


V6-4067

STEREO



Ella
Fitzgerald
Sings The
Johnny
Mercer
Song Book

Arranged and
Conducted by
Nelson Riddle



ella fitzgerald sings the johnny mercer song book

This is a song book with a difference. All the previous volumes in this remarkable series—and there have been no fewer than eighteen of them covering the repertoire of seven outstanding songwriters—have been devoted to composers, which is no doubt aesthetic justice. For every man who sits in the bath and sings the words there are twenty who walk the streets and whistle the melody. And in any case, concentrating on a composer usually implies concentrating also on a lyricist, or lyricist, as Ira Gershwin would have it. The great popular composers have all had their professional partners. George had Ira Gershwin, Rodgers had Hart, Kern had Harbach and Hammerstein, Porter had Porter. Johnny Mercer is the exception. Alone of the outstanding artists in this demanding field, he has acquired no lasting attachments, and the list of his collaborators reads like an ASCAP report.

This is not his debut in the song book series. One or two of the songs he worked on with Jerome Kern and Harold Arlen were included by Ella Fitzgerald in the volumes devoted to those men, and he has, at various stages of a brilliant ubiquitous career, paired off with men like Hoagy Carmichael, Richard Whiting, Walter Donaldson, Harry Warren, Jimmy McHugh, Jimmy Van Heusen, Victor Schertzinger and Arthur Schwartz.

Johnny Mercer takes long, sinuous words and makes them dance to his tune. Besides being a master of flippancy and the joke song, the aspect of his work most usually remarked, he is one of the few men who can wax Wordsworthian without sounding mawkish. His setting for Carmichael's *Skylark* pursues an intricate theme with a kind of lean tenderness which has had much to do with that song becoming one of the great standards.

Side One

- Too Marvelous For Words** 2:27
Early Autumn 3:47
Day In—Day Out 2:42
Laura 3:39
This Time The Dream's On Me 2:51
Skylark 3:07
Single 'O 3:15

Side Two

- Something's Gotta Give** 2:30
Travelin' Light 3:47
Midnight Sun 4:50
Dream 2:55
I Remember You 3:34
When A Woman Loves A Man 3:47

Cover photo: David Thorpe

Cover design: Michael Malatak

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There is one Mercer lyric where the polysyllables are wedded to the pastoral streak to great effect, *Midnight Sun*. In one of his several books of reminiscence, that modern pioneer among lyric writers P. G. Wodehouse, said that the thing which kept him awake at night was the thought of a triple rhyme-scheme. Yet, in *Midnight Sun*, Mercer gives us a homily in the art of stretching your vocabulary to find the natural rhymes which are strange but never bizarre. The first line ends with "chalice," a choice selection full of the merlinesque evocations suited to the element of wonder that Mercer is striving for. Then comes "alabaster palace," a commonplace rhyme redeemed by the succulence of the adjective which qualifies it. Finally, "Aurora Borealis," which fulfills the two golden rules, that it should be a natural rhyme and that it should be utterly unexpected by the listener.

The question of Mercer's humour also arises in this song book. How many lyricists would dare plump for a title that underlines their own inadequacy, as Mercer does in *Too Marvelous for Words*? He even goes so far as to say "I just can't find the words"—and then proceeds to find them. His poetic streak illuminates *Autumn Leaves* with the phrase "autumn walks the land." And for sheer rightness in the placement of words, the last stanza of *I Remember You* is as fine as anything in the popular repertoire. This may be my purely subjective twitch, but "When my life is through, and the angels ask me to

recall the thrill of them all" seems to be one of the definitive lines of the 1940's.

Of Ella Fitzgerald's gift for interpretation little remains to be said. She has shown time and time again, both in the song books and elsewhere, how the definitive version of an outstanding song usually turns out to be the Fitzgerald version. She has what Johnny Mercer might term crystalline diction, perfect intonation, the instinct for swinging born of her jazz environment, and that wonderful, indefinable lilting lullaby quality which makes her version of *Dream* a peculiar mixture of anodyne and stimulant.

It is right and proper that a book of Fitzgerald readings be coloured here and there with overtones of the jazz life. Nelson Riddle's psychic gift for the correct background figure is never out of the listener's consciousness, and among those who benefit in this album are instrumentalists like Buddy de Franco, Willie Smith and Paul Smith, who take the center of the stage from time to time. In discussing the soloists, there is one touching link with the past. *Midnight Sun* was composed by Lionel Hampton, a vibes player. In the version on this album the vibes solo by Frank Flynn turns out to be one of the instrumental high spots of an album composed almost entirely of high spots. One thing I dare not do, nominate a star for the album. Really of course, the star is Johnny Mercer. Or Ella Fitzgerald. Or Nelson Riddle. Whatever the listener's individual verdict, one indisputable truth is that this song book is worthy of all the others, no man can say more

Benny Green.

The Observer, London.

Author *The Reluctant Art*.

