

Country club honors an original member

Carmichael composed 'Heart and Soul' melody

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Last weekend, the History Committee at Thunderbird Country Club threw a big party. The idea was to honor one of the club's original members, and one of its most well-known. His name might not be as universally recognized as it once was, or as it should be, but his presence is still felt throughout the world. And every person who has ever sat at a piano since he did, has been influenced by him because he composed one of the most recognizable tunes in western culture.

The melody had an inauspicious beginning. Composed by Hoagland Howard "Hoagy" Carmichael, who would go on to turn out American Standards like "Stardust," "Skylark," "Two Sleepy People," "In The Still of the Night," "The Nearness of You," "Georgia on My Mind" and countless others, it would eventually eclipse them all.

The tune languished immediately after he wrote it. Hoagy recalled in his memoir, "You don't write melodies, you find them. They lie on the keys, waiting for you to find them. They have always been there. If you find the beginning of a good song, and if your fingers do not stray, the melody should come out of hiding in a short time."

Two years after the melody, Frank Loesser added the incomparable lyric and "Heart and Soul" was born.

The song knocked around Paramount Studios until it was recorded by Bea Wain with the Larry Clinton Band and was included in the 1938 short film "A Song Is Born." It quickly went to No. 1 on the Hit Parade and launched a legend.

In 1950, a simplified version became a ubiquitous duet among children learning to play piano, so it isn't hyperbole to say that since it was written it has literally been played by everyone who has



Hoagy Carmichael circa 1954 COURTESY OF THE PALM SPRINGS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

ever sat at a piano.

After it skyrocketed to No. 1, the tune launched Hoagy's career. Louis Armstrong, Duke Ellington and both Dorsey brothers were playing and recording his music. Carmichael compositions were played regularly on the radio. But Hoagy, himself, was still mostly unknown.

He had relocated to Hollywood in 1936 where, he wrote in his memoir, "the rainbow hits the ground for composers." During the next decade, Hoagy moved in front of the camera, appearing at first as a character actor in small parts playing piano, notably singing with Lauren Bacall in "To Have and Have Not," and then having bigger roles, and appearing on radio as himself and on the theatrical stage, winning an Oscar with Johnny Mercer for the song "In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening" in 1951, the same year that Thunderbird Country Club opened.

Hoagy frequented the desert through the 1940s with the rest of the affluent Hollywood crowd and looked at purchasing land. By the time he did actually purchase, prices had gone up 10 times. He settled on a stunning midcentury home designed by William Cody, located on the 8th green of the prestigious golf club with gorgeous views.

He was a regular on the links, along with his movie star friends. He con-

tinued to write individual songs, collaborating with many different lyricists, most notably Johnny Mercer who lived down the way in Palm Springs.

He was an avid coin collector, having guests at his Thunderbird house sift through piles of coins on the floor after dinner looking for buffalo nickels. Hoagy prized a coin given to him by Jacqueline Kennedy that the president had in his pocket when he was shot in Dallas.

1951 was a big year. In the excellent history written by William Wheatley on the Hoagy Carmichael website, Hoagy described his record-breaking appearance at the London Palladium that year: "I wore my hat on the back of my head and no tie, with a cigarette drooping from my lips, and I lazied through the entire performance."

The lazy image of the handsome, worldly and wise piano player translating the heart and soul of the human experience through clever lyrics set to a perfect tune was his image ever after.

Composer Alec Wilder described Carmichael as the "most talented, inventive, sophisticated and jazz-oriented of all the great craftsmen" of pop songs in the first half of the 20th century. So, it is no wonder that his 30 years of membership, camaraderie and entertaining at Thunderbird is worth historical remembrance.

But the Historical Committee, including Claudia Foster, Kristina Ballantyne, Nikki Bianchi, Patrice Merritt, Karen Reynolds, Jeff Scheffel, Lucy Tagmyer and especially Sue Todd Yates, had a surprise: Hoagland Bix Carmichael.

Hoagy Bix, (his father's namesake with the addition of a middle name paying tribute to Leon Bismark "Bix" Biederbecke, the best friend bandleader that first recorded some of Carmichael's compositions, and encouraged him to be a composer) was a guest at the party.

Hoagy Bix first saw Thunderbird as a teenager. His remembrances of an idyllic, sunny life, in a neighborhood surrounded by his father's celebrity friends were the focus of the evening. But Hoagy Bix is the consummate gentleman,

and has had a fascinating life apart from co-managing his father's catalog of some 500 songs.

Hoagy Bix has produced film, television and theater. He had a regularly scheduled weekly golf game with Fred Astaire, worked for Burt Lancaster, and grew up with the children of movie stars in Holmby Hills. He became an assistant director on films for Universal and Columbia Pictures, hung out at film and music nights at the mansion with Hugh Hefner, worked as a stockbroker and was the managing director and producer for the television show "Mr. Roger's Neighborhood" for WGBH Boston, and along the way became an expert fly fisherman.

But his current project is most interesting and ambitious. A tribute to his prolific father, Hoagy Bix created a theater production entitled "Stardust Road." The production gives context and added poignancy to the music that animates it.

(This show is different from the tribute Hoagy Bix brought to the McCallum Theatre, and some sixty other cities in 2000, with a big band tribute to some of the most beloved Carmichael tunes.)

"Stardust Road" includes swinging tunes with clever lyrics that walk down the historical lane of his father's career. Featuring songs that even the most avid Hoagy fan might not know like, "He's Dead But He Won't Lie Down," or "Don't Forget to Say No, Baby," the show is as remarkable as the music. That Hoagy Carmichael was adept at many different styles of music is very much in evidence.

Last weekend, Hoagy Bix treated the members of Thunderbird to some recollections of his life there with his dad, playing twilight golf and enjoying the warm weather.

He anticipates playing "Stardust Road" in theaters around the country. Fans can have a peek at the production, filmed for private use, at vimeo.com/woodmr/stardust using password Carmichael. And the most gracious Hoagy Bix can be contacted at hoagy@hoagy.com for those interested in perpetuating the iconic music of his father.