

FEATURES



WHEN NIGHT WAS FALLING

My evening with Johnny Mercer

BY ERIKA SCHICKEL

Thursday, October 6, 2005 - 12:00 am



In the winter of 1975, my family made our annual trip from our home in New York to Los Angeles to visit my mother's parents. Designed by my granddaddy in the '50s, their house was a sleek, Neutra-inspired affair perched on a Pacific Palisades hillside, offering a sweeping ocean view that an 11-year-old couldn't have cared less about.

But the house itself was the ideal setting for a girl living in her own MGM musical — all glass doors, white floors, stylishly decorated by my grandma Dorothy. A palm tree grew out of the living-room floor, and crystals splashed rainbows across the walls. I'd slide across the slick, terrazzo floors in sock feet like Gene Kelly in *An American in Paris* or clickety-tap on them in my Mary

Janes like Fred Astaire. I could tinkle the keys on the white baby grand, or bob like a Ziegfeld Girl in the sunken bathtub, surrounded by jungle fronds, lathering up with richly scented, seashell-shaped soaps. I spent hours in the swimming pool, smiling underwater like Esther Williams, and lounged in "the chatter pit," a subjacent, shag-lined den that had a TV with a *remote control*. I sprawled on the long banquette sofa, like Jeannie in her bottle, blinking my way through channels, searching for my favorite TV shows on the unfamiliar West Coast stations.

On this particular trip, my grandparents threw one of their big parties. I helped prep, buffing their colored, Lucite coffee-table knickknacks, Windexing the huge, sliding glass doors, lighting and launching floating candles onto the pool. Their guests were a mix of comedy writers and tennis partners, all of whom seemed incredibly old, smoky and uninterested in me. Forgotten by the grownups, I stayed up way past my bedtime, gorging on Spanish peanuts, lulled by the drone of adult conversation. It was late in the evening when my mother found me out by the pool, woozy with Shirley Temples.

"There's someone inside I want you to meet," she said.

"Who?"

"His name is Johnny Mercer. He's an old friend. You've met him once before, but you probably won't remember him."

"Mommy . . ." I whined, not wanting to give up my warm, sleepy spot by the lava brazier.

"He wrote the lyrics for a lot of famous movie songs."

"Really, like what?"

"*Seven Brides for Seven Brothers, Breakfast at Tiffany's, Darling Lili.*"

I was suddenly wide-awake. I loved all those movies, but *Darling Lili* was my current obsession. Though I had never seen the movie, I had spent that fall memorizing the soundtrack album.

Mercer was alone in my granddaddy's study. This room was different from the others. It wasn't like a movie set, it was a real place where actual work happened. The walls were hung with photos and memorabilia from a lifetime spent writing radio, sitcoms, movies and for magazines. There were awards, autographed posters and framed playbills. Stacks of scripts

Calendar go

- MUSIC ▶
- FILM ▶
- STAGE ▶
- ARTS ▶
- MOVIE TIMES ▶
- WHERE TO EAT ▶
- SEARCH ▶

SPONSORED LINKS EVENTS

- Ferus On Film
- Hollywood Halloween Extravaganza

This Month

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31	1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25

Event or Venue

- ROCKIE HOROSCOPE
- COMICS

LA WEEKLY PROMOTIONS

LA WEEKLY SUMMER CONCERT GUIDE  
Find all the information you need on the best summer concerts and festivals!

LA WEEKLY SUMMER RESTAURANT GUIDE  
Check out the Summer's tastiest

surrounded his typewriter. The room was dim and had the sweet, pungent smell of pipe smoke mixed with chlorine. Mr. Mercer, sitting on a low sofa, looked like an ordinary old man. I had half-hoped he'd be wearing a top hat and tails, but he was in slacks and a sports coat. He had a kind smile and seemed tired. He greeted me warmly and asked me the usual kid questions: How old was I, how did I like school, was I having a fun trip? Then he said, "Your mother tells me you're a fan of my songs."

"Did you really write *Darling Lili*?"

"Well, I wrote the lyrics. Do you have a favorite song?"

" 'The Girl in No Man's Land.' "

"*Really?*" He seemed surprised and interested. I sensed I had an audience, a thing I was always on the lookout for.

"I can sing it for you if you'd like."

Mercer laughed, then looked me in the eye. "Would you? That would be lovely."

Suddenly my whole body got hot and clammy as I realized what I'd gotten myself into. I straightened up and started the first verse in a soft, wobbly voice:

*They tell a story back in London town  
That when you hear taps sound  
Then all you soldiers have a sweetheart  
Who always comes around*

I knew I could sing this song better. I closed my eyes and pretended I was back in my living room in New York.

*When night is falling  
She comes calling  
The girl in no man's land . . .*

I picked up steam, and as so often happened, I became taken by the sound of my own voice. I fancied I sang it just like Julie Andrews did on the album. I opened my eyes to see a look of utter shock on Mercer's face that made me go up on the next lyric, "*Doughboys weary . . . Doughboys weary . . .*" I faltered and stammered. I had no clearer an idea of what the next lyric was, than I did of what a doughboy was.

". . . Cold and lonely . . ." Mercer fed me the line, and the rest of the song came rushing back.

I finished and Mr. Mercer applauded me. My mother draped her arm around my shoulder, and I noticed that Granddaddy had slipped into the room. He stared at me from under bushy eyebrows as though as he were seeing me for the first time. I assumed these grownups were all stunned by my exquisite voice, but now, 30 years later, I think it may simply have been the incongruity of an 11-year-old girl singing a ballad about a hooker.

Mr. Mercer thanked me, and I left him. A month later, I received a package of *Darling Lili* production stills and a note from him, thanking me again for my song. He died the following year. It wasn't until much later that I truly realized who I had serenaded in my grandfather's study and how many songs Mercer had written that I love to this day. Only now can I appreciate that a child memorizing his songs may have meant a lot to a man whose life, and work, were nearly over.

The house Granddaddy designed is still up on Tellem Drive. I drove out there with my 10-year-old daughter the other day on a whim and knocked on the door. It is owned now by a distinguished German film actor, and his son graciously gave me a tour. The master bath has been remodeled, but the rest of the house is just as I remember it, if a little smaller and dingier. I took a picture of my daughter standing by the pool brazier and thought about the people who had gathered there to drink, laugh and tell their stories of young Hollywood — a place and time that has long since faded into black and white.

Summer & Resort  
restaurants!

LA WEEKLY  
INSIDERS

Get inside for  
promotions and special  
offers!

HOOK ME UP!!!! - LA  
WEEKLY CONTESTS  
Check out ALL of LA  
Weekly's Contests  
Here!!!

---

## PREVIOUSLY IN FEATURES

### **NOTHING LIKE A DAME**

Wednesday, October 11, 2006 - 12:00 pm

### **LAST ORGASM IN HOLLYWOOD**

Wednesday, October 11, 2006 - 12:00 pm

### **APARTHEID'S SONG**

Wednesday, October 11, 2006 - 12:00 pm

**MORE»**

---

**ALSO BY ERIKA SCHICKEL**

**BODY WORK**

Thursday, September 25, 2003 - 12:00 am

**MORE»**

[NEW PRIVACY POLICY](#) | [STAFF](#) | [PRINT ADVERTISING](#) | [WEB ADVERTISING](#) | [AWARDS](#) | [FEEDBACK](#) | [JOBS AT LA WEEKLY](#) | [OTHER VVM PUBLICATIONS](#)

© Copyright 2006 LA Weekly, LP

LA Weekly • 6715 Sunset Blvd • Los Angeles CA 90028