

JIMMY McHUGH

By

Michael Feinstein

Jimmy McHugh is a composer whose songs I have sung extensively through the years yet is not as well known by name as many other songwriters of his time. His versatility, originality, and melodic inspiration distinguished him among a very distinguished group of colleagues. Why? Because Jimmy was a man who was able to adapt and sustain his career over a fifty-year period with a seemingly endless spring of melodic inspirations. Starting after World War 1 with patriotic songs like "My Dream of the Big Parade" and "Hinky Dinky Parlay Vous" and sailing into the sixties with luscious ballads like "Warm and Willing," he created songs that are assured immortality in the twenty-first century.

It is only time that determines what will truly last. Take for example, "I Can't Give You Anything But Love," a song that had a rather inauspicious beginning. Originally created for a show called "Delmar's Revels," the producer ejected the song after opening night, yet Jimmy and lyric writer Dorothy Fields had great faith in it. One year later it was placed in the musical revue "Blackbirds of 1928" and was to achieve a long unmatched run of 518 performances, quickly becoming one of the season's smash hits. It turned Jimmy McHugh into one of America's most celebrated songwriters,

McHugh was born in Boston July 10, 1894, and had an early interest in music instilled by his mother. He always projected an air of self-confidence that later manifested in a remarkable ability to promote himself and his work but in his early years helped him to land a job working for the Irving Berlin Music Company in Boston. Shortly thereafter he moved to New York and began working for the Mills Music Company, and after heading the professional office to exploit the music of others, he finally became a full-time composer. It was during this period that he discovered his first long-time collaborator, Dorothy Fields, when she wandered in to the Mills professional office looking for a job. It is to McHugh's great credit that he looked past the fact that Dorothy was a woman (trying to work in a male-dominated business) and recognized her extraordinary talent. She became the most successful female songwriter of the twentieth century and, with McHugh, created such hits as "Don't Blame Me," "On The Sunny Side Of The Street," "Exactly Like You," "I'm In The Mood For Love," and "I Feel A Song Coming On."

Most of McHugh's output consisted of writing songs for musical revues and Hollywood musicals. He first went to Hollywood in 1931 and created dozens of songs for early MGM photoplays and short subjects.

Even though he did return to Broadway in 1934, the rest of the 1930s were spent writing film songs for RKO, Paramount, 20TH Century Fox, and Universal, for whom he created the musical fanfare that started every picture. McHugh's principal collaborator in the latter part of the thirties was Harold Adamson, and they busily fashioned an array of hits such as "Where Are You" (written for Gertrude Niesen) and "You're A Sweetheart" (written for Alice Faye).

McHugh's other principal lyric collaborators included Frank Loesser, Johnny Mercer, and Al Dubin, all with whom he worked throughout the 1940s. Again, motion pictures dominated McHugh's output, but he did also find time to score three Broadway musicals: "Keep Off The Grass" (1941), "Star and Garter" (1942), and "As The Girls Go" (1949). Song hits included "A Lovely Way To Spend An Evening" (written for Frank Sinatra), "South American Way" (written for Carmen Miranda), and "It's A Most Unusual Day" (written for Jane Powell), among a great many more. McHugh's keen ability to tailor material for a plot situation, star, or other more arcane producer's requirement kept him busier in the 1940s than he had been in the previous decade.

With the eventual descent of musical films in the 1950s, Jimmy created several concert presentations of his songs. The first touring revue was called "Jimmy McHugh and His Singing Starlets" and was a smash success, playing Las Vegas, Reno, New York, Hollywood, San Francisco, and points beyond. He also appeared frequently on television with Eddie Fisher, Gordon MacRae, Perry Como, Patti Page, and Tony Bennett, among others. In 1956, he returned to Broadway for the last time with "Strip for Action" and continued to compose for films, writing several beautiful songs with Livingston and Evans.

Up until his death in 1969, McHugh was a very visible presence in Hollywood and New York—often receiving honors and awards as well as attending every major Hollywood event with his steady date, Louella Parsons.

The evidence that he continued to compose unabated was dramatically demonstrated the first time I went to visit the Jimmy McHugh office. His longtime assistant, Lucille Meyers, showed me stacks of hundreds of manuscripts containing treasures of wonderful melodies patiently waiting for a little love, attention, and a lyric. Even though we've had one major posthumous McHugh musical (the delightful "Sugar Babies"), there is clearly the possibility of another one with new songs that could easily enlarge the list of Jimmy's standards, thus affording me the pleasure of writing another introduction!