

2009 Georgia History Festival Featured Historical Figure Teacher Guide

Johnny Mercer
(1909-1976)



Photo date unknown, Image courtesy of Special Collections and Archives, Georgia State University Library

Explanation: In commemoration of the 100th anniversary of his birth, GHS chose Savannah native Johnny Mercer as the 2009 *Georgia History Festival* Featured Historical Figure. The biographical information below was developed to highlight his life and career as an actor, singer, and one of the most popular and successful songwriters of the 20th century. Click on the links below to explore Johnny Mercer's life and legacy.

John Herndon Mercer (1909-1976)



Portrait of Johnny Mercer, New York, N.Y., between 1946 and 1948, From the Library of Congress William P. Gottlieb Collection.

Johnny Herndon Mercer was one of the most popular and successful songwriters of the 20th century and one of Georgia's most well-known and talented native sons. He wrote more than 1,700 songs in his lifetime and sung and recorded many of them as well. Many of the songs Johnny wrote are still known and sung today; they've become American standards.

Throughout his life, Johnny's inspiration for many of his songs came from growing up in Savannah, Georgia. The history, beauty and charm of

Georgia's first city would follow Johnny as he moved to New York City and to Hollywood, California, singing and songwriting with celebrities such as Bing Crosby and Nat "King" Cole.

In addition to his prolific lyric writing, Johnny also was the founder and president of Capitol Records, using his musical skills to discover new talent and inspire performers to produce the best quality performances they could. He wrote songs for movies and for Broadway, and was nominated for a stunning 18 Academy Awards®, winning four Oscars® in his lifetime.

Johnny passed away at age 66, a relatively young age, especially for one so talented who brought so much beauty to the musical world. Johnny is a shining example of how a young man from a sleepy Georgia town in the early 20th century could go on to such great success and fame, but he always returned home to Savannah when he needed to escape the bustling city life in New York or Hollywood.

Growing Up in Savannah

An Early Love of Music



Christ Church, Savannah, 1950. From the Georgia Historical Society Foltz Photography Studio Collection (Savannah, Ga.), photographs, 1899-1960, 1360-05-05-07.

Johnny was born in Savannah, Georgia, on November 18, 1909. His father was an attorney and had a real-estate business, and he had a sister and three half brothers. Music was a big source of entertainment at the time, and Johnny grew up listening to his parents sing. His mother loved to sing ballads while his father favored turn of the century standards.

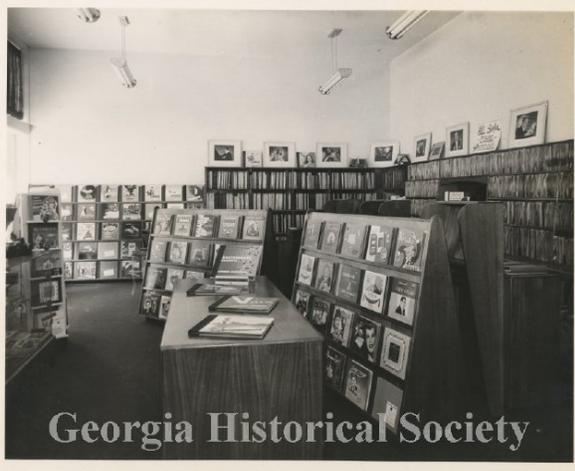
When he was six years old, Johnny began singing in the choir at Christ Church. He sang there until he left Savannah and was always entertaining his family and friends with performances. Johnny went anywhere he could to hear music.

I was always drawn to music and once followed a band I was always drawn to music and once followed a band around the town when I was six, which my mother must have found difficult to understand. And of course songs always fascinated me more than anything.

Before the age of digital music, the Mercer family relied on a Victrola phonograph to listen to music records. Johnny was constantly going to record stores to hear new music. In these stores, he would often listen to music by African-American musicians – kept separate from music by white performers during the time of segregation.

His family had a second home on Burnside Island, outside of Savannah. The family would spend summers there, his father driving the Model T automobile back and forth into Savannah each day to go to work. Their home backed up to the Back River, which was later renamed Moon River after one of Johnny's most famous songs. Johnny and his friends would pass their days exploring

the island's wilderness. The beauty of the island would stay with Johnny for the rest of his life, and he would often draw on images and experiences from this time when writing lyrics.



Haynes' Record Shop, Savannah, Ga., 1946, From the Georgia Historical Society Foltz Photography Studio Collection (Savannah, Ga.), photographs, 1899-1960, 1360-06-09-06.

Growing up in Savannah, Johnny attended [Massie School](#) in the city. Following in his father and grandfather's footsteps, Johnny went to the Woodberry Forest School in Virginia for high school. Here Johnny began experimenting with writing songs and poems, sketching and testing out rhyming word pairs as he embarked on his journey to becoming a lyricist. He also participated in literary and poetry clubs and was

known for his humor writing.

Despite his love of music and his interest in writing songs and lyrics, Johnny never learned how to play an instrument. His parents continually encouraged him to learn piano or trumpet, but he didn't pursue it. Even as a successful singer and songwriter, he never learned to read or write music properly. Instead, he would write lyrics to harmonies that were already written or use his own notations if he came up with the musical tune to accompany his lyrics.

Vocabulary

Attorney – Another word for lawyer, a profession where one conduct lawsuits or advises clients as to legal rights and obligations in other matters

Ballad – a popular song, especially one that is slow and/or romantic in nature

Choir – an organized group of singers, especially one for a church service

Lyricist – one who writes the lyrics or words for a song

Phonograph - an instrument that reproduces sounds by means of the vibration of a needle following a spiral groove on a revolving disc or cylinder, such as a record

Standard - a song that is continually played and used in popular culture, often rerecorded and/or performed by different artists

Segregation – the social separation of whites and African-Americans in the years following the Civil War until the Civil Rights Movement

Teaching Tips

Have students research technology from the early 20th century, such as the Model T, phonograph, and records and write an essay comparing similar technological innovations of the early 21st century.

As a class, pick a topic and have everyone participate in writing lyrics to an existing harmony. Songs could be set to something simple such as the tune for “Happy Birthday” or more complex like a pop song that most or all students will know. Show students how they can use a dictionary and rhyming dictionary to find words that work together, while still keeping on the song’s topic.

Johnny and Geechee Culture

Johnny grew up in coastal Georgia in the early 20th century, a time when racial segregation affected many areas of life. However, segregation didn’t necessarily extend to children and black and white children were allowed to play together until they were about 14 years old. Johnny had playmates who were often the children of black servants employed by his family.

In the summers, the Mercer family would escape the heat of Savannah for their home Vernon View on Burnside Island. A community of African Americans lived on the island, and their ancestors had been slaves before the Civil War. This group of people spoke an African-American dialect called Geechee, which was unique to the low country of Georgia.

Johnny, who was always interested in language, became fluent in the Geechee dialect during his summers at Vernon View, as did his mother. For the rest of their lives Johnny and his mother would sometimes speak to each other in Geechee dialect.

Not far from Vernon View, back on the mainland, was a small community called Pin Point. The African Americans in Pin Point caught and sold crabs, shrimp and oysters and sold them through the Pinpoint Oyster Factory. Johnny would go over to buy food for the family dinner and would end up staying and listening to the women talking and singing hymns as they shelled crabs or shucked oysters.

Johnny would also go to black churches in Savannah and Pin Point to listen to the black hymns and gospel music, which was different from the music he sang in the choir at Christ Church. He also attended the African-American Easter Day parade every year to hear the bands play.

Unlike many other songwriters of his time, Johnny was exposed to the music and language of southern African Americans. When Johnny was growing up and began writing songs, popular music had begun to absorb influences of black musical culture, such as jazz and blues. Segregation was so prevalent that it could dictate that whites should only listen to white music and blacks should only listen to black music, but Johnny contributed to the merging of music into a new sound.

Vocabulary

Geechee – a people and local dialect of lowcountry Georgia, descendants of West Africans who were brought to Georgia as slaves.

Gospel Music – genre of popular American hymns that emerged about 1870. Features strong vocals expressing personal or communal belief in Jesus Christ, often praising, worshiping or thanking God, Christ or the Holy Spirit.

Segregation – the social separation of whites and African Americans in the years following the Civil War until the Civil Rights Movement

Teaching Tips

Have students do research on how segregation affected African Americans after the Civil War but before the Civil Rights Movement. Have each student quickly present one aspect of life in a segregated society and start a class discussion about how this could affect other aspects of one's life, i.e., African Americans were required to ride in the back of the bus. What if it was full? Would someone have to wait for another bus? What if that person were late for work? Ask questions about why segregating is wrong, and include phrases such as "separate but equal" and what people meant by using that phrase.

Students can research other famous Georgians, and write an essay about their accomplishments, such as Justice Clarence Thomas and President Jimmy Carter. Other musical celebrities might include Andre Benjamin and Antwon Patton of OutKast or Trisha Yearwood. Have students discover how these people found success and how growing up Georgia affected their lives.

Early Acting Career



Kaufman's Orchestra Taken at Tybee Beach, 1930. From the Georgia Historical Society, Foltz Photography Studio (Savannah, Ga.), photographs, 1899-1960, 1360-23-07-06.

Like his father and grandfather before him, Johnny was expected to go on to college at Princeton University. However, while Johnny was in high school, his father's real-estate business lost nearly \$2 million by 1927 in the collapse of the Florida real-estate boom. The family was deeply in debt and his father could no longer afford to send him

to college. Johnny finished his last year at Woodberry Forest School in Virginia but did not graduate due to his poor grades. He then returned home and went to work for his father to help him reestablish his business.

Back in Savannah, Johnny continued listening and learning about music, taking advantage of live concerts and performances that came to the coastal town. His favorites were the dances out on Tybee Island, east of the city on the Atlantic Ocean. Tybee Island had a large open-air pavilion with a dance floor and crystal balls hanging from the roof that reflected the different-colored lights hung from the ceiling.

The summer after he returned home from high school was a magical time for Johnny, but he began to feel the draw of new places. His best friend was performing on ships that ran between Savannah and New York City. He hatched a plan to stowaway in his friend's cabin to make it to New York City. He decided to tell his mother who subsequently told his uncle who was the ship's purser. Not long after the ship was underway, Johnny was discovered and spent the remainder of the trip working below-decks to pay his way.

New York City was very different from Savannah. In Harlem, he could hear jazz and blues, and he could see vibrant musicals on Broadway. He bought his first set of sheet music while he was there, another step towards his future career. Johnny soon returned home to Savannah, but he continued to dream about returning to New York.



When he returned to Savannah he found a new job and decided to join the cast of a small theatre group. He did so well that the theatre group asked him to perform in their next production. This performance, called *Hero Worship*, was entered into a contest. Johnny and the rest of the cast traveled to New York City to compete against other small-town theatre groups. When they won the competition, Johnny was elated. He again went home to Savannah, but he was determined to return to New York City to find success as an actor.

Town Theatre's Performance of "Marco Millions", 1931. From the Georgia Historical Society, Foltz Photography Studio (Savannah, Ga.), photographs, 1899-1960, 1360-15-18-02.

Soon afterwards, Johnny decided to spend two weeks in New York City trying to find work as a stage actor. He soon had bit parts in a touring company that traveled to cities around the U.S. to perform. After several months traveling and performing, Johnny returned to New York City. He continued to look for work but spent his spare time playing music and writing lyrics. He would continue to try to act, but was able to earn income from songwriting.

During his first two years in New York City, he wasn't always successful, but he was persistent in following his dreams. He began to make contacts that helped him start and continue his career as a songwriter and lyricist.

Vocabulary

Cast – the set of actors in a dramatic production

Harlem – a historically African-American area of Manhattan in New York City, known for the Harlem renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s, which was the center of African-American artistic works

Purser – a ship official responsible for papers and accounts

Sheet music – printed version of music, as opposed to a recorded or performed version

Stowaway – one who secretly hides on a train or boat in order to get free passage to a new location

Becoming a Songwriter

Hit the Road to Dreamland

Eventually Johnny realized that his talents lay in lyrics and songwriting, which greatly helped his career. One of his earliest successes came when his friend Everett Miller wrote a song and he asked Johnny to compose the lyrics for it. The song, “Out of Breath and Scared to Death of You,” ended up in a revue called *The Garrick Gaieties*, and Miller’s father published the song. In addition, Johnny met a beautiful young woman, Ginger Meehan, who was performing in the chorus of the revue.

Johnny began bringing Ginger ice cream and taking her to the movies. Johnny soon met Ginger’s family, who encouraged Johnny to continue to pursue his career in songwriting.

Johnny began meeting other songwriters and music publishers and soon landed a job writing lyrics for an operetta. This was a wonderful opportunity for him, but he had to leave New York and Ginger to work in California where the operetta would first be staged.

While in California, Johnny had to work long hours to complete the operetta lyrics. Despite this, he was able to see some of his favorite musicians like Bing Crosby and Louis Armstrong perform. Listening to his idols provided a welcome change from the European opera music he was working with every day.

After returning to New York, Johnny gained full time employment with Miller Music, which had published “Out of Breath and Scared to Death of You.” The steady employment and income prompted him to propose to Ginger, and the two were married in a small ceremony in New York. Ginger quit her theatrical career and went to work as a seamstress, while Johnny kept working on his career.

Around that time, Johnny and a friend entered and won a singing contest. The contest led him to a semi-formal apprenticeship on a stage production. He worked with lyricist Yip Harburg and began to learn how to write lyrics.

I had been a dilettante at it, trying hard but most undisciplined, waiting for the muse to strike.

Johnny finally gained recognition and fame among other songwriters and musicians after he met Hoagy Carmichael. Hoagy and Johnny spent a year working on just one song, “Lazy Bones,” but it was a hit once it was released on the radio. The success of this one song gained him entrance into the musician brotherhood in New York. Johnny and Hoagy would go on to write many more songs together, including “Skylark” and “In the Cool, Cool of the Evening,” which won an Academy Award®.

Soon Paul Whiteman, the bandleader who had awarded Johnny first place in the singing contest, contacted him. Whiteman wanted Johnny to sing in a duet in addition to writing songs and comic skits. He offered him a weekly salary that would allow Johnny and Ginger to leave her mother’s home and move to an apartment in Manhattan.

Vocabulary

Apprenticeship – a time period when one learns a trade, art, or calling (such as songwriting) by practical experience under skilled workers

Chorus - a company of singers and dancers in dramatic performances that participate in or comment on the action onstage

Dilettante – a person having a superficial interest in an art or a branch of knowledge

Genre – a category of artistic, musical, or literary composition characterized by a particular style, form, or content

Operetta – a usually romantic comic opera that includes songs and dancing

Revue – a theatrical production consisting typically of brief loosely connected, often satirical, skits, songs, and dances

Teaching Tips

Discuss the different jobs and roles that might be available for someone interested in the music industry. Mercer wrote songs for famous singers, a practice that still goes on in present day. What other “behind the scenes” career opportunities might be available?

Have students create their own revue, divide them up into several groups to create and perform a short skit, song or dance. Pick a theme so everything is somewhat connected, and have students perform for each other

Hooray for Hollywood

It didn't take long for RKO Pictures, a California movie studio, to notice Johnny's many abilities, and make him an offer to move to Hollywood, thinking he could be a "triple threat" in the pictures: songwriting, singing and acting. Johnny was still under contract to Mr. Whiteman, so the studio had to be willing to pay Mr. Whiteman to use Johnny's services. The two parties settled on \$500 a week, a small fortune during the Great Depression when many Americans could hardly make ends meet. Johnny would be receiving \$1000 a week for his talents as a songwriter, singer, and actor.

Johnny jumped at the chance; he'd left Savannah to make it big as an actor in New York and after so many years someone finally wanted everything he had to offer. He was excited, but humble, as he knew he would be in a whole new environment working with people that didn't know what a talented and hard worker he was, so he was essentially starting over – although with a generous salary.

Johnny was confident in his abilities, and musical movies were making a comeback. Technology had advanced so actors and singers could move around the set while talking and singing, instead of standing in one place to ensure their voices recorded evenly.

After arriving in Hollywood, Johnny was surprised to discover he was working mostly on "B" movies, low-budget pictures theatres had to play before they could play the big budget "A" movies. He acted in two B-movies, but it was clear his acting skills didn't even compare to his songwriting or singing, and despite the studio's initial enthusiasm for Johnny, RKO did not renew his contract.

Despite this setback, Johnny was offered a job writing lyrics for a revue in England. Though it sounded like a good opportunity, Johnny soon found out there wasn't enough money for his salary after making this long journey to England by boat. He had no prospects for future career plans, and it seemed like his career in Hollywood might be over.

Johnny's stint without a job or income was short-lived. As he and his wife prepared to return to the U.S., he received a wire that Warner Brothers studio wanted to sign a contract with him. Warner Brothers provided him with another chance to make it in Hollywood.

Vocabulary

Comeback - a return to a former position or condition, a recovery

Contract - a binding agreement between two or more persons or parties

Pictures – a slang term for movies

Salary – regular payment for services

Studio – a company that produces motion pictures, movies

Teaching Tips

Find an inflation calculator online and find out how much money \$500 and \$1000 translates into 2009 dollars. Discuss with students how much money this is compared to the medium annual salary in your region.

Have students research cruise ships and lines from the early 20th century, such as the Queen Mary and the Titanic. They can create a chart showing the different levels of service available to passengers, such as those in first class or steerage, write an essay about the conditions on the ship, and how long it might take for it to travel across the ocean.

You Must Have Been a Beautiful Baby

Johnny wrote for Warner Brothers and wrote quickly. The young songwriter who would spend weeks and months on a single song when he was in New York was more experienced and had responsibilities, and he started churning out song lyrics. Warner Bros. studio was a fast-paced workplace, producing musicals one after another, and cashing in on the new trend of featuring radio stars so the audience could finally see what they looked like.

As usual Johnny found inspiration from Savannah and his family. While writing one song he recalled something Ginger said to him when she and his mother were looking through a photo album. Ginger saw a picture of Johnny as a baby, and remarked, “You must have been a beautiful baby,” and Johnny’s proud mother immediately brought out a blue ribbon Johnny had won in a baby contest years ago! But Johnny remembered that phrase from his wife, and turned it into yet another lyric.

*And when it came to winning blue ribbons,
You must have shown the other kids how.
I can see the judges’ eyes
As they handed you the prize,
I bet you made the cutest bow
Oh! You must have been a beautiful baby,
‘Cause baby look at you now.*

But this age of movie musicals was short-lived, and soon Johnny found himself out of work from writing Hollywood songs for movies. But once again, his multiple talents saved him. His singing voice combined with his songwriting skills spurred him to collaborate with other musicians and create a number of hits.

He and Ginger returned to New York after years in California, and Johnny found a job emceeding for a radio show called Camel Caravan. He was incredibly creative during this time; lyrics and songs sprang from him. One segment of Camel Caravan was called “Newsie Bluesies,” where Johnny would satirize current events and people, much the same way the show Saturday Night Live does with “Weekend Update.” Johnny would wait until the evening the show aired, and would sit down to write a whole new lyric for that week’s edition “Newsie Bluesies,” once again showing how he’d grown and matured as a songwriter.

While in New York, Johnny and Ginger, who had been married for nine years but had never been able to have children, adopted a baby girl from Georgia. Amanda, or Mandy, became was the light of their lives. Johnny wrote a song for her called “Mandy Is Two.”

*You ought to see her eyes of cornflower blue
They really look as if they actually knew
That she’s a big girl now...
You ought to see how many things she can do,
She knows her alphabet and ties her own shoes,
And no one showed her how.*

Upon returning to California, Johnny met Judy Garland. Garland had recently achieved great fame as Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz*, and she and Johnny fell in love with each other. They had a brief love affair, which ended when Johnny reaffirmed his commitment to Ginger and their new child.

Johnny’s songwriting and lyrics were deeply affected by this time in his life as he struggled to reconcile his love for another woman with his commitment to his wife and child. He and Ginger stayed together though, and eventually adopted a baby boy they called Jeff.

Vocabulary

Adoption - to take a child of other parents as one's own child

Emcee – to act as the master of ceremonies or the host of an event

Satire – wit, irony, or sarcasm used to expose and discredit someone or something

Trend – to go in a new direction, sometimes like a popular fad

Teaching Tips

Discuss what can happen to quality of work when you work very quickly without much regard for the finished product. Is it possible Warner Bros. was creating musicals so quickly that they made poor movies because of the speed involved? Or if there are enough support personnel, could the quality be similar to other studios that worked more slowly?

World War II

Just before Christmas 1941, Johnny and Ginger were listening to the radio when a report came that the Japanese had attacked Pearl Harbor in Hawaii. Soon afterwards World War II began for the United States. Johnny wanted to help the war effort, but he also wanted to avoid the draft. Due to his fame and many talents, the army sought him out to promote the war and raise moral through music. Like many other Hollywood stars, he entertained troops stationed on the West Coast. Through the Armed Forces Radio Service, which broadcasted to troops stationed all over

the world, Johnny and other provided music and shows that were meant to remind troops of home and inspire patriotism.

During the war, Johnny began writing songs about the soldiers' experience. His ability to replicate languages and dialects helped him capture military lingo.

*This is the G.I. Jive,
Man Alive,
It starts with the bugler
Blowin' reveille over your
head
When you arrive.*

Johnny's music during this time period also reflected many changes in American society that were necessitated by the war effort. He wrote lyrics for many of the songs in the patriotic ensemble movie *Star Spangled Rhythm*, which featured a desegregated cast of both black and white

actors. Though the messages in his lyrics were subtle and meant to promote national unity, they represented great strides in changing the notorious racism of Hollywood at the time.

Johnny also used his lyrics to recognize changing social and gender norms brought on by war. His song "On the Swing Shift" (also from *Star Spangled Rhythm*) was one of the first to discuss women working in factories during wartime. He also wrote many songs about long distance romance between soldiers and civilians.

Vocabulary

Bugler – a serviceman who plays a bugle, a type of trumpet, to wake the troops up

Front – a line of battle in a war, where two military forces meet

Munitions – ammunition used in war

Reveille – a bugle sounding to wake troops mornings

Teaching Tips

Students can research and write an essay about how World War II affected the people who were at home, such as with food rations. How did people sacrifice their everyday comforts and luxuries in order to support the country and armed forces?



Capitol Records



Johnny Mercer at Capitol Records

As Johnny's music inspired the servicemen to fight for their country, he continued to think about the musicians and performers he was surrounded by each day.

"I used to ask myself what talented people did between picture and radio jobs."

In a conversation with Glenn Wallichs, the owner of the Music City record store, Johnny and Wallichs started talking about how to produce and distribute quality music records. Johnny expressed unhappiness with the way record companies handled talent, and Wallichs thought the existing distribution set up was flawed. Together the two men formulated a better way to operate a new label, while capitalizing on the fact that there weren't any record labels on the west coast. The big recording labels, like

RCA and Decca, were on the east coast, and smaller companies that had tried to compete with them in the past had not been successful. However, Johnny Mercer and Glenn Wallichs believed they could do better, with Johnny's practiced ear and Wallich's business savvy.

The new company, Capitol Records, was immediately beset by problems. The musicians' union was preparing for a strike because radio stations were increasingly using records instead of live performers to broadcast music. Unlike today, the copyright laws of 1909 stipulated that records were for home use only, leaving only live performances for the radio. However, with the ease of use and lower cost of records, radio stations had begun to ignore this law.

In addition, World War II was still raging, and the U.S. government had seized 70 percent of the nation's shellac reserves. Shellac was used as a primary ingredient in bombshells, but it was also used in the production of records. The government needed shellac to create munitions for the armed services, so the fledgling company didn't have the raw materials necessary to create new records. Wallichs was able to find a temporary supply of shellac eventually, but the company also had to purchase and grind up half a million pounds of old records to create new ones.

While Wallichs navigated the business side of the company, Johnny supervised the talent and their recordings. The two men worked quickly in order to get as many recordings completed as possible before the impending musicians' strike. When the strike went into effect three months

after the company formed, Johnny and Wallichs had several hits and enough recordings to be able to keep producing and selling.

Johnny's personal taste ran to swing music, which was very popular at the time. He was also able to keep up with the rest of America's interests, bringing in country and western performers. Capitol Records was increasingly successful. Much of this success could be attributed to Johnny's chemistry in the recording studio and his ability to motivate singers and musicians to produce stellar performances.

Johnny was a major force at Capitol until 1948. By then the company had grown very large; it was no longer the small, elite recording label Johnny had envisioned. He left because he was unhappy with the direction of its growth, which involved a heavy focus on profits and less on quality music and performances.

Vocabulary

Strike – a move to stop work to force an employer or industry to meet a demand

Union – an organization of workers formed for the advancement of the individuals in respect to their wages, benefits and working conditions

Teaching Tips

Older students can write an essay comparing the musician's union strike against radio stations because of copyright infringement with issues musicians face today with copyright infringement becoming more prevalent with the advent of the Internet, i.e., peer-to-peer networking sites where users trade songs (or even images and movies) without the copyright holder benefiting.

Broadway and the Big Screen

Even after all his success as a singer, songwriter, and as a record label executive, Johnny decided he wanted to write a full-fledged musical for the stage. He made a first attempt in the 1940s, *St. Louis Woman*, but it didn't do very well. He continued with a few more attempts that had good runs but weren't widely successful. He continued to write songs for movies, and then finally in 1956 saw *Li'l Abner* hit the stage to great reviews. Johnny finally achieved the Broadway success he'd sought for so many years.

Still, things were slowing down for the lyricist. Music was changing in the 1950s as rock 'n roll was gaining in popularity and composers were beginning to write the lyrics for movie scores, edging out songwriters like Johnny. Johnny entered a dark period that lasted until he met Henry Mancini. Mancini and Johnny collaborated on a song together, and when Mancini was asked to score *Breakfast at Tiffany's*, he went to Johnny for lyrics for the theme song.

Mancini had the melody, and Johnny wrote three different lyrics. They talked each one over and settled on the second, called "Blue River." Johnny then found out a friend already had a song called "Blue River" and wanted to change the word 'blue' in the song and title. to evoke the

feelings of a summer in the South, Johnny thought back to his summers in Savannah playing on the Back River. Those were the images he wanted to evoke, but he needed a better title than Back River. He finally decided upon the name “Moon River,” which became the title song for *Breakfast at Tiffany’s*.

*Moon River,
Wider than a mile,
I’m crossin’ you in style someday.
Old dream maker,
You heart breaker,
Wherever you’re goin’
I’m goin’ your way*

“Moon River” was a huge success, and Johnny won an Academy Award® for it, once again finding himself in demand. The song was so popular and emblematic of the area where Johnny grew up that in 1962 the Chatham County Board of Commissioners officially changed the name of the Back River to Moon River.

Vocabulary

Academy Award® – awards given out by the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, considered the highest honor for the movie industry

Evoke – to call forth or bring to mind

Oscar® – the name of the statuette given to Academy Award® winners, the award ceremonies are often referred to as The Oscars®

Teaching Tips

Compare Oscar-winning songs from different decades in the past 100 years. Discuss how music has changed, what new types of music have evolved over the years, such as jazz, blues, swing, rock, rap and country.

Have students pick a type or genre of music they don’t know much about and prepare a short presentation about how it developed, how it affected society, and what performers are best known for that genre.

Death and Legacy

Perhaps one of the best stories about Johnny involves his loyalty to his family. In 1955, Capitol Records was sold to EMI Records and Johnny was able to sell his stock in the company. He became a millionaire from the sale. While deciding what to do with the money, he thought about how his father, George Mercer, had labored for most of his life to repay the debt from his failed

business in the late 1920s. Johnny took his profits from the Capitol sale and cleared his father's debt.

Generous acts such as these reached a smaller audience than his songs, but they were just as meaningful and moving. Johnny left an impressive legacy for anyone seeking to find success in a new life.



Johnny Mercer's Grave in Bonaventure Cemetery

Later in his life, Johnny began experiencing dizziness, sometimes stumbling or hitting a wall as he lost his balance. Johnny put off seeing a specialist for some time, but he was finally diagnosed with a benign brain tumor. He had surgery to remove the tumor, but it did not go well. Johnny was left in a semi-comatose state, unable to communicate. He lived

this way for eight months, passing away on Ginger's birthday, June 25, 1976.

Johnny Mercer's death was a great loss to the world of entertainment. His childhood in the south exposed Johnny to a rich verbal history and beautiful imagery both of which he carried with him his whole life, always returning "home" to Savannah when he needed to return to his roots. His ability to perform acts of generosity and kindness, and his lyrical genius to bring new emotions and experiences to his audience affected millions of people around the world.

Vocabulary

Benign – a type of tumor that is not cancerous, but may still threaten someone's health by its growth

Comatose – a state of unconsciousness

Legacy – a gift left by someone to the world; something that is handed down or remains from a previous generation or time

Stock – a supply of capital, or money, invested in a company

Teaching Tips

Johnny lived up to his father's expectations and repaid the business's investors, even though it was 30 years later. Have students write an essay about how they have done something honorable or helpful that lived up to their parent's expectations of them.

Additional Resources

Sources and Suggested Readings

Bob Bach and Ginger Mercer, *Our Huckleberry Friend* (Lyle Stuart, 1982).

Stephen Citron, *Songwriting: A Complete Guide to the Craft* (W. Morrow, 1985).

[Glenn T. Eskew, "Johnny Mercer \(1909-1976\),"The New Georgia Encyclopedia.](#)

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Jimmy Webb, *TuneSmith: Inside the Art of Songwriting* (Hyperion, 1998).

[Georgia State University, Johnny Mercer Song Database](#)

[Georgia State University, Johnny Mercer Digitized Collection](#)

Online Resources

[Friends of Johnny Mercer](#)

[Johnny Mercer Foundation](#)



Academy Award-Nominated Songs

- 1938 Jeepers Creepers
- 1940 I'd Know You Anywhere AND Love of My Life
- 1941 Blues in the Night
- 1942 Dearly Beloved
- 1943 My Shining Hour AND That Old Black Magic
- 1945 Accentuate the Positive
- 1946 On the Atchison, Topeka and the Santa Fe**
- 1951 In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening**
- 1955 Something's Gotta Give
- 1960 The Facts of Life
- 1961 Moon River**
- 1962 Days of Wine and Roses**
- 1963 Charade
- 1965 The Sweetheart Tree
- 1970 Whistling Away the Dark
- 1971 Life is What You Make It

Academy Award® Winners in bold

Georgia Performance Standards Correlations

Grade Two

Historical Understandings

SS2H1 The student will read about and describe the lives of historical figures in Georgia history.

- a. Identify the contributions made by these historic figures: James Oglethorpe, Tomochichi, and Mary Musgrove (founding of Georgia); Sequoyah (development of a Cherokee alphabet); Jackie Robinson (sports); Martin Luther King, Jr. (civil rights); Jimmy Carter (leadership and human rights).
- b. Describe how everyday life of these historical figures is similar to and different from everyday life in the present (food, clothing, homes, transportation, communication, recreation, rights, and freedoms).

Economic Understandings

SS2E1 The student will explain that because of scarcity, people must make choices and incur opportunity costs.

SS2E2 The student will identify ways in which goods and services are allocated (by price; majority rule; contests; force; sharing; lottery; command; first-come, first-served; personal characteristics; and others).

Grade Five

Historical Understandings

SS5H6 The student will explain the reasons for America's involvement in World War II.

- a. Describe the effects of rationing and the changing role of women and African-Americans; include "Rosie the Riveter" and the Tuskegee Airmen.

Economic Understandings

SS5E1 The student will use the basic economic concepts of trade, opportunity cost, specialization, voluntary exchange, productivity, and price incentives to illustrate historical events.

- a. Describe opportunity costs and their relationship to decision-making across time (such as decisions to ration goods during WWII).

SS5E2 The student will describe the functions of four major sectors in the U. S. economy.

- b. Describe the private business function in producing goods and services.

SS5E3 The student will describe how consumers and businesses interact in the U. S. economy.

- a. Describe how competition, markets, and prices influence people's behavior.
- b. Describe how people earn income by selling their labor to businesses.
- c. Describe how entrepreneurs take risks to develop new goods and services to start a business.

Grade Eight

Historical Understandings

SS8H8 The student will analyze the important events that occurred after World War I and their impact on Georgia.

SS8H9 The student will describe the impact of World War II on Georgia's development economically, socially, and politically.

SS8H10 The student will evaluate key post-World War II developments of Georgia from 1945 to 1970.

Geographic Understandings

SS8G1 The student will describe Georgia with regard to physical features and location.

- a. Locate and evaluate the importance of key physical features on the development of Georgia; include the Fall Line, Okefenokee Swamp, Appalachian Mountains, Chattahoochee and Savannah Rivers, and barrier islands.

Economic Understandings

SS8E3 The student will evaluate the influence of Georgia's economic growth and development.

- a. Define profit and describe how profit is an incentive for entrepreneurs.
- b. Explain how entrepreneurs take risks to develop new goods and services to start a business.
- c. Evaluate the importance of entrepreneurs in Georgia who developed such enterprises as Coca-Cola, Delta Airlines, Georgia-Pacific, and Home Depot.

Grade 9-12 United States History

Historical Understandings

SSUSH16 The student will identify key developments in the aftermath of WW I.

- a. Describe the impact of radio and the movies.
- b. Describe modern forms of cultural expression; include Louis Armstrong and the origins of jazz, Langston Hughes and the Harlem Renaissance, Irving Berlin, and Tin Pan Alley

SSUSH19 The student will identify the origins, major developments, and the domestic impact of World War II, especially the growth of the federal government.

- a. Describe war mobilization, as indicated by rationing, war-time conversion, and the role of women in war industries.