

# “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive”—Johnny Mercer (1944)

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Essay by Philip Furia (guest post)\*



*Johnny Mercer*



*Original label*



*Sheet music*

“Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive” is one of many songs that mark Johnny Mercer as a distinctively Southern lyricist. At a time when most songwriters—Irving Berlin, the Gershwins, Rodgers and Hart—came from New York City, immigrants or the children of Jewish immigrants, Johnny Mercer stemmed from a prominent Savannah family that could trace its ancestry back to Hugh Mercer, one of George Washington’s most trusted generals.

Growing up in Savannah in the early decades of the twentieth century, Johnny Mercer was drawn to African-American culture. As a child, he had a black nurse, played with black friends, and learned to speak “Geechee,” the African-Creole dialect of Savannah. He loved to sit outside black churches and listen to the singing as well as to the sermons. His favorite preacher was the evangelist Daddy Grace. As a boyhood friend recalled, “Johnny would venture down there with some friends and just listen to it because they really had a traditional black songfest in their churches, besides the oratory, but they did a lot of singing, and Johnny would sneak down there too.” As a teenager, Johnny Mercer frequented record stores in the black business district of Savannah where he listened to what were called “race records” by Bessie Smith, Louis Armstrong, and Ma Rainey.

After graduating from prep school in 1927, he was supposed to go on to college, but his father’s real estate business suffered a loss of more than a million dollars. George Mercer could have declared bankruptcy, but he liquidated the company instead and poured his own savings into the firm’s debt. He devoted the rest of his life to repaying his credit holders but could not foresee the Great Depression and still owed more than a quarter of a million dollars when he died in 1940.

The failure of the family business, however, freed Johnny Mercer to pursue his dream of going to New York to become an actor. He got a few bit parts, but there were some weeks when he had nothing to eat but oatmeal. He finally made it, not as an actor, but as

a singer and songwriter. He got his big break in 1932, when he won an amateur singing contest judged by bandleader Paul Whiteman, the self-proclaimed “King of Jazz.” Winning the contest led to a job as a singer and songwriter for Whiteman’s orchestra, where he was teamed with trombonist Jack Teagarden. Teagarden’s Texan drawl, coupled with Mercer’s southern accent, made them the singing equivalent of radio’s “Amos ‘n’ Andy.” Many listeners thought Mercer himself was black. One of his prized possessions was a letter he received from the Negro Boys Club of Chicago telling him they had voted Johnny Mercer their favorite “colored” vocalist.

In 1933, Mercer wrote his first hit song, “Lazybones,” with its music by Hoagy Carmichael. The lyric depicted an African-American man blissfully oblivious to the necessity for hard work even in the midst of the Great Depression:

*Lazybones, sleepin’ in the shade,  
How you ‘spec’ to get your cornmeal made?  
Never get your cornmeal made,  
Sleepin’ in the evening shade.*

The success of “Lazybones” led to an invitation from Hollywood, where the advent of “talking pictures” fueled the production of movie musicals and created a demand for songwriters. Mercer teamed with several composers, such as Richard Whiting and Harry Warren, but he found his most compatible collaborator, Harold Arlen, in the early 1940s. Arlen, who had composed such songs as “Stormy Weather” and “Over the Rainbow,” had grown up in Buffalo, the son of a cantor, and was, like Mercer, drawn to blues and jazz. He maintained that Jewish music from the Middle East had a natural affinity with African music. He liked to recall how his father, listening to a Louis Armstrong record, wondered, “Where did *he* get it?”

Writing with Arlen for film musicals, Mercer remained fascinated by African-American music—and preaching. A friend of his had gone to hear Father Divine, the great Harlem evangelist. Mercer recalled,

He told me that the subject of his sermon was “Accentuate the positive and eliminate the negative.” Well, that amused me so, and it sounds so Southern and so funny that I wrote it down on a piece of paper. And this was, what, five years later? And Harold Arlen and I riding home from the studio after a conference about getting a song for a picture.... And Harold was singing me this little tune he had sung before. Now, that’s a strange thing about your subconscious, because here’s a song that’s kind of lying dormant in my subconscious for five years, and the minute he sang that tune, it jumped into my mind as if it had dialed a phone number.... By the time we finished our drive, the song was more or less complete.

Mercer’s lyric was a musical sermon that featured some of his most vernacular catch-phrases:

*You’ve got to*

*Ac-cent-tchu-ate the positive,  
E-lim-mi-nate the negative,  
Latch on to the affirmative,  
Don't mess with Mister In-Between.*

“The song must have really pleased John,” Harold Arlen said. “It was the first time I ever saw him smile.”

“Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive” was featured in the 1944 movie “*Here Come the Waves*,” where it was performed by Bing Crosby and Sonny Tufts. However it was Mercer’s own recording that became a number one hit in the early weeks of 1945. He recorded it on Capitol Records, a company he had founded, with lyricist Buddy DeSylva and business-man Glenn Wallichs, back in 1942. At the time, the big record companies—Decca, Victor, Columbia—were based on the East Coast, but with so many talented singers and musicians gravitating to Hollywood, Mercer thought that a record company would flourish there. He served as Capitol’s A&R (Artists and Repertory) head and decided which singers recorded what songs. Mercer recruited such talented vocalists as Jo Stafford, Peggy Lee, and Margaret Whiting, and he persuaded Nat King Cole to sing as well as play the piano.

The success of “Ac-Cent-Tchu-Ate the Positive” and other recordings helped Capitol Records thrive. In 1954, when Mercer sold his share in the company for nearly two million dollars, the first thing he did was to send a check to a Savannah bank, repaying all of the credit holders in his father’s real-estate company and clearing the family name.

*Philip Furia is the author of “The Poets of Tin Pan Alley: A History of America's Great Lyricists,” biographies of Ira Gershwin, Irving Berlin, and Johnny Mercer, as well as other books on American popular music. He has taught English at the University of Minnesota and Creative Writing at The University of North Carolina Wilmington.*