



Skylark: The Life and Times of Johnny Mercer

Philip Furia

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Skylark is the story of the tormented but glorious life and career of Johnny Mercer, and the first biography of this enormously popular and influential lyricist. Raised in Savannah, Mercer brought a quintessentially southern style to both his life in New York and to his lyrics, which often evoked the landscapes and mood of his youth ("Moon River", "In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening"). Mercer also absorbed the music of southern blacks--the lullabies his nurse sang to him as a baby and the spirituals that poured out of Savannah's churches--and that cool smooth lyrical style informed some of his greatest songs, such as "That Old Black Magic".

Part of a golden guild whose members included Cole Porter and Irving Berlin, Mercer took Hollywood by storm in the midst of the Great Depression. Putting words to some of the most famous tunes of the time, he wrote one hit after another, from "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby" to "Jeepers Creepers" and "Hooray for Hollywood." But it was also in Hollywood that Mercer's dark underside emerged. Sober, he was a kind, generous and at times even noble southern gentleman; when he drank, Mercer tore into friends and strangers alike with vicious abuse. Mercer's wife Ginger, whom he'd bested Bing Crosby to win, suffered the cruelest attacks; Mercer would even improvise cutting lyrics about her at parties.

During World War II, Mercer served as America's troubadour, turning out such uplifting songs as "My Shining Hour" and "Ac-cent-tchu-ate the Positive." He also helped create Capitol Records, the first major West Coast recording company, where he discovered many talented singers, including Peggy Lee and Nat King Cole. During this period, he also began an intense affair with Judy Garland, which rekindled time and again for the rest of their lives. Although they never found happiness together, Garland became Mercer's muse and inspired some of his most sensuous and heartbreaking lyrics: "Blues in the Night," "One for My Baby," and "Come Rain or Come Shine."

Mercer amassed a catalog of over a thousand songs and during some years had a song in the Top Ten every week of the year--the songwriting equivalent of Joe DiMaggio's hitting streak--but was plagued by a sense of failure and bitterness over the big Broadway hit that seemed forever out of reach.

Based on scores of interviews with friends, family and colleagues, and drawing extensively on Johnny Mercer's letters, papers and his unpublished autobiography, *Skylark* is an important book about one of the great and dramatic characters in 20th century popular music.

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