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## Hoagy Carmichael: A Biographical Sketch

by John Edward Hasse

The year 1899 was a seminal one in American music. For in the space of seven months three auspicious events took place. Scott Joplin published his *Maple Leaf Rag*—whose acceptance would become emblematic of the mainstreaming of African American music in American culture. And two figures who would play pivotal roles in 20<sup>th</sup> century music—Duke Ellington and Hoagy Carmichael—were born.

Born Hoagland Howard Carmichael in Bloomington, Indiana, he grew up in very modest circumstances. His father earned an on-again, off-again living as an electrician. His mother played piano for dances at local fraternity parties and at “silent” movies. Hoagy would tag along. Like a sponge, he absorbed music from his mother, from the visiting circuses, and from the black families and churches in his neighborhood. Ragtime was in the air, and his mother mastered the *Maple Leaf Rag* and other popular tunes of the day.

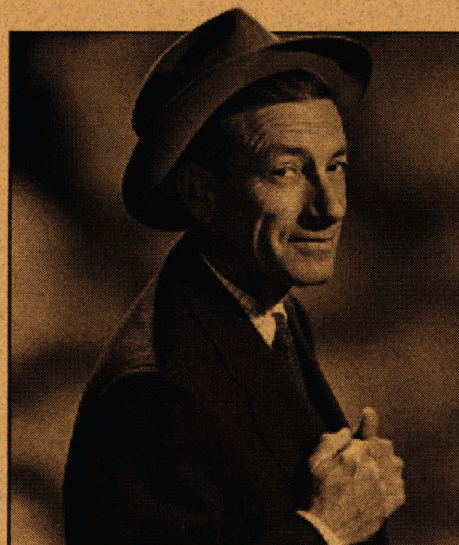
In 1916, his family moved to Indianapolis. There, Hoagland came under the influence of an African-American pianist named Reginald DuValle, who gave him a great piece of advice: “Never play anything that ain’t right,” he admonished the young pianist. “You may not make a lot of money, but you’ll never get hostile with yourself.” DuValle gave Carmichael pointers about playing hot ragtime and the emerging style of jazz. Carmichael sought out cheap pianos in restaurants, night spots, and brothels where he was allowed to sit in.

Back in Bloomington in 1919, Carmichael booked the Louisville-based band of Louie Jordan (not the later jump-blues singer), and this experience spurred Carmichael into becoming a self-described “jazz maniac.” He also listened to records avidly. He made a trip to Chicago, where he heard Louis Armstrong—a musician who would influence him (and with whom he would record later).

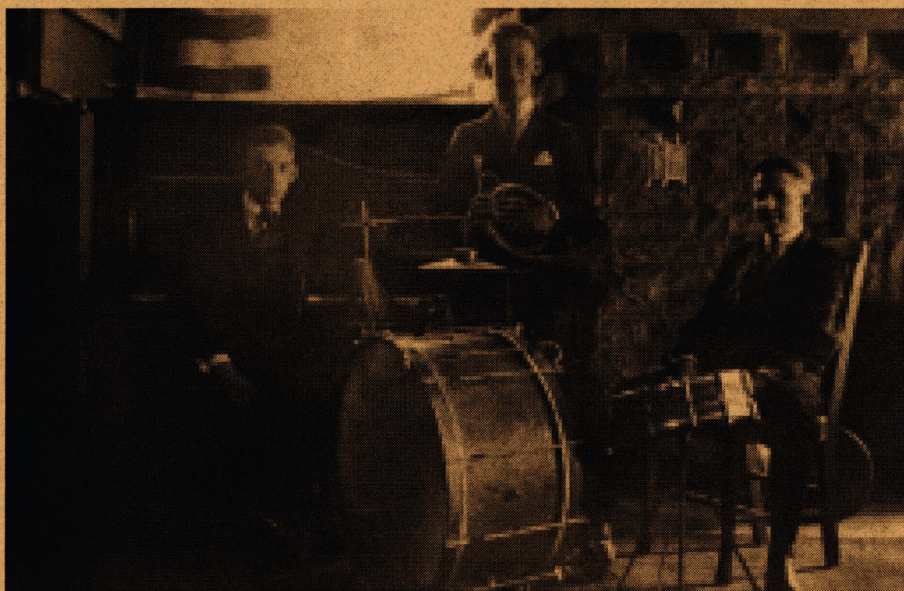
After completing high school, Carmichael entered Indiana University where, judging from his memoir *The Stardust Road*, it would seem he majored in girls, campus capers, and hot music. He reveled in a growing passion for jazz, and started his own group, Carmichael’s Collegians, which developed a reputation not only on campus, but in the region, as they traveled through Indiana and Ohio to entertain young dancers.

In the spring of 1924, Bix Beiderbecke—a young cornetist out of Davenport, Iowa—came to Indiana University. Carmichael booked him to play a series of ten

fraternity dances, and the two became fast friends. It was for Beiderbecke that Carmichael wrote his first piece, titling it *Free Wheeling*. Beiderbecke took it with him to Richmond, Indiana (100 miles to the east), home of the early record company,







**Hoagy's first band, 1919, taken at the Kappa Sigma House.  
Horn: Ted Cadou, Drums: Beshenbeizer.**

Gennett Records, and waxed it with his seven-piece band, The Wolverines. It was now re-titled *Riverboat Shuffle*.

Carmichael himself got a chance to record at Gennett studios, in 1927. One of the numbers he recorded on Halloween, 1927, was an up-tempo wordless original called *Star Dust*. It initially landed with a thud.

Meanwhile, Carmichael managed to secure his Bachelor's degree in 1925 and a law degree in 1926, both at Indiana University. After completing his law degree he briefly hung out a shingle in West Palm Beach, Florida, but after happening on a recording of his song *Washboard Blues*, he gave up law for good in favor of music.

Carmichael closed the chapter on the first of three periods in his life when he left Indiana in 1929 and moved to New York City—where you had to go to make it in the music business. By day he worked for a brokerage house, while by night he wrote songs and made musical contacts, among them his idols Beiderbecke and Louis Armstrong, as well the Dorsey brothers, clarinetist Benny Goodman, trombonist Jack Teagarden. And a hopeful lyricist out of Savannah, Georgia, named Johnny Mercer—ten years Carmichael's junior. They began writing songs together, such as *Lazy Bones*, which became a huge hit in 1933, even at the depth of the Depression.

In January, 1929, Mills Music Company of New York published Carmichael's *Stardust*, still a wordless instrumental. In May of that year, the piece was published as a song, with lyrics by Mitchell Parrish, a New York lyricist working for Mills. But still the song went nowhere.

In May, 1930, bandleader Isham Jones recorded the song, slowing the tempo and now the song began its skyward ascent, as more and more musicians were attracted to its dreamy, romantic qualities.

Carmichael was now writing folksy songs that would become jazz standards—notably *Rockin' Chair* (copyrighted in 1930) and *Lazy River* (1931). During the five years from 1929 to 1934, Carmichael made 36 recordings for the Victor company, the nation's leading record label. He was rubbing elbows, and recording, with some of the great talents in jazz: Louis Armstrong, Henry "Red" Allen, Bix Beiderbecke, Benny Goodman, Mildred Bailey, and Jack Teagarden. In 1931, he was admitted to membership in the American Society of

Composers, Authors, and Publishers (ASCAP), signifying his arrival in the songwriting fraternity.

In 1931, the death of his close friend Beiderbecke closed a chapter in his life and seemed to lessen his fire for jazz. By the mid-1930s, he was enjoying considerable financial success as a songwriter, and the mainstream beckoned him.

He made several life changes in 1936. He married Ruth Meinardi of Winona Lake, Indiana. The couple would have two sons—Hoagy Bix and Randy—though the marriage would break up in 1955. And in 1936 Carmichael left New York City for good, thus closing the second big

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chapter in his life. He moved to Hollywood, where, as he put it, “the rainbow hits the ground for composers.” Thus began the third and final phase of his musical career. Working for Paramount Pictures, he teamed with lyricist Frank Loesser on such songs as *Two Sleepy People*, *Small Fry*, and *Heart and Soul*. In 1939, Carmichael and Mercer collaborated on a Broadway musical, *Walk with Music*, but it closed quickly; this would be Carmichael’s only foray into musical theater. Otherwise, he composed “independent songs”—songs meant to stand alone of any production—as well as songs for the movies.

After a bit part as a piano player in the 1937 film *Topper*, Carmichael played roles in other movies, including *To Have and Have Not* (1942) where Lauren Bacall introduced *How Little We Know*; *The Best Years of Our Lives* (1946); *Canyon Passage* (1945, where he singing of his *Ole Butter-milk Sky* helped make it a hit); and *Young Man with a Horn* (1950), a fictionalized life of his good friend Beiderbecke.



**Carmichael signing autographs for fans in Portland, Oregon, mid-1940s.**

In the 1940s, Carmichael’s career took off in multiple ways—as a songwriter, as a singer recording for three labels, as a movie actor, as a radio star with his own series on three networks, and as an author: his first book of memoirs, *The Stardust Road*, was published in 1946. More than any other decade, the ‘40s marked the peak of his career and popularity.

One of his songs from 1942, the resplendent *Skylark*, with a fine Mercer lyric, like *Stardust*, seemed to have the improvisations built right into the melody; it became a

standard among singers and jazz musicians. In many of his songs from his California years, however, the jazz influence is not as obvious.

Another collaboration with Mercer, the 1951 film song *In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening* earned Carmichael an Academy Award for best song. Several of his 1950s songs including *My Resistance Is Low* and *Winter Moon*, found modest success, and he continued to compose, but he would have no more major successes as a songwriter. He had enjoyed a fertile creative run of more than twenty years, no mean feat in the fast-evolving, fickle world of popular music. And popular tastes in music were changing in the 1950s. Rhythm and blues and rock and roll brought harmonically simplified songs, heavy with beat, to the fore, grabbed young listeners, and began taking over the airwaves. The “golden era” of American popular song was, in the view of many, over with.

But once launched, many of Carmichael’s songs took on lives of their own, finding favor and permanent homes in the repertoires of singers and instrumentalists from various corners of American music. When, for example, Ray Charles made a huge hit and earned a Grammy Award for his moving rendition of *Georgia*, it helped the song find new audiences and live on in cultural memory. Already an evergreen, *Stardust* grew taller and stouter during the late 1950s and the 1960s, and RCA Victor even issued an LP, *The Stardust Road*, with nothing but different versions of the song. In 1965, his second book of memoirs, *Sometimes I Wonder*, was issued.

Carmichael became something of a fixture on television of the 1950s, even playing a straight dramatic role on the TV Western, *Laramie*, in 1959-60. He became an avid golfer and coin collector, and still wrote songs, though hardly any of them were to be recorded. He maintained an interest in children and in 1971 published *Hoagy Carmichael’s Music Shop*, a collection of songs he composed for children.

In 1977, Carmichael married the actress Wanda McKay after what was termed “a long courtship.” Golf and coin collecting were two avid pursuits. He returned a number of times to his native Indiana, and, as his years grew, was increasingly honored. In 1972, Indiana University



awarded him an honorary doctorate and in 1974, the university's rare book archive, the Lilly Library, curated an exhibition in his honor. In 1979, Carnegie Hall held a tribute concert. In 1980, a stage production, *Hoagy, Bix, and Wolfgang Betthoven Bunkhaus*, moved from England to the United States, playing in Indianapolis and Los Angeles.

After suffering a heart attack, Carmichael died at his home in Rancho Mirage, California, on December 27, 1981. His body was returned to his native Bloomington for burial.

In the years after his death, his place in the cultural firmament has slowly risen. His family donated his archives and memorabilia to Indiana University, which in 1986 opened the Hoagy Carmichael Room in his honor. In 1988, the Indiana Historical Society and the Smithsonian Institution issued a lavishly illustrated boxed set of recordings, *The Classic Hoagy Carmichael*, which earned Grammy Award nominations for Best Album Notes and Best Historical Album. In 1997, the United States Postal Service, acting on a recommendation from this author, issued a commemorative postage stamp in his honor. During his centennial year of 1999, there were radio broadcasts, concert programs, and songbook publications. His two memoirs were restored to print when Da Capo Press issued them in a combined edition—*The Stardust Road & Sometimes I Wonder: The Autobiographies of Hoagy Carmichael*. And came word of a forthcoming biography by the cornetist and author Richard M. Sudhalter.

With rare exceptions, until Carmichael came along, songwriters were a separate group from singers. Something of a modern minstrel, Carmichael was one of the first singer-songwriters in the age of mass media. He paved the way for later such performing writers as Bob Dylan, Billy Joel, Bruce Springsteen, and Joni Mitchell. His down-home Hoosier accent and singing style he described as “flatsy through the nose” made him seem like one of the people. In fact, more so than many songwriters (for example, fellow Hoosier Cole Porter), Carmichael's songs appealed to all sections of American society—from the Wall Street broker to the sharecropper farmer. He was a musical democrat.

If Carmichael's singing voice was as unmistakable as his nickname “Hoagy,” similarly no one would mistake his songs for those of Gershwin or Porter or any other songwriter. While there is no single Carmichael “sound,” his songs nonetheless sound like *him*. His melodies are

so strong and distinctive that they usually dominate the other elements of his songs. Many of these melodies move to unusual intervals, cover a wide range, and display the instrumental influence of jazz. Most have few repeated notes, and most travel an unpredictable path—they are fresh. And that's one reason why so many of them have remained with us for decades.

His two greatest songs, *Stardust* and *Skylark*, reveal deep jazz influences: eloquent, lyrical, striking melodies that seem like Beiderbeckian solos captured for all time. The composer himself said, “The Bix influence was there. And the improvisations are already written.” Other songs reveal a gift for harmony: the unusual chord progressions in *Baltimore Oriole*, the unconventional harmonies that end *Rockin' Chair*, the creative middle sections (what musicians call the bridge) of both *Skylark* and *Georgia*, and the abrupt key change in the chorus of *Washboard Blues*. His music was deeply rooted in his native Indiana, and in the ragtime and jazz he grew up with, as much as any influence from Tin Pan Alley. He turned instinctively to the vernacular sounds of Indiana, New Orleans, and Chicago. His world of songs was often small-town, early twentieth-century America, a time of *Lazy Rivers*, old *Rockin' Chairs*, and *Watermelon Weather*. So familiar and timeless were Carmichael's songs that several entered aural tradition. *Rockin' Chair* seemed to some so down-home that they thought it a folk song. With its repeating notes and stepwise melodic motion, *Heart and Soul* was so easy to remember that, in the years after 1950, it became familiar to virtually every American kid with a piano and a pal to play the other part. It was common coin among children.

And so it was—through the uniqueness of his songs, the charm of his performances, and the technology of the mass media—that Hoagy Carmichael's music found a place in the American consciousness, and that of much of the English-speaking world. His songs are at least as enduring as many public buildings of his day. And no doubt they will continue to give meaning and pleasure to people for a very, very long time.

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John Edward Hasse is Curator of American Music at the National Museum of American History, Smithsonian Institution. He is the author of *Beyond Category: The Life and Genius of Duke Ellington* and the editor of *Jazz: The First Century*. He produced and annotated the three-disc boxed set of recordings, *The Classic Hoagy Carmichael*. Hasse holds M.A. and Ph.D. degrees from Indiana University. He lectures and performs widely in American music.



## From the Departing Director

By Gloria J. Gibson

I am not leaving Indiana University, nor am I completely leaving the Archives of Traditional Music. I have, however, made a few office changes. First, I am now a faculty member in the new department of Folklore and Ethnomusicology here at IU. Previously, ethnomusicology was a program within the Folklore Institute. Second, I have accepted the position as Associate Vice Chancellor in the Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA). This new office, the result of a recent university-wide restructuring, serves as the advocacy arm for students of color, and the diversity education program for all students. The Latino Cultural Center, the African American Cultural Center, and the Asian Cultural Center also report to OMA. During the past twenty years at IU, from



**Gloria Gibson and Hoagy Bix Carmichael**

graduate student to associate vice chancellor, I have had several academic and administrative homes. Important threads, however, run through most of my experiences over the last two decades: the study of various aspects of African American culture, a commitment to the importance of archives, and advocacy for students of color. I am enormously proud that I served as Director of the Archives, and I hope to stay involved in the future. A search begins in the fall for a new director. In the interim, Ruth Stone has once again picked up the torch and will serve as director.

I will resist the temptation to discuss my four years at the Archives, but I will briefly mention a few gratifying experiences over the past few years. First and foremost, it was a pleasure working with the staff at ATM: Mary Russell Bucknum, Marilyn Graf, Suzanne Mudge, Peter

Alyea and Jonathan Cargill. Mary and Peter are now at the Library of Congress, and Jonathan is working fulltime as a music producer and running a record label. Suzanne recently received promotion and tenure, and Marilyn continues to provide institutional memory and vital links with other archives personnel, collectors, and patrons. This immensely dedicated and extremely competent staff contributes immensely to the Archives' international reputation as a facility of excellence.

Second, the Archives received funding from two prestigious agencies: the National Endowment for the Humanities and the Institute for Museum and Library Services. The NEH grant, "New Technology and Expanding Access for the Archives of Traditional Music," paved the way for us to complete the interactive CD-ROM titled, "Music and Culture of West Africa: The Straus Expedition." The CD-ROM will be available next year through Indiana University Press. The Archives and the IU Digital Library Program also received a grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services. The award funded a project to catalog, preserve, and digitize the Hoagy Carmichael collections at Indiana University. World wide web users can listen to excerpts of Carmichael's music or view images of original musical scores, photographs, scrapbooks, and lyric sheets. The site [www.dlib.indiana.edu/collections/hoagy/index.html](http://www.dlib.indiana.edu/collections/hoagy/index.html) also contains introductory materials and a complete finding aid. These two projects promote the Archives mission of preservation, outreach and access.

The four years also provided the opportunity for me to meet many wonderful people: Hoagy Bix Carmichael, the Jamaican poets, composer and musician Patrice Rushin, past president of the Laura Boulton Foundation, Shirley Porter, Voice of America correspondent Leo Sarkisian, and writer/researcher Lee Nichols, just to name a few. I also met many talented, creative, and intelligent students



**Gloria Gibson with Henry Glassie and Bill Ferris**



who worked as graduate assistants or researched as Laura Boulton Junior Fellows, including Daniel Reed, who is co-creator of the CD-ROM. It was also a pleasure to occasionally talk with Dr. George List, who represents a wealth of knowledge.

Finally, the 1998 Society for Ethnomusicology Conference Preconference Symposium, organized by the SEM Archiving Committee and the Archives of Traditional Music, and held in celebration of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Archives of Traditional Music was professionally and personally rewarding. "Ethnographic Futures: Issues in Documentation and Fieldwork" presented a range of papers examining early history, ethical and legal issues, and technology and archiving. Tony Seeger presented an inspiring paper

(see *RESOUND*, volume xv111, number1) outlining the challenges for archives in the next millennium. Several technology projects were demonstrated including an early CD-ROM prototype.

It was with great respect and enthusiasm that I served as Director of the Archives of Traditional Music. There are many challenges and opportunities the Archives will face in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century. Indiana University is fortunate to have a renowned collection of world music, and a professional staff regarded as best in the field. We must all continue to support the Archives so that it can continue to preserve and expand its collections, and continue to make them available through traditional and new technologies. Best wishes for the future!