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Interview with Johnny Mercer

January 30, 1970

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Conover: January 30, 1970 with Johnny Mercer. For a start, let me throw titles at you and just give me whatever comes to you about why and how and under what circumstances and whatever and I may bust in at some point to make it conversational. All right? Let's pull a title. "That Old Black Magic."

Mercer: "That Old Black Magic" was written for a movie at Paramount. Harold had the melody first. He had a short version, I think it was about twenty- four bars, and it seemed so effective to me that I wanted it longer, which he made [it?]. The title itself, I think, subconsciously, came from the Cole Porter song "You Do Something To Me," which in the middle has "so do do, that who do, that you do so well," and I thought "gee, what a good idea for a song" and not really realized, you know. So when this tune came along with its mood I think that sprang to my mind about "that old black magic." I don't know if . . . I could've called it "Black Magic" or "Old Black Magic" depending on the amount of notes. It just fell that way on that melody.

Conover: Now, you're a music fan, an appreciator and listener as well as a copyright owner and I'm wondering what did you like best in the performances of it? Glenn Miller or Billy Daniels or two different ways or who?

Mercer: Well, I don't really know all the records. I know that there are an awful lot of records of that song. If Sinatra made it, I'd probably like that the best. I think Billy Daniels made too much, made the song too much his own song and I don't fault him for doing that. Every

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performer should do that if he can do it, and he does it very effectively. But he took away from the song, made a jazz song out of it, to me. The other one, what did you say?

Conover: Glenn Miller.

Mercer: Glenn Miller. I don't remember it too well. I can remember the clarinet sound on the melody. I can't remember who did the vocal.

Conover: [Skip?] Nelson and the Modernaires.

Mercer: Well, it was probably fine. Probably first class, but I think the mood of the song would require somebody . . . and I can't remember the first really effective record. I wouldn't put those two at the top though. Although Billy Daniels would probably hate me if he ever hears this broadcast.

Conover: For a broadcast, I'll lay in some commentary later to lead into a record or another. Go to another title. "Come Rain or Come Shine".

Mercer: Well, that's another thing that we were sitting down one night late I remember. I think we went to work late one afternoon and we had to write a ballad. We had written a lot of the special material for St. Louis Woman which we were writing to a book produced by Ed Gross. And we had to have a hit song and I remember that we just talked about if we were going to do it and Harold said "Oh, we'll get something before we get out of here." And I don't know, we just, we got lucky. I think that same day, I think we worked about five or six hours on it, but he had the melody first. Usually it always comes first with me, I just fit the words to it. And I think "Come Rain or Come Shine" probably I had used before in "Day In and Day Out". I think I used it in a song with Jerome Kern but I never heard it used as a title and it just seemed to fit this

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music. And then all the other subsequent phrases, "happy together, unhappy together," just seemed like, it's like a song that I've always admired "Sometimes I'm Happy." And it's a simple lyric but it's a down to earth factual lyric and I thought it fit the melody very well.

Conover: "Dearly Beloved."

Mercer: "Dearly Beloved" I read in a magazine like Vogue or Mademoiselle. I was in Palm Springs for a weekend. I had this assignment to do a picture with Kern and of course it was scary because he was so wonderful. I had never done a picture with him before and he was much my senior in ability as well as age. But I happened to see this title. There was a picture of a bride and a trousseau and it just said "Dearly Beloved". And of course I'd heard it all my life in church when I was a choir boy but it never occurred to me that it would be a song title. But this tune was in my mind and the title just fit itself. So I called it "Dearly Beloved" and he was very pleased. I think he made one change in the lyric.

Conover: Did you get any sort of idolatry, do you still stand off from some people you admire very much and feel shy around them?

Mercer: I do. I still do. Well, I'll tell you. Yesterday afternoon I was inarticulate when I was with Mrs. Nixon, I really was. I couldn't say a word. And I think it's a feeling that generates itself not so much from one person as a group of people on an important occasion. It's like when there's a big benefit and you see a lot of stars backstage. There's a nervousness in the atmosphere, in the air, before you go on. You go on, you get through your job but you're not relieved until it's done. I feel that way about certain people. I've always felt that way about Kern and I think Sinatra does that to people. I think Martin, Dean Martin does that to people. Bing

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always has done that to people. Men. Now almost any great theatrical lady does that to you. I'm sure that as young as she is, Barbra Streisand must do that to almost everybody. It's kind of an electric current, I think. I don't know what it is.

Conover: What about the reverse of the phenomenon. People you can't wait to get away from.

Mercer: Well, they're mostly only bored, they don't mean to be. I think people who give you a chance to say your own piece are fun to be with. It's just the people who talk you blue in the face, you know, that you want to get away from.

Conover: _____ . . . take that as a cue. (laughs)

Mercer: No, no, no that's our business, you know when we're talking like this it's my business to talk to you and yours to talk to me. But at a cocktail party, I mean you sort of have to, you're not professionally shy, genuinely shy, genuinely humble. Say "Well I've really said enough, I think. I don't want to say too much. If I open my big, flappy mouth any more people will catch on to me." And that's about the way it is.

Conover: "Jeepers Creepers."

Mercer: "Jeepers Creepers." Henry Fonda was in a movie and he saw . . . he was a farm boy in this movie, and he said "jeepers creepers" and I thought "wow-wee," 'cause I, it's funny how these things happen when you've got a tune you have to write because the hardest thing to write is a short title like (sings opening four notes of "Jeepers Creepers"). I had had this tune that Harry Warren wrote for this movie and I thought "how am I ever going to write this tune and make it a hit"? And then Henry said those magic words. 'Cause it's been around, that saying, for a long time. A lot of songs have been around. Like "I Wanna Be Around To Pick Up The Pieces" has

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been around for years but I never thought of it until a lady sent the title in a letter. So that was "Jeepers Creepers." The writing, of course, I take a little credit for the writing. I sound as if all these titles were given to me. Well, maybe in a way they were, but I make up a lot of titles too. But I use them when I think they're effective.

Conover: "Laura."

Mercer: "Laura." There was a picture called Laura. And David Raksin had a tune in it that was so big, and so beautiful, that people began to go to the music stores and ask for, say "I'd like the music from Laura." And then they'd go in and say "I want that music, 'Laura.' Give me that Laura music." So the publisher called me and asked me if I'd write a lyric and I understand he had approached a couple of other people first, I think Hammerstein, who was busy, and Irving Caesar who wasn't interested or something. Finally, they asked me to do it and I was very interested the minute I heard the melody. So they said you'll have to call it "Laura" because that's what they're asking for. Well, it didn't matter too much to me except that the mood of the song mattered. And the mood of the song is the face in the misty light, the voice, the eyes on the train, the face on the train, footsteps. You know, that to me, that's what the music said. It could have been any name, it didn't have to be Laura. It was the name of the movie.

Conover: It was lucky her name wasn't Maude.

Mercer: Yeah, it was. Well, it couldn't, we'd have to say (sings) "Maude". That would have been tough.

Conover: Do you ever get emotionally affected later by listening to a lyric that you wrote that obviously must have come out of some kind of emotional involvement when you wrote it, unless

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you're completely a craftsman and not a human being.

Mercer: No, I get terribly emotionally involved. But the thing about it, like time, like everything else tends to dull those feelings. If you go along you hear it more and more, it becomes a factual thing. Just a song that you've heard maybe too many times and you can't look. . . . Like crying, you can't cry forever. You can cry for a while but there are no more tears, you know, left. You can cry for 18 years and then you stop crying. Some tunes mean a lot to me because they meant something to me at the time, you know. My wife's favorite song, our favorite song when we were courting, our song was "More Than You Know," which is a great Youmans song. It just happened to be popular that year and every time we hear it it means something to us. Every time I hear the Youmans tune I was talking about "Sometimes I'm Happy," I think of myself as about 17 years old. First time I ever went dancing on a pavilion over the ocean and everybody was young and the band was great. And I'll always see that whenever I hear that song. And I'll be about that age.

Conover: "Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe"

Mercer: That was an assignment to do for The Harvey Girls, but three or four years prior to that I had thought that would be a great song, "Atchison, Topeka and The Santa Fe." It sings, you know.

Conover: That's the name of a railroad.

Mercer: Yeah. It's like Steven Vincent Benet says "I've fallen in love with American names." Well, that combination of names just rolled. Although when most people ask me how did I write "Atchison, Topeka and Santa Fe" I say I was riding on the Union Pacific at the time (Conover

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laughs) and I saw a boxcar which had those words. But I thought it would be a good song. Just kept it in the back of my mind. Then when I got this assignment with Harry Warren about three or four years later I said "couldn't we write a song called 'Atchison, Topeka,'" 'cause it's about the Harvey girls, and he said "fine it's just the right tune for it."

Conover: "Dream."

Mercer: Well, "Dream" is my own tune and I just wrote it. It's really, I think you'll find, derivative, although I didn't realize it at the time, from "Whispering," it's about the _____, which has always been one of my very favorite tunes of all time so it's unconscious flattery on my part. I didn't really cop it, because I don't think it's that close, but I wrote the tune first and I wrote it at the piano and I can't play and I figured out the chords all by myself, and I had fingered them out and everything, which is most unusual for me. And then I found a word to fit the song. The words didn't really mean too much, it just seemed to go with the melody. And then when Paul Weston and I got an assignment to do the Chesterfield program, which we did for about six months, he came to my little house on (gives street name) and he sat down and I played him this tune and he was really intrigued with it. I don't know why, but as a musician I was flattered that he liked it. Because he liked the chords. And he wrote it out for me. It was notes and everything, and we used it as a theme song on the Chesterfield program.

Conover: Two songs: "Moon River" and "Days of Wine and Roses."

Mercer: Well, "Moon River" Henry and I wrote for Breakfast at Tiffany's and the first lyric I had was called "Holly" because I thought they wanted, it was kind of fashionable in those days to get a song that was tied into the picture. Once you heard the song,

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you'd immediately think of the picture. So I wrote a lyric called "Holly" and it went (sings) "I'm Holly like I want to be, like holly on a tree back home. Just plain Holly with no dolly, no mama, no papa wherever I roam." And I told him, I said, "this song I think the producers might like because it's right out of the picture, maybe Capote would like it, I don't know. But this other lyric," that I had, "which I'm going to sing now might be a bigger hit." So he said "what is it"? And I sang, I think it was "June River" because it was summery, "Blue River" and I think . . . it . . . there was one other one, I can't think of it. But we decided against all of them for one reason or another. There was a "Blue River" years ago, written by Joe Meyer, and "June River" he felt was a little too summery. Anyway we hit on "Moon River" finally. It was a substitute word and it was the one he approved of and we had the song then 'cause the rest of the lyric was exactly the same, just the one word change.

Conover: There was also a old radio program called "Moon River."

Mercer: I found that out later.

Conover: Really?

Mercer: Yes, I didn't know it and there was also a song called "Moon River" which I didn't know. But it was not a successful song but I had really had no access to it, so I think . . . There was some talk of a suit but I think it was dropped because I don't think that song was ever played.

Conover: Speaking of an alternate lyric that people never heard before, just never heard the lyric, the alternate lyric you just sang to the Mancini theme that became "Moon River." Can you go into the lyric that you had written to a melody by Harold Arlen that instead wound up with an Ira Gershwin lyric that became "The Man That Got Away"?

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Mercer: Yeah. Well, this was written some time ago. This was, I think, it was, I don't even know what picture it was for, or why it wasn't used. It might have been in a picture that was shelved or something. And it went faster when he first wrote it. It wasn't so dramatic, you know (sings). It was a jazz tune like "Got The World On a String," or something like that, and it went, (sings) "I've seen Sequoia, it's really very pretty, the art of Goya and Rockefeller City but since I saw you I can't believe my eyes. You're one of them there things that comes equipped with wings, it walks, it talks, it sings and it flies. I've touched the table that held the Declaration and Betty Grable in my imagination but you're a fable that's hard to realize." Now it goes on differently from then, because Harold changed the form of the song but it winds up, you know (sings) "Yes, I've seen a thing or two, seen a view or two but there ain't no view like you. Believe me baby I simply can`t believe my eyes." Something like that. Rhythmical, you know, not the same, I don't think you can compare them.

Conover: Any copyright restrictions on broadcasting or publishing this alternate lyric since the other song . . .

Mercer: I don't know. They may sue me for even doing this much. Ira might or Harold might.

Conover: I doubt that

Mercer: But, you know, this is sort of a silent agreement with most collaborators that if the song doesn't make it, they have their tune back, we have our lyrics back and we forget it. It was a nice try and that's all.

Conover: Do you have a lyric that became published to another melody and the melody was dropped and it was set to the melody that we now identify with it? And can you remember the

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original melody to that lyric?

Mercer: I don't really know. I think it's usually been the other way around with me. I'm stuck with the lyric and they go on and have a big hit. I can't remember. I know that I wrote a lyric to "Shadow of Your Smile" that's called "The Sandpiper." And it wasn't satisfactory to the producer so I told Johnny Mandel "why don't you get Paul Francis to write you a lyric"? And he wrote a great one, you know. But that lyric went (sings) "Today I saw a bird that broke its wing, which isn't in itself a tragic thing." This is the second part of the lyric. The first part went (sings) "today I'm in a mood I can't explain. It might be just a sudden summer rain." I can't remember it all but . . . It's very effective but I guess it wasn't good enough, that's all.

Conover: We coupled "Moon River" and "Days of Wine and Roses" and before playing them perhaps . . .

Mercer: Well "Wine and Roses" was kind of what we call a rocking chair song for me because I was given the title from the Ernest Stassen (sp?) poem "Days of Wine and Roses" and Henry gave me that great tune, and coupled with those two things I couldn't write the lyric fast enough. I just got out the pencil and I started to write and . . . I don't know if it makes sense to some people. Like Andy Williams says he doesn't understand the word "nevermore" but allegorically I understand it. On a door that you don't see, it's like a Dali painting, you know. You're walking through a meadow and suddenly there's a door and there's a word on it. You see past that, and past that you can't go. At least if you go through you can't come back. Anyway those were the feelings that I had when I wrote the lyric. I couldn't write it down. . . I think I wrote it in 5 minutes. I couldn't write it down fast enough.

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Conover: It just fell into place.

Mercer: Right.

Conover: Does that happen often enough?

Mercer: Occasionally. "Skylark" was written that way but only after a wait of about a year. I couldn't find any title for "Skylark." Hoagy gave me this marvelous tune and I couldn't write it, and I couldn't write it, and I couldn't write it, and finally I saw the word "skylark" somewhere on a billboard or in a book or . . . It wasn't from the poem. It just associated itself with that tune. And I wrote that very fast. I don't think it took me a half an hour.

Conover: "Lazy Bones."

Mercer: "Lazy Bones" took a year, took a year and a half. Took forever. Took . . . oh God, it took a long time. It was my first song that was a big song. It was with Hoagy. I didn't know much about writing. I learned a lot from him. I learned a lot after that song from other writers. We had the first 16 bars the first afternoon we worked on it. Then we got . . . oh, it must have been a month later, that we got the middle part. And then, oh it must have been three or months later that I got an ending which I thought was all right and we had it penciled in. And then Hoagy came up with the surprise line, you know, "you never heared a word I say" which was marvelous. Well of course, I got the credit for it because my name was on the lyric. But then after that we had to write the verse. It took about a year and finally, of course, it was worth it because it was a great big hit and got me started. I'm grateful to Hoagy for it too.

Conover: "Autumn Leaves."

Mercer: "Autumn Leaves" is a translation from the French and I think I wrote that pretty fast.

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Nicki Olsen (sp?), who published it, said "you gotta write this lyric" and I said "I can't write it. I promised you I'd write it but I'm going to New York this afternoon" and [he said] "I'd like to have it before you go." So I said "well, I'll tell you, you drive me down to the train and I'll see if I can write it on the way." And that's what happened. He drove me from, it takes about a half hour to get from Hollywood to Los Angeles railroad station. And during that time I wrote the lyric for "Autumn Leaves." It's a great tune, you know. Good title.

Conover: Nothing wrong with the lyric either.

Mercer: It's all right. It fits the tune. I don't think it's very original.

Conover: "Something's Gotta Give."

Mercer: "Something's Gotta Give." I woke up in the middle of the night one time and wrote the whole thing.

Conover: Words and music?

Mercer: Words and music. And I went to the piano in the front room, out of bed, and quietly picked it out with one finger. And I wrote it down in my little hieroglyphics which is my own way of writing music. And then finished it the next day and had it ready for Astaire when the picture came along.

Conover: Did the song wake you up or did waking up give you the song?

Mercer: I think . . . I don't know whether . . . I don't know what woke me up. My subconscious . . . I'm a great believer in the subconscious, you know. You just state your problem and you leave it alone and your mind is working all the time and it comes back and gives you the answer. I think it's the greatest computer known so far. And I don't know whether I had a problem about

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that, wanted to write that song, or whether this was a worry that I had about the score I was doing. Anyway, I thought it was an effective song.

Conover: "One For My Baby."

Mercer: "One For My Baby" is another mood song. Harold had that tune. We had a picture to do and I don't know how I happened to think of "One For My Baby." I think it was kind of a way of writing a torch song which was a little new. It was a realistic thing. The guy's at the saloon and he's feeling bad and he's got to talk to somebody so he talks to the bartender. And Fred used that in the movie. He did a dance on the bar and broke the glasses and everything. But you should hear Peter Hayes do it. Did you ever hear Peter Hayes do it?

Conover: No.

Mercer: It's wonderful. Wonderful. He starts off singing a song, "One For My Baby," and he's drunk, he's loaded, but he's funny loaded. And he comes in with his hat up and he starts talking to the bartender and he sings about half the song and he starts a long routine with the bartender about his wife. He says, "Leonard, she took the furniture, I got the mother-in-law" and he goes on with all these things about how he . . . and it's really funny. And then at the end he turns around and he sings the last 8 bars and he begins to cry and he walks out. It just shows that he really meant it all the time. Wonderful performance.

Conover: "Accentuate the Positive."

Mercer: Well, that's a title from an old Father Divine sermon. And a publicist in New York gave me about, around the time I wrote "Jeepers Creepers." He said "did you ever hear Father Divine's sermon "You Got To Accentuate the Positive?" What a colorful, wonderful phrase.

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And it kind of sings too. It's melodious. So I tucked that away in my mind and when Harold came up with this little tune, this offbeat little rhythm tune, it just popped into my mind as we were driving home one day from the studio to write some songs for this picture for Bing and Sonny Thompson. I think it was a navy picture. And they did it in blackface. But it turned out to be a real good song. Big record for me. I was making records at the time at Capitol.

Conover: Yes, we remind our listeners with those records quite frequently.

Mercer: Thank you.

Conover: "My Shining Hour."

Mercer: Well, that was a song in a war picture done at RKO. And I think the lyric is derivative from two sources. One is an old world war song called . . . I don't know if it's "Look for the Silver Lining" or "Keep the Home Fires Burning." It's something to do about shining hour, something to do about the First World War which connected it in my mind with the other world war. And then I think there was a Philip Barrie play called "Shining Hour" which I probably unconsciously took.

Conover: Alec Wilder says it's the greatest American song ever written.

Mercer: Really? Well, that's high praise from a high source, but I don't think that that . . .

Conover: Well, he might have been talking about Harold Arlen's melody too, also.

Mercer: I think he must be.

Conover: "Bob White."

Mercer: "Bob White." The music kind of suggested that (sings "Bob White" motif). When Bernie played that tune for me out in California, he came out to visit me. We had done a few

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songs here in New York. We were very young together and wrote a lot of songs and had a lot of fun, too, writing them because we were way ahead of our time, rhythmically. I mean as far as writers go, like the Beatles, in our day, but nobody cared too much about jazz songs. Anyway, he came out to California and he played me this tune which is a very cute tune as you know. And the music sort of set it (sings motif again). And I figured out the rest, some angle. About the bird who wasn't hip and then got hip. So that's the way we wrote that.

Conover: You know, there are songs that I know you didn't write that I occasionally think you should have written. One song in particular that sounds to me like a Johnny Mercer song, "Too Close For Comfort." I don't know if you agree or not. You didn't write it but . . .

Mercer: No. I wish I had. It's wonderful.

Conover: But does it feel to you as though it's in your genre, in your bag?

Mercer: Yes it does. It does to me. Is that Cy Coleman or Bach and Harnick?

Conover: Now don't give me questions.

Mercer: Well, I think it's one or the other. Cy Coleman, it could be but I think it might be Bach and Harnick.

Conover: I don't think it's a Cy Coleman.

Mercer: He writes some pretty good songs too.

Conover: The reverse of that is there're some songs that I think you wrote that you didn't write or did. I'm going to go to my ASCAP directory for a moment. I haven't been looking up these titles. I'm just remembering them up to now. "Too Marvelous For Words"?

Mercer: Yeah, I wrote that with Richard Whiting. That was a just a phrase that was around you

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know and it fit his melody. That was the first big hit I had in Hollywood, well, after "Old Cowhand" which I wrote myself. But the first one I wrote with Dick Whiting, and it got us off to a pretty good start. I think it kept our job at Warner Brothers for a few years.

Conover: You know it's been said Johnny that you are the prime rater of a song lyric in the American language. And you say the expression "Too Marvelous For Words" has "just been around." Well, that's the whole point of that particular compliment.

Mercer: Well, first of all let me tell you what makes me maybe a little bit different, I think, from the other writers. I have always, since the time I can remember, and that may mean six months old or a year old. I have always been absolutely in love with songs. I knew them all, I sang them all. By the time I was ten or eleven, I knew every writer who was writing songs. I knew all Donaldson's songs, Percy Wenrich, you name them, Von Tilzer, Lew Brown, and when I got to be a songwriter, I met all these fellows and was so thrilled to meet them, and when I'd meet them I'd sing them some obscure song that they'd written. It's just like you are about records. I was that way about songs. I'd sing them verses that they had forgotten. And I wasn't trying to play up to them or anything I just sincerely loved songs. So that may give me an edge about fitting words to music because I have this musical sense anyway. I have a pretty good ear. And these words are always in the back of my mind as possibilities for titles. And when the tune comes along the subconscious does its work and finds the phrase to fit the tune. And I don't know where they come from at all times. Sometimes you invent them like "The Girlfriend of the Whirling Dervish," or "The Lady On the Two-cent Stamp" or "The Weekend of a Private Secretary." These songs are absolutely pure invention but they're hardly ever hits. But they're fun to do.

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Conover: I understand that when you've been asked "how does it start," you'll say it starts with the title first.

Mercer: Well, I think it should.

Conover: It should but in your case it does.

Mercer: Sometimes. Most of the time. On occasion, though, you can write a song with no title and just have it titled something else.

Conover: Do you have a book of titles just in case?

Mercer: I used to. I don't have so many anymore. I do have a lot of pieces of paper, though, with phrases written down on them. I look through them occasionally. However, now I think I'm so trained, so crafted, that when I get a melody something comes to my mind and I pursue it. It's like a gleam in the night, like a will o' the wisp, and if I feel it up here, I'll say "oh, there's something there" and I'll keep after it until it crystallizes and it seems to fit the music. Not always successfully but quite often.

Conover: I recall also someone, I don't recall it clearly enough, but perhaps you will, telling me that he wanted a liner note for an album that he had recorded and he got in touch with you and over the telephone, or maybe you just sat down and wrote off 80 verses of a lyric that you improvised as a liner note for that album.

Mercer: I don't remember that.

Conover: Well, is it true that you can, when forced to, improvise a lyric?

Mercer: I used to. I used to do it as a party thing.

Conover: I'd throw a word at you or a line or what?

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Mercer: Yes. I'd go out to a night club and I'd get up and sing and make up things about everybody in the place, the musicians, and then people in the audience. It was the blues form, which gave me time to think because you have the double line like "there's old Willis Conover sittin' over there. I said there's old Willis Conover sittin' in his chair." And then by that time I had thought of the third line, you know.

Conover: I can't wait to hear it.

Mercer: Well (laughs) well there, you see, "he's sitting over there but to most people he is nowhere."

Conover: Oh, thanks a lot. I had to ask.

Mercer: Well, sometimes it's good, if you're out drinkin', that they don't know where you are. (laughs) Especially if you're with another lady. No, those are the things I used to do and it was like a trick. But I was much younger and much more agile-minded and I think if I had a few I'd try anything, you know.

Conover: Does it have to be in the blues construction?

Mercer: Well it usually was because that was easy for the band to play, and I could sing in almost any key, and as I say it gave me this little time to think. And I got so I'd expect it so I'd have something kind of prepared.

Conover: Well, you're not prepared . . .

Mercer: Oh, I couldn't do it now.

Conover: Let me throw a line and see what you do.

Mercer: I haven't done it for years.

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Conover: That's why I think it's time that you tried it. "Love, loss and sorrow are all a man can call his own."

Mercer: Oh, that's beautiful. That took a little thought. You don't just write that on the spur of the moment. Well, I don't think that's quite true. "Love, loss and sorrow are all a man can call his own but I won't forget the friendships and the joys I've known." You could say that. Give it a little different connotation.

Conover: Once more, then a bridge and out.

Mercer: Yeah.

Conover: Go ahead . . . (laughs)

Mercer: (laughs) I don't know anything else to say. I really don't do that anymore, make up things. I think it's you get more critical of your work you don't want to do anything sloppy, especially with everything recorded these days. In those days nothing was recorded. And so when you sang it, it was for the air alone, and the ear, and now it's for tape and records and people can hold it up to you and say "not only did you sing it, listen to how you sounded. You didn't have five drinks you had 55 drinks." (laughs) That's the difference.

Conover: Gene Lees wrote a very sensitive and perceptive article about you in High Fidelity magazine in 1967. And he did something in writing about you that he does not like done when someone writes about him. And that is get critical in order to give emphasis to the overall complimentary aspects of the piece. Can I quote from memory?

Mercer: Certainly.

Conover: This goes out of the program and it may not go into an article. If you'd like people to

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leave, and you can talk into a, while we're out of the room . . . Just something that he said in there. [He] said something like "the most affable man you'll ever meet but he can turn into something pretty salty when he's had a few drinks and tell people off." What does that mean and why, or did you ever . . .

Mercer: No, that's true, that's true. I don't think it's so unusual though. I find that most people who drink, it eventually effects something, probably the liver, or the bile or something, because most steady drinkers as they get older tend to get less and friendly and more and more vitriolic. And I think it's a physical thing that your system just doesn't take anymore. When you're young you're happy longer and nobody gets mad, and you laugh, and you get sick. But when you get old and you've been drinking a lot, you don't get sick, it just sits there and you get mean and sallow and . . . I can say mean things but I don't mean them. I really don't. It's just the whiskey talking. I really like people. I harbor no grudges. I don't like to be taken advantage of, I don't think anybody does. But I essentially am an optimist and a very friendly man. I like almost everybody I meet. I don't mean like Will Rogers. But I genuinely want to like people. I hope that it's a happy comradeship or companionship.

Conover: Someone who's very close to you said about you the following: "He's very accommodating, he doesn't like to be tied down to something, don't corner him." Which is what I'm doing, of course. And then he also said "he is very much today still a product of the area in which he was born. He is a Southerner." How do those three things . . .

Mercer: That's all true. I try to be accommodating. I don't like to be pinned down and I am a Southerner essentially. I'm also, I think, a Scorpio. It seems to me that we have traits that, we

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have a deep independence and a kind of a quality that I don't see in any of the zodiac. And I'm not a zodiac man. I mean I'm an old choir boy.

Conover: You don't believe in horoscopy?

Mercer: I don't know about it yet. It might happen and I think we've just touched the beginning of the influence of stars and everything but it may be true. But I have those basic traits. Some people are loners and I'm not a loner but I do like to be alone occasionally. And some people are terribly sensitive. I can have my feelings hurt but I don't think I'm that, like my wife is, for instance, she's tender, got great empathy. I don't go that far. My daughter who's a Taurus and she's bullheaded, you know. It's very tough to tell her anything. Course it's probably because she's my daughter.

Conover: That's the thing these days.

Mercer: Yeah, I guess so.

Conover: What do you mean when you say "I'm still very Southern." What does that word mean? I know that you're a Southerner by . .

Mercer: Southern means that the South should have won the war. That we haven't forgot it. That we are polite. We believe in saying "yes sir," "yes ma'am." We take our hats off in elevators. We love colored people but we like them as we knew them when we were first introduced to them. Which is humble and kind. Just like we like humble and kind anybody. I mean we do it ourselves and we expect other people to do it. I still am impressed with kids around Richmond, Virginia who, it's "yes ma'am" and "no sir," you know, and shy, and they

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spoke when they're spoken to. The new freedom, for all people, all Americans, which has been promised us in the Constitution, and which many of us came over from foreign lands to get, is a good thing. But being a gentleman is also a good thing. That's what the Southerner prizes. The Southerner prizes his lady. He prizes the manners. He likes to sit around and drink in a polite way. He doesn't push his personality into your life. He doesn't believe any man has a right . . . for instance, I don't think he would think, until the unions came along, that he could picket. That he would dare force an economic measure. He doesn't live like that because he was brought up, I think, in the plantation days and it's very hard to change four or five generations of a way of life. It's changed slowly. If you're a thinking man and you do believe that the South is wrong, those Southerners probably leave. Well, I left the South because economically I could have never made a living in the South. I was the fourth son in a small business that couldn't have absorbed me and I had to go to find something to do. And I left and I came to the right place because I wound up in New York and Hollywood where my little talent was salable. But I never forgot the South. I never forgot the friends I made there, the things I learned there, the way of life that I like. It's fast going and almost all gone. But there's a remnant left which . . . I think anybody feels it. If you're from Ohio or Illinois or Indiana, you go back to your hometown and what you like is the sight of the trees, the smell of the place, the way the people say hello. Like in New England they're reserved, they're quiet, they're also quite humble but they're tarter than the Southerners are. They'll say more what they think to you than the Southerner will. He won't say it. He'll hide it, you know? It's a question of being polite really. It's a question of respecting your individual privacy. That's what I think it means. It doesn't mean anything about race, not to me.

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Conover: Did it ever?

Mercer: Well, there was a difference, you know because you grow up accustomed to hear for one class to be a menial class and the other class to be the monied class. It's always in the back of your mind. But it never made any difference as far as friendliness goes, never, because a mean person could be a mean person, a white person, or a mean colored person. But a gentle person or a gentleman or a lady could be black or white. And those are the people . . . I think that's why Southerners resent having other people tell them what to do. They know that. They know, they can see the difference in the people and they've got along for years. But the reason the Negro left the South was because they didn't have any money down there. There was just nothing to do, you know. They had field hand salaries, after they were domestics, and there were no opportunities, so once colleges were open and industrial opportunities in the North, you can't blame them for leaving. And when they left they dropped all the things with them. They dropped the "yes sir, boss." They dropped the broad accents. They dropped their roots. Not their basic roots, not the rhythm, and not the athletic prowess, not their quiet dignity that they always had, you know. Not their pride in their race. But they dropped what they thought was unbecoming to them, the subservience and that stuff. Can't blame them, I don't blame them.

Conover: Well, let's go into other reasons. What do you find attractive, if you do, in the Northeastern character, if you do. I realize New York is the concentration of that to a certain extent and it's very easy to find fault with New York. There's so much there to find anything in.

Mercer: New York is a melting pot. Always has been. I think New York is . . . The glamorous thing of New York is the city itself. The size of it, the amount of people in

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it and the hustle and bustle of it, and the opportunity not only to meet thousands of people, but to be lost, to be anonymous. It's a great thing. Most of the people in New York are awful people. You know, they push and they have no manners and they're out to survive. That's not what I like about New York. When I say the Northeast, I mean up around Maine and Vermont and Connecticut where they say "yep" and "shuah." That kind of downeaster. Those are the kind I like. Because they have this great Yankee reserve, and belief in themselves, and pride. Independence of spirit. Stand up, you know, and vote their own way even if there're only two states going to go that way. That's great. And the Westerner is friendly. Years ago when I went through Texas, my wife and I, drove through in a little convertible Ford, I never met more open hearted, generous, wide-open, "glad to see you folks," "come on in have a . . .," "can we do anything for you." That's wonderful. But that kind of stuff is disappearing because of what we're getting in place of it. This, for instance, radio, television, communications. Everybody has the same kind of car. Everybody can get places faster. It's going to tend to make us all one, so the sectionalism has got to go. Slowly, I hope, 'cause I hate to see it go. I think it's lovely to have colorful, different people, different places, different customs, different costumes, because life is duller when it's all one shade.

Conover: Well, you have relocated yourself some 3,000 miles away from the Northeast and you're in California. Is there a personality characteristic about the Californian, which is a pretty long state, so it would be upper, middle and lower California.

Mercer: California you must remember had the biggest migration in the world's history (blank spot on tape) to America. So the Californian is kind of lost in that multitude, but the Californian

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that seemed to me to be prominent when I got out there was first of all the Mexican-Indian Californian, which was not greatly noticed except in certain neighborhoods. And then the other Californian, which was the tall, blonde, sunlit tennis-playing Californian. There were a lot of those. And they're being kind of absorbed into just a whole bunch of Americans coming out there and settling down. California is a great big . . . Los Angeles is a great big city with more cars than I've ever seen because of the space that you have to cover. And I don't know what's going to happen to California. It's like a python that swallows a water buffalo. It's going to take a long time to digest, to see what happens, you know. I know it's beautiful, the climate . . . If we could hold the smog back, the climate is still gorgeous. On some sunny days when the wind is right it sparkles and it just looks like a dream city. And it's great because it hardly ever rains and you know, it's the same old thing, you can go to the ocean, snow, and the desert and the mountains all within an hour or two. I love California but I wish it were smaller or I wish the movies maybe were still there. The movies are now worldwide, you know.

Conover: Let me get my ASCAP book 'cause I want to find some more titles. At the moment they slip my mind. All right. My, my, my, the songs you wrote.

Mercer: An awful lot of them. Unknown songs too.

Conover: "P.S. I Love You."

Mercer: "P.S. I Love You." I saw that . . . I was reading the New Yorker one time and it had, one of the things in the "Talk of the Town" just was labeled, it was titled, "P.S." I don't why it occurred to me to write "I Love You" onto it but I think in those days everybody said something "I love you." "Woman disputed I love you," "Hammacher Schlemmer, I love you." "I love you"

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was quite a big phrase before it got too well done. So I just had the idea of "P.S. I Love You" and then I thought "well naturally it's got to be in the form of a letter." So I wrote a kind of a dummy tune to it on my own but then I gave it to Gordy and he set the lyric the way it is now.

Conover: "Goody, Goody."

Mercer: "Goody, Goody" is just a phrase and I think that it's one of my best songs and also one of my earliest songs. It's just a phrase that everybody said but I just, I don't know why I got that particular approach to it. You know, the "ha, ha, ha, goody, goody to me." But I wish, you know, just recently I changed one word which I think makes it a much better song and it's about 25 years later. Instead of saying "you rascal you," I now sing it "goody, goody for me, goody, goody for him. Goody, goody . . . and I hope you're satisfied you baddy you." Don't you think that's better than rascal?

Conover: I still hear rascal, after 25 years. "Hooray for Hollywood."

Mercer: "Hooray for Hollywood" was written for a picture called Hollywood Hotel, I think. And I think it's just one of my satirical songs that I wrote in those days. Hollywood seemed like a big put-on to me and I just tried to make a little fun of it.

Conover: "You Must Have Been A Beautiful Baby."

Mercer: Well that's, I think, a wonderful title. That's my wife's title. She gave it to me. And it turned out to be a great song I think. Harry wrote just the right tune for it.

Conover: "Day In, Day Out."

Mercer: "Day In, Day Out." Well, that was a great tune of Rube Bloom. I searched around to try and find the words to fit that and I think that the music threw me into those words (sings

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opening notes of song). I used "come rain, come shine" in that.

Conover: Also "Blue Rain"

Mercer: "Blue Rain" of course, I guess that's a purely inventive song. I don't think it ever "happened" but I wish it had. Nice tune.

Conover: "I Thought About You."

Mercer: Well, I really did think of that on a train. I was riding on the train one night and I was looking out the window and looking at all these little towns with the lights and the cars parked and the glow worms in the dark and everything and I thought gee, what a . . . So I wrote the song. Then later I took the lyrics back and showed it to Jimmy, and he set the music to it.

Conover: There are two other songs that have the same opening phrase. One is "I Had the Craziest Dream" and the other is "Jersey Bounce."

Mercer: Well, I think sometimes composers and lyric writers or whoever writes the tune is inclined to use pickups sort of like you use articles, the, and an, and of, you know, you just (sings) and you're into your melody and then it changes. I think "Jersey Bounce" is probably the first one of those three songs so Van Heusen and Warren would have to be guilty subconsciously of taking those pickup notes. But I don't think that that's unusual in the beginning of a song. I think I told you before "Atchison, Topeka" is really "Sunny Side of the Street" for about 5 notes (sings). But the other notes are the same.

Conover: "And the Angels Sing."

Mercer: "And the Angels Sing" was written as a contest song on the Camel Caravan. Ziggy Elman had this old tune, a fralich, folk tune which he played slow, which used to be played fast.

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And he played it also on the trumpet fast if you remember in the second half of the record. But it had this great melodic, kind of a Gershwin-esque tune when it was played slow. (sings). Pretty, you know. So I said "gee, that's a pretty tune" and Benny said "would you like to write it." I said I sure would. I was on the program with them. So the producer said "Well we'll announce that you're going to write it and you'll have it by next week." So I said "Okay." So I went home and Thursday came around or whatever it was and I said "I can't make it by tomorrow, I'll try." He said "Well, put it off a week. I'll just tell 'em I'll have it next week." And so they said "Okay." And I did, I got it by the next week. I kept trying, and I had a title called "And It All Came True," and another title, and I wrote them all up in rough form and I showed them to a few of my friends and asked them which lyric they liked the best and they said "The Angels Sing" is the best lyric. So I finished that in time for the program and we did it on the radio and Martha made a record and it was an instant hit because of the band, her vocal and Ziggy, I think.

Conover: Yeah, doubling up the tempo in the middle scared a lot of dancers. I was learning . . .

Mercer: (laughs) Wouldn't scare them now. Nothing scares them now. I like the dances better now than ever. I thought that nothing would ever top the jitterbug in the Harvest Moon Ball but these kids today out-dance them. They're great. Especially the little girls in the mini skirts. (Conover laughs) Don't you think so?

Conover: I do, but how old are you now John? (laughs)

Mercer: (laughs) I'm not that old.

Conover: No but I can remember when I was first daring to casually ask a girl to dance and get out and "And the Angels Sing" played and right in the middle . . . It was slow enough for me to

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dance to . . .

Mercer: And then it changes on you.

Conover: You know, "shall we sit down"? It was very embarrassing.

Mercer: You know, that's like the guy that talks about dancing these days. You know how the kids all dance, but they don't touch, and the girl says "thanks for the dance" and the guy says, "thanks for the dance? I'm trying to get the Coke machine!" (both laugh) So that's the way you felt when the tempo changed, right?

Conover: Yeah. Speaking of swing bands, hit records that we identify with bands. There's another song and that's the Irving Berlin tune "Marie" that Tommy Dorsey recorded and I understand that you wrote the counter remarks that the band chorus sang in the background.

Mercer: Oh no, that's a mistake. I have done that, and I might have done it before Dorsey did it on some record way back maybe at Decca or something. I tell you, I think maybe I had a date of my own way back when I did "Bob White" and "Jamboree Jones" and things like that. But I think that's a thing that Tommy really invented. And I know that the boys in the band made those things up on the date. "Oh, Mama" and all those things, and it was so effective that he did about eight like that. He kept doing it. "Song of India", "Blue Sky", he did a lot of them I think. And it was a marvelous thing because the tempo was going just right for dancing and yet it was all this entertainment going on too. No Tommy gets the credit for that. Tommy . . . wonderful, I thought, an outstanding man.

Conover: I was really beginning to look up your birth date when I saw the song "Glow Worm" credited to you.

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Mercer: Yeah. Well, I'll tell you. That was for a record date out in Capitol. I don't know why I thought of it but it occurred to me that it would be a cute record.

Conover: Of course, the song itself, we should establish, was written many years before you were writing songs.

Mercer: The copyright was about to run out. It was about 50, how long is a copyright? Fifty-four years, 26 and 26? Fifty-two? Something like that. Anyway we had about two years to go when I wrote this lyric and I had to clear it with ASCAP because of the BMI publisher and Marks. Marks jumped at the chance. They said "well, just give us a chance to copyright it for 50 something more years. If we can get your lyric." I said "it's all right with me if it's all right with the lady who wrote the original song." So I wrote it just for a record date and then I made a record with Alvino Rey and then I don't think anybody heard it much except the Mills Brothers, and then they made a big record of it.

Conover: "Fools Rush In."

Mercer: Well "Fools Rush In" is from the Shakespeare quote. And I think it just fit that tune perfectly, I think that's one of my better lyrics. A simple way to a very big, almost an operatic kind of tune. Great tune.

Conover: "Blues in the Night."

Mercer: Well "Blues in the Night" is right out of Savannah, my background and all the things I heard when I was a boy and experienced, and there was some talk about what to call that because Harold wanted to call it "My Mama Done Told Me" and we talked to Berlin, I said "let's ask Irving and do what he says." And he said I think "Blues in the Night" is better. And I said "I

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think so too," so two against one. So we called it that.

Conover: "Tangerine."

Mercer: "Tangerine," one of my favorites. Victor Schertzinger played me the tune note for note just the way it is. We had to write it for a movie and I don't know why I called it "Tangerine" except that it had a kind of a Latin flavor, the melody. And once I fell in, you know in the Argentine, and oh, I love it right now. Crazy about it. But I don't know how many other people like it.

Conover: Oh, come on.

Mercer: Well, you know . . . I know that the Dorseys made a great record. They did the two tempo record and they had those great singers. But I just love the song. It's a kind of a tune that I never tire of the melody. And I like the lyric enough so I'm always kind of proud of it every time I hear it. So it's one of my favorites.

Conover: "I Remember You."

Mercer: Well, that was one of those songs that I wrote for Paramount. I think it was in the same movie, wasn't it?

Conover: I think so.

Mercer: Well, I had a very lucky weekend. I wrote all those songs in a weekend. I was living down at Emerald Bay and . . .

Conover: Including "Arthur Murray Taught Me Dancing In A Hurry"?

Mercer: Well, that might have been in the same month. I don't think it was in that weekend. That one I got a wire from Cole Porter about. Like I did "Laura" too. He loved "Laura." That

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was his favorite song that he didn't write. But he wrote me and said "I love your 'Arthur Murray.'"

Conover: How did Arthur Murray like it?

Mercer: He loved it. He sent me 60 free dance lessons. (both laugh) The only thing is, if you ever dance with Mrs. Murray, boy, she leads. She was teaching me but she was . . . I said "please," you know. I was saying to myself, "please let me lead." She was pushing me around. Anyway . . . and Buddy loved that song, Buddy de Sylva, he produced the picture. He loved "Arthur Murray". He gave it to Betty Hutton to sing. "I Remember You" just fit that melody. I just tried to write it. I think I got some nice words at the end which most people like a lot.

Conover: "Hit The Road To Dreamland."

Mercer: Well that was with Harold for that movie. A big movie with a lot of songs in it. I like the song just the way it is. But what made it very effective was that in picture the Golden Gate Quartet sang the whole interlude to Mary Martin and Dick Powell. I don't know if you've got that record but that's effective.

Conover: "G.I. Jive."

Mercer: Well, that was a war song. I always liked . . . From the first world war when I was a tiny little boy I can remember the songs I liked were the funny songs like "How You Gonna Keep Them Down On The Farm." Happy songs, I didn't like the serious songs. Although I wrote a few of each. I like "G.I. Jive." That was written as kind of a request because I was on some programs called "G.I. Journal," "G.I. Jive." And I don't know, I just wrote it. Kind of patriotic.

Conover: "Travelin' Light."

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Mercer: "Travelin' Light" is Jimmy Mundy's tune. I think it's just a phrase that I thought would go well with the melody.

Conover: It appealed to Billie Holiday too.

Mercer: She liked it a lot. Lady Day. And Paul Whiteman recorded it. It was one of the first records we did for Capitol. I don't know, I never got the middle quite straight because you know I don't read . . . There are two songs that I'm not so sure I wrote. I wrote them but it's like I anticipated the melody to go a little bit different like the pick . . . the time is different. See if you don't notice it next time you play "Travelin' Light." It sounds like it doesn't go the way the words do exactly, and the same thing in the middle of "Midnight Sun." I never quite got them straight in my mind time-wise.

Conover: "June Comes Around Every Year."

Mercer: Boy, you're really going into some . . . Nobody knows that. That was written in that same Paramount movie with Harold I think, that "Hit the Road" . . . maybe.

Conover: Jean Harvey sang with Benny Goodman on Columbia.

Mercer: I don't know. I think Miller made it too. He made two or three songs from that picture. "Says Who, Says You, Says I." I don't know, I thought "June Comes Around Every Year" was going to be bigger than it was, but "June" is the only thing that comes around. The song doesn't come around.

Conover: "Out Of This World."

Mercer: Well, I love that song. I think that's a special kind of a tune. And I think that's a good lyric too. That was a popular expression at the time, kind of a musician's expression. And I

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think I was only one to write it except Porter. Sometimes Porter and I wrote the same titles, never the same way, but I think he was also aware of what was being said, you know, popular expression. But I like mine rather than his. Ours, I mean. Harold's.

Conover: "In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening."

Mercer: That's Hoagy's title and it's from an old joke which we could repeat if there were just fellows tuned in. But it's "in the cool, cool, cool of the evening you can tell them I'll be there." And we had to make up all the different images to go with it, the verse. It's a nice little song.

Conover: "When The World Was Young."

Mercer: "When The World Was Young" is my translation to a French lyric. Now I've just come back from Paris and the Frenchmen over there tell me that the English lyric is far superior to French lyric. However, it seemed to me just my way of remembering how it was in the old days, because the song in French, as well as in English, talks about a man who has been to war, comes back disillusioned, or girl who's been around the pool comes back disillusioned, and remembers how it was when she was young. Before the world got to her, and disappointed and everything. And in writing "When The World Was Young" I just remembered all these things that I remembered as a boy, you know. Not necessarily me, just things. Things that were . . . like you have a program called "Nostalgia," well, this is little labels of an age like jack o' lanterns and vests of applique, you know. Now they're coming back, but in those days they were gone. It's funny.

Conover: "Satin Doll."

Mercer: "Satin Doll" is I guess Ellington's title or Strayhorn's title. I just wrote the words. They

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sent me three tunes to write that Ellington had made for Capitol when he was with them. And I don't know who wrote what. I think Ellington and Strayhorn's name are both on all three tunes. One is called "Blossom." This is his title, "Blossom." "Satin Doll" is his title. And a little instrumental which I call "Take the Dayplane" (both laugh) but they never put it on. It was a cute little tune too.

Conover: "I Wanna Be Around."

Mercer: "I Wanna Be Around" was sent to me by that lady in Youngstown, Ohio. She is a sweet old thing. She's older than I and she wrote me and she said "I have a great title. I think you should dedicate it to Nancy Sinatra because I'm sure that someday he'll come back to her." So it's funny, I said, well, I wasn't going to get into that position but I said "it's a great title and I don't think it can help but be a hit. Because it's practically a song in itself." And I said "if you'll wait, if you don't mind, I've got some work to do, and I'll I get around, I'll write it up." She said "fine" so in about a year later I wrote the song and I sent it to her and she was thrilled. And we got a Tony Bennett record in it and it was an immediate hit. And then we got a lot of other records and she's still getting royalties from it. It really changed her life. She retired from her job in the cosmetics counter of a big department store. She said, it was cute, Willis, you'll like this, she said "I'm getting so popular," she said, "people come by the store and they want my autograph. They say did you write that song? And I say 'yes, I did.'" And she said, "I've been on two or three radio programs in Youngstown and I'm getting to be very famous." Then about a month later she said, "I had to go to Cleveland to be interviewed on the radio." She says, "It's so exciting. You can't believe how, it's like a fairy story, it's a Cinderella story." So she said, "Now,

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I'm going to New York to be on a program to be interviewed as the creative ladies or something, grandmothers or something and it's just wonderful." Then about a month later she said, "My goodness," she said, "it's just getting awful." She said, "I'm tired, I think I'm getting out of show business." Isn't that cute? She came out to California for the record awards because we had a nomination. One of the five nominations, but we didn't win it but . . . we came in close, we were second or third.

Conover: "Emily."

Mercer: "Emily" was for the movie by the same name. Johnny Mandel and I just, we do that you know. We're hired to write a theme song. I do it less and less because I find that only some songs really should be written and its kind of dumb to do it just to make a little money, really. It's better to have a few hits than a whole bunch of songs when you've got a little money in the bank and the song that doesn't happen . . . it's just, I don't think it helps your reputation any.

Conover: Don't you like "Emily"?

Mercer: I like "Emily." I don't think the words are as good as the music. The music is lovely. I don't think we've ever had. . . I can't say that. I don't know why the song isn't a hit. We've had some good records. I was going to say that we didn't have any good records. We had a Sinatra record, we had a lot of good records on "Emily."

Conover: Tony Bennett.

Mercer: Yeah, wonderful. And I don't know why it didn't "happen." Must take the blame for the lyric, I guess. It's a good tune.

Conover: Tell me about your current project with Michel Legrand.

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Mercer: Well, it's very ambitious. I kind of have my fingers crossed and hope that it'll see the light of day. It's a musical version of Cyrano de Bergerac which of course has been a stage classic for many years. The reason I say I have my fingers crossed is that I feel that as great as it is with all the dueling and the old, the romantic flavor of dialogue and the way the play is constructed, it may be hard to "get over" today as a very romantic musical. But if we get a great performance and a great singing performance from some actor and a good score I think we have a chance. Stanley Kramer was very high on the story and Michel and I have already written about ten or eleven songs. We won't use them all but we'll use some of them. And the way I figure it Willis, just between you and me and all these thousands of people that are listening, is that even if the picture comes off, if it's filmed or not, we'll have written some, I hope, wonderful songs. And if it's a flop we'll still have written some wonderful songs, and if it's a hit, great. I'll tell you I'm so excited about Michel. He's such a first class writer. He's younger than I, and I don't think he's Kern yet, but he's awfully good.

Conover: What other writers? You mentioned . . .

Mercer: Well, you know my favorites are, I think, most of the obvious favorites. My favorite is Antonio Carlos Jobim. He's so tender and melodious and writes beautifully. And Michel, and Burt Bacharach, who is really going, he's like Arlen. He's trying so hard to be his own man. He's inventive, he finds new rhythm, new ways to take the melody, and yet he's not above writing a simple little theme. You hear the theme in Butch Cassidy and the Sundance Kid. It's just lovely. It's almost like "Laura" is to me. And he's good. This new song from Promises, Promises. First class song, wonderful song. "I'll Never Fall In Love Again." Really cute. And then Jim Webb.

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Outstanding writer, to me. And he's only done a few but he's so his own man. He's inventive. He's got his own style already and he's only 23, which is unusual. Johnny Hartford wrote that great song "Gentle On My Mind." I'm sure there're more songs in him. And Simon and Garfunkle. I'm crazy about them. They're tender and they say something, they're angry. I mean they want to say something about . . . like all kids do today. The Beatles I find better performers than writers although I must say that some of the songs move me. "Here, There and Everywhere" is a wonderful song. "Yesterday" is a lovely song. "Rocky Raccoon" is a great song. Funny, you know, to me. Those are the guys I like the best so far.

Conover: And the early writers who influenced you most?

Mercer: The older ones? Well, there are writers like Harry Warren whom everybody considers kind of a dean of writers because he's undiscovered by most people. Everybody knows, and it's true, that Richard Rodgers is the best writer we have as far as composing for the theater, like Kern used to be. He's just head and shoulders above everybody else. Berlin is probably the greatest living writer because of not only what he knows but what he's written and he's just a natural born great songwriter. And Harry Warren. Now, one of my favorites, who's dead, is Walter Donaldson. He wrote with Gus Kahn. He also wrote a lot of songs by himself. And I don't know if I need to tell you what he wrote but he wrote many, many big songs. Richard Whiting is one of my favorite songwriters. Ted Fiorito is a great songwriter. I don't know if you know many he wrote or what he wrote . . . but he wrote a lot of songs.

Conover: "Rio Rita"?

Mercer: Well no, that's probably . . . (laughs)

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Conover: (laughs) that's confusion together with his name.

Mercer: No I think Jimmy Hamby (sp?) wrote that score. No, he wrote "Toot, Toot, Tootsie",and, oh boy, a lot of songs . . . "King for a Day," "Laugh Clown Laugh" and a lot more. "No, No, Nora" which is a great song. But no not many people know it. And these writers, Harry Ruby, and Kalmar, "Three Little Words" and many other songs. These are all the great old writers. Harry Woods. I lost a great friend in Harry Woods just the other day. He was a marvelous writer and a wonderful guy.

Conover: You haven't mentioned Cole Porter.

Mercer: Well, maybe it's 'cause I'm saving my favorite for the last. He's my favorite. He really was. I thought his early lyrics when he was a young man were incomparable like Lorenz Hart. Gifted, great writer. I thought his lyrics got a little sloppy as he got older but tunes got stronger and stronger. Cole Porter's tunes towards the end began to sound like Tchaikovsky. Really wonderful strong big melodic tunes. And the lyrics to me seemed as if . . . He couldn't write a bad lyric, but it just seemed to me as if they got, oh, a little less inventive. A little less "first class."

Conover: Are there any songs you've heard . . .

Mercer: I like Sondheim a lot. I forgot to mention him. He's a wonderful writer. Sondheim. Steven Sondheim. Any songs . . . ?

Conover: Any songs that, instead of simply appreciating them, make you envious and even jealous maybe to the extent of hating the guy who wrote them thinking "I wish I had written that."

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Mercer: Not so much as I used to be. When you're a young man you hate everybody who writes a great song. You think "I had that idea" or "I should have had that idea and I hate him. I wish I had written it." But when you get a few songs of your own you're inclined to be more charitable to the other guy. I hated Mack Gordon 'cause he wrote so many hits and I wasn't having any. But when I had few of my own I began to like Mack Gordon a lot more. That's about the way it goes.

Conover: Well, let's get into other activities, John. We really haven't gotten into your singing. The first thing I heard of you singing was with Benny Goodman singing "Sent For You Yesterday, Here You Come Today."

Mercer: Well, I don't really think I'm much of a singer. I think I sing better now than I ever sang because I'm a little less hysterical. I don't try so hard, and I think when I sang with Whiteman and Goodman . . . It's like the ball player who sits on the bench all through the game and finally gets in the pinch hit and he gets up there he swings so hard, he falls down, you know. I just couldn't sing . . . I wasn't relaxed enough. And I never gave a good performance in the early days with Goodman or Whiteman or anybody. I think with Bing I did a few, and then I think one date I'd made on my own out in California wasn't too bad. But I think I could sing better now or maybe in the last ten years, I don't know about now, I'm getting kind of old. I would like to try again to make one good album. I never thought of myself as a singer, much just sort of a demonstrator of my songs. There're too many good singers around

.**Conover:** Well, Mark Warnow (sp?) and George Washington Hill thought you were quite a singer. And I'm not even talking about my opinion. When you sang on the "Hit Parade" every week.

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Mercer: They put me on for a while. I think it was because I was writer. I think my singing has always been, I think I got my job with Whiteman because I had written a couple of big songs and he could say "here's the writer of . . .," you know, and then I'd sing a song. Or sing the song. And I think I got on the "Hit Parade" for the same reason.

Conover: How did you feel about some of the songs that you didn't write that you had to sing?

Mercer: Oh, I liked most songs. Because I'm a songwriter I picked a lot of great songs to sing like "Personality" which I didn't write. "New Ashmolian" which I didn't write. "Small Fry," which I didn't write. All these songs are by other men. "My Sugar is So Refined," "The Most Surprised Party is Me." All these songs. "Candy." These songs have enough entertainment value in the words so that they don't notice my voice. Or in the case of "Candy" it lay just right for my voice. I could manage "Candy." The notes were not quite too long. They were just enough. You know? Must sound terribly introspective on my part. I don't know about the singing. I like to sing for fun. But I mostly like to hear other people sing, who can sing.

Conover: Who especially?

Mercer: Well, Andy Williams, right now, and Edye Gorme and Peggy Lee and Ella Fitzgerald and Joe Williams. I don't know, there's a whole bunch that can sing. But I think they're like ball players. I think they have their years of learning and then their peak of performance and then they kind of slide downhill. It's just physical. Very seldom do they get better after a certain age. It's in the strength of the diaphragm and the larynx and the breath control, and it's just a physical thing, singing is. Besides from the heart and the mind. And you can't help but get old. But that doesn't mean they weren't absolutely marvelous, and we're so lucky today that we can have them

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on record and tape. There's a little Italian restaurant that has nothing but Caruso records that I go to occasionally. And it's such a joy to hear them. God, what a singer, you know. Marvelous. And to hear a record by Bing called . . . well, to have him singing "Old Man River" with the Whiteman band or his own record on Decca "When You're Away," the Victor Herbert song. Boy, I'm telling you, you can't, that's him at his best. And Sinatra when he was singing, you were talking about "Last Night When We Were Young" and one of my favorites is "Lost in the Stars." Or his record of "Dream" with that great change that Axel put in the melody. It's just wonderful, wonderful to have these guys at their peak. And I think right now Andy's got it but I can see the Osmonds creeping up on him. Have you noticed those kids? Osmond Brothers? Boy, they're wonderful. I think the youngest is about 10 or 11 and the oldest is probably about 18. They're all brothers and they work on his program all the time. But pretty soon you'll be hearing them and Andy will be old, see? Like we are. Well, not like you are, Willis, but like I am. I think I'm getting too serious. Can't we get on to something more lively like how I founded Capitol Records?

Conover: That was exactly what I was getting to next. Did you see my notes?

Mercer: (laughs) No, I didn't.

Conover: I've got a note here that I can't read. I was writing it very . . . It looks like "American Lagoon." And that doesn't make sense to me at all. So I'm going to have to cross that out or come back to it later, or maybe it's something . . ."I agree" or . . . that can't be it.

Mercer: If it's a "rootin', tootin', high falutin'. . ."

Conover: Oh, I've got to tell that story sometime when I've an hour.

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Mercer: I don't know what that could be. "Sleepy Lagoon" I didn't have anything to do with.

Conover: I know. Well, I'll get to that. I'll phone you and . . .

Mercer: It's probably the "New Ashmolian." Well, at Capitol . . . One day . . . We were all out of work out there and there were a lot of people that were out of work. Like Freddy Slack had left the Dorsey band and Jo Stafford had left the other Dorsey band. And Ella Mae Morse, no wait a minute, that's a little . . . I'm jumping ahead of myself now. And who else? Bobby Sherwood, who I thought had a lot of ability to play, and could play about 6 instruments, also sang. Margaret Whiting, who was just getting old enough to sing. All these people and I said "gee, what a great idea if we could have a weekly show and call it 'The Angelinos,' like Fred Waring except cooperative." Everybody who was out of work would work. And one day it would be five people, one week, and then the next week would be five other people. But we'd have kind of a stock company of singers. This was my idea to go on the radio as a radio program, sustaining or, hopefully, a commercial. And around that time I went into Music City and I had a talk with Glenn Wallichs who was selling records behind the counter. Well, he wasn't really behind the counter, it was his store, but he was all over the store. He was buying records and selling records and fixing radios and everything. He was a very enterprising young fellow. And we were talking about it and I said "why don't we start a record company." I don't know whether he said it or I said it, but we decided that we ought to start a record company. Because there were a couple of little local independent records out at the time. And he said "well, that's a good idea." He said "do you think you could sell them in the lobbies of the theaters, like the Paramount Theater"? I said "well, I don't know, I'll ask." I was working over at

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Paramount. So I went in and I talked with Buddy de Silva who was the Executive Producer over there and I said "this fellow over here has got a music store, we want to go in the record business and we thought maybe we could sell the records in the lobby." So he said "well, I tell you. I don't think Paramount would really be interested. But I'd be interested as a kind of a . . . just a venture. Why don't you have him . . . bring him over to lunch"? So Glenn and I went and had lunch with Buddy at the Paramount Commissary and he said "Well, I'll tell you what. You guys, if you think you can get started, I'll give you $25,000."

Conover: I want to break in with a point that I think ought to be established for some our listeners, readers. The year that this happened, and the fact that there weren't the hundreds of record companies then that there are now.

Mercer: There were four big companies. Or three. There was RCA Victor, Columbia, Decca and Brunswick, Decca and/or Brunswick. And probably some other small ones that had been around like Harmony or Gennett or some other labels that were maybe owned. I don't think there was any . . . There were a couple of little tiny independents in California but they were not known at all. We were just another little . . . like a wildcat oil driller, fly by night.

Conover: About to become number four.

Mercer: Just about to become number four only we didn't know it. So we started off, and I had had all these ideas and I had been writing tunes and Buddy said "okay, go." So Glenn said "okay, we'll go." Now two things happened. The shellac. We couldn't get any shellac from India because of the war. The war was starting and you couldn't get the boats through. And the

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musicians' strike of Petrillo's. Both things which would have an ordinary company out of business mitigated in our favor, because Glenn found shellac somewhere or some material. He went East and he got old records and reground them up into material. He made some deals with pressers to press the disks and he did all the necessary things about organizing the factual material things about our record company while I was back in the West recording. Now I was using all these tunes that I had been writing, "Strip Polka," "G. I. Jive," "Harlem Butterfly," all these tunes that I had written, with and without . . . Then I had some tunes in movies at the time. I had lot of tunes and then I looked around and I found other tunes. Bobby Sherwood had a couple of instrumentals. One was called "The Elks' Parade." And Margaret Whiting sang a couple of her father's songs which we always liked. I did a kind of a jazz version of "They Didn't Believe Me" and we found a lot of tunes. Freddy Slack came along with Gene DePaul and Don Ray had a great song called the "Cow Cow Boogie" and also a song called "Mr. Five By Five." And it's like a scout from a baseball team. They know where a lot of good players are where the executives who are too busy don't know. They wouldn't know where to reach out and find the right singer and the right tune and make them that fast. We were in a lucky position, a favorable position. So it didn't seem we could do anything wrong. Everything we made got played because of the musicians' strike, because the other record companies weren't issuing any records, and because, well, the "G. I. Jive," I know, was sold to a lot of army camps. So we spent, of the $25,000 that Buddy gave us we spent 15 before we began to make money. We gave him back his ten and within the year he had the 15 back and we never were headed after that. After that we got Nat Cole, we got other artists. We got Peggy Lee, we got Stan Kenton. He was one of the

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early ones. I forgot to mention him, Stan Kenton. And Andy Russell, Paul Whiteman. Because of my friendship with Buddy, Betty Hutton who was singing at Paramount. Johnny Johnson was singing at Paramount. So our roster of artists got bigger and bigger and our records sold more and more and more and we just were off to the races. Never were headed. And it was just one of those things. Then I went back to writing and a lot of other guys came and joined the company. All important guys. Paul Weston was in at the beginning. Dave Dexter of course. Jim Conkling came in, Alan Livingston came in and Gillette was there early. And they were all artist men and they did everything. Transcriptions and they went on the road and sold records and made records. Anyway, it was just one of those great operations that Glenn was marvelously equipped to be an executive of. I think it was a lucky thing for me and for all of us that it happened when it did. And, you know, I'm in and out of all phases of show business. I was on the television academy. I was on that for a couple of years, then I was president for a year. The year before it became national, when Ed Sullivan was the first president. And now I'm on the Songwriters Hall of Fame which we're trying to establish, like the Baseball Players Hall of Fame. And I'm a songwriter but I really like everything about the theater and the movies, and especially music, just like you do.

Conover: You didn't even mention your most recent appointment.

Mercer: Well, I was waiting with bated breath. I didn't know if you were going to ask me. No, Willis, you know it's really your assignment more than mine. But Willis is talking about a request that we had from the White House to establish a record library there for all future residents of the White House. And we're going to try and pick five of us, Willis, and Paul

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Ackerman, Irving Kolodin, Helen Roach and myself. Jazz, Country Western, Folk, Rhythm and Blues, Popular, Operatic, and the spoken word, and poetry. A comprehensive library that will, we hope, cover the best in recorded music and poetry from the time the phonograph was invented. I guess around 1910 or so. Goes right up until today. And we'll try and present the best things that we can within the space available. We'd be limited to several thousand because . . . Of course there are many, many thousands of records, but we'll try and get the best so that anybody who lives in the White House or who's a guest in the White House can have the benefit of these great recordings. And that's just this red hot minute, we just had our first meeting yesterday.

Conover: How did you feel about the personally conducted tour of the White House and the reception upstairs in the living quarters with Mrs. Nixon?

Mercer: I was very flattered and impressed. I really was. And I was completely inarticulate as I always am. I'm not . . . Today I'm talking too much, but yesterday I couldn't say a word. I just looked. I couldn't speak for looking. I was just looking at all those beautiful rooms, all the portraits of the past presidents. All the history and the things that must have gone on under that roof and the dignitaries that must have visited. It's quite impressive and it's quite beautiful. Beautifully kept up and something to be very proud of. I wish they'd do the same with all the historic things in the rest of the country. I come from a little historic town called Savannah. It's got a lot of old buildings, a lot of history and they're just beginning to do that. I don't mean rebuild it like Williamsburg. I mean shore it up. Keep the facade and put in great plumbing and air conditioning but keep the antiquity like Paris does. If you go to Paris you'll see that they don't

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fool around with those artworks or those old buildings. They just bring them up to date on the inside. And that's what has been done to the White House and that's what should be done in every historical place in America. Keep the indigenous thing that the natives of that particular place are proud of. If it's in Mexico, New Mexico then keep the New Mexican and Indian architecture, Spanish influence, and in New England, same thing. If you'll go to Richmond, Virginia you'll see it's all fairly Jeffersonian in architecture. There's a similarity and it makes for a great attractiveness of the region. And I wish it were done more everywhere. New York City is going to be skyscraper city, you know. Los Angeles is going to be something else again. Athens on the Pacific or whatever, you know.

Conover: Horizontal skyscrapers.

Mercer: Yeah, wide, big wide avenues and beautiful, beautiful sunlit streets, but whatever it is it ought to be done the best way we can do it without destroying the historic significance and the old historic beauty. There's some buildings, like the Plaza Hotel, you're just not going to find anything much prettier, I don't care how new it is. Some buildings are ugly and they could be taken down, like auditoriums and, you know, artillery barracks and things like that.

Conover: Back into a series of programs after they come out of a record. This will run into three or four, five, six programs anyway when we lay records in. I've had one hour of sleep in the last two days as you know. And I'm beginning to stumble a little bit.

Mercer: Don't you think we ought to knock it off?

Conover: That's what I was about to, that was what I was saying as a matter of fact.

Mercer: Let's say au revoir.

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Conover: Well, that's what I want you to do. Tell what a great honor it was to be on my program and all that.

Mercer: Willis, this is not the first time I've been on your program. I appreciate it. I think it's marvelous to be invited. I think it's always pleasant to have an articulate, sensible, sensitive man to talk to especially one who loves music. It's gratifying to be able to talk about it honestly and I hope without sounding too conceited . . . If I sound conceited it isn't that I really am, it's that I know what I'm talking about. I've been writing songs for 50 years. I feel that while I'm not the best, I'm good at my work, and I don't mean to sound conceited but I love to talk about it and I hope it hasn't bored your listeners too much. And thank you very much for inviting me.

Conover: Johnny, I don't know what this conceit business is. You responded only to specific questions I gave you and you responded honestly and even had I not given you leads there wasn't a note of conceitedness that I could detect. I want to say this, that I have a very confused relationship with you. And that is I have admired you as an artist for so many years and am in awe of you as an artist and yet like you so much as a friend that I sort of vacillate between which way to approach you.

Mercer: Thank you. Well, I'll tell you the way I feel about the artist part is when you work side by side with Jack Teagarden and he outsings you, night after night, and he outplays anybody, and you work side by side with Benny Goodman who plays better than probably anybody in the world on his instrument. Artie Shaw who is certainly not far behind if at all. All these guys, the Dorsey Brothers who were my personal friends, Glenn Miller and Joe Venuti and those guys. And all those guys that are playing now in the world's greatest jazz band. You just don't feel like

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much of performer that's all. But I do feel that I can hold my own as a writer.

Conover: Pretty good talker too, John.

Mercer: Well, thanks.

Conover: Thank you, Johnny. Johnny Mercer. Willis Conover speaking. This is part one of "Music USA".

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