

'I'm Hep To That Step And I Dig it': Johnny Mercer Writes For (And With) Fred Astaire
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Fred Astaire's film musical career can be divided into two unequal parts: "W.R." and "A.R." – "With Rogers" and "After Rogers."

While partnered with Ginger Rogers at RKO in the 1930s, Astaire burst upon the scene as an historic screen personality: a dancing, singing, acting leading man who created his own dances, sang in a style that matched the still new technology of synchronized sound, played piano and drums brilliantly, and served as the centerpiece for a series of hit films that introduced a string of hit songs. Astaire and Rogers established a talent-driven sub-genre all their own, fueled by Astaire's creative fire as a dance maker and sparked by the couple's surprising chemistry. Of course, they didn't do it alone and chief among their collaborators was a clutch of already legendary songwriters. The RKO series was a Broadway annex, with major New York figures journeying to RKO's Gower Avenue studios in Hollywood to write songs for Astaire and Rogers to introduce to the paying public. Irving Berlin wrote three scores for the series, Jerome Kern two, the Gershwins two, and Cole Porter was represented by "Night and Day," a song introduced by Astaire on Broadway. This rare convocation of talent broke up when the Pandro S. Berman production unit dissolved in 1939. Rogers stayed on at RKO to play dramatic roles.

Astaire became a free agent, never again tying himself to a standard contract, working all over the movie capital for a further eighteen years, making nineteen more films, almost all of which made money. But grouping these years and films under the rubric "After Rogers" does a disservice to Astaire, as if the Rogers / RKO era cast a permanent shadow over everything he subsequently did. Some critics have seen things this way. Arlene Croce famously described Astaire without Rogers as "the sun without the moon." But such romantic notions don't hold up. For a full two decades after leaving RKO Astaire continued to do high-quality creative work, making brilliant musical numbers at every major musical studio (except for Warner Brothers). He never lost the ability to connect with his audience and he continued to introduce new songs. How might this long, peripatetic, creatively diverse period of Astaire's career be characterized in positive terms?

Beyond his continuing association with dance director Hermes Pan, the only regular collaborator Astaire had across the full length of these years was – surprisingly enough – Johnny Mercer. And so, for the purposes of this presentation, I'd like to rechristen the second period of Astaire's career "W.M." – "With Mercer." And while Mercer didn't have the singular impact Rogers had – how could he, after all – the contribution Mercer made to Astaire's work across almost two decades was pronounced and, in retrospect, revealing. Astaire "After Rogers" faced a multitude of creative and professional contexts where he was no longer at the center of things. He never regained the total control he had enjoyed at RKO in the Thirties. But in more than a

few cases, Astaire's work "With Mercer" allowed the dancer to mark a song or dance routine with his creative priorities and professional goals. Mercer had a good line on Astaire's musical identity – it was remarkably close to his own – and the pair enjoyed a lasting if intermittent partnership. Indeed, longevity proves a key aspect of their shared sensibilities. Mercer and Astaire shared the desire to make high-quality popular music products while also staying in step with the changing beat of popular culture. They wanted to be both good and popular.

Before looking at specific examples, it's useful to quantify Mercer's work with Astaire by comparison with Irving Berlin. Berlin wrote twenty original tunes for six Astaire pictures produced between 1935 and 1948. (A caveat: the songs for *Easter Parade* were written with Gene Kelly in mind.) In addition, Astaire used four older Berlin songs, including "Puttin' on the Ritz," for prominent film routines. Berlin's output of twenty original tunes for Astaire was exceeded by Mercer, who wrote the words or both words and music for twenty-one original songs heard in five Astaire pictures dating from 1941 to 1954. Astaire requested Mercer's song "Dream" for use in *Daddy Long Legs*, the only Astaire film, indeed the only musical film, for which Mercer wrote both words and music. On the other four films, Mercer wrote words to the music of six composers. In numerical, chronological and creative terms, Mercer was the single most important songwriter in the post-RKO phase of Astaire's film career (especially given the several films Astaire made in this period that used recycled songs, such as *Band Wagon* and *Funny Face*).

Furthermore, Mercer was the only songwriter whose connection with Astaire extended into the dancer's decade on television. In 1959, Astaire and Mercer collaborated on the song "The Afterbeat" for the one-hour variety special *Another Evening with Fred Astaire*, the second of four specials Astaire created between 1958 and 1968. "The Afterbeat" wasn't the first time Mercer provided lyrics for an Astaire tune and I'd like to begin by considering a non-film related song from 1935. Mercer wrote the words and Astaire the tune for "I'm Building Up to an Awful Letdown," among the earliest times these two men worked together.

Music clip: "I'm Building Up to An Awful Letdown" (Astaire's version from 1935)

It's a straightforward 32-bar, AABA song to be sure but Astaire's melody is instrumentally rather than vocally conceived. The tune has the quality of something worked out at the piano. With his light, agile and true voice, Astaire makes it sound easy to sing. It's not. In similar fashion, Mercer's lyric is clever without calling attention to itself, lightly touching on Astaire's debonair persona without striking too broad of a pose. Playing in clever ways with the words "up" and "down," Mercer manages to hit a spot somewhere between Berlin's colloquial diction and Porter's sophisticated word play. The song is cleverly made without being too cute. The inherently modest nature of Mercer and Astaire's personas come to the fore in reciprocal fashion. When recording a jazz version of the song in 1952, Astaire proudly noted that "Letdown" had reached the Hit Parade. Astaire, a frustrated songwriter with a film career, and Mercer, a somewhat frustrated actor with a songwriting career, had similar priorities with a number like "Letdown": to produce a hit. It was a modest success at a time when the airwaves were full of similar swing-band, radio-oriented tunes.

Tuning their efforts to the popular marketplace would prove a consistent strategy running across their collaborations over the next quarter century. Almost without fail, when Mercer was brought onto an Astaire picture, the resulting songs and dances made direct, frequently explicit connections to the popular music marketplace, a realm that Mercer, among Astaire's many songwriters, was particularly attuned to. When working with Astaire, Mercer showed the instincts of a man of radio and records, rather than a man of the theater. Mercer's work for Astaire helps locate Astaire in the realm of popular music and jazz, the consistent source of the dancer's musical and choreographic inspiration. I will briefly comment on four of the five films Astaire and Mercer collaborated on, highlighting this desire to connect with popular music and dance trends, a priority Astaire brought to film after film and that found its most direct expression in the songs Mercer wrote as he, in turn, followed Astaire from studio to studio.

Mercer's first chance to write lyrics for an Astaire picture came just after Astaire left RKO. *Second Chorus* was a rare independently produced musical. A story of jazz bands and jazz musicians, the bandleader originally signed for the picture was Paul Whiteman. But Whiteman went into Metro's *Strike Up the Band* and, in his place, producer Boris Morros engaged Artie Shaw, the immensely popular but controversial leader who was, once again, making a comeback. Astaire was eager to work with Shaw and signed on to *Second Chorus*, a decidedly low budget affair, for that reason alone. The script for *Second Chorus* was re-written several times. The original version, by Shaw friend Frank Cavett, dramatized a middle class Midwesterner's struggle to realize his true calling as a jazz trumpeter. With John Garfield penciled in for the lead, *Second Chorus* was conceived as an earnest downer of a film, a dark view of the competitive jazz scene with hot players framed as misunderstood souls.

When Astaire and Mercer came onto the film, both story and music were utterly transformed. Beyond writing the lyrics, Mercer received an unusual screen credit for his "contribution to the screenplay." His fingerprints are all over the film. *Second Chorus* became Astaire's most swing-oriented film, commenting ceaselessly on the world of hot bands and players, at the time the very center point of a resurgent popular music industry.

As part of the plot, Mercer wrote a song that describes a tone-deaf music lover who dreams of playing mandolin (!) in Artie Shaw's band. Charles Butterworth, pictured here, played the role. With a tune by Bernie Hanighen, "Poor Mr. Chisholm" is sung by Astaire as an audition for an arranging job with Shaw. It's a jazz insiders mocking tribute to a square who, to quote the lyric, "just couldn't dig the jive."

Music clip: "Poor Mr. Chisholm" (film soundtrack)

As this lyric suggests, Mercer was adept at marking "the poles of hipster and square" – to use Philip Furia's formulation – and Astaire sings the tune with real understanding.¹ Mercer and Hanighen's 1937 hit "Bob White" – about a bird whose got a "corny trill" and needs to learn to swing – imagines a similar situation in less acerbic terms.

¹ Philip Furia. 2003. *Skylark: the Life and Times of Johnny Mercer* (New York: St. Martin's Press), 99.

Every aspect of *Second Chorus* was keyed to the ongoing swing craze and all of distributor Paramount's publicity emphasized the musical content. For the film, Mercer wrote the first of four named dance tunes for Astaire. These numbers capture Astaire and Mercer's shared sense for popular music, dance and jazz history as well as the desire to craft a hit that met the beat of the moment and, perhaps, kicked off a new dance craze. Astaire introduced named dance songs in eight of his thirty his films. As a song-selling strategy in the film musical, named dance tunes were closely, almost entirely identified with Astaire. Mercer's only named dance songs were written for Astaire, likely at Astaire's direct request.

"(I Ain't Hep to that Step But I'll) Dig It" – dance instructions for which were printed on advertisements for the film and in the *New York Times* – begins with a rap at a band rehearsal, according to Astaire scholar John Mueller "one of the most beguiling transitions from dialogue to musical number in Astaire's career."²

Music clip: "(I Ain't Hep to that Step But I'll) Dig It" (film soundtrack)

Mercer's lyric is almost entirely swing lingo, a strategy designed to resonate with the jitterbug crowd being targeted by the film. Heard regularly on Benny Goodman's radio show around this time, Mercer was a national "authority" on such matters. Often speaking in rhyming patter, Mercer disseminated the latest hip expressions to an audience that was sometimes unsure whether Mercer was white or black. A March 1939 interview for the *Detroit Free Press* titled "Meet Swing Music Master; His Middle Name is 'Umph'," introduced the singer-songwriter this way: "If you have not yet heard of Johnny Mercer, (1) you don't go to many motion pictures; (2) you don't listen to the radio and (3) you aren't a jitterbug."³ Hiring Mercer to write lyrics and contribute to the script was part and parcel of the swing-centered plan behind *Second Chorus*. He's the only unifying presence across a score which mixes tunes credited to three tunesmiths. Artie Shaw and Mercer were two sides of the same coin for Astaire, whose personal admiration for jazz musicians was as genuine as his bid for the youth audience was new. The *Free Press* interview ended with Mercer handing out a "New Jitterbug Expression": "And before leaving Mr. Johnny Mercer, perhaps you would like to know the latest in jitterbug talk. Mercer says that when one jitterbug wants to know if another jitterbug is ready to swing out he asks, 'Have you got your boots laced?'" As we heard, in the "Dig It" patter, the band asks "Are your boots on right?" Astaire responds, "I got 'em laced up tight." Mercer's sensibility permeates Astaire's swing opus *Second Chorus*.

With no single composer on *Second Chorus*, Mercer as lyricist and contributor to the screenplay was able to exert considerable influence. His next Astaire picture – *You Were Never Lovelier*, produced by Columbia Pictures – put Mercer beside an established master tunesmith of the previous generation, Jerome Kern. Kern chose Mercer as his collaborator and the results, at least in one instance, suggest the generation gap between these two songwriters and the extent to which Mercer could meet Astaire's needs in a way Kern could not. When Astaire needed a genuine jive tune from the decidedly unhip Kern, Mercer may have stepped in to save the day.

² John Mueller. 1985 *Astaire Dancing: The Musical Films* (New York: Wings Books), 181.

³ "Meet Swing Music Master; His Middle Name is 'Umph'," *Detroit Free Press*, 2 March 1939.

In *You Were Never Lovelier*, Rita Hayworth plays the pampered daughter of a wealthy Argentinean hotel owner. Despite living in Buenos Aires, she speaks perfect English and knows all the latest American songs and dances. Astaire and Hayworth sing and dance a named dance called "The Shorty George," a dance move everyone already knew and a title that had already been used by Count Basie. Astaire introduces it as "a little thing from Harlem."

Music clip: "The Shorty George" (film soundtrack)

In this portrait of an African American street performer, Mercer first uses the phrase "natural man," which returns several years later in the song "Little Augie is a Natural Man" from the Broadway musical *St. Louis Woman*. It's not at all surprising to find references to black figures or language in Mercer's lyrics for Astaire. Astaire was deeply invested in black tap dance idioms and jazz practices. Black musical practices, at the center of popular music in the swing era, were foundational to both Mercer and Astaire, shared ground they occupied in similar ways. One difference: Astaire never affected a black vocal style as Mercer did.

"The Shorty George" was Kern and Mercer's second try at a named dance rhythm number for the film. Their first effort was titled "Barrelhouse Beguine." Kern's music features an ill-fitting combination of a Cole Porter-esque triplet-heavy melody above a Latin groove and random bars of boogie bass, all inflected by Kern's complex early Forties harmonies. Mercer's lyric takes a geographical approach, tracing the northward journey of the song's rhythm from "somewhere between Cape Horn and St. Augustine" to, inevitably, Memphis. The endpoint is "any nickel machine" and a nation busy "tapping the Barrelhouse Beguine." Beyond the forced conceit of Mercer's lyric, Kern's tune is just not danceable. It did not suit Astaire's purposes. And while the rejected "Barrelhouse Beguine" suggests Kern was directing the process, the second try "Shorty George" reflects Mercer's swing savvy almost entirely. Beyond the nominal attribution of the song to Kern, there is no positive evidence he wrote it (and there is evidence from other Astaire films that Kern, at times, handed swing-oriented numbers off to others). Perhaps, in this case, Mercer took up the task.

As with "Dig It," the song cue for "Shorty George" uses slang and swing references and Mercer may have been involved. (No script materials for the film survive.) During the lead-in to the song, Hayworth quotes the 1942 hit "A Zoot Suit (for My Sunday Gal)" as evidence she's entirely hep to the jive. Astaire fairly melts before her. The "Zoot Suit" reference passes between them like a hepcat password and certain viewers in their audience would have picked up on it with a smile. Mercer was founding Capitol Records at the time and was certainly aware of what was on the Hit Parade. But the connection is closer than that. The lyrics for "A Zoot Suit for My Sunday Gal" were written by Mercer's close friend Wolfe Gilbert. The insertion of a line from the song can be read as Mercer's salute to a pal's hit song, an inside joke that fit right in to Astaire's jive dance number.

Seven years passed before Mercer and Astaire collaborated again. The project was the ill-fated *Belle of New York*, an MGM period musical that failed at the box office despite some ambitious dance numbers for Astaire and partner Vera-Ellen. Working with composer Harry Warren, Mercer's best remembered contribution was the lyric for "I Wanna Be A Dancin' Man,"

Astaire's solo in the final reel. This was a second try at a solo tune for Astaire in the picture. He nixed a rambling, marching band-centered solo called "I Wanna Beat a Big Bass Drum."

"I Wanna Be a Dancin' Man" makes no sense within the film: it's an exercise in writing to star persona. Astaire normally shied away from self-referential numbers but Mercer's lyric captured the dancer's interest, inspiring a major solo dance routine and one of Astaire's most Mercer-esque vocal performances.

Music clip: "I Wanna Be a Dancin' Man" (film soundtrack)

Mercer's lyric captures Astaire beautifully. In an early draft of his autobiography, Astaire described his life's work as the making of "dance creations" and Mercer uses that word here. It's a surprising choice and a telling detail. The appeals to nature – typical Mercer references to the tide coming in and being free as a bird – are unusual in what might be construed as a show biz anthem. Creation is a personal act in this song, a lifelong project, not a matter of razzle dazzle or "selling it." Mercer expresses Astaire's introverted nature and his devotion to syncopated song and dance, in Mercer's felicitous phrase, his "footsteps on the sands of rhythm and rhyme." Astaire was seldom comfortable pointing towards himself or his accomplishments. It's a singular accomplishment that Mercer's restrained, remarkably apt lyric met with Astaire's approval.

A handful of Astaire's films were conceived for someone else then adjusted to fit Astaire's persona. *Daddy Long Legs* is prominent in this group. *Daddy Long Legs* was the brainchild of Fox chief Darryl Zanuck, who originally saw the likes of Cary Grant and David Niven in the title role. After settling on Leslie Caron for the girl, Zanuck had the "sensational idea" of casting Astaire opposite her. Because several drafts of the *Daddy Long Legs* script had been completed before Astaire and Mercer were brought onto the film, how the project was changed by them can be clearly seen.

Before Astaire signed on, his character had no musical personality. As rewritten by screenwriters Phoebe and Henry Ephron, Astaire's character is a creature of jazz. Astaire first appears seated at a drum kit, loudly playing along with a hot jazz big band record. The solo which follows is danced to a Mercer tune titled "The History of the Beat," its lyric – not much of which is heard in the film – recounts the story of jazz in gleeful tones. Mercer was brought onto the film by Astaire, who wanted to use Mercer's 1944 hit Chesterfield Tobacco theme song "Dream."

Mercer wrote his third named dance tune for *Daddy Long Legs*. Introduced in a big college dance scene, "The Sluefoot" was taught and promoted in the real world by the Fred Astaire Dance Studios, a chain of social dancing schools Astaire had opened a few years earlier. Ray Anthony's big band, riding the crest of the "Bunny Hop" craze, was brought onto the film to promote the number.

But the primary new hit of Mercer's score was the standard "Something's Gotta Give," which elicited from Astaire a particular sort of danced tribute. Songwriters who really understood Astaire's identity as a rhythm dancer often wrote melodies he could, quite literally, dance. George Gershwin's highly syncopated melodies were often rapped out note for note by

Astaire in taps. Irving Berlin wrote several melodies that inspired Astaire to "tap the stems." The most notable is the bridge from "Top Hat, White Tie, and Tails," which Astaire tapped every single time he danced to this tune.

Music clip: "Top Hat, White Tie and Tails"

Mercer could not be classed among Astaire's principal songwriters without producing a tune that engaged the dancer's impulse to convert syncopated melody into body rhythms. "Something's Gotta Give" met the test, as this glimpse of Astaire and Caron dancing shows. Here, Mercer not only puts words in Astaire's mouth but provides the very musical pattern of his dancing.

Film clip: *Daddy Long Legs*

Mercer and Astaire's final collaboration was a named dance tune for television. Both words and music for "The Afterbeat" are credited to Astaire and Mercer. Astaire apparently began work alone then turned to Mercer for help. Mercer's publishing company managed the song, which was never released as sheet music.

"The Afterbeat" begins in old-fashioned style with a patter-like verse. The chorus, however, abandons the 32-bar form on which Astaire and Mercer had built their careers. Instead, "The Afterbeat," as notated on the lead sheet, is a series of five blues choruses in C.⁴

Music clip: "The Afterbeat" (television soundtrack)

As the title suggests, "The Afterbeat" is all about beats two and four, the offbeats that formed a central rhythmic difference between swing and rock and roll drumming. Astaire and Mercer's lyric locates changing popular music style at the most fundamental level, in the drummer's hands. This new beat is "like a back beat, or an echo beat": it is "not an oom-pah-pah, nor a cha-cha-cha." Mercer and Astaire look for common ground between rock and roll, firmly installed by 1959, and their own rhythmic tradition, claiming that "a swingin' beat, and a dancin' beat, is the afterbeat." But fastidious grammar like "nor" and made up phrases like "echo beat" don't cut it. Some reference to Astaire's persona has to be inserted for the song to really work. Cole Porter's satirical but well-intentioned "Ritz Roll and Rock" from *Silk Stockings*, also based in part on 12-bar blues phrases, is more successful. Everything rhymes with "beat" in "The Afterbeat," a lyric perhaps intentionally written in a simplistic manner. Chuck Berry could get away with rhyming "choose it" / "lose it" / "use it" in the chorus to "Rock and Roll Music" (1958) but not Mercer and Astaire. Neither Astaire nor Mercer had the youthful directness or fresh energy of rock and roll. That edge of craft and cleverness, so evident in their work in the swing era, is dulled in this encounter with a musical revolution neither really understood.

It is, perhaps, unfortunate that Mercer and Astaire's work together ended with "The Afterbeat." But the song, whatever its faults, captures their shared primary purpose: to reach the public in a big way, to stay up with popular music and dance trends, to be hit makers in every

⁴ "The Afterbeat" lead sheet, John and Seymour Rennolds Collection, series V/6, Georgia State University, Atlanta.

medium where songs were sold. Mercer once called Astaire "hit insurance" for songwriters and even if every one of their collaborations did not score with the public, Astaire and Mercer's partnership provides continuing insight into how these two men with tremendous longevity in the popular music mainstream used each others talents to further their individual professional goals of entertaining the mass American audience.