

Star Dust – Story of a Song

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Last October marked the 90th anniversary of the first recording of Hoagy Carmichael's iconic American song classic -- Star Dust. On October 31, 1927, Hoagy and nine musicians from the Indianapolis Orchestra of Emil Seidel – calling themselves Hoagy Carmichael and His Pals -- recorded an instrumental version of Star Dust at the Gennett Records Studio in Richmond, Indiana. Star Dust was not an immediate hit but its popularity soon skyrocketed to the point where it is now universally regarded as one of the most popular songs in the American Song Book and one of the most – if not the most -- recorded popular songs of all time.

The place where Star Dust was first recorded – the Gennett Records Studio -- was a small recording studio in back of the Starr Piano Company in rural Richmond, Indiana, located near the Ohio border about 75 miles east of Indianapolis. As unlikely as it was, the Gennett Records Studio became a mecca for many young American jazz musicians between 1922 and 1928 including Louie Armstrong, Jelly Roll Morton, Bix Biederbecke, and Tommy Dorsey – as well as Hoagy Carmichael – all of whom made their first recordings there.

Hoagy Carmichael described that place and time this way:

In the farmland among the Indiana corn—and from the 'cow pasture universities'—there sprouted a beardless priesthood of jazz players and jazz composers. Instead of buttermilk, we were nurtured on bathtub gin and rhythm. It 'just happened'—like a thundercloud."

Hoagy Carmichael was a product of the Indiana farmland. He was born Howard Hoagland Carmichael in Bloomington, Indiana on November 22, 1899 to Howard and Lida Carmichael. Hoagy was named after a traveling circus troupe known as "The Hoaglands" who stayed with the Carmichaels when Hoagy's mother was pregnant with him.

Hoagy grew up in humble circumstances. His father worked on-again, off-again as a horse drawn taxi driver and electrician. His mother, Lida, played piano for fraternity

dances at Indiana University and at local movie theatres where she provided musical accompaniment for silent films. Hoagy often tagged along with his mother on these engagements and it was this experience that nurtured his interest in and love of music.

In 1916, Hoagy and his family moved from Bloomington to Indianapolis. Shortly thereafter, Hoagy dropped out of high school and -- to help out with the family's finances -- started working odd jobs, including a short stint at an Indianapolis slaughterhouse. The drudgery of this work was greatly relieved by the piano lessons his mother allowed him to take from African-American jazz pianist, Reggie DuValle, known as "the elder statesman of Indiana jazz." DuValle taught Hoagy how to improvise on the piano and was a lasting influence Hoagy's music.

In 1919, Hoagy moved back to Bloomington and finished high school. The following year, Hoagy enrolled at Indiana University and formed his own jazz band, called "Carmichael's Collegiates," which was a popular dance band not only on the IU campus but throughout Indiana and Ohio, and was the means by which Hoagy supported himself through college.

In 1924, Hoagy brought legendary jazz cornetist Leon "Bix" Beiderbecke and his band the Wolverines to the IU campus for a series of ten campus performances. Bix and the Wolverines stayed in Bloomington during much of April and May 1924 playing engagements for IU fraternities, sororities, and student groups. During this time, Hoagy and Bix developed a deep friendship which continued until Bix's premature death in 1931 of alcoholism at the age of 28. In honor of Bix, Hoagy later named his oldest son, Hoagy Bix Carmichael.

Bix Beiderbecke has achieved almost mythological status over the years. Louie Armstrong said, "Every musician in the world knew and admired Bix...we all respected him as though he had been a God." Bix was a gifted and creative improviser who had a pure tone often described as "golden" and "bell-like." The time Hoagy and Bix spent together in 1924 had a great impact on Hoagy as it was Bix who first suggested to Hoagy that he try his hand at composing. As a result of Bix's prodding, Hoagy began to write songs of his own. One of Hoagy's early songs was "Washboard Blues" which was recorded in 1924 at the Gennett Records Studio -- where Star Dust was later recorded.

Hoagy graduated from IU in 1925 and enrolled at the IU Law School. Today Hoagy's portrait is on display at the law school along with the portraits of other well-known IU law school alumni. Hoagy's portrait shows a handsome and dapper young man, whose looks reminded Ian Fleming of his fictional hero, James Bond, whom Fleming described in his first Bond novel, as "very good-looking" and "rather like Hoagy Carmichael."

Hoagy graduated from IU Law School in 1926 and moved to West Palm Beach Florida where he joined the law firm of M.D. Carmichael -- the former mayor of West Palm Beach. Interestingly, Hoagy and M.D. Carmichael were not related even though both were Hoosiers and graduates of the IU Law School.

Hoagy was drawn to West Palm Beach by the Florida land boom of the 1920s -- which, unfortunately, had ended shortly before Hoagy arrived. Hoagy quickly grew dissatisfied practicing law in Florida and one day he supposedly heard his song Washboard Blues playing in a record store near his law office and, growing nostalgic, decided to return "back home again" to Indiana to devote more time to his first love --

writing music. Other accounts claim that Hoagy decided to return to Indiana not because of hearing the Washboard Blues but because of hearing "the Bar Exam Blues" informing him that he had flunked the Florida bar exam.

In either event, Hoagy returned to Bloomington in 1927 – after practicing with M.D. Carmichael's law firm less than a year. On his return to Bloomington, Hoagy started working at the Indianapolis law firm of Bingham and Mendenhall. Hoagy's decision to return to Bloomington proved fateful for shortly thereafter, he conceived – or put the finishing touches on – his most famous and enduring song: "Star Dust."

According to Hoagy, Star Dust came to him one late summer night in 1927, when he was walking through the IU campus and stopped to sit on a small limestone ledge in front of the law school known as the spooning wall, where college sweethearts used to rendezvous after dark.

Hoagy described the scene as follows:

It was a hot night, sweet with the death of summer and the hint and promise of fall. The stars were bright, and the North Star hung over the trees... The town and the university and the friends I had there flooded through my mind... But most of them had gone their ways. As I'd gone mine. I looked up at the sky and whistled Star Dust and I knew that I had something very strange and different.

Hoagy recalls running across the street to the Book Nook, a student hangout where he was a regular and well known patron. Pete Costas, the owner of the Book Nook, recalled that night in an interview he gave years later. According to Costas, he had closed for the night and was mopping the floors when -- at around two or three in the morning -- Hoagy knocked at the door and asked to come in as he needed to play the piano. Costas told Hoagy that he was closed but Hoagy persisted and Costas

finally relented and let Hoagy in. Hoagy ran to the upright piano and started playing around with the melody that became Star Dust.

The building which housed the Book Nook is still there today and looks very much as it did in 1927 -- a white two story Spanish Colonial brick building with a clay tile roof and three gables in the front. The building is now home to Buffa Louie's, also a popular student hangout at IU, which -- unlike the Book Nook -- serves Buffalo Wings and legal beer and spirits instead of the boot leg beer and liquor which the Book Nook allegedly served when Hoagy went there.

A short time after playing the song at the Book Nook, Hoagy played it for his college roommate Stu Gorrell, who -- after hearing it -- said to Hoagy that the tune reminded him "of the dust from the stars drifting down through a summer night." Thus the song's title: "Star Dust." Hoagy said that "he had no idea what the title meant but he thought it was gorgeous."

Some dispute Hoagy's romantic version of how he composed Star Dust on a summer night on the IU campus. For example, Ernie Pyle, the great World War II war correspondent and an IU classmate of Hoagy's, claims that Hoagy actually composed Star Dust at the Pyle's home in Indianapolis but that Hoagy liked the public to think that it was conceived under the "moonlight, amid roses and soft breezes."

Hoagy's biographer -- Richard Sudhalter -- contends that Star Dust may have begun with fragments, evolving over months and maybe years. And the New York Times wrote in Hoagy's obituary that he composed Star Dust while he was still a struggling young lawyer in West Palm Beach and that he scribbled the song on the front pages of a law book while waiting for law business.

Perhaps we will never know for certain when or where Hoagy first conceived of Star Dust. What we do know is that Star Dust was formally introduced to the public with the first recording Hoagy and His Pals made of the song at the Gennett Records Studio on Halloween in 1927. That first recording of Star Dust was a jazz instrumental rendition reminiscent of the improvisational style of Hoagy's great friend Bix Beiderbecke.

In describing Star Dust's melody, Oscar Hammerstein said it "rambles and roams like a truant schoolboy in a meadow. Its structure is loose, its pattern complex. Yet it has attained the kind of long-lived popularity that few songs can claim. What has it got? I'm not certain. I know only that it is beautiful and I like to hear it."

Reportedly, Gennett Records didn't share Oscar Hammerstein's appreciation for the song. In fact, it apparently didn't think much of it at all, and nearly destroyed the master recording shortly after it was first recorded. Fortunately, though, for Star Dust's countless fans, that didn't happen.

A year after recording the instrumental version of Star Dust, Hoagy again recorded "Star Dust" at the Gennett Records Studio this time with lyrics he had written. However, Gennett Records rejected Hoagy's lyrical version of Star Dust and did not release a recording of it because Hoagy's original, instrumental version had sold so poorly the year before.

In 1929, Hoagy left the Bingham law firm in Indianapolis and moved to New York City to pursue song writing full time. Shortly after moving there, Hoagy met Mitchell Parish -- a young, Tin Pan Alley, lyricist who was working at the Mills Music Company. The Mills Music Company -- to which Hoagy had sold the rights to publish Star Dust --

commissioned Parish to write new lyrics for the song. The lyrics Parish penned are the familiar lyrics that we know today which start like this:

Sometimes I wonder why I spend  
The lonely nights dreaming of a song  
The melody haunts my reverie  
And I am once again with you  
When our love was new  
And each kiss an inspiration  
But that was long ago  
And now my consolation is in the stardust of a song

About the same time as when Mitchell Parish was rewriting the lyrics for Star Dust, the then popular Isham Jones Orchestra released a romantic ballad version of Star Dust which became a top-selling, number one hit. The following year, Bing Crosby recorded Star Dust with Mitchell Parish's lyrics and it too became a smash hit. In 1936, Benny Goodman also had a hit with Star Dust, as did Artie Shaw in 1941. That same year it was also a Top 20 hit for the Glenn Miller Orchestra as well as the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra with Frank Sinatra... not bad for a song that Gennett Records had nearly discarded over a decade earlier.

Since Bing Crosby's recording of Star Dust in 1931, Star Dust has become one of the most recorded songs of the 20th Century – if not the most recorded song -- with over 1,500 total recordings. It has been recorded by virtually every popular singer and orchestra of note including Louie Armstrong, Dave Brubeck, Wynton Marsalis, Frank Sinatra (who recorded it multiple times), Tony Bennett, Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald -- and, more recently, Willie Nelson, Harry Connick Jr, Rod Stewart, Michael Bublé, and Ringo Starr – who recorded Paul McCartney's arrangement of Star Dust for his first solo album. And – believe it or not -- just this last year, folk/rock legend Bob Dylan released his recording of Star Dust.



Star Dust is included in the list of the 100 most important American musical works of the 20th century compiled by National Public Radio. In 2004, the original 1927 recording of Star Dust was one of 50 recordings chosen that year by the Library of Congress to be added to the National Recording Registry. And, in 2011, Time Magazine listed Star Dust as one of the most extraordinary English-language pop recordings since the beginning of *TIME Magazine* in 1923.

Besides Star Dust, Hoagy Carmichael composed many other hit songs, including Georgia on My Mind; The Nearness of You; Heart and Soul; Up a Lazy River; Skylark; and I Get along without You Very Well. Hoagy also appeared as an actor in 14 motion pictures, including the screen adaptation of Hemingway's *To Have and Have Not*, starring Humphrey Bogart and Lauren Bacall, in which Hoagy played piano as Lauren Bacall sang Hoagy's song "How Little We Know."

Hoagy is memorialized with a historical marker in front of the former Book Nook across from the IU Law School and a bronze sculpture of Hoagy playing the piano sits near the IU School of Music. IU's Archives also maintain the Hoagy Carmichael Collection containing the largest grouping of materials pertaining to Hoagy's life available anywhere.

Hoagy died of heart failure at the Eisenhower Medical Center in Rancho Mirage, California, on December 27, 1981, at the age of 82. His remains are buried in Rose Hill Cemetery in Bloomington, Indiana. In reflecting on his most famous song -- Star Dust -- Hoagy recalled feeling a "queer sensation that this melody was bigger than me" the first time he heard a recording of Star Dust. "Maybe I hadn't written it at all.... I wanted to shout back at it, 'maybe I didn't write you, but I found you.'"

I thought a nice way to end this paper would be to listen to Hoagy perform the song that he found and left to all of us.

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Recording of Star Dust from 1942 Album, "Hoagy Carmichael Playing, Singing and Whistling His Own Compositions" (Decca Records, 78 RPM)  
[\[https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=gvhq3V8ZhTA\]](https://m.youtube.com/watch?v=gvhq3V8ZhTA)

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Whether Hoagy wrote that sweet and haunting melody or found it in the stars, I think most of us would agree that Star Dust sounds as beautiful today as when it was first played over ninety years ago and should continue to delight us for at least another ninety years.