

Southern Charm: Two of a Kind + One

Nancy McGraw, Johnny Mercer & Mark Nadler

By Jerry Osterberg

In the Fall of 2019, during the innocent pre-Covid era, I had the welcome assignment to review Nancy McGraw’s delightful show *In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening* at the Laurie Beechman Theatre. That night I wrote: “...McGraw, brimming with enthusiasm, was clearly eager to share her joy with the audience.” After attending the latest edition of McGraw’s love letter to Johnny Mercer at the March meeting of the American Popular Song Society, again with the strong support of her Musical Director, Mark Nadler, my observation remains unchanged.

Although the set list varied somewhat from the show I saw originally, it was all Mercer’s lyrics joined to the music of several extraordinary composers, their songs embedded deep within the memory of the eighty or so APSS members gathered around the Zoom screen. More and more hopeful that the performing arts community will soon return live, all we can do for now is to hang on until there is no need for recorded programs, sadly presented sans applause, which is what all performers crave and the primary reason they do what they do.

As with other APSS programs over this season, March being one of six to date, and a trio of shows ahead McGraw’s presentation was comprised of both live and recorded music and commentary. It is no coincidence that these shows have proceeded seamlessly,



Johnny Mercer at the piano

thanks to the exceptional support of Jaime Maletz, the resident tech expert who manages to keep the feet of every APSS member and performer alike, firmly planted within the 21st Century.



Nancy McGraw

As if shot from a circus canon, the irrepressible team of Jim Caruso and Billy Stritch suddenly appeared on stage, opening with their *Monster Mercer Medley*: “Old Black Magic,” “Any Place I Hang My Hat is Home,” “Blues in the

Night,” “Dream,” “On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe,” “In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening,” “Goody – Goody” and “Bob White.” To say that this was a high energy presentation would be an understatement. Rather, watching Caruso and Stritch perform with such cheery gusto was like drinking enough caffeine to prevent you from ever sleeping again.

Speaking of staying awake, Amanda McBroom, joining us live from California, winked appreciation for the early morning wakeup call. This may have been her earliest performance ever, but McBroom sang “Days of Wine and Roses” with the heartfelt passion and tenderness which one associates with the classic Oscar- and Grammy-winning song. Another live guest was Daryl Sherman, whose voice and style are ideally suited to the music of Jerome Kern and Johnny Mercer, in all his moods. She contributed “I’m Old Fashioned,” written for the film *You Were Never Lovelier*. The song was performed by Rita Hayworth in a scene with Fred Astaire— Hayworth’s singing voice supplied by Nan Wynn.

One of the sweetest moments of the afternoon was a rendition of “Skylark” by the Broadway actress and singer Barbara Walsh. Mark Nadler wrote a striking arrangement of the Mercer and Hoagy Carmichael creation, performed by the singer, whose glorious bell-like tones and long, luxurious

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President's Message...

Linda Amiel Burns, President

Holiday Greetings to our APSS Members, Family, Friends, and Fans!

I am wishing you all a very Happy Passover, Easter, and Spring! It's amazing to realize that we have nearly completed our 2020-2021 season with exciting all-virtual programs on Zoom! There are only three months remaining, and our coming programs are all top-notch. I know that you won't want to miss any of them.

April 10th we are celebrating Jazz Month with a terrific program being co-produced and presented by Marilyn Lester and Danny Bacher.

May 9th will bring us Sandi Durell's 16th wonderful award-winning Annual Songwriter Series. It's always a crowd favorite, featuring a great line-up of composers and performers.

June 13th we will be celebrating Dean Martin on his birthday, with a program co-produced by Bill Boggs and Will Friedwald. There is a rumor that Dean's daughter, Dina, may be joining us!

I cannot sufficiently thank the talented Nancy McGraw for the remarkable program she performed last month. In "At Home with Johnny Mercer," Nancy shared many years of research and knowledge, and brought on an all-star, exceptional cast. Details are in our lead story, written by our editor, Jerry Osterberg. If you missed the show, the link to our Zoom program is on the website: www.apssinc.org.

Our Zoom Director, Jamie Maletz, has resigned, due to an over-loaded schedule. But, never fear—at the next meeting you will get to know our new Zoom Director, Amy Engelhardt, who is already working with the April show. Many thanks to Sandi Durell for helping to make this happen so seamlessly.

I am looking forward to seeing you all on April 10th, and am hoping that you will continue to spread the word about APSS and all we are doing.

Last month we had a record turnout, proving that we are growing and thriving, even during these challenging times.

Virtual Hugs,

Linda

Linda Amiel Burns, President
American Popular Song Society



Sheldon Harnick, Linda Amiel Burns, 1993 revival of "She Loves Me" – Lunch With The Stars (Broadway Museum Cafe)

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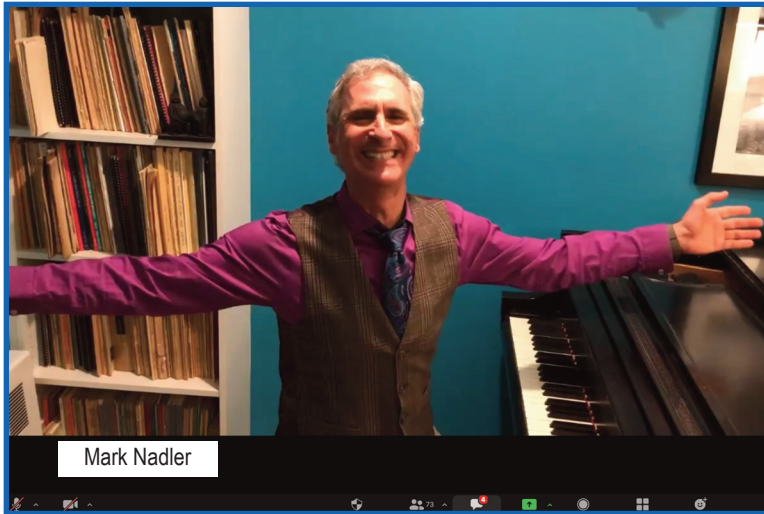
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phrasing infused the piece with a palpable essence. Carmichael wrote the melody based on a Bix Beiderbecke cornet improvisation for what was supposed to have been a musical about his late friend Beiderbecke. He turned the music over to Mercer who added the lyrics, said to be inspired by his yearning for Judy Garland, with whom he had a stormy love affair.

Laurence Maslon, a writer, theater director, producer, teacher, and radio host, whose program *Broadway to Main Street* broadcasts on NPR, provided some fascinating history of Mercer's early experience with musical theater. Having appeared in the Garrick Gaieties, and following a decade of success in Hollywood, a fully engaged Mercer decided to extend his reach to Broadway: *Texas Li'l Darlin'*, *Top Banana*, *Saratoga*, *Li'l Abner*, and *St. Louis Woman*. Written with Harold Arlen and based on the novel *God Sends Sunday*, *St. Louis Woman* included the Nicholas Brothers and Pearl Bailey. Although it ran for just 113 performances in 1946, a few hit songs emerged from its disappointing showing: "Any Place I Hang My Hat is Home," "Come Rain or Come Shine," and "I Had Myself a True Love."

Again from California, but not appearing live, was actress and singer Linda Purl, who sang "Free and Easy," by Mercer and Harold Arlen, with the sound of the Pacific Ocean's surf behind her, and "Any Place I Hang My Hat is Home." Aaron Lee Battle, a winner of the Backstage Bistro Award for Outstanding Vocalist, and musical theater performer, most notably *Ragtime*, did a sparkling performance of "Come Rain or Come

Shine." Lumiri Tubo, a concert singer and musical theater actor: *The King and*



Mark Nadler

I and *A Raisin in the Sun*, and frequent performer on the *Seven Seas*, gave a



Jim Caruso & Billy Stritch

tender performance of "I Had Myself a True Love," the third of three songs to transition to the American Songbook from *St. Louis Woman*.

Will Friedwald was in the house with his rare film clips, always certain to generate a smile. As a singer and a genteel Southern raconteur, Mercer was a regular on television variety shows, such as those of Rosemary Clooney and Dinah Shore. He appears in a skit on the Clooney show with Clark Burroughs, later a member of the Hi Lo's, performing a duet of "Jamboree Jones." Similarly, he joins up with Shore for a

lively "You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby," and with Nat King Cole, who invited Mercer on his excellent but short-lived show for a funny "Save the Bones for Henry Jones."

McGraw's program would not have been complete without a real Southern boy from Mercer's hometown, Savannah, Georgia. Jim Wann, the creator of *Pump Boys and Dinnettes*, came on board to sing and play *Pardon My Southern Accent*, one of the many Mercer tunes Wann has been known to sing. Should anyone be wondering, his Southern accent is quite authentic. While Mark Nadler was McGraw's constant partner throughout the show, his solo of "Moon River" provided a special moment. As familiar as the song has become to us, it is not to be tossed off lightly. Nadler's performance was simply perfect. Throughout the afternoon, McGraw provided a running commentary about Mercer, the songs and their back stories, and the singers. She has a magnificent presence, at once accessible, easy on the eyes, and easy on the ears. The host reserved "I Remember You" for herself and performed it with her usual refined Southern charm. 🎵

If you enjoy our programs, please say so in the guestbook on our website:
www.APSSinc.org

The Unknown Duke Ellington

By Marilyn Lester

(Reprinted with permission from Theater Pizzazz)

Recently, in August, legendary jazz



Ellington and Bennett

and pop singer Tony Bennett celebrated his 94th birthday. And while his fame as a performing artist is widely known, Bennett has a lesser-known other identity—as a fine artist. His works, under his birth name, Anthony Benedetto, are in art collections and institutions worldwide. Bennett owes this career to another man, Duke Ellington, who also led two similar creative lives—as a world-renowned composer, pianist and bandleader and as a painter. (Click this link to hear Bennett speak about Duke’s influence in his life.)

Not many people are aware that Ellington, this great American genius, who wrote almost 3,000 musical works in many genres over a career that spanned 60 years, might well have had a career as an artist instead of in music.

Young Duke Ellington entered into a comfortable middle-class life at his birth (April 29, 1899) in Washington, DC, christened Edward Kennedy Ellington (Kennedy was his mother’s maiden name). Within the confines of racial segregation, Ellington’s family

prospered. His mother, Daisy, had completed high school, rare for a black woman at the time. His father, James

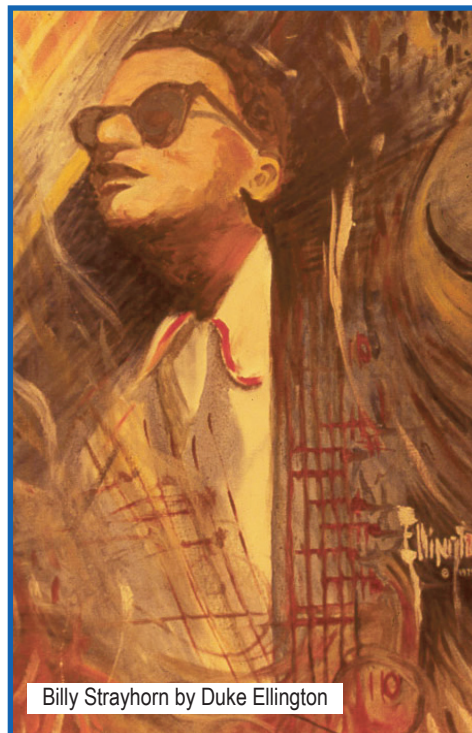
Edward, worked as a butler for a prominent white physician and was occasionally requested to assist at the White House for special catered events. Both played the piano. Until his only sibling, Ruth, was born in 1915, Ellington was a doted upon son whose mother encouraged him to greatness. He was always impeccably dressed and it was this deportment that earned him the regal nickname of “Duke,” but by whom... that depends on who’s telling the tale. Duke himself, very capable of being wry and sometimes a tease, gave a few versions of the story.

At age seven he

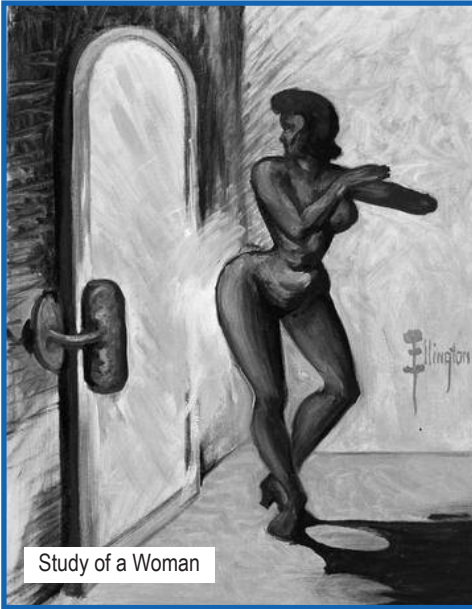
began piano lessons, but found his love of baseball more compelling, especially, as he reported, when President Teddy Roosevelt would ride by on his horse and stop to talk to the boys. And so Duke stopped piano instruction—his heart not in it. It was also at this time that his artistic abilities began to seriously manifest. In 1913, when it became time for high school, he chose the Armstrong Manual Training School to pursue a career in commercial art. Duke was never one for book learning, preferring to educate himself through his own pursuits. But even though it seemed art was on the ascendent, music was never far away as an interest and opportunity. A few more forces in Duke’s life also came into play at this time. He’d met New Jersey pianist, Harvey Brooks on a family trip to the Jersey shore and was impressed by him. Back in Washington, the very precocious Duke also began sneaking into pool halls where he could hear piano music being played. He resumed his piano lessons. This time he was eager, having been motivated by his observation that it was always the piano player who got the girls.

Ellington was ever a willing and hard

worker. In 1913 another event shaped his life; he took a job as a soda jerk at the Poodle Dog Cafe on Georgia Avenue. When the piano player there was incapacitated by his love of the bottle, Ellington’s boss would have him take over at the keys. Noodling around, he composed his first work, the “Soda Fountain Rag,” followed by “What You Gonna Do



Billy Strayhorn by Duke Ellington



Study of a Woman

When the Bed Breaks Down?” While studying art by day, he began to play at teenage gatherings and dances, soon gaining a reputation that made him exceedingly popular. This sideline to his education became a significant factor in Ellington’s life direction. Dancing became so popular in Washington that dance halls abounded. Duke sought out Washington band leaders for direction. Oliver “Doc” Perry taught him how to read music. Ellington soon began filling in for Perry and other musicians in clubs and cafes.

In 1916, Ellington won a poster contest sponsored by the NAACP and was deemed so talented to be offered a scholarship by Brooklyn’s Pratt Institute of Applied Arts. But in February 1917, three months before graduating from Armstrong High, he dropped out to begin his career as a professional musician. To earn money, he established a sign-painting business, working at his art by day and building his other career by night. When the US entered World War I, Duke registered for the draft and got a job as a messenger at the Navy Department. Due to the war, there was an influx of government visitors in the nation’s capital, which, in turn, created a surge of social activities—and

work for Washington musicians.

Ellington saw opportunity and he was learning to become a businessman. In early 1918 he formed his own group, The Duke’s Serenaders. Through business savvy and commitment, he began to book jobs further into the white community, at embassies, private mansions and Virginia society balls. Throughout, though, he still maintained his sign painting business. When customers came to him to create an advertisement for a dance, he would ask them if they needed a band and likewise, when someone wanted to hire a band for a dance, he would ask them if they needed a sign painter. He also continued his musical studies. Twice a week he went to the prominent Washington musician, Henry Grant (founder of the National Association of Negro Musicians, among other accomplishments) for lessons in harmony and additional studies in reading music.

Ellington’s reputation and popularity



Portrait of Lena Horne

continued to grow, especially between 1920 and 1923, with Duke forcefully seeking to better his musical skills and leadership abilities. In 1923, Ellington

and a few of his band members decided to crack the New York market. The effort was not an immediate success, but by the



Ellington painting Study of a Woman (image on left).

end of the year, through persistence, Ellington was beginning to establish himself and his band as a leading force in New York City’s jazz scene. He went from strength to strength musically, becoming the house band at the fabled Cotton Club in 1927, cementing his fame and path to greatness.

In an interview, Ellington once said it was easier to write music in the back of a taxicab than it was to paint. Yet he continued to paint for pleasure his life-long. He believed in having more than one creative pursuit, and that is the advice he gave Tony Bennett. Asked About the source of his creativity, he said, “Ideas? Oh, man, I’ve got a million dreams. That’s all I do is dream, all the time.” Duke Ellington was in constant motion. Of this he remarked, “What do people do who rest?” There’s no telling what heights Duke would have achieved had he pursued a career as a visual artist. But we do know that this towering individual, whose astounding genius goes beyond music, left behind a creative legacy “beyond category.”

Lucille Ball: Her Genius Is Never Forgotten

By Glen Charlow

As the title of the show indicated, Lucy, of course, was the star. While she could, at times, downplay her hard work, Ball was a perfectionist. Contrary to perception, rarely was anything ad-libbed. It was routine for the actress to spend hours rehearsing her antics and facial expressions. And her groundbreaking work in the area of comedy paved the way for future stars such as Mary Tyler Moore, Penny Marshall, Cybil Shepard, and even Robin Williams.



Her genius did not go unrecognized. During its six-year run, "I Love Lucy"'s success was unmatched. For four of its seasons, the sitcom was the number one show in the country. In 1953 the program captured an unheard of 67.3 audience share, which included a 71.1 rating for the episode that featured Little Ricky's birth, a turnout that surpassed the television viewing for President Eisenhower's inauguration ceremonies.

While the show ended in 1957, Desilu Productions continued on, producing more television hits like "Our Miss Brooks," "Make Room for Daddy," "The Dick Van Dyke Show", "The

Untouchables," "Star Trek," and "Mission Impossible".

In 1960, Lucille and Desi divorced. Two years later, Lucille, now remarried to comedian Gary Morton, bought out her former husband and took over Desilu Productions, making her the first woman to run a major television production studio. She eventually sold the company to Gulf and Western in 1967 for \$17 million.

More acting work followed, including a pair of sitcoms, "The Lucy Show" (1962 - 68) and "Here's Lucy" (1968 - 73). Both achieved a modest level of success, but neither captured the magic that had defined her earlier program with Arnaz. However, it didn't matter. Even if she had never done another piece of acting again, Lucille Ball's impact on the world of comedy, and the television industry in general, was widely recognized.

In 1971, she became the first woman to receive the International Radio and Television Society's Gold Medal. In addition, there were four Emmys, induction into the Television Hall of Fame and recognition for her life's work from the Kennedy Center for the Performing Arts.

In 1985, Lucille Ball strayed from her comedic background to take on a dramatic role as a homeless woman in the made-for-TV movie, "Stone Pillow". While hardly a smash hit, Ball earned some praise for her performance. Most critics, though, wanted to see a return to comedy and in 1986 she debuted a new CBS sitcom, "Life with Lucy". The program earned its star \$2.3 million but not much of an audience. After just eight episodes it was cancelled.

It was to be Ball's last real television



role. Three years later, on April 26, 1989, she died from a ruptured aorta following open-heart surgery at Cedars-Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. 🎵

Loving
LUCY

This article originally appeared in the November, 2011 issue of TIMES SQUARE CHRONICLES. It is rewritten here with permission from the Publisher of that paper.

Glen Charlow became a major Lucille Ball collector when he moved from Baltimore to New York in 1983 and has since become recognized by many as having one of the largest "Lucy" collections on the East Coast. Some may remember him from A & E's Biography when they did their tribute to Lucille Ball & Desi Arnaz. Many stills and photos of his are in that tribute as well as a few segments of his interview. That biography only aired once, Thanksgiving night, 1994. Now, living back in Baltimore since 2013, Glen occasionally performs his one-man show, "Loving Lucy: A Tribute To Lucille Ball, Desi Arnaz & I Love Lucy". When he's not collecting Lucy, Glen is fulfilling the graphic design needs for many performers. He performed this show for us back in June of 2012 when we were the New York Sheet Music Society. Read a review of that show: <http://www.lucilleball.net/cabaret-nysms.html>

Glen Charlow runs a website dedicated to Lucy: www.LucilleBall.net