were not really engaged.

While I was staying at the MacLoon's in Beverly Hills, I got a clipping in the mail saying that my Savannah innamorata had announced her engagement to a Carolina boy. I think that made up my mind for me, if I ever had any doubts. And so on my way back east, I stopped to see Ginger, who was by now touring, in Chicago and Detroit. Fortunately for me, Ginger had made some changes too, sending a few of her old beaux packing. Before the next two weeks were over, we were really engaged.

Though he had worked tirelessly on the Emmerich Kalman operetta at the MacLoon home, and the show finally was presented in San Francisco and Los Angeles, John never saw it. He said he didn't like the score, and was unhappy with his own work, but surely sheer curiosity would have impelled a boy just turning twenty-one to see onstage the results of his labors on his first musical.

It seems to me that John married Ginger on the rebound.

In any case, he went home to Savannah, glumly aware that he had much to learn.

John, in an interview, had this to say about the girl in Savannah:

"All this ran through my mind now as I walked through the trees to the Lovers' Wall. And then a melody seemed to flow out of my thoughts; a melody and some words. When I reached the wall, the song was formed."

We do not know what the song was.

And we do not know who the girl was.

It is of more than passing interest.

Writers inevitably — there is no other way — draw on personal experience. It has been said that there is no more autobiographical novel than Swift's *Gulliver's Travels*. Balzac said that the charac-

ters in his novels were made up of bits and pieces of persons he had known. But, he added, the soul of a Balzac character is always Balzac.

It is common for writers of short stories and novels to draw in their early work on the Lost Love of youth, that girl who is perfect because the writer never knew her well enough to discover her human frailties. One finds it in Stephen Vincent Benet's *Too Early Springs*, in the Lara of *Dr. Zhivago*. Writers of most kinds of fiction usually outgrow it. Writers of lyrics, which on the whole are a form of rhymed and melodic fiction, don't want to outgrow it, for love is the stock-in-trade of the craft, and lost love is particularly useful. Actors trained in The Method use what they call sense memory to summon up emotions to infuse the performance. In a sad scene, one thinks of some poignant event in one's own past to bring tears or otherwise convey the melancholy. Singers do it too, the good ones anyway. Among actors, the source of this Method is Konstantin Stanislavsky. In fact the Encyclopedist Denis Diderot foreshadows it in *De la poésie dramatique* (1758) and *Paradoxe sur le comédien* (1778) and other writings on the theater

I have no doubt that John reached into his emotional past for ideas and feelings. And so I wonder. Is the girl in Savannah the foxfire figure that haunts John's lyrics?

Is she the *Laura* of the song, footsteps that you hear down the hall, a laugh that floats on a summer night that you can never quite recall?

Transplanted from Savannah to Paris, she may be the girl of whom he writes:

*But I remember, when the vespers chime,
you loved me, once upon a summertime.*

Charlie Miller, with whose son John had written *Scared to Death*, obviously had faith in John. When he left T.B. Harms to set up his own publishing company in partnership with a would-be part-time composer and president of the American Locomotive Company named William H. Woodin — later to become Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Secretary of Finance — Miller put John on a drawing account of approximately \$100 a month, which was augmented by the \$50 a month John's father was sending him. Such advances are carried on the books to be recouped later from royalty earnings. Clearly, Charlie Miller expected John to have them.

John worked on a show called *Jazz City* that was never produced. It is notable in that it contained sketches written by a New York native just eleven days older than John named Norman Krasna. Once again, the law background: Krasna had studied at Columbia and Brooklyn Law School. He would go on to write, produce, or direct, and sometimes all three, any number of acclaimed movies, including *White Christmas*. The show, however, went unproduced. Nonetheless:

On the strength of this . . . Ginger and I, one day in the Spring, walked with my boss Charlie Miller the few blocks to St. Thomas' Church. Ginger and I were just twenty-one at the time. Charlie

Miller had tears in his eyes, because, he said, we were so young.

That is all John has to say, in his biographical sketches, about the wedding. Ginger had something to say about the marriage. John took her to Savannah to meet his family. Several persons have attested that she was not made entirely comfortable, because she was Jewish.

Whatever the case, Ginger — she told the story often in later years — said to Miss Lillian, John's mother, "Mrs. Mercer, I can't even cook."

And Miss Lillian, in her thick Southern accent, said, "Never learn, darlin', never learn."

John's new friendship with Yip Harburg would soon get him an assignment. Harburg was in charge of assembling the score for a Shubert review called *New Americana*, set to open in early October of 1932. In that era, it was not always the practice to entrust an entire score to one composer working with one lyricist. Several of them might contribute to a show. Whatever discontinuity of style this produced apparently didn't bother anyone. The "integrated" musical lay in the future.

John was aware of the work of a gifted young composer and pianist named Harold Arlen, who had been contributing, with lyricist Ted Koehler, to the reviews at the fancy Harlem speakeasy called the Cotton Club, owned by gangster Owney Madden. John recommended Arlen to Harburg. Not only would John write some of his most magnificent songs with Arlen; so would Harburg. The song he and Arlen wrote for *New Americana* was titled *Satan's Little Lamb*. It was the first piece they wrote together, and presumably John's first recorded song: Ethel Merman recorded it a week before the show opened, backing it with an Arlen-Koehler collaboration, *I Gotta Right to Sing the Blues*.

Edward Jablonski, in his biography *Rhythm, Rainbows and the Blues: Harold Arlen* (Northeastern University Press, Boston, 1996), writes: "Of greater significance to Harold is that *Satan's Little Lamb* united him for the first time with two of his most gifted lyricists, E.Y. Harburg and John H. Mercer, who would soon be better known as Johnny Mercer"

Harburg was to say later that he admired Arlen's "typically American approach. It was away from the Viennese derivations of Kern and other writers, and I took a shine to that gutsy, earthy (quality). It was a combination of Hebrew and black music."

Many years after this, some time in the late 1960s, because of Arlen's despair over the death of his wife, John urged me to interview the latter. He thought it might draw him out of his self-imposed isolation. John really loved Arlen.

He said at that time, "Harold Arlen is a *genius*. I don't know what to say about him, except he doesn't write enough. He's been bothered by illnesses and the various mundane things of this world. But if he were writing like he wrote twenty years ago, I don't think you could catch up to his catalogue. I think he's been inactive so long that people have sort of forgotten about him. He's wonderful. I think he'd *like* to write. I think he probably *needs* to write, for his spirit, for his heart. He's a very tender, very sensitive

man, and he writes so beautifully. It's easy for him. It sounds terribly inventive to us, terribly difficult, what he does, but not to him. It's like turning on a tap. It just flows out of him. We did two shows together, *St. Louis Woman* and *Saratoga*, which is kind of a quiet score. Not many people know it and not many people have heard it. Maybe that's because it isn't too good. It wasn't a hit."

That is typical Mercer self-denigration. Anyone who might have thought it was an affectation didn't know John. Johnny was always insecure, always plagued by doubt.

"We did about ten movies at Paramount," John said. "The songs that came out of them were songs like *Out of this World*, *That Old Black Magic* and *Ac-Cent-Tchu-ate*. We had a lot of songs that are people's favorites that you don't hear much, like *Hit the Road to Dreamland*, *This Time the Dream's on Me*. *Blues in the Night* is probably our best-known song."

That very afternoon, after making that comment, John telephoned Arlen and arranged an appointment with him for me. I visited Arlen in his apartment on Central Park West, and there — watched by the quite remarkable oil portrait George Gershwin painted of Jerome Kern — I asked him a question which, to judge by his air of slight surprise, had never been put to him before.

I said, "Mr. Arlen, when you and George Gershwin and Rodgers and Hart and the others were writing for the theater in the '30s, were you consciously aware that what you were writing was art music?"

He looked at me for what seems in memory a long moment and then said, softly, "Yes."

That afternoon I picked up Arlen's nickname for John. He called him "the Colonel."

That collaboration between Arlen and Mercer (and that of Arlen and Harburg as well) began in *New Americana* in 1932. Arlen, born in Buffalo, New York, was twenty-seven, John not quite twenty-three. And Yip Harburg was thirty-six.

Yip, John said, gave him assignments and encouragement and work when he badly needed them. "More than that, in making me a kind of assistant during the formation of the *New Americana* score, he taught me how to *work at* lyric writing. I had been a dilettante at it, trying hard but very undisciplined, waiting for the muse to smile. Yip taught me to go seeking her, never letting a day or a work session go by without something to show for it. Often the songs went unpublished, but there were *songs*. Finished. Complete. Work done."

John remembered with great warmth another collaboration of that period: that with Carl Sigman. John and Ginger by now had their own apartment, and Sigman was a neighbor. He was yet another Brooklyn boy, born there on September 24, 1909, which made him two months older than John, and he was yet another lawyer by training. He had a BL degree from New York University Law School.

Carl told me in August, 1998:

"I was playing some songs for Henry Spitzer, when he was with Harms." Harry Spitzer was a professional manager — the polite industry euphemism for song-plugger. One of the best in the

business, he moved from Harms to Chappell. Estimates vary on how much he earned, but it was between \$500 and \$1000 a week, a considerable amount in that era. But he was a gambler, liked to go to Las Vegas, and got \$50,000 into debt to The Boys". He committed suicide.

Spitzer told Sigman, "Well, I can put you with somebody. There's a guy named Johnny Mercer who's going to be on the radio on Monday night." The show was a semi-professional contest. Spitzer said, 'Why don't you listen in, and I'll give you his phone number and you can call him. He's an up-and-coming songwriter and maybe he can help you.'

"So I called him the next day after the performance," Carl said. "He lived just a few blocks around the corner from me in Brooklyn. He was receptive. He walked to my house. We talked and I played a few tunes for him. He sat there like a lyric writer. Then we established a relationship. We wrote a few songs. They weren't very good, but they were professional. I was a beginner, but he liked my melodies — some of them."

Johnny said:

"After playing softball together in the Brooklyn schoolyards, we'd spend long nights writing what seemed to me Isham Jones type songs." A prominent bandleader of the time, composer Isham Jones wrote *On the Alamo, I'll See You in My Dreams, The One I Love Belongs to Somebody Else, There Is No Greater Love, You've Got Me Crying Again, and It's Funny to Everyone But Me*. His name is largely forgotten; his songs are not.

Sometimes, John said, "I would go over to write at Carl's, and his little, round, attractive mother would fill me up with blintzes or chopped liver on rye bread. I wished I could have laid some turnip greens or artichoke pickles and divinity fudge on her. Still, I doubt that she would have dug my Southern reciprocity as much as I did her smoked sturgeon.

"We were living in Crown Heights a couple of blocks from Ebbetts Field," Carl said. "Johnny and Ginger lived around the corner on Carroll Street, I was on Crown Street. They had a little apartment on Carroll Street. I think Ginger's mother, Mrs. Meltzer, was on St. John's Place. It was a lovely neighborhood at that time. President Street was two blocks away, and it had palatial homes.

"They seemed to be very close. She sat through it very patiently, every evening that they came over. Never said a word. Very nice, quiet person. I thought they got along beautifully. Later on, who knows? Things happen. But they were terrific together then, and I really enjoyed both of them.

"And we all smoked. I'd play tune after tune after tune. Every once in a while Johnny'd stop me and say, 'That's a nice tune.' And once in a while I had a title.

"That's how it started. A song I wrote with him was called *Just Remember*. Southern Music published it but never released it in this country. But it was a modest noise-maker in England, and I didn't even know about it. It was never a hit, but that was my first published song.

"Not too long after that he drifted out to Hollywood and became very important. I was struggling. He would see me every now and then. I would call him, push myself on him and pick his

brains. Every once in a while I'd play some tunes for him.

"I was a counselor at a boys' camp, and I called him when I learned he was going to be in New York. I insisted on having an appointment with him. He was so busy. He had songs everywhere. He'd write a song here, he'd write a song there. I had to see him. I wanted to. I was at Camp Lenox in East Lehigh, Massachusetts, in the Berkshires. I took a day off and took a train into New York. I met him at one of the publishing offices.

"I sat down and played a tune for him. He liked it very much, and I mentioned a title — not for that tune, just a title I had, *Come Out of Your Dream and into My Arms*. That was my little catch phrase. About two minutes later, he put both of those together. 'Please come out of your dream' In about ten minutes we finished the lyric, most of which was his.

"Now when I left, he said, 'Good luck with your song.'

"I said, 'What do you mean, my song? It's *our* song.'

"He said, 'No, it's your song. It was your title, it's your tune. I just helped you. I had nothing to do with it.' I fought with him, but he insisted, and he wouldn't put his name on the song. He was that kind of man.

"I got it published. Guy Lombardo introduced it. In those days that was important. It almost made it. The only reason it didn't is that there was another dream song called *Darn That Dream* at the same time, and it got smothered. It was the first really noisy song I had in the country.

"But still I couldn't get rolling, I couldn't break through. One day Johnny said, 'Look, you write nice melodies, you've got a flair for lyrics. We need lyric writers. There are fifteen tune writers to every lyric writer. Every band has a couple of guys who can write a couple of tunes a day.'

"That was my clue. And I started to write lyrics seriously. I started to take assignments of foreign melodies like *Arrivederci Roma* and *What Now My Love?*. So I became a lyric writer and more in demand and I started to get songs published. That was one of the great things he did for me. He steered me into it."

Carl would eventually write *Dream Along with Me* (Perry Como's television theme song), *Dance Ballerina Dance, Crazy She Calls Me, Where Do I Begin, It's All in the Game, Ebb Tide, Pennsylvania 6-5000, My Heart Cries for You, Arrivederci Roma, A Day in the Life of a Fool, Over and Over, and Answer Me My Love*. He was the first of many lyricists whom John would encourage, whose careers he advanced.

"I worshipped him," Carl said, "because I was learning about writing. He really helped me a lot. There was real goodness in the man. We *all* worshipped him. He was, to me, the hippest, coolest person that I ever met. And he was so good. And he was so talented. It was unbelievable. He would sit there and thoughts would come pouring out of him."

John remembered a young vaudevillian, a former acrobat and stilt-walker named Archie Leach, who was making a bit of a name as an actor. They shared a cottage one weekend at Freeport, Long Island. He soon went to Hollywood to make a screen test for B.P. Schulberg, head of Paramount Pictures, who signed him to a contract and changed his name to Cary Grant. John too would, not

very long after this, work for Paramount.

Another aspiring lyricist with whom John became friends was Harold Adamson, a graduate of the University of Kansas and Harvard. John and he waited outside Vincent Youmans' office from ten o'clock one morning until two the next afternoon until the composer could see them. At the time Youmans was casting his musical *Through the Years*. He was kind to John, who said that his friendship was important in those years. Harold Adamson went on to write such lyrics as *Everything I Have Is Yours*, *Where Are You?*, *The Music Stopped*, *I Couldn't Sleep a Wink Last Night*, *A Lovely Way to Spend an Evening*, *Comin' in on a Wing and a Prayer*, *How Blue the Night*, *A Most Unusual Day*, *My Resistance Is Low*, *Too Young to Go Steady*, and *An Affair to Remember*.

Adamson was another of his friends to whom John introduced me. He struck me as a shyly laconic man. He had a sure touch for writing hits. They were not at the level of John's work, to be sure, but they were solidly workmanlike, quite good within their limitations.

Producer (and sometime songwriter) Billy Rose asked John to contribute some comedy songs to two reviews he was preparing. He turned the songs down and John dismissed them as inferior, as was his wont. One must wonder if Rose's taste just wasn't as sharp as John's. But, John said, he was trying to be as witty as Larry Hart, as sophisticated as Cole Porter, as simple as Irving Berlin, as poetic as Oscar Hammerstein, and he thought it remarkable that his own style evolved at all, given the disparate influences. Again, he was being self-abnegating. All good art begins in tradition and imitation. It is in the synthesis of influences that originality begins. As Miles Davis said of jazz, "It takes a long time to sound like yourself." John in fact sounded like himself very early.

The drawing account from Miller Music, and having the company's office from which to work, gave John a certain amount of — comparative — security. He wrote with a number of composers, but the most fecund of these collaborations was that with Bernard (Bernie) Hanighen, a native of Omaha, Nebraska, a graduate of Harvard who gained his first songwriting experience writing for that university's Hasty Pudding shows, training camp for so many important songwriters in that time. A love of jazz made them regular clients of the Onyx Club and the Famous Door, two speakeasies that became legitimate nightclubs when the Volstead Act was at last repealed in 1932. Johnny felt that he and Hanighen and Arlen were far ahead of their time in their taste for the influence of jazz in their work.

With Hannigen, John wrote: *Bob White*, *The Dixieland Band*, *The Weekend of a Private Secretary*, *Show Your Linen Miss Richardson*, *Calling All Squares*, *The Air-Minded Executive*, and *The Blues Sneaked in Every Time*.

All these songs, and indeed most of Mercer's output up to this time, exploited his gift for the quick, the clever, the witty, the flippant. The exploration of his own demons, his darkly and magnificently melancholy lyrics, had not yet begun.

Every day John would take the subway into Manhattan from Brooklyn and make the rounds, the publishers' offices in what was known as Tin Pan Alley. Mitchell Parish, who wrote the words to

Hoagy Carmichael's *Stardust* — one of the most magnificent lyrics in the English language — once described to me the thrill of Tin Pan Alley on a warm day, when you could walk down the street and hear the composers and songpluggers sending their piano music out of open windows and over the cobblestones; most of the the streets were not yet paved with asphalt.

John remembered an afternoon sitting around at Harms when a "rather scrawny girl from the South, with her hair in twin pony tails, came in and sat down and played." Dana Suesse was born in Kansas City, Missouri, on December 3, 1909 — just two weeks after his own birth. Among the melodies she played that day were two that became, with words added, *My Silent Love* and *Have You Forgotten?* Her catalogue would eventually include *My Silent Love*, *You Oughta Be in Pictures*, and *The Night Is Young and You're So Beautiful*. Yet another large talent who gave the lie to the myth of a separation between jazz and classical music and jazz and popular music, she was also a concert composer who trained in France with Nadia Boulanger and had given her first piano recital at the age of eight.

"If we were lucky," John said, "we might bump into Jerome Kern or Otto Harbach in the lobby, or get a nod from Sigmund Romberg or Rudolf Friml, while Oscar Hammerstein — that tall, shy Abe Lincoln of a librettist — was quietly padding around the corridors, working out his assignments with most of the great composers then under contract to Harms."

There seems to have been a conspiracy of fellowship, of mutual sympathy, rather than competition among the writers. They would introduce each other to someone who might be of use, a producer assembling a review, a comedian looking for jokes. "We covered all fields, picking up experience and learning all the while," John said.

We younger ones were content to sit around and kibbitz among ourselves, trying out our wares on each other, or lapsing into discreet silence if one of our more famous brethren dropped into the conversation for a few bars. Some of the older, more established, writers might place a song, get an advance, and hurry back to the bar to celebrate — or off to the track to try and double their money.

Playing the ponies was apparently as endemic as drinking in that era. It was a world celebrated in the Damon Runyon short stories and those of Ring Lardner, who had a peculiar insight into and feeling for athletes and songwriters. It was Lardner who said of Oscar Hammerstein's *Softly, as in a Morning Sunrise*, "I suppose that's as opposed to an evening sunrise."

(To be continued)

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