

SKYLARK

The Life and Times of Johnny Mercer

Book Review by Jack Morrison

The Four Freshmen have close ties with Johnny Mercer. The current Freshmen not only recorded *Skylark* on their latest CD but over the years the Freshmen have recorded 16 other Johnny Mercer songs as well - probably more than any other songwriter (lyricist). The Freshmen were also signed to their first record contract with Capitol Records. Johnny started Capitol records and was its President. He wanted a certain type and style of artist and the Freshmen fit this concept very well.

This is a story about the life and times of one of America's top song lyricists. For twenty years, from the mid 1930s to mid 1950s, Mercer dominated the popular song charts. During this era, he had at least one song in the Top Ten for 221 weeks. For 55 weeks, he had two or more songs on the top 10 list. Not only were they popular back then, but they have endured as standards. His songs have more range and have taken on more of American life than any other songwriter. He could hiply write *Satin Doll* or *Midnight Sun*, folksy in *Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening* or *I'm An Old Cowhand*, childlike in *Jeepers Creepers* and pensive in *Moon River*, *Autumn Leaves*, *Skylark* or *Laura*.

In this book we get to see firsthand what times were like during the golden age of American song writing. Johnny came to New York as a young 19-year-old from a wealthy southern family trying to break into the exciting world of Show Business. After failing in trying to be an actor, he found his niche as a song lyricist. You get a firsthand view of tin pan alley, the jazz age with Paul Whiteman, and finally making his first hit with Hoagy Carmichael with *Lazy Bones* at the age of 24.

Johnny took Hollywood by storm in the late 30s and his impact was felt into the 60s. He founded Capitol Records as a start-up-recording studio with a few artists. He found Nat King Cole in a lounge one evening and immediately signed him to a record contract (but told Nat he would have to sing more rather than just play the piano with his trio). Peggy Lee and Stan Kenton were other early members of his small community of recording artists. He picked up Frank Sinatra when he was down and out in the early 50s. When the studio became the largest, Johnny decided it was no longer fun and decided to resign as President and sell the business.

Johnny was such a paradox. On one hand he was so kind and generous. He could be a perfect southern gentleman. When he drank, he tore into his friends and strangers alike with vicious abuse (but always sent them flowers and an apology note the next day). Even with all his successes, he was tormented with the fact that he never had a smashing Broadway hit like the other famous songwriters of his era.

The Four Freshmen

in Edmonds, WA - 2005

by Loren Knutsen

The Four Freshmen concert in Edmonds, Washington, is history, but this concert will remain in the minds of those who saw and heard it forever. The 900-seat auditorium was within a few seats of being full and the fifty seats that our group had reserved held forty-eight fans of the guys.

Let me back up a bit to say that this is the second time that the Four Freshmen have been the headliners at the "Edmonds Jazz Connection's" festival. Edmonds is about twenty miles north of Seattle and each year the Rotary Club of Edmonds "Daybreakers" sponsor a jazz festival. The proceeds from this event benefit the "Burned Children Recovery Fund," a nationwide organization based here in Edmonds. The jazz goes on in venues all over town and ends with a concert that features some nationally known jazz musicians. Our guys were selected for the first year (five years ago) and were so well received that they were chosen again for this year's concert.

The concert began with some vocal and instrumental groups from high schools and colleges around the state. The performances of these students was really very good and it was hard to believe that most of them had not played and sung together except for one or two rehearsals. After a short intermission it was time to dim the lights and welcome the Four Freshmen to the stage.

There is really no need to say very much about how good these four are as we already know that. We have come to expect them to be at their best at all times and we were not disappointed this time. They opened with an old favorite, *Day In, Day Out* and that got everyone on the edge of his seat. They have very good stage presence as they interact with the audience and incorporate local humor between songs. Bob Ferreira is a native of this part of the state and they made a lot of jokes about that at Bob's expense. I can always tell a lot about how well a performance is going by the expression on the faces in the audience. It was easy to tell that this one was going well.

A couple of us, Keith Rydman (the Washington State FFS Rep) and I had offered to sell CDs in the lobby and that went very well as we sold almost everything except the box they came in. So many folks converged on our sales table when it was over, waving money in the air and clamoring to get a CD, that we could hardly keep track of what we were doing. We were rather proud of our selling success until we realized that it was the Four Freshmen who sold the CDs and we were simply the clerks at the sales table.

The four of them sat at an adjoining table signing autographs and talking with fans as fast as they could but answering all the questions as if that was all they had to do. These guys really make a hit with their audience. Fans feel they know them personally after talking with them for only a very short time.