The Classic Hoagy Carmichael. By John Edward Hasse. (Indiana-
polis and Washington, D.C.: Indiana Historical Society and
Smithsonian Collection of Recordings, 1988. Illustrations,
notes on the recordings, select filmography, select bibliogra-
phy, select discography. Booklet and album or cassette, $42.00.)

Numerous scholarly and creative works have analyzed and
celebrated the impact of America’s first jazz age, which began after
World War I. In The Classic Hoagy Carmichael John Edward
Hasse, curator of American music at the Smithsonian Institution,
presents a unique version of that decade and its long-term influ-
ence via one musical career. A collaboration between the Indiana
Historical Society and the Smithsonian, this collection is an im-
pressive tribute to Hoagy Carmichael; it also makes a valuable
contribution to the history of American popular music.

Hoagland Howard Carmichael was born in 1899 and came of
age during the important social and cultural changes that shaped
modern American life before and immediately after World War I. According to Carmichael in his 1965 autobiography, Sometimes I
Wonder, his was a time when “jazz maniacs were being born and I
was one of them.” Carmichael’s earliest musical influences came
from his mother’s piano performances, including some at Indiana
University fraternity parties, and informal instruction from a
black pianist, Reginald Duvall, whom Carmichael met in Indiana-
polis. In the 1920s Carmichael participated as a performer and
composer in the early college-based jazz network that developed in
Indiana and adjoining midwestern states. Cornetist Leon “Bix”
Biederbecke had a profound influence on Carmichael during these
formative years. Carmichael practiced his trade in New York and,
after 1936, in California.

Hasse correctly describes this project as a “sonic portrait of one
of America’s foremost creators of songs” (p. 21). The well-illus-
trated album set contains fifty-seven musical selections and a
sixty-three-page booklet that provides a chronological overview of
Carmichael’s life and musical career including brief evaluations of
his skills as a composer, lyricist, and performer. Careful attention
is paid to historical context.

The musical selections provide the central historical record.
Beginning with a 1927 version of “Riverboat Shuffle” by Frankie
Trumbauer and his orchestra, the albums proceed through seventy
years of Carmichael’s music. As Hasse notes, these songs “tell a
tale about Carmichael’s active and eclectic life and the lives his
songs have led on their own” (p. 21). Because the songs are performed by over thirty individual singers, bands, or orchestras, listeners benefit from a versatile set of interpretations that range from those of Paul Whiteman and Kate Smith to Louis Armstrong and Wynton Marsalis. Carmichael himself is featured on nine cuts, which the producers use to document the musician's developing vocal and compositional talents. Included are two versions each of Carmichael's best-known hits, “Lazy River,” “Georgia on My Mind,” “The Nearness of You,” “Rockin’ Chair,” and “Skylark,” as well as six versions of his immortal “Stardust.” Hasse provides an informative additional discography, bibliography, and filmography as references for further study.
The Hoagy Carmichael collection is an excellent testimony to what jazz historian Ted Gioia calls the “symbiotic relationship” between American popular song and jazz music. As these albums demonstrate, Carmichael’s most accomplished work took place at the sometimes elusive boundary between these two musical areas. Interestingly, Carmichael’s ear for this protean material developed because of his appreciation of American vernacular music, including ragtime, spirituals, and circus tunes. As Carmichael stated in his autobiography, he was pleased that he had written tunes that sounded like “folksongs” because they “could be sung all the way through by drunken quartets or by blondes over a piano bar.” Hasse notes that Carmichael demonstrated this talent for attracting a wide audience not only with nostalgic songs like “Lazy River” and “Georgia on My Mind” but also with the piano standard, “Heart and Soul,” which generations of children continue to play as though it had come from an anonymous folk tradition (p. 15). Some American song traditions come laden with potentially offensive racial and ethnic stereotypes, of course, and Carmichael found that he needed to change certain “controversial” lyrics in songs like “Hong Kong Blues” (p. 37). One wishes that Hasse had commented more on what Carmichael found distinctive about African-American and other musical traditions.

Carmichael’s career also embodied the commercial congruence between jazz influences and pop music. The diversity of performers and performance styles in these recordings effectively document the wide range of musical possibilities for compositions like Carmichael’s. Indeed, Hasse writes that Carmichael “blazed a trail as one of the first singer-songwriters in the age of mass media” (p. 13). His abilities developed with the emerging phonograph recording, radio, and film industries. He listened to race records as a youngster and wrote music for Hollywood films as an adult. His music illustrates the important role that visual as well as aural music played in the dissemination of jazz.

Perhaps the most telling event from Carmichael’s Hollywood tenure came when he played a pianist named “Smoke” in the 1950 cinema tribute to his hero Bix Beiderbecke. The film gave Carmichael an opportunity to celebrate the dawn of a new musical era and his personal role in creating it. Jazz age history has frequently been distorted by nostalgic portrayals of flappers, sheiks, and jazz hounds; but as The Classic Hoagy Carmichael aptly demonstrates, there were thoughtful young white men and women who embraced jazz as a language for communicating new values and ideas. Carmichael was one of them, and his love for early jazz launched him on a career in popular music that symbolized many of the best creative possibilities of those jazz influences that entered the mainstream of American popular music.

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