Stardust Melody: The Life and Music of Hoagy Carmichael

RICHARD M. SUDHALTER

OXFORD UNIVERSITY PRESS

STARDUST MELODY

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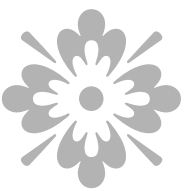

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For TSP, Bunzer, and their friends

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INTRODUCTION

Our United Airlines 767 had barely lifted off the runway at Santiago when I found myself in conversation with my two immediate neighbors in row fourteen. Young, female, and blonde, they radiated a particularly American, particularly effortless, brand of assured good health.

They were college juniors, they said, and had just backpacked their way across the Andes, actually scaling some of the glaciers viewed distantly from the cruise ship I'd just left at Valparaiso. For the next hour they held me in thrall with tales of towering ridges and tenebrous valleys, mystical dawns and dazzling sunsets—all with a verve and immediacy hard to resist.

Finally, with things starting to flag a bit, came a few questions. What was *I* doing down here? What did *I* do in life besides ride in airplanes? Well, I explained, I played the trumpet, specialized in jazz, and had just finished entertaining passengers on an ecocruise with the music of Hoagy Carmichael—

Their blank stares halted me in mid-sentence. "Hoagy . . . Carmichael . . . ?" I repeated, enunciating each syllable slowly and clearly. "You know—'Star Dust?' " Not a blink of recognition. " 'Georgia on My Mind?' 'Rockin' Chair?' " I reeled off the familiar titles. " 'Ole Buttermilk Sky?' " Still no sign. Nothing. Oh come on, kids, I thought—and started humming the opening bars: "Sometimes I wonder why I spend the lonely night . . ."

"Oh, right," one of my companions declared, furrowing a radiant blonde brow. Haltingly, as if summoning the Pythagorean Theorem from the darkest recesses of memory, she ventured, "I'm sure I heard my mom singing that once . . ."

Perhaps that's just the natural way of things: America is world-famous, after all, for celebrating the new, living in the moment. How quick we are to discard, to expunge what's not immediately relevant to us. Surely it wasn't all that long ago that Hoagy Carmichael—wise, thoughtful, casual in a grown-up, seen-it-all way—was a familiar, even reassuring, presence in our midst. But a lot of mileage now separates his times and ours: change

remains the constant, and we dare not forget that those sorts of seismic shifts have always gone on, were even going on in Hoagy's own lifetime.

He spent his first songwriting years in Indiana and New York, immersed in the almost gnostic subculture of hot jazz, a music that burst into 1920s America in its own kind of youth rebellion. By his mid-thirties he was in California, rebel no more, blending into the movie establishment, and he spent the rest of his career writing songs for, and acting in, films.

But then as now, Hollywood trafficked in ephemerality, and too many of the movies that brought Hoagy Carmichael—his face, his image, his songs—to a mass public now repose quietly on video store "classics" shelves, ignored by anyone not expressly seeking them out.

Various of the tunes escaped their films to join the roster of much-loved popular standards, alongside "Georgia on My Mind," "Skylark," and of course the incomparable "Star Dust." But all that exists on the far side of an immense generational divide. From time to time a k. d. lang will recycle "Skylark," or ex-Beatle George Harrison will have a go at "Hong Kong Blues." But for the most part there's no reason why today's kids would have the slightest idea about—or interest in—an old song celebrating the purple dusk of twilight time.

Broadway composers seem to have made out better. Perhaps it's because George Gershwin celebrated life and romance in fast-moving, superhip New York, Cole Porter's reach extended to high-society Paris and Venice, and the melodies of Richard Rodgers melded smartly with the acidulously world-weary lyrics of Larry Hart. Those songs never need reviving because they always seem to be around, and surely more youngsters today know them than know those of Hoagland Carmichael.

But anyone with enough curiosity to stop, look, and listen is bound to find that Hoagy and his songs are still very much alive and—here's the key word—relevant, occupying territory recognizably theirs alone. His melodies and (more often than is popularly realized) lyrics have little in common with the Ruritanian conceits of Jerome Kern, the arch topicality of Porter, or the cutting-edge smarts of the Gershwins. But they have unrivaled strengths of their own.

Hoagy Carmichael's songs can evoke place and time as vividly as the work of Edward Hopper or Sinclair Lewis, the essays of H. L. Mencken, or the humor of Will Rogers. But they're not period pieces. They deal with eternal things: youth and age, life and death, a longing for home. Relatively

few of the best known Carmichael songs, in fact, are about love—at least in any explicit, boy-girl, moon-June sense. Hoagy's love songs have their own spin: "I Get Along Without You Very Well," for all its bereavement, remains stoic, never approaching standard-issue "Body and Soul" self-pity. "Skylark" and "Baltimore Oriole" apostrophize birds in the service of amour; "Two Sleepy People" looks back on young romance with wry affection.

Finally, and above all, there's "Star Dust." Rangy, arpeggiated, structurally unconventional in its ABAC format, it stands alone; outfitted with its Mitchell Parish lyric, it's a song about a song about love. No other song even begins to challenge its unique primacy as a kind of informal American national anthem. Even the resolutely yuppified National Public Radio, selecting its "100 most important American musical works of the twentieth century," found time for a lengthy, affectionate Susan Stamberg ode to "Star Dust."

Numerically speaking, Hoagy didn't write many songs—perhaps 650 at a conservative estimate, a mere handful compared to, say, the prolific Irving Berlin. But quantity is at best an unreliable unit of measure: Carmichael's songs are personal statements, most often nourished and reinforced by his own performances. Beyond argument, he's the key precursor of that phenomenon of our own times, the singer-songwriter. Whether Billy Joel or Elton John, Dave Frishberg or Bob Dorough, or the countless others who have made an industry of devising and performing their own material, all share a common ancestor in the wiry little guy at the piano, hat back on his head, often bathed in cigarette smoke as he chides "Lazybones" or "Small Fry," exhorts an "Ole Buttermilk Sky" to be mellow and bright, or extols the fragrant memory of "Memphis in June."

It's possible to talk of songs as having a "Carmichael flavor." Not that they all sound alike or conform to any one model: far from it. Overall, in fact, they're a pretty diverse lot. Yet they remain unmistakably his, and, in all but a very few cases, it's hard to imagine them having been written by anyone else. If such perennials as "Georgia on My Mind," "New Orleans," and "Moon Country" evoke the Southland, it's worth noting that Indiana, set on a firm east-west axis alongside Ohio and Illinois, can also be seen latitudinally, contiguous geographically and socially with Kentucky, Tennessee, and the Carolinas.

Except for Duke Ellington, whose primary activity was not songwriting, Carmichael is arguably the only major tunesmith whose musical roots are

discernibly in jazz. Though his later career grew in another direction, he never lost his early affinity for, and love of, the dynamic music of his youth. No coincidence, that some of Louis Armstrong's most majestic recorded moments are in performances of "Star Dust," "Rockin' Chair," and other Carmichael songs.

I discovered Hoagy Carmichael early in life, through the crystalline miracle of Bix Beiderbecke's cornet. Seeking out Bix inevitably meant running across Hoagy's "Riverboat Shuffle," "Washboard Blues," and the original, medium-tempo incarnation of "Star Dust." To a kid growing up in the Boston suburbs of half a century ago, the pair of them seemed American exotics, equal parts roaring-twenties college hepcats and *Saturday Evening Post* Norman Rockwell archetypes.

Imagine all that farmland. Those golden wheatfields and deep blue big-sky summer horizons. Lakefront ballrooms, with no ocean within thousands of miles; nocturnal expeditions into Chicago to find hot jazz in basement cabarets and South Side dance halls. What a wondrous world of discovery and exuberantly, timelessly youthful music!

How easy, too, and how welcome, to bask in the magenta glow of Carmichael's two published memoirs, *The Stardust Road* and the more matter-of-fact *Sometimes I Wonder*. But what about a biography? Books on Gershwin, Porter, Youmans, Kern, and the rest were easy enough to find, as were studies of Armstrong, Ellington, Benny Goodman, and other jazz notables. But no Hoagy. Had his own two books said everything that needed to be said?

Even shorn of its subject's embellishments and elisions, the story asked to be told, and the music badly needed addressing. Alec Wilder's brief Carmichael section in *American Popular Song* had made a start; various estimable writers, from William Zinsser to John Edward Hasse, had added much of value. But a full biography, of both the music and the man, was still yet to come.

I'd like to think that future generations, backpackers and music scholars alike, will read here about Hoagland Carmichael and respond to the American vision so lovingly preserved in his music, a vision now receding much too quickly from view. It's an idealization, of the people we'd like to think we once were and those we want to believe we still can be: open and decent, worldly but appreciative of simple pleasures; pragmatic yet principled, secular yet deeply moral. In our quest to find what's best in ourselves we need

all the help we can get, and there's nothing like a *Vorbild* or two to speed things along. Above all, great songs are indestructible artifacts, impervious to time and changing fashion.

With all that in mind, then, I invite you (and my quondam traveling companions, wherever they are) to enter Hoagy Carmichael's world—a world sprinkled, in the most truly magical sense, with stardust.

SOUTHOLD, NEW YORK R. M. S.
JUNE 1, 2001

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"Play me a Hoagy Carmichael song and I hear the banging of a screen door and the whine of an outboard motor on a lake—sounds of summer in a small-town America that is long gone but still longed for."

—William Zinsser
The American Scholar, 1994

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STARDUST MELODY

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* I *

Daybreak

Sonny—ain't but one thing to remember when you gets to be a man:
You saves your money, and does the best you can.

—HOAGY CARMICHAEL *(Undated, unused lyric)*

Anyone wanting to drive from Indianapolis to Richmond, Indiana, these days simply picks up Interstate 70, which bisects the city, heads east, and steps on the gas. Provided the traffic is relatively light, the weather reasonable, and the police not too attentive, a driver can cover the seventy-three miles in little more than an hour.

That's the way most people in this adrenalized age do it. Driving an interstate in central Indiana, after all, is much like driving one anywhere: self-contained, insular, passing by but never through; experiencing but never partaking. Penetrating, even—but never touching.

At certain points along I-70 it's possible to look south and see, off in the middle distance, another road, running parallel. The map identifies it as Route 40, though most folks in this part of Indiana still call it the "National."

Built in 1827 as a stagecoach route, it cuts right across the middle of the state, from Terre Haute, over by the Illinois line, through Indianapolis, then wanders east toward Ohio; the names of Dunreith, Straughn, Dublin, and East Germantown trace settlement patterns, waves of immigrants moving west, naming new places for those they'd left in search of lives better than what they'd journeyed all those miles, crossed oceans, to escape.

Indiana achieved statehood in 1816, but even before that it was a crossroads place. Anyone wanting to get from New York, Philadelphia, or Boston to Chicago or Kansas City, St. Louis or Omaha, Des Moines, Minneapolis, or points further west, had to go right through Indiana Territory, on either the train or the National Road. As nineteenth-century America grew, that came to mean meat and grain heading one way, people and supplies moving the other, a burgeoning economy flooding across the heartland.

Few were surprised when the 1890 census placed the statistical center of the U.S. population on Lewis Wells's farm outside Greensburg, some fifty miles southeast of Indianapolis. By 1900 it had marched thirty miles west to another farm, that of Henry Marr, near Columbus, Indiana. B. M. Hutchins, whose firm cut gravestones for just about every family thereabouts, carved a monument for the spot, and the *Indianapolis News* remarked on December 16, 1902, that "farmers for miles around watched the work with interest. Quite a number of Columbus people drove to Marr's farm during the day."[1]

The land was arable, and between 1860 and 1900 the number of Indiana farms increased from 132,000 to 222,000. Newcomers from Germany, from Ireland and Scotland, Scandinavia and Holland, brought a love of the soil and knowledge of what riches it could yield. Indiana forests provided timber. Men quarried limestone from the vast shelf on which much of the state rested.

If modern-day Indianapolis resembles most other medium-sized American conurbations in its ever more cluttered skyline, traffic jams, and labyrinthine one-way systems, its restaurants, motels, and shopping malls, the similarity ends abruptly at the city limits. The National Road may parallel the interstate, but the difference between them—in appearance, tempo, meaning—betokens a gulf of time and culture.

Driving the National eastward, the visitor traverses a gently rolling landscape dotted by old wood-frame houses, stately brick school buildings, churches and Moose lodges, Shell stations and savings banks. Discreet signs extol the Riley Family Restaurant or Suzy's Cafe (no fancy French accent *aigu* here, please), where the Sunday fried chicken dinners are still the best around. Barbershops and "beauty parlors," Jim's Hardware and John Deere dealerships, line the main streets.

As William Least Heat-Moon (in *Blue Highways*, 1982) and other peripatetics have discovered, these towns still speckle the U.S. landscape, their people living out daily lives not so much in spite of as simply alongside

and apart from the hurry-up cities. "You enjoy your beepers and cell phones and too-busy-to-bother existence," they seem to say, "and we'll just carry on here, at our own pace, the way we always have."

* * *

Abraham Lincoln, born in neighboring Kentucky, spent his boyhood in southern Indiana's Spencer County; when he ran for president in 1860, Hoosiers (the origin of the term is unclear) helped vote him in, remaining loyal to the Union throughout the Civil War. Apart from a raid in 1863 by Confederate General John Hunt Morgan, Indiana kept out of the war—making it a prime, 36,000-square-mile postbellum destination for waves of southern blacks moving north to the promise of better lives.

They and other groups at society's margins left their cultural mark—not least on an audience eager for entertainment. In the words of historian Duncan Schiedt, turn-of-the-century Indiana

> was a favored place for touring musical shows of all kinds. The circus, the opera, musical comedy, burlesque, and even the lowly medicine show . . . all regarded the Hoosier state as fertile ground. A major circus, the Hagenbeck Wallace organization, was but one of several which wintered at the town of Peru. In Indianapolis, black stage producers got an early start as they sent companies on the road.[2]

Among the visitors were musicians, many of them members of town and traveling tent show bands, representing myriad backgrounds and traditions. As Schiedt puts it, the Germans brought their choral legacy, the Anglo-Saxons their folk melodies, the blacks their rhythmic vitality—and the unique, compelling accents of the blues.

By the late nineteenth century, Indiana folk were living a rich, varied, ever-expanding musical life. It erupted into the national consciousness on the very eve of the twentieth century, when Paul Dresser, brother of novelist Theodore Dreiser, published "On the Banks of the Wabash," his sentimental ode to his home state. Not long after came James Hanley and Ballard MacDonald's "(Back Home Again in) Indiana," reverentially borrowing several key phrases from Dresser's tune.

It didn't take long for songs celebrating Indiana to become staples of the popular repertoire—even if they did run a distant second to Tin Pan

Alley's eternal fascination with a romanticized (and largely fictitious) antebellum South. The first decades of the twentieth century brought nationwide popularity to "Indiana Moon," "You're My Little Indiana Rose," "Wabash Moon," "Dreaming of My Indiana Sweetheart," the punningly titled "Hoosier Sweetheart," and even Dresser's own "Way Down in Old Indiana." Songwriter Harry Von Tilzer, who as Harold Gumm had lived several boyhood years in Indianapolis, expressed fond longing for home in his 1920 "A-B-C-D Blues."[3]

It's perhaps no coincidence, moreover, that Richmond, the last major town on the National Road before it crosses into Ohio, should have been the site of a small pioneer company whose phonograph records chronicled, and in turn helped shape, the history of American twentieth-century music, in particular the unique hybrid form ultimately to be known as jazz.

* * *

A visitor driving along the National Road today still glimpses bits of earlier Indiana life. A ten-mile stretch between the towns of Cleveland and Charlottesville, say, remains much as it must have been: solid old Victorian houses, set well back on open farmland, frowning at the passage of years like slightly disapproving village elders. Stop along here for a moment, and it's easy to imagine the chill predawn hours of Monday, January 26, 1925, and an open Ford bumping eastward along the two-lane road, two young men scattering the darkness with their laughter.

> We were halfway to Richmond . . . when we stopped and for some reason Bix took out his horn. He cut loose with a blast to warn the farmers and start the dogs howling . . . Clean wonderful banners of melody filled the air, carved the countryside. Split the still night. The trees and the ground and the sky made the tones so right.[4]

That's Hoagy Carmichael talking. When we find him, out there on the National, he's twenty-five, long-faced and solemn; stands a skinny five-eight; plays piano and a little cornet, and is allegedly studying law at Indiana University in his hometown of Bloomington, about fifty miles southwest of here. He's never going to be a lawyer: that much he knows in his heart, though at this point he's nowhere near ready to admit it to himself or anyone else.

Hoagland Howard Carmichael, born in Bloomington on an overcast Wednesday, November 22, 1899, has music on his mind—music, in fact, as embodied in his companion of this night, a quiet, huskily good-looking guy from Iowa, three years his junior, named Leon Beiderbecke. No one ever calls him Leon, of course, except the occasional schoolmarm or maiden aunt. To the rest—parents, friends, an ever-widening circle of admirers—he's "Bix."

His instrument of choice is the cornet, though he's also quite good at the piano. He's already emerged as a minor celebrity in the underground fraternity dedicated to playing "hot music." Enjoying themselves together on this coldly moonlit night, the two friends are bound for quite different destinies: Beiderbecke, impelled by dark inner forces, will burn briefly and brightly, and barely survive the decade. His friend Hoagland, the sometime law student, will walk another path; throughout a long and productive life, he'll bear the imprint of these nights, of the trees and the ground and the sky that "made the tones so right." His friendship with this star-crossed young man, and the music that cascaded so effortlessly out of his horn, will go on shaping the aspiring lawyer's life, ringing bright and forever in the stillness of memory.

* * *

A first child, Hoagland Carmichael was born at home, in a four-room cottage on Bloomington's Grant Street, only boy in what ultimately became a family of girls. Sometime during his mother's pregnancy, said boyhood friend Harry Orchard, "there was a traveling troupe of circus people stranded in Bloomington and the Carmichaels took in the Hoaglands." The guests went their way, and the name remained.[5]

Howard Clyde Carmichael made a steady if uncertain living running horse-drawn taxis. "He had courted my mother, Lida, while banging a whip into the rump of a fast-pacing horse," the son later recalled, and she "promised to marry him if he'd only slow up."[6]

One of seven children born on Michael Taylor Carmichael's livestock farm near Harrodsburg, twelve miles south of Bloomington, Howard had been a high-spirited boy, especially good with horses. In the U.S. Army during the Spanish-American War, he'd won the nickname "Cyclone" for his uninhibited style in regimental middleweight boxing championships.

A newspaper announcement of his marriage to Mary Lida Robison on

May 24, 1899, describes him neutrally as "a young man of character and promise." His sister Florence remembered him as "the family comedian," entertaining social gatherings with "mimicry and soft-shoe dances . . . a jolly friend of everyone."

Howard Carmichael's photographs show a stocky, stiff, rather solemn man, clearly uncomfortable in front of the camera. A bit rough-and-ready, even intimidating (said his son), but overall "a great guy, an easy mark, a soft touch . . . who was always being bamboozled into something yet not getting riled up about it." Not that he didn't get "riled" once in a while: sudden outbursts of temper could reveal "a primitive instinct that made him a fighter when he was enraged."[7]

Howard's wife, by contrast, was "a shy, poetic young girl" barely five feet tall. Her hairdo and manner of dress emulated those of the "Gibson Girl" ideal created by turn-of-the-century magazine illustrator Charles Dana Gibson, those "classical-faced beauties, smart under their piled-up hair, with studied, superior smiles ready to trap a male."[8]

How close Lida (pronounced "Lye-dah") Robison Carmichael actually came to such perfection is hard to tell. But she possessed at least one striking attribute, owing nothing to Gibson's idealized sophisticates: she was an adept and dynamic pianist. When silent movies came to Bloomington early in the new century, theatre owners hired Lida to improvise piano accompaniments; among her regular places of employment were the Vaudette Nickelodeon, on South College, and the Wonderland Air Dome, on East Sixth Street. When fraternity and sorority houses at Indiana University held weekend dances, Lida was usually at the keyboard, often accompanied on the traps by a man remembered only as Mr. Woodward, who worked days as a clerk in Whitaker's Grocery Store.

She could give a respectable account of "classical" favorites, cobble together impromptu Gilbert and Sullivan medleys, draw on familiar themes from opera and operetta—and toss off such favorites of the day as "The Stars and Stripes Forever" or Scott Joplin's "Maple Leaf Rag," written in the year of young Hoagland's birth. Reportedly she also wrote verse and short stories, though no examples have survived.

Lida lost her heart to "Cyclone" Carmichael from the start. Quick comparison of the dates of their May wedding and the boy's birth six months later indicates that romance bloomed early and ardently. But Cyclone's jobs somehow never seemed to last very long, and when "horseless carriages" began to replace the horse-drawn rigs of his taxi service, he tried

his hand awhile as an electrician. Admitting to friends that he was "no Tom Edison," he soon started looking for better-paying work to support his new family.

That meant moving around, going where the jobs were. Sometimes he'd be gone weeks at a time, leaving Lida, her mother, and various aunts to run the home and care for the boy. Feast or famine, with the emphasis too often on the latter. "We were poor white trash," Hoagy Carmichael declared during a 1972 interview, in a surprisingly harsh assessment of the family's economic and social circumstances—and contrasting sharply with the more affectionate tone he usually adopted. But that careless utterance was far from the only hint that life for the Carmichaels had a hardscrabble side, and young Hoagland soon learned to be canny with what little money he had.

Boyhood friend Harry Orchard, later a respected Bloomington banker, recalled Hoagland watching carefully from the sidelines as he and some high school fraternity boys shot craps. "I was up and down and up and down and finally lost every cent I had," Orchard said in a 1983 letter. "I approached [Hoagy] when I had lost all my money and asked for a loan. He wanted to know what I would give him for security and I pulled out my prize Christmas billfold and told him I would give him that as security for a $5 loan. The billfold had cost my mother $10. Hoagy said it wasn't worth $10 but he would lend me $2 if I put it up for security. I gave the billfold to him and he gave me $2, which I later paid back and got the billfold back."[9]

In 1904, his cab business a failure and work as an electrician not forthcoming, Cyclone packed up his little family—including his now-pregnant wife—and headed up Route 22 for Indianapolis. They found an apartment at the corner of East and Lockerbie streets, where, on the second day of November, Lida gave birth to a second child, a daughter they called Georgia.

Three houses down Lockerbie Street lived the rotund, beloved "Hoosier poet" James Whitcomb Riley. By then in his mid-fifties, he'd written such sentimental children's classics as "Little Orphant [*sic*] Annie" and "The Runaway Boy." Hoagland, no runaway, remembered the poet as "a fine, fat figure of a man," often wobbling around the neighborhood on a bicycle.

> He used to carry me on his shoulders to the grocery store, and when the fire engines passed, he counted them for me. There were always

> fifty. I don't care how many fire engines there are in Indianapolis today, there were always fifty then.[10]

The Indianapolis sojourn didn't last long. By January 29, 1906, Cyclone, his wife, and their two children were back in Bloomington, living at 214 South Dunn Street, a short walk from both the Indiana University campus and its football practice field.[11]

For the lad who later wrote that "change always upset me," it was a time of happiness and—most important to him—stability: "Bloomington offered everything," he wrote. "Creeks, ponds, rabbits, circuses and wide open spaces. I could cross a dusty street here in my bare feet without the aid of a traffic cop."[12]

There were baseball games in summer, and football in autumn, on Dunn's Meadow, a onetime community pasture; winter ice skating on the Jordan River, a local creek named for a past president of the university. Young Hoagland joined in eagerly, showing up regularly at the football field to "become a nuisance generally to the Indiana varsity players."[13]

Gradually he gained a circle of friends, among them cousins Hugh "Percy" Campbell and Sammy Dodds, as well as "Pee Wee" Johnson and "Klondike" Tucker, both from Bucktown, Bloomington's black neigborhood. It established an ease of association across lines of color and class that remained with Carmichael the rest of his life.

Spring brought the Gentry Brothers Dog-and-Pony Show out of its Bloomington off-season quarters, to set up and rehearse on Dunn's Meadow. Then, in high summer, came the big one, the Hagenbeck and Wallace Circus, which wintered in Peru, Indiana—where it had captured the imagination of a well-to-do local boy named Cole Albert Porter.

The days leading up to such big events saw young Carmichael and his pals collecting empty flour sacks from local boardinghouses, then selling them back to Whitaker's grocery for a penny each—just enough to cover the cost of setting up a soda pop stand on the meadow perimeter.

> The day before the circus, all hands got together to build a sleeping-out camp with straw beds, tent, and everything. A grape arbor usually provided the best site. Into this we crawled with the flies and mosquitoes. An alarm clock was set for 4 A.M., and we tried our best to go to sleep in the unmercifully hot place at 5 o'clock in the afternoon

so we would be wide-eyed and alert to watch the circus unload at an early hour in the morning.[14]

Entry into the first grade at Central Elementary School in early 1906 did little to ruffle the lad's sense of being just where he belonged. Even Cyclone's prolonged absences had a bright side: evenings, when Lida left the house to play the piano at a sorority dance or local movie, the slight figure of her son was more often than not at her side. He recalled doing little dances for the customers—and later putting two folding chairs together and stretching out blissfully beside the piano, letting the music float him far away.

Cyclone Carmichael, meanwhile, "tested my mother's love by his desire for moving and wandering, tearing up roots to try new places, new ideas, new plans . . . He was born too late: he belonged with the wagon trains in the gold rush days." In 1910, like the covered wagons, he headed for the far West, bringing his son's Bloomington idyll to an abrupt end and pitching the boy into despair.[15]

European merchants had settled far western Montana's Bitterroot valley in 1860, and a small town gradually sprang up around the trading post run by C. P. Higgins and Francis Worden. Known at first as "Hellgate Village," it soon had both a sawmill and a flour milling operation—leading newcomers to style it "Missoula Mills" (later shortened to just Missoula), from a Salish Indian word meaning "near cold, chilling waters."

Set in an old glacial lake bed near the three-way juncture of the Clark Fork, Blackfoot, and Bitterroot rivers, it was a place of towering mountain vistas and big skies—and, as Cyclone Carmichael had heard it, limitless opportunity for any man willing to put in a hard day's work. With electricity and telephones just coming in, there were immediate jobs stringing wires south along the Bitterroot to Hamilton.

He went. It's impossible now to know what thoughts went through Lida Carmichael's mind in those weeks, packing up her household, storing her treasured Armstrong golden oak upright piano in her parents' parlor, and, finally, boarding the Monon Line train with her two children, bound for heaven knew where.

Dunn's Meadow, the Jordan, the circus, the magic nights in darkened theatres listening to "Maple Leaf Rag"—all that had meant security for the boy, something to grasp, hold, make his own. Now, in their place, was this

raw, inhospitable outpost, where the scale was too vast, the mountains too distant, the wind constant, cold, and hostile. "I was so homesick," he wrote, "I could gaze over Elephant Mountain and imagine I could see the smoke from the tall stack of the Bloomington gas plant curling over it."[16]

Around the same time, and for many of the same reasons, the family of future songwriter Harry Owens left Holt County, Nebraska, and trekked west, first to Hamilton, then up the valley to Missoula. In later years, living comfortably in Hawaii, Owens recalled the selfsame bleak existence.

> As I look back upon that early beginning, memory spells hardship. All summer we would stack the winter fuel supply in the woodshed but the winters were incredibly cold and our wood supply would never quite survive the winter's demands . . . though the word "depression" had yet to come into usage, "bad times" was an expression we learned to know by heart.[17]

"Dad went back there for location work on the movie *Timber Jack*," his elder son, Hoagy Bix Carmichael, told the author in 1998. "I was just fourteen, and came along with him. We drove out to where the family had lived all those years ago—and amazingly enough the little clapboard house they'd rented that winter was still there. Imagine—this teensy piece of land, maybe the size of a garage, in front. That was the 'lawn,' his playground, where he played the little games he writes about in his 1965 memoir, *Sometimes I Wonder*—created a whole imaginary farm, in miniature. He even fenced in the 'lawn' and flooded it with water, just so he could ice-skate, the way they'd done in distant Bloomington.

"The house—it was so small—was right at the brow of a hill. You'd look out and down, and there were the railroad tracks, and beyond them this line of brick row-houses, the brothels, where the lumbermen and other workers took their pleasure. In a funny way that was a good thing: it wasn't long before he discovered that lots of those houses had piano players, black ones, and they played hot ragtime, sort of the way his mother did. He'd had his black pals in Bloomington, and it seemed the most natural thing in the world for him to steal down there and listen to 'em. I don't think his mom ever found out."

Even with such diversions, it was a forbidding place for a ten-year-old. A place of exile. "He felt alone, abandoned in a foreign land . . . In talking

to me about it in '54 he was still able, after all those years, to feel those feelings; and his mother, however strong she was—and for all her small size she was as strong as steel—must have shared it. A feeling of utter misery, of being at the very bottom of the barrel, marooned out there at the edge of nowhere. I think it strengthened a resolve in him. No matter what it took, he wasn't going to live this way ever again."[18]

As usual, the big opportunities Howard Carmichael had anticipated—and the good money—never materialized, and by spring 1911 the family had returned to Bloomington, first at the Dunn Street house, then at 325 South Fess Avenue, just two blocks away. Lida, "this little 80 pounds of wire and sweetness," sat down to a dish of her mother's apple pie, recovered her beloved golden oak upright, and got right back to the business of making "a nickel go more places than it does in a dice game," shoring up the family's meager finances with her music.[19]

But something had changed. No one knew why, but suddenly young Hoagland began to show signs of something like musical aptitude. It came oddly wrapped, in an almost obsessive interest in the 1891 sentimental ballad "Little Boy Blue." With the kind of single-mindedness only an eleven-year-old knows, he implored his mother to teach him the words, penned by nineteenth-century American poet Eugene Field (music by Ethelbert Nevin, best known as the composer of "Mighty Lak a Rose").

After what he remembered as "weeks of practice" he was able to sing melody and words. "The story of the angels taking Little Boy Blue away, and how his 'tin soldiers and toy dog stood staunch and sturdy in their rust' to await his return, had made a firm impression on my memory long before."[20]

He quickly graduated from singing his new *tour de force* just for the family to doing it in public. "The entire grade school turned out en masse in the great halls of the school building to hear the young maestro as he stood beside a grand piano and 'chilled' them to the accompaniment of the best-looking red-headed teacher in town," he wrote.[21]

Even allowing for some embroidery in the telling, it seems inevitable that such musical prowess would have led various Carmichaels and Robisons to recommend lessons on the violin or piano. Lida's answer was characteristically forthright: "We don't see any point in forcing something on the child that he doesn't have a hankering for. We'll know soon enough if he has any talent."[22]

Carmichael himself later agreed. "Kid days are short enough," he said, without the regimen of time-consuming practice required by serious instrumental study. What neither Lida nor Howard, and certainly not their son, could have known was how soon that "hankering" would show itself and what an extraordinary form it would take.

⁂ II ⁂

Discovery

John Porter Foley had every reason to be happy. Since 1896, his first year as a student at Indiana University, he'd held the post of campus electrician and "mechanician." Any problem with an electric or mechanical device and—well, just find Mr. Foley. He'd know what to do.

So it was that when, on Saturday, January 20, 1906, the bells for the university's brand-new clock tower finally arrived, John Porter Foley oversaw their installation. They'd been expected in mid-December, in plenty of time to be mounted, adjusted, and rung out on New Year's Eve. The McShane Bell Company of Baltimore had shipped them on time, but something had gone wrong in transit, and they'd arrived a month late, much to the chagrin of school administrators.

The $120,000 Student Building, housing a six-hundred-seat auditorium, a cafeteria, barbershop, film theatre, billiard room, swimming pool, and men's and women's gymnasium facilities, was due to open in June; it would take weeks to lift the eleven massive bells to the top of its hundred-foot clock tower, mount them, attach them to their keyboard mechanism, and get them working. A month's delay, even at the start, could affect the dedication ceremony, scheduled for commencement week.

Nor were alumni of the classes 1899 through 1902 overjoyed. They'd beat

bushes and twisted arms to raise the $3,650 (valued at nearly $66,000 by today's standards) it cost to purchase and ship the bells. The idea that they might not ring out for the first time until summer recess, with nobody but local merchants and townsfolk to hear them, was almost too much to bear.

Only John Porter Foley seemed unruffled. The job would be done, he assured them, properly and on time.

And so it came to pass. On Tuesday, June 19, 1906, students and teachers stood by proudly as university president William Lowe Bryan dedicated the new building, hewn of the Indiana limestone so plentiful in Monroe County. With Mr. Foley working the big broom-handle keys, the clock-tower bells struck the hour, then pealed out the school's newly adopted alma mater, "Hail to Old I.U."

They resounded from one end of campus to the other. There seemed no place in Bloomington where they could *not* be heard loudly, proudly—and, above all, clearly. Every weekday afternoon at six, for years thereafter, all Bloomington turned an ear to Mr. Foley (or, for a while, his deputy Archie Warner), tolling out "Hail to Old I.U."[1]

Mr. Foley's rendering of the melody was clearly audible one rainy six o'clock at 325 South Fess Avenue, to the young ears of Hoagland Howard Carmichael. As he later told it, a regular Saturday afternoon baseball game at Dunn's Meadow had been rained out. He'd been standing there in the family's parlor, he said, looking out at the rain and banging his fists in frustration on the keyboard of his mother's upright piano—and, as if in reply, the strains of "Hail to Old I.U." came floating back to him. A simple melody, spanning less than an octave, it moves scalewise from the tonic—in this case in the key of A-major. Imagination needs no prompting to picture the boy reaching over and picking out the theme with one finger on the piano keyboard.[2]

"I had been exposed to the piano all my life, but no one ever told me to try it, to touch its keys," he recalled later. "Yes, I had discovered a whole new world, and found a new true love." Sometime after this epiphany his mother came home, and "put her arms around me from behind, and held me ever so tightly and I felt her tears falling on my shaggy neck. I didn't turn around. I went on playing. I knew then that my mother had realized a secret goal and that neither of us would be lonely again, as long as we kept that piano."[3]

(In his various memoirs, Carmichael places these events on a Saturday afternoon. But the chimes sounded "Hail to Old I.U." at six P.M. only on

weekdays, never weekends. Young Carmichael may indeed have been frustrated because the rain thwarted his after-school plans—but where were his mother and sisters at what was, after all, nearly the family dinner hour? In all probability the story, even if basically true, contains a liberal amount of embroidery.)[4]

Lida Carmichael soon began to acquaint her son with some keyboard rudiments. "Mother showed me the simple construction of the bass and occasionally the fifth," he wrote. "That seemed an impossibility to find in a tough key like three flats, but she always left me with something difficult to solve. This was good psychology and was most helpful to one who was picking it out by 'ear.' "[5]

Exact information is scarce. But it's obvious that young Carmichael's interest in music, and skill at the piano, grew apace. The very fact of sharing a musical life with his mother, he has written, allowed him to "let myself go a little more. I wasn't even too annoyed at my father's loud ways, his hunt for a crazy rainbow at the end of some uprooting journey. I was learning to observe, to file away my emotions, the way a big-eyed, silent kid will."[6]

* * *

There is a miniaturized, and idealized, flavor to all this, making it all too easy to imagine the actors in Bloomington's small drama living their lives oblivious to a world dominated by real, even apocalyptic, events.

But that world was out there, waiting. On Sunday, September 6, 1914, one ocean and thousands of land miles from Indiana, a war unlike any other in history was sputtering into action. French troops, under the imposing figure of sixty-two-year-old General Joseph Jacques-Césaire "Papa" Joffre, fell upon General Alexander Von Kluck's exhausted German forces near the river Marne, outside Paris. When the battle smoke lifted at week's end, hundreds of thousands of men lay dead, and what quickly came to be called "the Great War" had engulfed Europe. The United States, at least for the moment, stayed out; but that would not last long.

If these five days that shook the world attracted any notice at all in communities such as Bloomington, Indiana, it was distant, abstract. The life of small-town America went its sealed, still relatively pastoral, way. And on an Indiana Wednesday in the week of the Marne, Hoagland Carmichael entered Bloomington High School.

He speaks affectionately of his first "long-pants suit that took $19.50 of Dad's hard-earned cash"; recounts his "crushes" among the girls, and his efforts to win dates with his favorites. When, that March, classmate Ruth Orchard hands him her "character book" to sign, he inscribes his answers to its many questions with a blend of whimsy and high seriousness. "Give a description of yourself," it demands. Answer: "Red eyes, pink hair, pointed nose." What is the signer's highest ambition? "To be something." What is his mother's maiden name? "Ko Chug Ling Chi." Favorite pastime: "Playing the piano." His ideal of a man: "True, honest, brave, strong, good disposition." Kind of life he prefers: "Happy, fast, go-lucky."[7]

The overwhelming impression is of a youngster born into slender means, immersing himself ardently in music, a diversion that will shortly expand into a world for him. More and more, his every waking moment reflects fascination with his mother's keyboard skills. Two-steps, he recalls later, "were the rage, and mother could play them in swell style. Her tiny right hand that stretched to reach the octaves had the power of a man's, and her left never missed a beat of the difficult rhythm."[8]

In 1912, shortly after the birth of a second daughter, Martha Claire, Cyclone Carmichael found work in Bedford, some twenty miles south of Bloomington. His son speaks of it as if the family, uprooted again, had moved there and suffered for a year before returning to Bloomington, but that's unlikely: Bedford is not far enough away to warrant such a convulsion, and no break appears in the boy's public school records. Hoagland often baby-sat evenings for his sisters—another indication that Lida's piano-playing jobs went on as usual. Another lonely patch, yes, but this time the piano "had me body and soul," and "the days without companionship gave me hours of much needed practice."[9]

The cottage on South Fess Avenue lay directly behind Beta Theta Pi, one of the more imposing and well-to-do houses on Third Street, in those days Indiana University's fraternity row. It stood on a natural promontory some fifteen feet above the Carmichaels' low-lying backstreet dwelling, enhancing its sense of exaltation in the boy's mind. "I had my own tiny bedroom with a slanting ceiling and I would lie on my bed nights, listening to the college boys carry on," Carmichael writes. Among them was Wendell Willkie ('13), a future Republican presidential candidate, and Paul V. McNutt ('13), one day to become governor of Indiana.

But above all there was Hubert Herschel Hanna, whose father taught mathematics at the university. His field, officially, was economics, but most

fellow-students knew "Hube" as a ragtime pianist. "Not only was his left hand a whiz-bang, but his right was the miracle of the times as it ran octaves at lightning speed," Carmichael writes. "Unconsciously, his bass made the firmer impression on me as I lay night after night near my window to take in his chords amid the whoops and howls of the dear old Beta Theta Pi boys."[10]

Hanna also led the university's only dance band, a quintet that included Francis "Hank" Wells on "hot" fiddle and "Red" Carmichael, no relation, on C-melody saxophone; they were good enough to play weekends at the Crescent movie house, where young Hoagland became a regular attendee. Soon various of Hube Hanna's fancy bass figures began showing up in the boy's own "treatments" of popular tunes of the day. "It wasn't long until I noticed students hesitate occasionally as they passed our house to get an earful of the 'Maori' I was copying from Hube . . . This excited me to a louder bombardment of the keys with the piano lid wide open and my left heel pounding the floor."[11]

(Composed in 1914 and identified on its published sheet music as a "Samoan Dance," *The Maori* gained wide popularity, along with the slightly earlier *The Trocha*, at the height of the first tango craze, as one of the first tangos written by a home-grown American musician. Its composer, William H. Tyers, was assistant conductor of the famed James Reese Europe Clef Club Orchestra, whose performances were at that time the talk of New York. Tyers, a pianist and arranger, also composed such straightforward ragtime pieces as the "Barn Yard Shuffle" and, notably, "Panama," which went on to become a staple of the early jazz band repertoire. He died in 1924.)

According to one account, only a thin wall separated the Carmichael home from the house next door, and the young man's left heel stomping out *The Maori*'s tango rhythms was only too audible to the neighbors. "Every minute I could I banged away, hunting chords on the old upright," Carmichael recalled; "there are no sounds more irritating than unfound music." One neighbor, a man who worked nights, seemed to agree, confessing later that the boy's before-school pounding had indeed kept him awake. "He has some talent for composing and it's important to encourage him" was Lida's no-nonsense reply.[12]

Hoagland "continued to pound out notes on the piano like a madman, trying to impress the peg[ged trouser]-legged college boys in tailored clothes as they walked past our window. *I wanted them to see how refined I was*

[emphasis added]. I was amazed that they never seemed to pay any attention to me. I thought I was good; at least I played loudly, and in stylish ragtime."[13]

Mark well that statement: "I wanted them to see how refined I was." A small, wiry kid, growing up on the wrong side of Bloomington's town-gown divide, living for the first time in a house with indoor plumbing, perceives another world over his backyard fence, a world of comfort and substance, in which people can afford to hire a black cook to prepare their meals, to dress in tailored clothes, and in general lead lives that are "happy, fast, go-lucky."

He makes little of this in his memoirs, even less in the many polished interviews he gave over the years. But it doesn't take much reading between the lines to feel the longing of his emotionally locked-up imagination to transcend the small world of itinerant labor, nickel-and-dime saving, and making-do. And it is the music, clearly, that will make his escape possible.

In early twentieth-century America, the role of professional music differed widely in the aspirations of people of different classes. In the imaginations of such bourgeois families as the Beiderbeckes of Davenport, Iowa, or even the rather less affluent Dreisers of Terre Haute, Indiana, a life in popular music was a step down, usually into a *demi-monde* inhabited by gamblers, thieves, pimps, whores, and petty crooks. "Music," as historian Neil Leonard puts it, "was considered an enjoyable avocation, but a musical career was thought to be unfit for a gentleman." Conductor-educator Walter Damrosch amplified the point: "A strong feeling existed," he wrote in his 1923 autobiography, "that music was essentially an effeminate art, and that its cultivation by a man took that much away from his manliness." The 1910 census found 84,000 American women working as musicians and music teachers, compared to only 54,000 men. Little wonder that Paul Dreiser, whose younger brother Theodore aspired to a literary life, changed his name to Dresser long before his song "On the Banks of the Wabash" became a national rage.[14]

Prospects for poor blacks were quite different. The Civil War and Reconstruction still burned painfully in memory; slavery was no longer the law of the land, but free black men and women still confronted "Jim Crow" racism in a segregated society. With most "respectable" professions closed to all but a relative few, there was little choice but to take opportunities where they occurred: the life of a professional entertainer or band musician offered travel, earning potential, even possible fame and (especially as in

the case of such figures as James Reese Europe or the venerated conductor, composer, and Oberlin Conservatory alumnus Will Marion Cook) dignity. Such allure drew to ragtime, and later to jazz, a disproportionate number of young men who might otherwise have distinguished themselves as concert artists, composers, painters, authors—and even, by extension, physicians, scientists, and academics.[15]

The Carmichaels worked hard at maintaining a modest version of the gentility they perceived in those more privileged than they. Even a morning's walk up Main Street was a lesson in comparative sociology. Booth Tarkington, writing about turn-of-the-century Indianapolis in *The Magnificent Ambersons*, describes houses that

> lacked style, but also lacked pretentiousness, and whatever does not pretend at all has style enough. They stood in commodious yards, well shaded by left-over forest trees, elm and walnut and beech, with here and there a line of tall sycamores where the land had been made by filling bayous from the creek.[16]

A burgeoning, industrialized twentieth-century economy was beginning to open a new sense of social mobility among members of all classes. It mattered ever less what you did or what you came from, as long as you somehow got where you wanted to go. Music would be young Carmichael's means of ascent, up and away toward a wider, more promising life.

He felt at ease among black families, and from all indications they felt no less so with him. In a 1982 reminiscence, Bloomington resident Mary Cardell Johnson recalled the young man always receiving a warm welcome at the Tenth Street home of Collet and Vertis Johnson. "We liked to see him because we liked to dance and he played the piano for us," she said. "He was a swell guy."[17]

For Hoagland—or "Hogie," as he was beginning to be called—the piano meant both his mother's ragtime specialties and the flashy keyboard feats of Hube Hanna. Saturday nights usually found him in the darkness of the Crescent Theatre, listening to Hanna and Hank Wells beating out such lively tunes as "Mammy Jinny's Jubilee," a 1913 hit by L. Wolfe Gilbert, composer of "Waiting for the Robert E. Lee," "Down Yonder," and the later "Jeannine, I Dream of Lilac Time."[18]

Hank Wells is a pivotal figure in Carmichael's young life. Arriving at the university in 1914, he created an almost immediate stir with what a later

newspaper account called "original ideas about dance music. Wells had such an unusual technique, back in those days of the more graceful steps, that his efforts were wasted on the campus socialites."[19]

"Hank Wells," said Indiana bandleader Charlie Davis, "could inspire anyone. He played a lot of jazz fiddle, could romp all over a piano, and write a sensitive lyric with the best of 'em." At the piano, Carmichael added, Wells "knew what he was doing when he brought his left thumb down on the seventh of a chord that his right hand already had struck. This was to emphasize the dominating [*sic*] harmony."[20]

Home recordings of Wells playing and singing his own songs, made years later, reveal a sure touch at the piano and a gently reflective way with melody and lyric. The sensibility occasionally resembles that of Willard Robison (1894–1968), a Missouri-born singer-pianist who wrote such evocative and homespun songs as "Old Folks," "Guess I'll Go Back Home This Summer," and the poignant "Deep Summer Music." Indiana historian Duncan Schiedt has referred to Wells as "a sentimental songsmith, whose influence on Carmichael can be detected in songs like Hoagy's *Little Old Lady* and *The Nearness of You*." Among Wells's outstanding creations is "Falling Star," a sixteen-bar waltz with a dreamy, nostalgic flavor.[21]

Another local figure who plays a role in the boy's early development is the pianist, singer, and occasional banjoist Edwin East, known variously as "Big Ed" or the slightly less flattering "Heavy." Proprietor of a Bloomington music store, he worked frequently around town, amusing audiences with original comedy songs bearing such titles as "Louise, Louise, Come out of the Trees," and "Hello, Hoosier Town." For a while he worked with Charlie Davis's Indianapolis band, playing banjo and doubling at the keyboard during change-of-instrument novelty numbers.[22]

A world was beginning to open up for the boy: silent-film thrillers at the Princess Theatre; a weekend job as ticket taker at the Harris Grand Opera House, despite its high-flown name a cinema with a largely black clientele; and, too, there were the high school fraternities, Beta Phi Sigma and Kappa Alpha Phi, and the Greek Candy Kitchen, frequented by high schoolers, run by the Poolitsans, the family that owned the more popular Book Nook, a collegiate hangout on Indiana Avenue.

Neighbor Bill Kenney remembered the times young Carmichael "came over to our house and my mother used to let him bang away on our piano in our parlor. He had a one-finger base [*sic*] then and played a tune called 'The Little Red House on the Hill.' Years later, when Hoagy became famous,

my mother was very proud of that piano, as she used to tell people the above incident."[23]

* * *

This hometown idyll came to an abrupt end in early 1916, when Howard Carmichael's errant fortunes took him back to Indianapolis. This time the family came to rest at 27 North Warman Street, remembered by Hoagland as "the thin dark side of a double-fronted place" on the capital's west side. Directly across the street, the Central Indiana Hospital for the Insane cast a hulking, gloomy shadow across the neighborhod.

In mid-February the boy enrolled at Manual Training High School on South Meridian, a two-and-a-half-mile walk from Warman Street. He remembered the school as a bleak, lonely place ("I never had a friend or knew a girl or a boy as a human being"), and this time in his young life as even bleaker. "I was a mixed-up kid, living at school like a monk with a vow not to talk or enjoy anything if he could help it" is a typical reminiscence.[24]

He was there a little more than one miserable year. Lacking friends or diversions, he tried vainly to apply himself to his studies. Finally, "when the teacher tried to show me how to shingle a roof"—something he'd already learned better from his Grandpa Robison—"I knew my school days were numbered." Declaring Manual Training High School "no go with me," Hoagland Carmichael, age sixteen, left on April 25, 1917, and went out looking for a job.

Short for his age, pale of complexion and slight of figure, he was nonetheless strong enough to work, sometimes alongside his peripatetic cousin Sammy Dodds, on a construction gang putting up the city's brand-new Union Station. He dug ditches; pulled twelve-hour night shifts running a cement mixer; stood on an assembly line making bicycle chains; spent a few bootless weeks as a grocery store delivery boy. But his fortunes and morale hit bottom with a three-week ordeal at the Kingan meat-packing plant, extracting and cleaning the bloody entrails of freshly slaughtered pigs in "a forgotten dungeon, a hell-hole full of death."

This was no less desperate a time for his parents. Arrival of a third daughter, Joanne, in mid-1915 swelled the family to six, taxing even Lida Carmichael's ability to stretch a dollar. At one point a charity worker, well meaning, came calling with an offer of food and clothes—only to collide

headlong with Lida's fierce pride: "Young woman, what are you *talking* about?" she demanded, showing her visitor the door.

"My father tried to make us a home," Hoagland recalled. "He went to a cheap furniture store and bought, on time, some of the worst furniture one could possibly imagine . . . the cheapest sticks of wood, highly varnished with a junky finish." Beyond the loneliness, the sense of desolation, and—yes—an element of self-pity, something else is at work here, a sense that even this difficult time has a role to play.

"It's easy to paint too dark a picture of one's unsettled youth," Carmichael writes, "and I don't want to grime up my own early life as nothing but a struggle, all dark edges and hard times, with me fighting onward and upward against odds . . . Mother had seen to it that her piano was there and that was all that mattered to us. We rattled away at four-handed noise."[25]

And, too, there was Joanne: golden-haired, affectionate, the little girl seemed a reason for endless rejoicing. Even when she misbehaved, she won every heart. Hoagland's memory of one tantrum in particular seems to glow on the page:

> Almost two hours of struggle and howling took place and then all of a sudden there was quiet. I kissed her on the cheek and said, "I love you," and she kissed me back and said in a small voice, "I wove you." That was the end of the tantrums and, after that, no sweeter, [more] obedient child ever existed.[26]

So sometimes, after all, "the sun shone, life felt good, I smiled and laughed, we enjoyed our food and took our little pleasures." And, as he writes elsewhere of himself and cousin Sammy, "if there was anything to get our noses into, we found it." Did he and cousin Sammy, by all accounts a precocious young man of the world, actually spend so many evenings exploring the fleshpots of greater Indianapolis, especially those with black ragtime piano players, as Hoagland later suggested? It makes a fine story—but it's hard to imagine his conscientious mother voicing no objection at the idea of her young son out carousing after work, often in parts of town that were at least questionable. Whatever their frequency and nature, the boys' nocturnal adventures seem to have included anywhere that had a piano, be it the Columbia Burlesque House (with ragtime whiz Harry Bason

at the keyboard), some nameless backstreet Greek restaurant, or even a co-worker's shabby parlor.[27]

There may also have been a few expeditions to Indiana Avenue, center of the city's black nightlife—and, perhaps on one of these forays, a chance meeting with the pianist Reginald Alfred DuValle, whom bandleader Charlie Davis and others have called "the elder statesman of Indiana Jazz." Born in Indianapolis in 1893, DuValle first surfaced around 1912, playing second (ensemble) piano with the popular Indianapolis dance orchestra of pianist Russell Smith (no relation to New York trumpeter Russell "Pop" Smith) at the Severin Hotel. Kentucky born, Smith gained some early renown as composer of such pre–World War I novelties as the "Princess Rag."[28]

But ragtime, like the hot jazz that would soon grow out of it, was still largely a regional phenomenon. Itinerant dance band musicians, on the road, generally knew who the good players were in far-removed places. But such communities as Denver and San Antonio, Indianapolis and Louisville, though musically active, were too far from New York or even Chicago to make much impact on popular consciousness. Nevertheless, recordings by "territory" bands of both races reveal the vigorous, often creative, musical life of such locales.

Throughout the century's second decade, Russell Smith led Indiana-based groups of consistently high quality, played Florida society affairs for James Reese Europe, and later settled in New York City, where he worked for W. C. Handy, knew and was respected by fellow-pianists James P. Johnson and Perry Bradford, and toured with the hit musical *Shuffle Along*.

Reg DuValle, meanwhile, remained in Indianapolis, leading his own band, with himself at the piano, providing society dance music for the ballrooms and "dancing academies" (Brenecke's, on downtown Meridian Street, was one) proliferating in the capital, playing dances at local facilities and at area schools, including Purdue and Indiana universities. When the Walker Theatre, financed by and named for cosmetics magnate Mme. C. J. Walker, opened on Indiana Avenue in 1927, DuValle's "Blackbirds" were the resident band.[29]

Did the adolescent Hoagland Carmichael really first cross paths with this respected musician "in a crumbum dive," as he later asserted? Did DuValle actually tell him that "a brown man plays where he can?" It's possible, though it fits uneasily the image of the handsome, dignified pianist of Brenecke's, the Severin, or the no less toney Lincoln Hotel. What's beyond

dispute is the effect that hearing DuValle had on the young man. "Reggie had the new black music tricks and he made ragtime sound old hat. With his head hanging to one side, as if overcome with ecstasy, he'd play and play—and grin. 'You listening, boy?' I would sit, absorbed, watching the movements of his crazy hands."[30]

What was it DuValle was actually *doing*, Carmichael wanted to know.

> "You bring your thumb down on the chord right after you've hit it with your right hand."
>
> "Yeah," he grinned. "I want that harmony to *holler*."
>
> "To laugh?"
>
> "Look, Mr. Carmichael," Reggie said . . . "Never play anything that ain't *right*. You may not make any money, but you'll never get mad at yourself."[31]

"He showed me the art of improvising" is Carmichael's evaluation, "using the third and the sixth of the chord as a basis for arpegii [*sic*]. In this manner, Reg departed from the stilted rag-time I had known." Another musician shortly to impress young Carmichael, saxophonist Bradford "Batty" DeMarcus, referred to DuValle's "fine solid tenths and rolling bass."[32]

DuValle's son Reg, a skilled trombonist born in 1927, remembered hearing his father play "a style with the left hand working in a sort of stride manner. He had such big hands, he had a big stretch, and could voice chords interestingly. He was way ahead of his time, especially with his chords—though his 'feel' was still ragtime. Not that his harmonies were what you'd call 'way out'—he stuck largely to the melody, and embellished that. One thing nobody knows is that he wrote the melody for at least part of what became 'Copenhagen.' Sold it to [white bandleader] Charlie Davis for five dollars."[33]

Young Carmichael became a frequent guest in the DuValle home, at 1202 Harlan Street on the largely black south side of Indianapolis. "In our neighborhood we seldom had any white people," the younger DuValle said. "So he kind of stood out, if you know what I mean."[34]

Billed as "the Rhythm King," Reg DuValle also broadcast regularly on Indianapolis radio station WFBM (later known as WKBF). A printed program from a February 25, 1927, concert sponsored by the "Colored Men's Branch Y.M.C.A." lists his eleven-piece orchestra, fronted by violinist Theo Cable, playing such favorites of the day as "Moonlight on the

Ganges," "On the Road to Mandalay," "Indian Love Call," a Hawaiian medley, and a selection of hits from Rudolf Friml's 1925 operetta *The Vagabond King*—as well as Fred Rose's much-recorded 1926 stomp "Deep Henderson."[35]

Though business fell off with the Depression, DuValle continued to lead bands during the 1930s, while holding down a day job with the Linco Gas Company. Later, using his second instrument, the accordion, he toured widely on the Ohio Gas Company's promotional "Lincoln Safety Train," remaining widely known, and beloved, among veteran musicians; members of major bands, including those of Cab Calloway, Eubie Blake, and Noble Sissle (who had gotten his start in Indianapolis singing with Russell Smith), frequently stayed overnight at the DuValle home—a pleasant and gracious antidote to the segregation still in force in area hotels. Reginald DuValle died in 1953.

* * *

It's not clear just when the Carmichael family's Indianapolis exile ended. Harry Orchard's diaries have "Hogie" back in Bloomington in early autumn of 1917, determined to reenter high school there. *Jazzbanders*, his unpublished first memoir, speaks of a return to the college town in early 1919, with ten dollars in his pocket, and Bloomington High School records show him rejoining the student body for the spring term of that year.

With his family still living in Indianapolis, it's likely that the young man took several trips home, renewing old friendships and hatching plans to return, even if on his own. Others, including neighbor Bill Kenney, refer to him staying with his grandmother and grandfather Robison at 907 Atwater Street, in the same West Bloomington neighborhood as the Dunn Street and South Fess Avenue houses.[36]

And, as if all the hardship and aimlessness hadn't been catalyst enough, there came a day dark beyond words—an event that hardened his resolve to escape the family's shabby, hand-to-mouth life of matchstick furniture and social-worker solicitude, the constant upheaval, the nightmarish jobs in the slime and gore of bloody animal entrails.

That was the day in 1918 when three-year-old Joanne, of the golden curls and cherub's laughter, died, victim of remorseless illness. A passage in *Jazzbanders* powerfully describes the effect on his father—and, by implication, on himself:

> He walked into the house after a twenty-four hour ride in a cold day-coach with the hope that diphtheria was not very serious. He found his child in her little white dress. Only a week before he had given her the most prolonged farewell any girl ever got as he struck out for a "boom" town in Alabama to make enough money so we all could eat. Because it was a diphtheria case, there were no services, but Mother had the courage to play a hymn on the old upright piano we had carted all over the country and which I had banged out of tune long before.[37]

Among Hoagy Carmichael's private papers is a small photograph of Joanne, sunlit, winsome, happy in that very same white dress. On the back, scrawled in her brother's unmistakable hand, is the briefest of inscriptions:

> My sister Joanne—the victim of poverty. We couldn't afford a good doctor or good attention, and that's when I vowed I would never be broke again in my lifetime. She died from dyptheria [*sic*] and it broke my heart that I didn't have the knowledge or where withall [*sic*] to help her. It broke my dad's heart, too.[38]

And, on a separate scrap of paper: "It's strange, but even to this day [1957] I get wet eyes when I think of her. I think Dad . . . would rather have seen me go."[39]

Was it truly diphtheria? At first unnoticed, almost undocumented, a deadly influenza epidemic had spread across the nation, carrying off thousands, especially children and young people in the prime of life. A mysterious killer, it struck without warning; young and old suddenly "took sick" and, after a few days of bleeding, failing respiration, and raging fever, died in agony, leaving families shocked, disoriented, demoralized. It had first appeared that spring, with an outbreak at Fort Riley, Kansas, spreading to Michigan, Georgia, and other military bases all over the country. In early summer it disappeared awhile, only to resurface in civilian Philadelphia and other eastern cities.[40]

By Carmichael's own account, the family could not afford adequate medical care; diphtheria and influenza shared enough symptoms in common to make misdiagnosis—especially by a less than perceptive physician—a real possibility. Without firm documentation, and in view of recent discoveries about the 1918 influenza virus, it is plausible to surmise that Joanne