

Going Hollywood with Hoagy Carmichael and Johnny Mercer

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Carmichael and Mercer

While we are more likely to associate Hoagy Carmichael and Johnny Mercer with Tin Pan Alley, Jazz, and the Great American Songbook, they both spent a lot of time in Hollywood. Carmichael and Mercer were already known as talented songwriters before they made homes on the West Coast. Neither figure ever lost their primary identity as songwriter, so it's not surprising that few people recall that Mercer and Carmichael's roles went beyond composing behind the scenes. Though both men are rightly remembered as songsmiths, each performed in front of Hollywood cameras as well.

In Carmichael's case, his acting roles were more than a lark. He appeared as the musical everyman in some of the most important films of the 1940s, including *To Have and Have Not* (1944) and *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946). Mercer's career was short-lived but he contributed two relatively strong performances in two slapdash RKO musical comedies, *Old Man Rhythm* and *To Beat the Band* (both 1935). When the Hollywood studio system began to decline, Mercer and Carmichael spent a significant amount of time on television work (performing, writing, appearing, and in Carmichael's case, acting) for decades.

How and why did these songwriters find a place *in front* of the camera? Why would the movie industry be interested in turning two songwriters into actors? Hollywood studio executives rarely missed a money-saving opportunity to use talent in a variety of ways, but they didn't use all their songwriters in *this* way. George Gershwin never acted in a feature length film and on rare occasions when Irving Berlin was on camera, he played himself. Perhaps this is because Gershwin and Berlin were understood in Hollywood as Tin Pan Alley songwriters as much as performing musicians. The movies are populated with many more musicians than songwriters, because playing music offers better cinematic possibilities than songwriting, which is commonly represented in films through the time-honored device of the montage sequence. Musical performance, however, was a lot more attractive to Hollywood, particularly in the first years of the "talkies" when musicals were the overwhelming favorites at the box office and jazz was synonymous with popular music.

In this presentation, I will suggest that the personas created by Carmichael and Mercer as jazz musicians – and in equal measure, the fact that film audiences would have largely understood them as jazz musicians as much as songwriters – made them appealing figures for the movie screen. Their association with jazz is also crucial to understanding the roles they played onscreen. Accordingly, my presentation bridges film history with popular music history to focus on the unique role that musicians such as Carmichael and Mercer played in front of the camera.

But before they worked for Hollywood, both worked for Tin Pan Alley. Despite their allegiance to the much newer genre of jazz, it was their association with Tin Pan Alley that played a pivotal role in establishing their careers.

Unlikely Routes to Tin Pan Alley

During its emergence in the late 1800s, the popular music business in the United States was concentrated along the East Coast, with its heart on New York's Tin Pan Alley, or 28th street between Broadway and 6th Avenue, just off Manhattan's Union Square. The rise of the recording industry solidified this geographical focus for a time; the most powerful record labels of the 1910s and 1920s were all headquartered along the East Coast, with Edison and Victor in New Jersey and Columbia in Washington, D.C.

Unlike many songwriters of Tin Pan Alley's golden age whose American experience was largely limited to New York City, Hoagy Carmichael and Johnny Mercer were outsiders in this specific cultural milieu. While legendary songwriters like Irving Berlin and George Gershwin's New York childhoods were commonplace among their Tin Pan Alley contemporaries, Mercer and Carmichael grew up in the U.S. hinterlands, in the towns of Savannah, Georgia, and Bloomington, Indiana, respectively. As songwriters too, Carmichael and Mercer were late to the party on Tin Pan Alley. But having missed one golden age proved to be no real matter to Carmichael and Mercer because they were in the midst of another with the emergence of jazz, a music for which both men felt a great affinity. If Tin Pan Alley still ruled in New York, jazz had moved up country from New Orleans to Chicago and its influence was felt on an increasingly national basis. It was jazz that made the larger impression, and that turned Carmichael and Mercer into musicians and into songwriters.

Both men greatly benefited from associations with "the King of Jazz," popular bandleader Paul Whiteman. It was "Riverboat Shuffle," a Carmichael song that he recorded with Paul Whiteman's Orchestra in 1926 that truly launched his career and caught Hollywood's ear. He was twenty-seven years old at this point after having had time to develop outside the limelight and planning a law career he would soon leave behind. On the strength of "Riverboat Shuffle," Carmichael was offered a contract from Irving Mills, a publisher who specialized in jazz. Shortly after, back in Indiana, Carmichael had the much-mythologized "private epiphany" that became one of the most recorded songs of the twentieth century, "Stardust." (Sheed 98) Mercer moved to New York at a younger age (19), where he eventually got work as a songwriter for Miller Music writing songs for Broadway revues. Interestingly, he first looked for work as a stage actor. (Furia 2003 61) While Carmichael spent time with Whiteman and his orchestra, Mercer worked in Paul Whiteman's orchestra as a vocalist, and was often paired with trombonist Jack Teagarden for comedic as well as musical effect. It was his duets with Teagarden that were heard via sound recordings and radio on Whiteman's *Kraft Music Hall* radio show. Then Hollywood came calling.

When George Gershwin decided to go west after Tin Pan Alley and Broadway hit hard times in the first half of the 1930s, many songwriters followed suit, trading in the East Coast for the West Coast and a chance to write for film. It was the film industry that weathered the Depression so well and both Mercer and Carmichael followed the westward migration with a

mixture of trepidation and excitement. Once acclimated, both Johnny Mercer and Hoagy Carmichael tried their hand at acting with differing levels of interest and satisfaction.

Going Hollywood

Like many songwriters who had left New York for the promise of lucrative songwriting deals for the movies, both Carmichael and Mercer would make names for themselves at the height of the Hollywood studio system. California was still relatively remote in the era when the most popular route there was by train. Gene Lees wrote that in those days, "California seemed a land of distant glamour...almost a nation unto itself." (103) Carmichael had flirted with Hollywood before, but would stay this time. He was a decade older than Mercer, more established, and confident in his own skills. Mercer was a known entity to Hollywood studios, but without Carmichael's experience.

Some of the newly relocated songwriters had (like actors) already developed public personas in relationship to their songwriting, radio, and recording work. Both Mercer and Carmichael sold versions of their own backgrounds to the coasts, through bits of musical "local color," meant to evoke idealized scenes of the South and Midwest. From their first appearances in movies, the two did the same on film – usually through musical performances. Johnny Mercer's lazy Southern countenance and pie-shaped face along with Hoagy Carmichael's seen-it-all demeanor and Hoosier twang helped them become something more than just songwriters or musicians, moving them closer towards the kind of personas that have the power to affect a given film's narrative. James Naremore has described the presence of this dynamic in film as "unplotted theatrics." (23) Those most likely to have this effect on the public are stars of one sort or another, whether Bing Crosby or Elvis Presley. Neither Mercer nor Carmichael was a celebrity of this magnitude, but they each had carved out a persona via songwriting and performing on record and radio. One's persona was so close to the other that they were variations on a theme: the jazz musician.

Carmichael first got work with Paramount Pictures. Recounting his own decision, Carmichael noted that: "Fred Allen said, 'California is a great place to live, if you're an orange.' I laughed with the rest, but silent pictures were dying, and music would be needed, theme songs, tunes, lyrics, to drown out the sissy screen stars with their feeble voices and strange accents." (Carmichael 191) Carmichael's appearance quickly became an asset along with his songwriting. Wilfred Sheed notes that Carmichael's visual persona was as split as his personality, part international playboy and part down-home Hoosier. Just as Mercer sold his Southern persona, Carmichael sold a humble but playful Midwestern identity, even if he preferred a more dapper sartorial approach. Sheed suggests that it was the timbre and the grain of Carmichael's voice "would be the tiebreaker between the two faces of Hoagy": "the one he preferred himself, that of a dandy who looked so good in a dinner jacket that Ian Fleming originally described James Bond as looking just like him, and the face of the roustabout at the piano with his hat tilted back and features that looked like a road map of the United States." (Sheed101)

This persona was introduced with *Topper* (1937), in which Carmichael appears. Early in the film, Carmichael plays a piano player in a bar, which is the last stop on a long night of nightclubbing for Marion and George Kerby, a devil-may-care couple played by Constance

Bennett and Cary Grant. Carmichael essentially plays himself – in the film's diegesis, Grant calls him Hoagy as the couple leaves. But the key elements of Hoagy's acting persona are present: Carmichael's body language and his singing along with the Kerbys suggest that he is as comfortable in the bar as he'd be in his own living room. Along with the Kerbys, Hoagy is unbothered by the owner's numerous attempts to have them stop, as a waitress sits at a table nearby waiting for the night to end. It's Hoagy's job to provide musical accompaniment as the bar regulars close the place down for the night.

The Carmichael persona was solidified with Howard Hawks' *To Have and Have Not* (1944). The story goes that the director saw Carmichael in work clothes one day and that clinched it. Hawks, who had also spent some of his childhood in Indiana, saw in Carmichael the kind of saloon piano player he needed for his bar scene in *To Have and Have Not*, already having lined up an impossibly strong cast, including Humphrey Bogart, Lauren Bacall, and Walter Brennan. And yet, Carmichael remains as memorable as any of these other characters for his performances in the film. (Sheed 101) As Cricket, Carmichael provides a memorable presence in a movie full of very big presences. In the opening credits Carmichael's song (with lyrics by Mercer), "How Little We Know" is the only song mentioned by name, clearly the chosen tune for the pop music charts. In Carmichael's role as Cricket, he plays a few numbers and helps to move the narrative ahead at a few points during the film, often acting as a kind of sounding board or counselor to Lauren Bacall, who plays Slim.

Film clip: *To Have and Have Not*

Mercer too gave Hollywood a try, landing a job writing songs for RKO at first (he wouldn't stay long). Johnny Mercer will forever be associated with "Hooray for Hollywood," a tongue-in-cheek ode to the movie industry hubris he wrote for the film *Hollywood Hotel*. Like many of the hired guns who went out to Hollywood, Mercer felt like an outsider on arrival, but also realized a tremendous opportunity: "I kept my eyes and ears open and my mouth shut," he remembered, "I wanted to be as big as my small talent would allow." (Lees 103) He had made his name on Paul Whiteman's radio shows, capitalizing on audience expectations about a songwriting man from the south. As Wilfrid Sheed writes: "Johnny looked and sounded exactly like people wanted him to: with a Huck Finn face, a gap-toothed grin, and an old shoe of a voice that reminded Paul Whiteman of a man singing in his sleep. Most of the great songwriters, as we've seen, looked like something else, but Mercer could have won an open casting call for the part of himself." (255)

Still, Sheed was less than laudatory regarding Mercer's appearance in two RKO films, *Old Man Rhythm* and *To Beat the Band* (both 1935). Sheed's account goes like this: "In 1935, Mercer signed on briefly as a writer and singing actor at RKO, but after two crummy movies, no one ever called him actor again." (261) It's true that he's not a strong actor in these films, at least he isn't when he's not singing. But I think there is more to Mercer's onscreen than can be explained by simply calling him a bad actor. He's engaging to watch, particularly in the musical sections, and could well have become at least the actor that Carmichael became. But Mercer was at his acting best when he *was* playing at least a version of himself, preferably while singing.

Mercer's first appearance as an actor in a Hollywood feature came in August 1935, when he appeared as "Colonel," one of the college gang in a B-movie RKO comedy called *Old Man Rhythm*, directed by Edward Ludwig. The plot revolves around a father who learns that his son has fallen for a campus gold digger, so Dad enrolls as a student himself to sort it all out. In the first scene from the film, which takes place on a train full of college students returning to school, Mercer's character is seen sleepily relaxing in the overhead compartment. In between verses of the other actors singing lines from Mercer's song, "Nothing Like a College Education," he offers up a "yeah" in a slow Southern drawl. Near the end of the number, he sings a few of his own verses:

Oh, I left my old plantation in the south-uh
 With my southern accent drippin' from my mouth-uh
 Just to hear you Yankees talk to one another
 But I can't understand a word.

Film clip: *Old Man Rhythm*

Later in the film, Mercer holds his own in a dance number with actress Evelyn Poe (who also appeared in *To Beat the Band*) in a dance number featuring choreography from Betty Grable, who also appears in the film. It's in the sections when he's not singing that his poor acting skills are sometimes evident. At one point in the film, Colonel is on campus with the gang and they're discussing the relationship between the film's protagonist Johnny and the girl that's wrong for him, Marion. Here's the "wrong note" that Mercer hits in a bit of dialogue meant to further the narrative and up the film's central conflict.

Film clip: *Old Man Rhythm*

In Mercer's second acting effort for RKO, *To Beat the Band*, he mainly acts as a colorful member of the all-male orchestra, which is engaged in a competition with a rival all-female band, musically and romantically. In this film, Mercer is good for some laughs between trombone solos but is relegated to a smaller role than in his previous film. Other than some interesting performances during the *To Beat the Band*'s songs, Mercer's part in the film doesn't provide the highs or lows of his previous effort. But even in this role, Mercer hams it up during musical performances, further solidifying his persona as the fun-loving southern boy, an undisciplined but talented musician, who isn't reliable but always means well.

Mercer either chose or did not get the opportunity to develop as an actor after these two quick efforts for RKO. He may have realized that he preferred songwriting, recording, and radio or maybe he felt burned by his experience in these two B movies. Clearly his impact as songwriter alone, let alone his co-founding of Capitol Records, the first major record company headquartered on the West Coast, is enough to solidify Mercer's importance. Still, there is something about Mercer onscreen that makes him a compelling movie presence in a way that not all of his fellow B-movie actors can muster. With some work, could Mercer have had a proper acting career like Carmichael? Could he have been happy with the limited roles that Carmichael was offered? The concrete answers to Mercer's brief film career may lie in his archives here at Georgia State. We tend to dismiss musicians-turned-actors unless they are able to convince us otherwise, but the most successful stars of the 1930s onward were those with a strong presence

across media forms: movies, radio, live performances, and so on. So Mercer's flirtation with acting can be seen in this light as adapting once again to the ways of the new media business, which included a rapidly changing Hollywood. Bing Crosby sang and danced and acted. If that's what it took, Mercer would give it a try – as did many other musicians then and now.

Musicians as Actors

But do Mercer and Carmichael's performances constitute *acting*? In his book *Acting in the Cinema*, James Naremore defines acting as "a special type of theatrical performance in which the persons held up for show have become agents in narrative." (23) Naremore isn't thinking of acting in its most "sophisticated" form, but instead is focusing on those individuals "held up for show" and part of the narrative. Carmichael and Mercer's appearances in film both meet Naremore's definition. While live musical performance usually doesn't meet the last criterion – being part of a narrative – songs sometimes do meet this criteria.

There is a kind of acting involved in selling a given song and you see it in the performances of Mercer and Carmichael on film. This is a rarely discussed aspect of popular music: the role of the singer fulfilling the role called upon by a given song. Just as we notice an acting job when it's bad, so too do we notice when a singer cannot imbue the song with the range of emotions appropriate for the performance. Selling a song is especially difficult when you don't believe in it, as was the case when Elvis Presley performed the spoken word section he despised in "Are You Lonesome Tonight?" Frank Sinatra described his approach to singing in this way: "You begin to learn to use the lyrics of a song as a script, a scene. I try to transpose my thoughts about the song into a person who might be singing those words to somebody else." (Ray 103) As Robert Ray suggests, "Film stars...have always been less actors than personalities, paid to personify (rather than impersonate) a certain character type." (103) In film acting, personality wins over characterization in most instances. One answer to why Carmichael's career was so much longer than Mercer's – beyond Carmichael's willingness to put up with making movies in Hollywood – may have to do with Carmichael's ability to personify rather than impersonate. While in Mercer's brief film career he's a musician only part of the time, Carmichael plays a musician over and over in his roles and does so successfully. While Carmichael deploys his persona – a certain facet of his personality – again and again in his film characters, Mercer only seems truly comfortable when performing music.

Indeed, both Mercer and Carmichael are largely confined to their roles as jazz musicians. There is a clear racial component to these white musicians and their association with a music inextricably linked with African-American culture. One way or another, their association with jazz – and therefore with African-American culture – defined their public persona, deeply influenced their own songwriting, and to some extent dictated their behavior onscreen. Like all white musicians associated with jazz, their relationship with African-American culture has been a preoccupation with music critics and biographers. In 1983, Roger Hewitt charged Carmichael with "the cultural reproduction of racism," despite the songwriters "own anti-racist personal opinions and the practices of his private life." (Hewitt 34)

In his book, Krin Gabbard agrees that some of Carmichael's songs did "perpetuate the casual racism of America in the 1920s." (257) This includes the song, "Lazybones" with lyrics

by Johnny Mercer. While Gabbard rightly concedes this to Hewitt, he does offer an additional counter-argument, suggesting, "Carmichael's interactions with black musicians began early and went well beyond voyeurism." Further, he notes that Carmichael was "one of the few white musicians to appear on a 'race' record, specifically a 1929 session by a band called 'Blind Willie Dunn's Gin Bottle Four,'" which included King Oliver. (257) While understandable, this line of arguing back and forth seems to be never-ending, in part due to the fact that one cannot solve the riddle of all-permeating societal racism through the life of one individual. With his triumphs and failures, Gabbard writes, "Carmichael may represent one of the more intriguing meetings of black and white culture." (258)

This complicated relationship between jazz and race – and the presence of two white musicians who in some ways are associated with African-American culture through their performance of jazz music – is ever-present in the majority of roles played by Mercer and Carmichael, whether on radio, record, film, or television. Gabbard suggests that the majority of Carmichael's roles could have been played by African-American musicians such as Louis Armstrong or Nat King Cole, both of whom played similar roles to those filled by Carmichael and Mercer in their film and television appearances. The following passage, which Gabbard uses to describe Carmichael's roles, could also easily apply to those played by Mercer, a domesticated trickster figure, "always at the sidelines and often commenting ironically, set the tone for most of his subsequent appearances." (263)

Carmichael and Mercer's respective personas may well have been too complicated for the shorthand of cinema, which is usually working in service of a narrative, the simpler, the better. As Gabbard suggests, "The many faces of the trickster, and the many fronts on which even a single one of his statements must be negotiated, do not always fit Hollywood's penchant for clarity, at least not the kind of clarity that has been constructed to conform to American mythology." (265) But the lasting value of Carmichael and Mercer's presence in films goes beyond the cinephile's thrill of seeing these legendary songwriters and musicians in action. There is the additional value in paying attention to the questions and incongruities that arise in by them being in the movies at all.

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