

Pennies in a Stream

In the movies of my youth, women came in two kinds, good and bad, Madonna and Whore. The former were played by the likes of Joan Leslie, Ann Rutherford, Gail Russell, and Janet Blair, the latter by Lynn Bari, Nina Foch, and their wicked ilk.

Young mothers produced their progeny without preliminary protrusion and when the wife had to tell the husband that she was, in the ancient euphemism, in a family way, she could not say so directly. She would say something allusive, and the poor sap who had got her that way, would reply, wide-eyed, "You mean, you're . . . uh, you mean we're going to . . . ?" In obedience to the movies' morality code, of the time, husbands and wives wore pajamas or nightgowns and occupied twin beds, although every kid in the world knew his parents shared a bed, so who was protected and from what moral corruption is questionable. The word "pregnant" was *never* heard in movies, and the 1953 film *The Moon Is Blue* was condemned by the Catholic Legion of Decency because it contained the words "virgin," "seduce," and "mistress." Producer Otto Preminger released the picture without the seal of approval of the Motion Picture Production Code by which the Catholic church had exercised a tyrannical censorship of movies since it was instituted in 1934.

That was three years before Harry Anslinger, the newly appointed head of the nascent Federal Bureau of Narcotics made possession of marijuana a criminal offense, thereby ruining the lives of millions of Americans imprisoned because of it, and costing the American taxpayers untold billions in the lockup and support of their victims. In 1959, the stripper Juanita Slusher, stage-named Candy Barr, was sentenced in her native Texas to fifteen years in prison for possession of a very small amount of marijuana. She served three of it in a woman's prison until Governor John Connally pardoned her.

Much of the disinformation still bedeviling the land was generated by Anslinger who said, among other things, "Reefer makes darkies think they're as good as white men," and "Marijuana is taken . . . by musicians. And I'm not speaking about good musicians, but the jazz type."

Anslinger was close to the Dupont family who were opposed to the growing of hemp for the good reasons that all sorts of things can be made from it, including fabrics, plastics, food, and fuels. The Duponts were in the chemical business. Anslinger lasted until 1972, when it was said that he resigned. He had in fact been fired by President Kennedy. It is just another of those inconvenient "coincidences" that Kennedy and Connally were shot together.

The songs of the time reinforced the idea of Innocence and Experience. Singers too were typecast. Pearl Bailey was suggestive; Ella Fitzgerald was Innocent. Anita O'Day was outright *bad*, as she was in real life; Gertrude Niessen was naughty, singing *I Wanna Get Married*, containing what for the period was a pretty racy line, "I wanna sleep in pajama tops." Doris Day was Innocent, longing to make her *Sentimental Journey*, written by her boss, Les Brown. Doretta Morrow and Polly Bergen too had voices that conveyed a virginal purity, although it was known that if one walked in the dim light backstage at one of her musicals, you had to be careful not to stumble over Morrow and Alfred Drake. But the most conspicuous personification of Innocence was Margaret Whiting, who had a voice of unaffected sweetness, naive purity, lovely enunciation, and beautiful pitch. She was one of Johnny Mercer's *protégées* at his newly founded Capitol Records. She was also the daughter of Richard Whiting, the versatile and gifted Peoria-born composer of *Till We Meet Again*, *Japanese Sandman*, *Sleepytime Gal*, *Ain't We Got Fun*, *Horses*, *Breezing Along with the Breeze*, *She's Funny That Way*, *My Future Just Passed*, *You're an Old Smoothie*, *On the Good Ship Lollipop*, *Guilty*, *Roses in the Rain*, *When Did You Leave Heaven*, and two with fine Mercer's lyrics, *Too Marvelous for Words* and the sardonic *Hooray for Hollywood*.

The first song I ever heard Margaret Whiting sing was *Moonlight in Vermont*. It seemed a very strange song to me, notable for a deep stillness, and in fact it *is* a strange song. Margaret recorded it in 1943.

When I moved from Toronto to Montreal — partly because I wanted to learn French — I discovered that from Mount Royal and Westmount, you could look south into the

Green Mountains of Vermont. Vermont in fact means Green Mount, or if you want to translate it into Italian, Monteverdi. The state always seemed romantic to me, partly no doubt due to that song and Walter Benton's under-rated long autobiographical poem *This Is My Beloved*, which contains a reference to the state.

But I didn't realize for many years what gave the song its unusual quality of stillness. It is completely pastoral. But more to the point is the form. The lyrics are, except for the release, haiku, a Japanese poetic form seventeen syllables long, divided into three lines of five, seven, and five syllables. (Well, that's in English. The subject is much more complex in Japanese.)

A haiku verse contains no verb.

All our teaching and all our tradition in the western languages conditions us to accept that a sentence contains a noun or pronoun, a verb, and maybe another noun or pronoun — the direct object in the case of the transitive verb. The verb is an action. Something is *happening*, acting upon itself or something else. There is motion. But since the haiku form contains no verb, *nothing* happens. The images are just there, suspended for your contemplation. And the form thus creates a profound stillness, related to all sorts of Japanese esthetic traditions, such as the sand garden and the tea ceremony.

I have been unable to find sheet music of the song, and the various printed lyrics, versions by Sinatra and others, are not in accord with each other, due to the unhappy habit of singers of learning songs from records, not the published music, thereby reproducing whatever errors have already been made and passing them along. This has happened on a number of my songs, and such errors, once started, roll on forever. But this, as far as I can deduce, is the lyric and the haiku form:

Pennies in a stream 5
falling leaves, a sycamore 7
moonlight in Vermont 5

Icy finger waves 5
ski trails on (or down) a mountainside 7
snowlight in Vermont 5

Telegraph cables
(they) sing down the highway and follow each bend in the road.
People who meet in this romantic setting
are so hypnotized by the lovely

ev'ning summer breeze 5
warbling of a meadowlark 7

moonlight in Vermont 5

Some versions employ a codetta:

You and I and
moonlight in Vermont.

But I doubt that it was in the original. And I doubt that the word in parentheses (they) was in the original. It's grammatically clumsy and also unnecessary.

People who have never lived in bitter winters doubtless don't understand "telegraph cables sing down the highway," the single theramin tone sung by the wires on tall poles on sub-zero nights. I don't know why they make that sound. And I'm not sure I want to: knowing would take the mystery out of it.

But I remember that eerie high pitch, as I walked along country roads in brilliant moonlight among black barns and fence posts and the lacy fans of leafless elms. And on some nights, I would see, like shimmering gossamer green veils, the aurora borealis, usually to the north but sometimes covering the entire sky. Quite creepy.

I discovered the haiku form when I was living in New York, and for a time I wrote such verses, several each day, along with another historical exercise discipline, the sonnet. Both of them build your chops.

There is another bit of felicitous ingenuity to the song: the way the melodic line and lyric pass seamlessly into the last eight bars. Jerome Kern used to do that, as in *The Folks Who Live on the Hill* and the end of the release on *I Hear Music*, with its startling modulation from B7 to a C chord.

After *Moonlight in Vermont* came out in 1943, it was bruited about that it was written by two rank amateurs named John Blackburn and Karl Suessdorf who never wrote another song. Both were in fact educated men, and Blackburn for years ran a puppet theater that traveled the United States, and Suessdorf composed a number of instrumental pieces, working with, among others, Benny Carter. They were certainly sophisticated enough to experiment with haiku.

Johnny Mercer, head of the upstart Capitol records label, chose the song for Margaret Whiting. He'd first heard her sing at the home of her parents, and he was writing songs with her father, Richard Whiting.

Margaret told me:

"Johnny always saw every songwriter. He listened to every song. Because he wanted to pick the things for all of his artists individually.

Margaret said he told her:

"You sing like a trumpet. And there's a great trumpet

player, Billy Butterfield. I want you to do this record together.' I did *My Ideal* and *Without Love*. We used Les Brown's band. They were at the Palladium. I sang the two songs. Two or three takes. The record did very well and we needed a follow-up. Johnny heard *Moonlight in Vermont*. He said, 'That's for the kid.' He called me down and he sang the song, and Paul Weston was playing it. He said, 'What do you think?'

"I said, 'It's gorgeous.'

"He never brought up the fact that it didn't rhyme, and I didn't think about it for many years.

"Johnny said, 'I want you to think, what does Vermont mean to you?'

"I said, 'A calendar with a church in the snow.'

"He said, 'There are more images.'

"I said, 'Well, there's got to be summer, winter, fall. Fall. Everybody goes to see Vermont in the fall for the leaves.'

"He said, 'I want you to think of those pictures. I want you to think of the coming of spring. I want you to think of summer, people swimming and people walking, people having a lovely time outdoors.'

"So we go in and record it and I'm envisioning all these pictures. It gave me something to go on. That's what he taught me, and that's what Frank Loesser taught me. Pick up that sheet music and look at those lyrics and make them mean something. Read the lyric aloud, over and over and over. Recite it until you get it. Your own natural instincts will tell you."

Good advice to a singer. What John was imparting to her, essentially, was Stanislavsky's sense-memory perception applied to singing, Actors Studio philosophy long before there was an Actors Studio. You cannot get emotion into a performance by conscious effort. Only actually feeling will do that, for everything emotional is controlled by the autonomic nervous system, whether the sound of sadness or joy in a voice or the look of it in the muscles of a face. Actors who don't have this ability are wooden.

John got a remarkable performance out of her, and the song has doubtless generated the image of Vermont in countless minds ever since.

Since then, only one singer has surpassed it, Frank Sinatra, and he always surpassed everybody. Arranger Marion Evans has a term for it: he said that when Sinatra did a song, he fixed it, as in fixing a photographic print.

But her version was the first, and it lingered long in many minds. Indeed, it almost became the state song, but it's still *Hail Vermont*.

Jack and Margaret

I cannot recall where or when I first met Margaret. Probably Mercer introduced us. She was one of the earliest subscribers to the *Jazzletter*. When bassist Bill Crow wrote a three-part essay for the *Jazzletter* on the Benny Goodman band's tour of Russia, revealing Goodman's inventive cruelties to musicians, she wrote me a letter saying, Thank God somebody has finally told the truth. Perhaps it's time someone told the truth about her too.

In her autobiography, *It Might as Well Be Spring*, Margaret states that after Mercer and his colleagues founded Capitol Records, "Of course, the Whiting family got into the act. We not only bought a lot of Capitol's stock, but also acted as talent scouts. We had relatives in Detroit who heard a small combo playing in a two-bit joint. The combo recorded for an obscure label. We were sent the recordings. We listened and loved them and passed them along to Johnny, who immediately signed the King Cole Trio."

Unfortunately, this is at odds with the facts. The label he had recorded for, Decca, was hardly obscure. Indeed, Capitol faced the challenge of going up against the Big Three of popular music, Columbia, RCA Victor, and Decca. The King Cole Trio had made four sides for a small label, Ammor, in February of 1940, and then recorded *Sweet Lorraine* and three other tunes for Decca in March, 1941. These recordings were given extensive Los Angeles exposure by the disc jockeys Al Jarvis and Gene Norman. *Variety* noted in its issue of November 6, 1938, that "King Cole and his Sepia Swingers (opened) at Jim Otto's in L.A."

Daniel Mark Epstein says in his biography of Cole: "Johnny Mercer heard them there." Furthermore, Cole had recorded with Lionel Hampton, including one particularly successful number, *Central Avenue Breakdown*, in which his dazzling skill with boogie-woogie took jazz fans aback everywhere, along with *Jack the Bellboy* and two others. They were recorded in Los Angeles on July 17, 1940 in Los Angeles. The bassist was Wesley Prince, the guitarist Oscar Moore — with Cole, the original King Cole Trio. Hampton was recording with *them*, not vice versa, although the records were in his name. And he was heard extensively on NBC.

Given Mercer's relationship with network radio, his passion for great jazz pianists, the prominence of Lionel Hampton, the fame of *Central Avenue Breakdown* and *Jack the Bellboy*, the exposure of Nat Cole by Al Jarvis and Gene Norman, perhaps the biggest disc jockey in Los Angeles at the time, it is not even conceivable that he had to wait for Margaret Whiting and her father — indeed, Richard Whiting

died February 10, 1938, four years before Capitol *was even founded* — to draw Mercer's and Capitol's attention to Nat Cole.

But as Paul Weston said, "If you listen to Margaret Whiting, she'll try to convince you she founded Capitol Records." His wife, Jo Stafford, who also recorded for Capitol, was a pragmatic and factual woman, though not a cruel one. And when Margaret was mentioned, I caught a certain chill in Jo's mien and conversation.

Margaret first met Johnny Mercer when her father was collaborating with him on the 1937 movie *Ready, Willing and Able*, for which they wrote *Too Marvelous for Words*. She was thirteen at the time, precociously read the show-business trade papers, and loved singing for her father's friends, such as Harry Warren and Jerome Kern.

Her sound of virginal purity was at odds with the tone of her autobiography, which chronicles, sometimes in sticky detail, a life of unflagging sexual aggression. She describes how she plotted her first fornication, with a Warner Brothers actor named Tom D'Andrea. "It was in the guest room of my mother's house," she writes. "I had heard from other women that getting deflowered was not the most pleasant experience in the world, so I was eager to get it over with. Tom was the perfect choice. I adored him; he was not the kind a girl could get involved with, because he wasn't really serious. He just wanted a good time. And that's what we had. He led me through that tunnel of love in the gentlest way possible. It wasn't terrific, but it wasn't anything too horrible, either. And I felt relieved. Now that was over."

Her next was actor William Eythe. She describes how they would drive out to the Pacific Coast and sit there at six a.m. drinking wine. "And then he made love to me. Bill was an extremely sexual person and he was a sweet and tender lover, but there was something missing." Later she tells us he was a homosexual.

She tells us that she and composer Jimmy Van Heusen were lovers. Hal March and an agent at MCA named George Gruskin were among her men. Then she had an affair with CBS executive Hubbell Robinson, kept very secret because she knew he was married. In 1948 she married him. In 1950 she divorced him. Then she met John Garfield: "I had left Hubbell and was looking for a good time." A little later she writes, "I went to bed with him that night."

She recounts that Garfield said, "You're mothering me. Women either want to mother me or fuck me."

She told him, "Well, now I've done both."

She describes multiple simultaneous love affairs. One of her men married her sister. Margaret married pianist Lou Busch, best-known to the world as Joe "Fingers" Carr, who

gave her a daughter, Debbie. After Margaret's divorce from Busch came actor Hugh O'Brian: "He was a very sexy guy and I felt very free with him."

Next is Richard Moore, "this six-foot-four gorgeous hunk," one of the founders of Panavision. "[W]hen we finally made love, yes, he was wonderful in bed." Farther on: "Richard began to make mad passionate love to me the moment we were inside the front door. He stripped off my clothes and stripped off his own, and we made love in the dark on a bed I was not familiar with. But I knew his body and I longed for it. He was strong and he was lusty, and he covered my body with his and wrapped his arms around me. He totally contained me. There was no way I could move, nor did I want to. I longed for that too. For once, he seemed out of control, as hungry for me as I was for him."

Then there is composer John Meyer. She went to France with him, "walked the streets of the little villages, made love . . ."

She writes: "At this point, the reader may well ask, 'Was there *anybody* Margaret was not involved with at one time or another? And the answer is yes, Mickey Rooney. And Artie Shaw. We were just good friends.' Conspicuously, she does not exclude Johnny Mercer from the list of her conquests, and there have long been rumors about that.

Then comes Jack Wrangler, the star of gay porn movies, born July 11, 1946, and thus twenty-two years her junior. He was born Jack Stillman in Beverly Hills, the son of Robert Stillman, producer of movies (*Champion*, *Home of the Brave*) and the television series *Bonanza*. He in turn was the son of John Stillman, who built a retailing empire that included Stillman Stores and Grand Leader Stores, which left him a multi-millionaire when he sold them off at the age of thirty. Jack Stillman changed his name to Wrangler when he began his life in porn movies. He'd had a lackluster career as an actor and director after leaving Northwestern University without a degree. He too wrote an autobiography, *The Jack Wrangler Story or What's a Nice Boy Like You Doing?*, assisted by a writer named Carl Johnes. Much of Margaret's autobiography is about him; much of his is about her.

Read in counterpoint, these two books are astonishing. If all the TV ads for Cialis, Viagra, Extenze, and the little Trojan brand vibrator that a woman can take anywhere in its cute little carrying bag and slip onto the tip of her index finger so as to amuse herself in a moment of boredom, perhaps under a restaurant tablecloth while waiting for a friend, aren't enough to turn you off on sex, the Wrangler-Whiting saga should do the trick.

You can find a picture of the two of them if you look up Charles Pierce, who bills himself as the World's Greatest

Female Impersonator. He does an impression of Joan Crawford that is awesome in its inaccuracy. And for a still photo he stands with Wrangler and Whiting. Her makeup is gross, shaping her lips into two mouths that meet in a point in the middle.

Wrangler suggests to us that his accounts of events in his life can't be trusted. For example, of one incident he recounts, "That whole story was completely manufactured by me. None of it happened." And, "How many times had I told transparent stories about my friends, my whereabouts, even my work?" In other words, both he and Margaret were habitual liars, tango dancers of dissimulation.

After minor work in drama, Wrangler confessed to his mother his taste for men, then worked as a bartender, and then took a job as a mail stripper at the Paris Theater in Los Angeles. Soon he made the first of approximately fifty-six male X-rated movies, and his book is largely an account of that career, containing such passages as:

"My entire repertoire of masturbatory techniques runs for around twelve minutes. From there on in, it's variations on a theme. Up and down, up and down, sideways, double-handed . . . and circular friction."

"They wanted hardons and cum shots." The directors' instructions included:

"All right, Jack, now I want him to start licking your balls Okay, fine. Now tongue his dick That's it Move up slowly to the tip. Good. Now suck the tip — just the tip . . . Now go on down on him . . . Good. Good. All right, *cut!*

"My face was streaked with makeup, and I'm sure there was cum in my hair.

"Our lunch on locations shoots, whether on land or at sea, always consisted of cheeseburgers, pickles, and onions. After starring in two or three of these cheeseburger, pickle and onion epics I realized that all porn stars taste alike. So I started bringing Lavoris. Now all porn actors still taste alike, but better.

"For God's sake, Jack! Stop fooling around and fuck him in the ass!

"Go on, you fairy cocksucker, eat her twat!

"It was an unwritten rule that orgasms must be seen *and* heard, so I was to shoot all over her back while my fiancée looked on lovingly Left hand in action, lightning speed, sweat flying, and presto! Protein!

"After that, the rest of the plot was, well, pure formula: I untie the guy, he's grateful, he blows me. I kiss him, take him back to the barn, and screw him. Then we both beat off."

"That would require six and a half hours of carefully maintained hardon, which took a lot of concentration."

But, in defense of his integrity, he writes:

"I didn't want to be thought of as a cock, or worse, a freak. Jack Wrangler was not a tripod. No, I wanted to be known as a personality. And a writer. And a director. And a charming, witty, attractive pussycat."

Whiting met Jack Wrangler in a New York nightclub during a period in 1976 when she was touring with a group called 4 Girls 4, including herself, Rosemary Clooney, Helen O'Connell, and Rose Marie. She was introduced to the audience and so was he. She found him attractive. They met, and she went to the Jewel Theater in Greenwich Village to watch him perform. She writes: "The music pulsated and so did he. Hypnotically, rhythmically, he doffed shirt, pants. Then, as the music crescendoed, he turned his back to the audience and, simulating orgasm, ended with a great sexual cry."

She had known his father. Both she and Jack had grown up in Beverly Hills, and they had gone to the same schools — she a couple of decades earlier than he. And then:

"It was a man kissing me, a sexy passionate man."

"Yes, we were making love, and I want to tell you about it because it was so special. Because Jack was so caring, so gentle, and so strong. Because he really did love me. Of course he was an expert lover. Of course he had a terrific body. An awful lot of people had seen that body on the screen, in action. That had nothing to do with it. The man who made love to me was a different person. He was tender and beautiful and caring, and he needed me, and that made all the difference."

She writes, "It concerned me what was to become of him. I already knew he couldn't get a job, a straight acting job, in Los Angeles. He had gone to see about a couple of them, had been hired, in fact, until they found out about his past. In New York, perhaps, it would be different. In New York, perhaps, he could work in the theater. New York was less a company town, it was more accepting. It was obvious that Jack had no future in Los Angeles, no future as anything but a porn-star stud, and that kind of success lasted maybe twenty minutes. Jack was too good for that, too talented."

She learned that Jack was a big business, selling pornographic pictures of himself by mail, even Jack Wrangler gym shorts, sweatshirts, socks, and towels. She decided to change his life. She urged him to try for some "straight" roles, though no porn star has ever made the transition successfully, and Tracy Lords for one tried. (Several whores became successful movie stars, but the public never got to see them in sexual action on screen and press agency obscured their pasts.)

She brought Jack home to live with her, even though her

daughter Debbie was also living in her 55th Street apartment. "Evidently," she writes, "Debbie had decided that Jack was no good for me (the wonderful things kids do to protect their parents!), and she didn't hesitate to tell him that I had many men in my life, that he was just another one, and the moment I was bored with him, out he would go. Tell this to a man who already spends an hour in front of the mirror before he goes out, and you do not have a secure male."

Wrangler writes that Debbie "thought I was an opportunist, and I thought she should give Margaret some space." Whiting, after all, shared with her sister Barbara the very considerable body of royalties from her father's estate.

Margaret says, "Part of the reason we were happy was that I had been able to adjust to Jack's work."

Then one day she got a call from Jim, one of Jack's sexual partners in a film. He told Whiting he was very much in love with Jack, and she passed this message along to him in a restaurant. This caused some friction between them, and Wrangler shouted: "I'm a *fucking faggot*!" All the restaurant heard it.

She said, "Only around the edges."

Wrangler's version is close to this: "What I'm *trying* to tell you is that I'm a *fucking faggot*!"

From then on, Whiting strove to give Wrangler legitimacy. She tried to promote him as a stage director. It was about this time that I met him.

My wife and I were for some reason to meet Margaret at her apartment. Often when a great songwriter dies, some woman moves in to take a stranglehold on his memory and even his talent, the classic example being the predatory Kitty Carlisle, who set herself up as the authority on the work of Alan Jay Lerner, though their only connection was that her husband, the playwright and producer Moss Hart, had directed the Lerner and Loewe *My Fair Lady*. He was also probably the chief author its book. He also worked as a play doctor on *Camelot*, saving it to the extent of making it only a semi-disaster. Carlisle did an act at one point in which she talked of all the great songwriters she had known, and she veiled herself in a myth of how much she and Hart loved each other, although everyone in the business knew he was homosexual. She successfully passed herself off as a singer and actress but did both jobs poorly. What she did to Alan Lerner and his memory, Whiting did to Mercer. One major difference between them was that Whiting *could* sing.

Both of them remind me of the novelist Georges Sand, best known to modern memory for her ten-year affair with Chopin and reminiscences about her other lovers. His friends were not all charmed by her. Liszt said she looked like a horse, and Charles Baudelaire said: "She is stupid, heavy and garrulous.

Her ideas on morals have the same depth of judgment and delicacy as feelings of janitresses and kept woman The fact that there are men who could become enamored of this slut is indeed a proof of the abasement of the men of this generation."

Margaret was in her mold. She had an awkward body such that her finery fell precipitously from the nipple line over a protrusive belly and thick waist to give the impression of a self-propelled barrel, or R2D2 in a dress. By this time, she looked what the French call *fripée*, meaning frazzled, crumpled, much like the tassels on a small carpet.

By the time of Jack Wrangler, however, her talent was largely compromised by the calcification of the vocal chords that comes with age.

When Whiting cobbled together an inept show based on Mercer songs, and titled *Dream*. She made Jack Wrangler its director. And she wanted me to write it with him!

Perhaps that's why she invited my wife and me to her apartment that morning. It was raining. We went to the building on West Fifty-Eighths Street between Sixth and Seventh Avenues. We entered the elevator, and were joined by a blond man with spiky hair wearing a shabby raincoat. I am always fascinated by body language, even in animals, and his bespoke a bellicose homosexuality. This is what I am and if you don't like it, fuck you! He was *looking for* confrontation. We exchanged no greeting in the elevator. We got off at the same floor, and my wife and I turned right to the door to Margaret's digs; I'd been there before.

I introduced my wife to Margaret, who had not apparently expected her. Margaret turned a book face down as discreetly as possible on the coffee table, and covered it with a newspaper; it was, I realized later, Wrangler's autobiography. At that point, the man from the elevator entered the living room, a thick sandwich in his hand. She introduced us. Wrangler. He had apparently entered the apartment through the kitchen. He continued the crude consumption of the sandwich, one of those folk whose mouth never fully closes and he produced a wet moorf-moorf-moorf pedal point to his munching. He still wore that rancid raincoat. Margaret told him to go back to the kitchen if he wanted something more to eat: she had laid in a supply of groceries. When he had left the room, she said, "He doesn't like to go out to eat." I suspect that the reason was that he feared being seen with her.

But he certainly was aware of the size of her share of the Richard Whiting royalties, and now she was about get control of Mercer's too.

Dream, as directed by Wrangler, ran briefly on Broadway to bad or tepid reviews. From then on in her publicity about

Wrangler she referred to him as a Broadway director. She appointed him to the board of directors of the Johnny Mercer Foundation, and assigned him considerable authority.

The Foundation web site says that the popular music collection at Georgia State University contains primary research materials relating to the history of twentieth century American popular music. The papers of the late Georgia-born songwriter Johnny Mercer form the core of the collection; these include manuscripts of songs, biographical information, correspondence, photographs and sound recordings. Other topics documented include Atlanta radio broadcasting, film music, and country music in Atlanta. The collection includes sheet music, historical files and more than 56,000 sound recordings."

Anyone doing research there is required to sign an agreement that none of this material can be used for dramatic or other purposes without written permission of Margaret Whiting or her husband, Jack Wrangler. The document is legal nonsense, since Whiting and the university own none of it. The newspaper and magazine clippings are the copyright property of the writers and/or the publication, including several articles I wrote about John. The letters to John are the copyright property of their writers, according to the Supreme Court ruling in the case of the novelist J.D. Salinger. The sheet music is the copyright property of the publishers, and the recordings are the property of the record companies in question.

Of her marriage to Lou Busch, Whiting wrote: "I was the dominant one in the relationship. Maybe I have always needed to dominate."

The correspondence collection at Georgia State is comparatively useless, since it contains few if any of John's outgoing letters, only letters written to him. I found some of my own there and realized that John and I had been on the verge of setting up a publishing company together; and I discovered with a pang what warm friends we had been.

I am rather deft at postponing or suppressing pain, but those letters to John resurrect that which I felt at his death.

In early October, 1998, some of the New York newspapers had a great deal of fun with Jack and Margaret. The *New York Post* carried a four-column headline:

Their Sex Life 'Slipped Away'

Under the byline Dareh Gregorian, the story read:

A former porn star is suing the city for loss of sexual

services after his elderly wife, Broadway singer Margaret Whiting, tripped on a Manhattan street and broke her knee.

"Raunch Ranch" star Jack Wrangler, 52, wants \$1 million from the city, Con Edison, and a paving company because the injuries to his wife left him without "conjugal fellowship" and "sexual fulfillment," claims the suit, filed yesterday in Manhattan Supreme Court.

Whiting, 73, who starred in the Broadway musical "Dream" last year, was injured while crossing 57 Street and Sixth Avenue when she tripped "due to a dangerous, hazardous, uneven, defective, depressed, and hole-like condition."

The fall left the '40s big-band star with a fractured left knee, wounds to her head, limbs and body, internal injuries and severe shock to the nervous system, the suit claims.

Whiting is seeking \$2 million for loss of income and medical bills in the same suit.

The story goes on to tell of their meeting and marriage, and quotes wrangler as saying, "Margaret helped me to believe in myself as an artist and as a man — not a sex object."

In a sidebar column on the same page of the paper, Steve Dunleavy wrote:

"When jumpin' Jack wrangler strikes, Viagra falls.

"Jack, a thespian of sorts, is in the midst of one of the greatest dramas of his life.

"He has, hopefully only temporarily, lost the tender loving care of Margaret Whiting.

"While scientists are about to launch a Viagra pill for women, Margaret . . . has shown it ain't necessarily so."

The *Daily News* also gave the story prominent play.

The suit was settled in the summer of 2002. Whiting and Wrangler received a total of \$220,000 — \$165,000 from the city of New York, \$30,000 from City Wide Asphalt, and \$25,000 from Consolidated Edison. There is no information as to whether this settlement restored their sex lives. Whiting was now seventy-eight.

In his book, Wrangler wrote:

"Margaret's heels tend to get caught in the damndest places."

I got those figures, by the by, from a high executive of Con Ed after I made a promise never to reveal the source, a compact I have now hermetically sealed by forgetting who it was. But the incident showed how far tge pair would go for money, and completely unembarrassed.

Paragraph IV of the Articles of Incorporation of the Johnny Mercer Foundation states: "This corporation shall have not less than three (3) nor more than seven (7) directors." As of March 21, 2001, it had eighteen. They were:

Lewis M. Bachman, Alan Bergman, Ervin Drake, Ray Evans, Joseph Harris, Nancy Rishagen, Michael A. Kerker, Al Kohn, Patrick A. Lattore, Ginny Mancini, Robert Margolies, Charles S. Tigerman, George C. White, Margaret Whiting, Don Youpa, Julia Marks Young, and Alvin Deutsch.

No member of the Mercer family — neither Mandy nor Jeff Mercer [his adopted children] nor Jamie Corwin [Mandy's son] nor Nancy Gerard [his niece] — is on the board of the Mercer Foundation. Accountant Nick Mamalakis [John's friend] served on it for one year, but was dropped because, Margaret Whiting told him, it was too expensive to fly him to California for meetings.

For the 2001 meeting, Whiting flew the entire board to Savannah and put them up in luxury suites at the De Soto hotel and dined them lavishly on Mercer's money.

One of Mercer's close friends was Wolfe Gilbert, who wrote the lyrics for *Waiting for the Robert E. Lee*, *Ramona*, *Green Eyes*, *Marta*, *The Peanut Vendor*, and *My Mother's Eyes*, all very big in their time. He was born in Odessa in 1866 and died in California in 1970. Wolfe's second wife, Rose, many years his junior, became through a mutual friend a close friend of mine and especially of my wife. She must have been a formidable looker in her youth, retained more than a trace of her beauty into her eighties, and remained intelligent and keenly observant. She detested Margaret. She also detested a man named Marc or Red Kramer, who turned up after Johnny's slow and excruciating death. He claimed to be an old friend of Johnny's, but neither Paul Weston, Jo Stafford, nor I, had ever heard mention of him. Paul said, "If he was such a friend of Johnny's, how come none of us ever heard of him?" Actually, some of John's friends *had* heard of him. One of them was Bill Harbach, son of the lyricist and producer of, among many things, the old Steve Allen *Tonight Show*.

Bill said: "I knew Red Kramer 'way before he knew Ginger. I knew him in New York. He escorted Jane Brant, Herbert Bayard Swope's daughter, as a walker — he'd take her to the horse races or something. He'd wear a derby, very dressed up. That's what he was: a walker. Taking rich women out. Taking them to 21 or El Morocco. And they'd pay for it."

"He tried to be an actor. He was in a couple of B pictures. And then he had a little radio show in New York at seven in the morning, called *Second Cup of Coffee*, that he did with another guy. One hour of chit-chat and stuff like that. Red Kramer was a jack of no trades. He and Johnny *may* have met,

but he didn't really know him at all.

"I was there when he first took up with Ginger," Rose Gilbert said. "He told her that he was a friend of Johnny's, that he had sent Johnny many articles and things, and Ginger *believed* him. And I said to her, 'I don't think he really knew Johnny. It's too far from left field.'"

"I'd never heard of him, never saw him. I was there when he told her that when he knew Johnny he had taken Mandy to the zoo. Mandy doesn't remember it."

"One reason I didn't like him is that he was a terrible liar. He found out names of men who had died, leaving wealthy widows. He would take them out for dinner, take them out for lunch. He never paid, period."

"He pretended he wasn't Jewish. He said to me once, 'Ginger and I are going to a very important affair tonight.'"

"I said, 'How nice.'"

"He said, 'Yes, there's not going to be any of those kind of people there.'"

"And I said, 'What kind of people?'"

"He said, 'You know what kind of people.'"

"I said, 'No, I live a very sheltered life.'"

"He said, 'Well, you know — Jews. There are not going to be any Jews at the party.'"

Rosie, being Jewish, and quite sardonic, said, "Well I know one who's going to be there. Ginger."

He replied, "Oh, Ginger gave up her faith so long ago it doesn't matter."

Rosie continued, "Ginger opened an account for him at a very exclusive men's shop at Rodeo Drive and Little Santa Monica. She opened a charge in the name of Johnny Mercer."

"He was a gigolo."

Jamie Corwin, Mandy's son, came to know him well. He said, "I hate to call Marc a gigolo, but that's the only thing that fits. He was a charming guy, very articulate, and very good-looking for his age. And he would get in with the crowd. He got free lodging almost always. He would hang out with people who had multiple homes or multiple living quarters in the same home. He would manage to get in there."

Ginger took him in, and he even moved into the house with her. He had John's clothes re-tailored to fit him.

Jamie Corwin, who was also living on the property while attending school, once found him passed out on the living room floor, an empty Scotch bottle on his chest, a pool of urine around his hips. Jamie somehow got him into bed.

Ginger told my wife and me that she set up the Johnny Mercer Foundation to give Red Kramer a job, make him feel useful. Eventually he took gravely ill. Jamie dressed him and took him to St. Vincent's Hospital, where he died with

symptoms that included cancerous skin lesions and sound to me like Kaposi's sarcoma.

I never liked Ginger. Neither did I dislike her. There seemed nothing to like or dislike. Steve Allen, who apparently never said a harsh word about anyone, told me, "Although I found it easy enough to talk to John, I cannot recall a single comfortable exchange with Ginger. It wasn't that I disliked Ginger. My reaction to her could be more accurately described as blank." Exactly. She was a sort of nobody-home person. Nonetheless, I was always cordial to her for John's sake, and I continued to be after he was gone, feeling that it was what he would expect of me.

With the passage of time, I have become convinced that she never loved Johnny. She loved his money, his prestige, his status, and his fame. No wonder he was in love with Judy Garland, one of the notoriously lubricious wonders of the world.

Mandy told me that Ginger and Johnny fought incessantly. There was something else about her that I never noticed: she drank. Those who knew John would often preface comments about him with, "Well, you know, Johnny drinks." Of course I knew. I did a lot of it with him, which may be one reason he and I never clashed. As it turns out, she too was a heavy drinker, but a surreptitious one.

Rose Gilbert remained estranged from Ginger even after Marc Kramer's death.

"Then I saw her at an ASCAP memorial service for Jimmy Van Heusen. I said, 'Are you alone?' and she said, 'Yes.' She said, 'I miss you.' I said, 'I'm sorry, I live in Palm Springs now, and I'm going back in the morning. Do you have a lift home?' I was concerned about her. She said, 'Yes, I do.'

"She was thin and gaunt. Her words kept tumbling over each other, as if she didn't know what she was actually saying. I went back to Palm Springs.

"She called me one day and invited me to lunch. So we went to lunch at Cedar Creek Inn. In Palm Springs. She was wearing her mink stole, and it was hot out. She had taken along a small radio. And she kept on saying that she had to get batteries for it. Mandy, who had driven her, said, 'Mom, we'll get the batteries after we have lunch.'

"Mandy said, 'Do you want a drink?' And I said, 'No, it's too early for me.' I said to Ginger, 'Are you going to have a drink?' And she said, 'No, I don't drink any more.' But the next thing I knew there was a drink in front of her. Then she decided she wanted two. Mandy and I had salads but she wanted soup. The waitress brought her the soup, and she didn't eat it. She kept saying, 'I need batteries for the radio. It's not working.' I turned it on, and it went on.

"That was the last time I saw her. She was pretty far gone

by then. She had deteriorated terribly."

The symptoms are fairly obvious. Jamie Corwin said, "For the last four years of her life, she had Alzheimer's. She had five stories that she just repeated. You could ask her questions and jog her memory. But if you didn't engage her, she just kept repeating her five stories."

During this period, with Marc Kramer dead, in circumstances that are not entirely clear, Margaret Whiting was appointed president of the Johnny Mercer Foundation. Mandy said, "I don't think that Mom knew that she had given her control. She told me that she thought she was just giving Margaret permission to use some of his songs in her show." Whiting hoped to present a Johnny Mercer revue, starring herself, and eventually did so: *Dream*,

Ginger died October 21, 1994, at Cedars Sinai Hospital. She was eighty-five.

"Her will was pretty simple," Jim Corwin said. "She allocated about 50 percent of it to the American Cancer Society, institutes for the blind, and several other charities, and the rest to the Mercer Foundation. She made a million-dollar commitment over a ten-year period to the Mercer collection at Georgia State. About 50 percent of her estate went to the Mercer Foundation and the rest to specific charities, which she delineated but which were to be administered by the foundation. But it was a fairly loose charter.

"When she started the foundation, she said it was going to be devoted to children. Some of the bequests were dictated by her will, and others were given by the board. The amounts flowing right now are approximately \$700,000 to \$800,000."

"She made Margaret the president of the Foundation in perpetuity. But she gave Margaret her share of the royalties, which gave her a lot of de facto authority."

The figures are these:

For the period August 1, 2000, to July 31, 2001, the Mercer Foundation received \$752,607.74, the largest sources being ASCAP (\$118,357.23), ASCAP Foreign (\$184,323.47), Warner Brothers (\$111,855.60), WarnerChappell (\$127,029.33). The previous year, for the same fiscal period, the total was \$829,624.36, with a similar proportion of sources. It is a comment on the state of the American culture that more money came from foreign sources than from the United States, and this for songs in the English language.

Margaret always tried to project an impression that she and John were very close, but the evidence indicates otherwise. In one of his nasty moods, which came when he'd had too much to drink, he told her, "You sing too goddamn loud." When I quoted that to Jo Stafford, Jo said, "Johnny

was right.”

On another occasion, Margaret phoned his house. When Ginger called out that Margaret Whiting was on the line, John called back, “What does that goddamned old dike want?”

Johnny’s papers and memorabilia went (before Ginger’s death) to the Popular Music Collection at the William Russell Pullen Library at Georgia State University in Atlanta. The web site of the Johnny Mercer Foundation states that the current (2002) recipients of moneys from the foundation are the Audubon Society, the Children’s Hospital, the Los Angeles Philharmonic, the Laurie Strauss Leukemia Foundation, Cancer Research — the Art of the Brain, the Sundance Initiative, the Braille Institute, the Physician Volunteers for the Arts, and the Los Angeles public television station KCET. The foundation’s web site states (with grammar that would have made John cringe):

“Our foundation’s most passionate goal is to initiate a series of dynamic fun, hands-on educational programs designed to introduce the songs of Mercer, and Berlin, and Gershwin, and Ellington and all our great American songwriters to our children quick, before their ears change!”

The dispersal of funds was interesting. Once Margaret made a substantial contribution of Mercer money to PBS. PBS gave her her own TV special, thick waist, tattered voice and all. Margaret had retained that febrile passion for self-display she had revealed from childhood. The timing of course was pure coincidence.

The Sundance initiative is linked to Robert Redford’s Sundance Festival. The web site of the Mercer Foundation states that “the teachers and presenters will include legendary recording artist and performer, Margaret Whiting . . . (and) Jack Wrangler (*Dream, Midnight in the Garden of Good and Evil*) and other specialized talents.”

One wonders what specialized talents they had in mind. Not to mention that he had nothing to do with the movie, directed by Clint Eastwood, or the song *Dream*.

One wonders too at the judgment of Robert Redford. That so gifted a man — one of the finest directors in film, as well as a better actor than he is usually given credit for — could be sucked in by a man whose knowledge of American music consisted largely in having memorized that Herman Hupfeld wrote *As Time Goes By* is rather numbing.

But all good things must come to an end, and on April 19, 2009, destiny heaved a sigh: the *Los Angeles Times* carried a headline: **Jack Wrangler dies at 62; 1970s gay porn star**. The obit said:

Jack Wrangler, a ruggedly handsome 1970s porn star whose openness about his homosexuality made him

a symbol of self-confidence for many gay men, died Tuesday in New York from complications of lung disease.

His life of sometimes surprising turns — the openly gay star found decades-long love with singer Margaret Whiting — was chronicled in the documentary “Wrangler: Anatomy of an Icon,” released last year . . .

His resume grew to include more than 80 adult films, including “A Night at the Adonis” and “The Devil in Miss Jones: Part II”.

He met Whiting, a big-band-era singers whose hits include “That Old Black Magic” in the 1970s (sic). Their romance turned tabloid heads in the 1970s. She is 22 years his senior, and Wrangler continued to describe himself as gay even in an interview with the gay magazine the Advocate last fall.

The photo that accompanied the story shows him with a cigarette in his mouth, eyes looking to the right, his tinted blond hair disheveled, cut spiky and butch and without pomade, erotic or otherwise.

Mandy Mercer pointed out to me that had Red Kramer not died before Ginger, he would have inherited the money control of the entire Mercer Estate. Had Jack Wrangler not died before Margaret, he would have had control of the Mercer monies and probably half the Richard Whiting bread.

There really are, aren’t there, ways to get through life without wasting an erg of energy on work.

Mercer was born November 18, 1909; this year marks the hundredth anniversary of that event. The city of Savannah is planning an elaborate celebration, including the unveiling of a statue of John derived from a photo of him, reading a newspaper. He is quite young, wearing a light topcoat, legs crossed at the ankles, as he leans against a fire hydrant. The background appears to be Herald Square.

I have been asked to attend the events but alas that is not possible. I can think of so many of John’s friends and associates who won’t be there, from Richard Whiting and Harry Warren to David Raksin and Henry Mancini.

Fortunately Jack Wrangler can’t be there either, which will spare John’s shade a measure of embarrassment.

The Jazzletter is published twelve times a year at Ojai CA 93024-0240, \$80 U.S. for the United States and Canada, \$90 for other countries. Copyright © 2009 by Gene Lees.