

THANKS FOR THE MEMORIES

Mills' relentless drive promoted jazz

He worked hard to support black musicians

Tracy Conrad Special to Palm Springs Desert Sun
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Newspaperman Bruce Fessier chronicled an amazing story in 1982 as told to him by his friend Irving Mills. By then, Mills had retired to a big house in the south of Palm Springs and would regale Fessier with stories of the golden age of jazz. After all, Mills had been there for some of the most important moments, or really, had worked tirelessly to make many of those moments happen.

For instance, Mills wrote the lyrics to "It Don't Mean a Thing" (If It Ain't Got That Swing) in 1929, but as Fessier recorded, Mills said it happened by accident. "I had an engagement in Chicago for a café roadhouse that opened in the summer, and prior to the opening, he (Ellington) played for six weeks in theaters. After six weeks, doing four shows a day, five on Sundays, they became very stagey. I noticed the dancers weren't dancing right. It wasn't Duke Ellington's dance music.' Shocked after his first viewing, Mills said he 'ran back to the dressing room' and asked Ellington why he had changed his music. Ellington said the people liked it, but Mills told him to stop. "I said, 'It don't mean a thing if it ain't got that swing,'" he recalled. And he said, "You know, Irving, you've got a lyric there. Let's write it up."

And write it up they sure did. Mills added some more lines, and Ellington's trumpet player Cootie Williams came in with the music, "Do-whacka-do-whacka-do-whacka-do."

Born at the end of the 19th century in Ukraine and having immigrated to the United States as a child, Mills had a spectacular, if unlikely, career. His father was a milliner who died in 1905 when Mills was just 11 years old, forcing him and his brother Jack to work at exceedingly odd jobs including busboy, wallpaper salesman, telephone operator, and "song demonstrator" to support the family.

By 1919, Irving and Jack Mills were in business together publishing music. Soon, they were the kings of Tin Pan Alley, cultivating songwriters and then hawk-ing those tunes to radio stations. Both Irving and Jack discovered a number of first-rate songwriters like Sammy Fain, Hoagy Carmichael, Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields. (Carmichael and McHugh would also retire to the desert.)

But Mills also had a keen eye for performers, and started, or boosted, the careers of Cab Calloway, Benny Goodman, Hoagy Carmichael, Lena Horne and the



Irving Mills COURTESY OF BRUCE FESSIER VIA JAME FEE.

Dorsey Brothers. But most importantly, one evening in New York around 1925, Mills went to the Club Kentucky on West 49th between 7th and Broadway. Playing there was a small band of six musicians in from Washington, D.C., led by Duke Ellington. According to lore, Mills promptly signed Ellington, launching his career by managing to get the band booked uptown at the Cotton Club, and broadcasting those shows on radio.

Fessier noted that Mills did more than almost anybody to promote black musicians and singers. He was one of the first to record black and white musicians together, using twelve white musicians and the Duke Ellington Orchestra for a recording of "St. Louis Blues," and was powerful enough to force the music label to release the record over their objections. He booked previously all-white auditoriums for black performers. Fessier recounts that one of the finest things he thinks Mills ever did was to hire a private Pullman car, with proper dining room and sleeping quarters, to take the Ellington band through southern states in order to spare them from having to endure the harsh segregation of restaurants and hotels. (Many Ellington compositions are known for conjuring train imagery.)

As was the practice at the time, many of Ellington's most famous tunes were also credited to Mills, who was an able lyricist, including "Mood Indigo," "(In My Solitude)" and "Sophisticated Lady."

Mills only produced a single movie, "Stormy Weather" in 1943 for 20th Century Fox starring an all-black cast including Lena Horne, Bill "Bojangles" Robinson, the Nicholas Brothers, Cab Calloway and Fats Waller.

In addition to relentless promotion of the best talent, black or white, Mills was an innovator. He printed "small orchestrations" transcribed off a record, so that non-professional musicians could see how great improvised solos were constructed. And he conceived of the concept of a band within a band, a rhythm section who could go into the studio without the full orchestra and lay down cutting-edge sounds.

Mills was constantly making records, arranging tunes, selling and merging companies, until he was the head of what would become Columbia Records. At the time of his last sale, the total catalog of songs was estimated to number in excess of 25,000, of which, 1,500 were still producing royalties. In 1964, Mills was enjoying royalties in excess of one million dollars per year, equivalent to about eleven million today, and the company encompassed 20 music publishing subsidiaries as well as outlets in Britain, Brazil, Canada, France, then West Germany, Mexico, the Netherlands, and Spain.

After that spectacular career, Mills retired to Palm Springs, but was still busy creating. Fessier recalls, "I was at Irving's house one night in December of 1981 when Hoagy Carmichael called. Irving had published Hoagy's 'Stardust' in 1929 after challenging his stable of lyricists to come up with the right words for Hoagy's beautiful melody. In the late 1970s, Irving said he couldn't find the right piano jazz for the kind of cocktail parties he liked to throw, so he produced a series of 15 albums featuring the music of some of his favorite jazz and pop composers. He called them 'Musical Cocktail Records' (a phrase he trademarked) featuring great pianists playing the music of Hoagy, Irving Berlin, George Gershwin, Duke Ellington and Jimmy Van Heusen."

Fessier continues, "Irving went into business mode when Hoagy called, telling him he wanted to promote the record he had made with him, featuring Paul Smith. Irving didn't get the response he wanted and I asked him what Hoagy said. He said Hoagy's reaction was, 'Irving, are you still working?'" Indeed, he was. Nice work if you can get it.

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