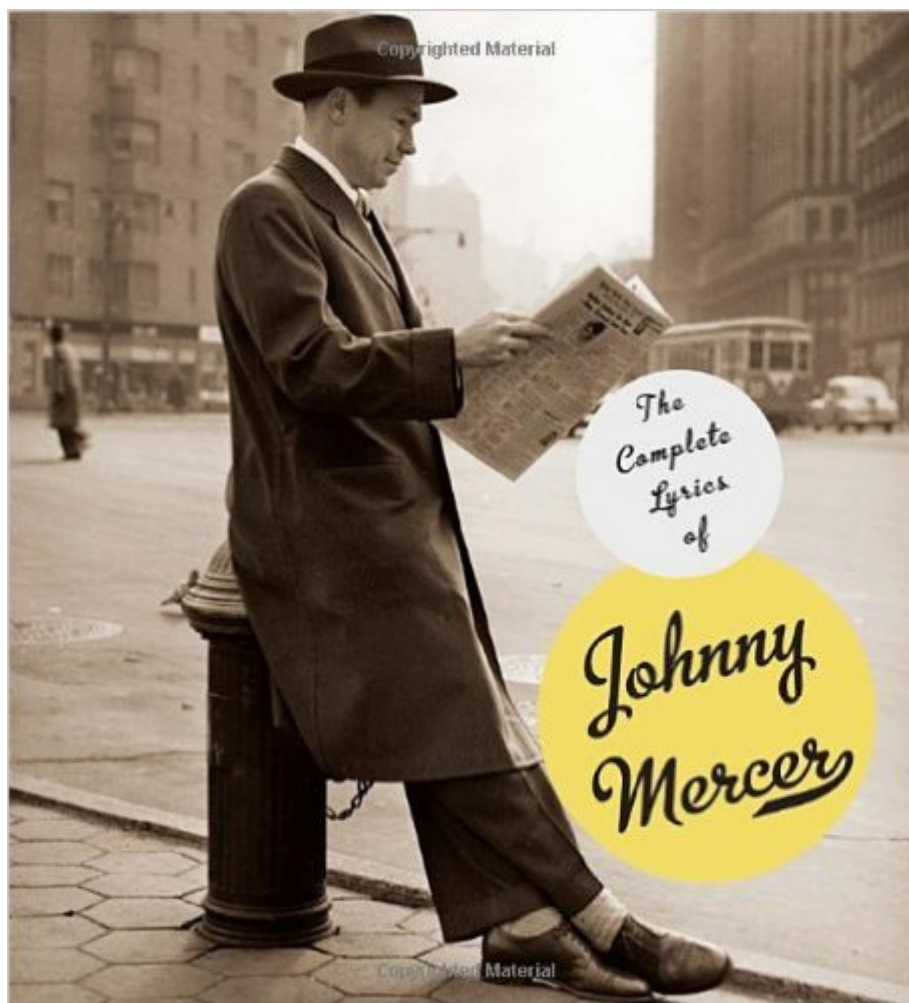


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The Complete Lyrics Of Johnny Mercer



Synopsis

The seventh volume in Knopf's critically acclaimed Complete Lyrics series, published in Johnny Mercer's centennial year, contains the texts to more than 1,200 of his lyrics, several hundred of them published here for the first time. Johnny Mercer's early songs became staples of the big band era and were regularly featured in the musicals of early Hollywood. With his collaborators, who included Richard A. Whiting, Harry Warren, Hoagy Carmichael, Jerome Kern, and Harold Arlen, he wrote the lyrics to some of the most famous standards, among them, "Too Marvelous for Words," "Jeepers Creepers," "Skylark," "M. M. M. Old-Fashioned," and "That Old Black Magic." During a career of more than four decades, Mercer was nominated for the Academy Award for Best Song an astonishing eighteen times, and won four: for his lyrics to "On the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe" (music by Warren), "In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening" (music by Carmichael), and "Moon River" and "Days of Wine and Roses" (music for both by Henry Mancini). You've probably fallen in love with more than a few of Mercer's songs "his words have never gone out of fashion" and with this superb collection, it's easy to see that his lyrics elevated popular song into art.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

Ira Gershwin has the oft-quoted line: "Any resemblance between popular song lyrics and actual poetry is purely coincidental." He must not have been very familiar with Johnny Mercer's

work. Mercer doesn't display the cosmopolitan wit, mordant ironies, and dazzling word play of Cole Porter. Nor does he exhibit the finely honed literary skills and heart-breaking personal vulnerability (thinly disguised by ironic, verbal defense mechanisms) of Lorenz Hart. But Johnny Mercer is said to have more #1 songs than any other lyricist, and he's clearly the favorite of the great American singers. When Ella Fitzgerald did her landmark Great American Songbook series for Verve records beginning in the 1950s, each of the fourteen albums was devoted to a composer--with one exception: The Johnny Mercer Songbook (Verve, 1964). Numerous similar recordings devoted exclusively to Mercer have followed. What's the attraction of Johnny Mercer? First, and maybe foremost, he's a Southern American writer. He knows "Southern Gothic," Southern vernacular and black dialect, story-telling and the oral tradition. In favor of going to college, he absorbed the indigenous culture around Savannah, combing record stores for every "race record" (recordings targeted at African-American audiences) he could find. His story is similar to that of a writer like Faulkner, whose formal education is spotty and who learned from the books in his immediate surroundings in Oxford, Mississippi.

From "One for My Baby," (music by Harold Arlen) "You'd never know it, but I'm a kind of poet, and I've got a lot of things to say." Johnny Mercer was, indeed, a poet. And he had a lot of things to say. In my mind there are 5 great lyricists of the golden age of songwriting: Larry Hart, Ira Gershwin, Cole Porter, Irving Berlin (yes, Berlin should be included), and Johnny Mercer. There are, perhaps others that could be on the list. Two that spring to my mind are Gus Kahn and Dorothy Fields (though Kahn's most memorable songs, "Nothing Could Be Finer," "It Had to Be You," and "Makin' Whoopee," came a bit earlier than the rest, and Fields, who wrote the lyrics to "The Sunny Side of the Street," "I Can't Give You Anything But Love," and "The Way You Look Tonight" was at a disadvantage in a male-dominated industry). But I've always felt that Johnny Mercer was the cream of the crop. Why? After all, weren't Porter, Gershwin and Hart far more clever and sophisticated? Perhaps, but I think that's primarily because Mercer took on, or perhaps was "assigned" the role of the southern rustic, not the Manhattan urbanite. After all, his first hit was "Lazybones," and one of his last, "Moon River," continued to mine that same rural southern vein. Also, Mercer had a knack for not calling too much attention to his words. His view, I think, was that the lyric should serve the singer, not the lyricist. Porter and Hart and Ira Gershwin were sometimes prone to throwing a "look-how-clever-I-am" line into their songs now and again. Mercer rarely did. And when he succumbed to the temptation, it was usually in character, as in this line from "Fare-thee-well to Harlem": "Things is tight in Harlem."

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