

# This Day in History... November 22, 1899

## Birth of Hoagy Carmichael

Hoagland Howard Carmichael was born on November 22, 1899, in Bloomington, Indiana. A self-taught pianist, composer, singer, and actor, Carmichael composed many of the most popular songs of the Big Band Era.

Carmichael was named after the circus group, the "Hoaglands," who stayed with his family when his mother was pregnant. Carmichael's mother played piano for silent movies and private parties and taught her son how to play and sing when he was six years old.

Carmichael never had formal training, but he did befriend and take lessons with Reg DuValle, also known as "the elder statesman of Indiana jazz" and "the Rhythm King." DuValle is credited with teaching Carmichael the art of jazz improvisation on the piano. By the time he reached high school, most of his time was spent practicing the instrument. Carmichael also liked listening to famous ragtime pianists as an inspiration to his own playing. He worked odd jobs to help the family and got his first paying gig in 1918, playing a fraternity dance.

While attending Indiana University where he earned a bachelor's and a law degree, Carmichael started a band, Carmichael's Collegians, that played around Indiana and Ohio. He also befriended cornet player Bix Beiderbecke, who introduced him to Louis Armstrong and influenced his compositional style. Beiderbecke's band played Carmichael's first recorded song, "Riverboat Shuffle," which became a jazz standard. In 1925, Carmichael first recorded his own song, "Washboard Blues."

After graduating in 1926, Carmichael briefly moved to Florida to work as a legal clerk, but returned to Indiana the following year. He worked for a law firm, but spent most of his time working on music.

In 1927, Carmichael recorded his most successful song, "Stardust." The song gained even greater popularity in 1929 when the addition of Mitchell Parish's lyrics. That year Carmichael moved to New York City where he worked at a brokerage firm during the day and spent the rest of his time composing and recording music. Also in 1929, Carmichael had his first major song with his own lyrics, "Rockin' Chair," recorded by Louis Armstrong and Mildred Bailey.

With the onset of the Great Depression and the decline of "hot jazz," Carmichael worried his music would fall out of fashion. Luckily, the "big-band swing" phase came shortly after and he supported himself during the Depression writing songs for the Southern Music Company. In 1930, Carmichael composed "Georgia on My Mind," which became a pop standard after World War II and is perhaps the most well known of his songs today.

In 1933, Carmichael began collaborating with Johnny Mercer. Carmichael was reportedly fascinated by the "young, bouncy butterball of a man from Georgia." The two musicians spent a year together working on a series of songs. In the end, they produced three: "Thanksgiving," "Moon Country," and "Lazybones."

"Lazybones" became a sensation just one week after it first aired on the radio. The song sold over 350,000 copies in three months. Mercer and Carmichael each received a royalty check of \$1,250 from "Lazybones," which brought much needed financial relief to both men. Though the two musicians went their separate ways for a short time, they later worked together again on "Skylark" and "In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening." The latter was originally planned to be used in a Paramount movie, but was forgotten for a number of years when the film was cancelled. It was later rediscovered and used in the 1951 film, *Here Comes the Groom*, winning an Academy Award for Best Original Song.

Carmichael moved his family to Hollywood in 1936, where he composed music for films and worked as a character actor in 14 movies, often portraying a folksy pianist. He composed patriotic songs during World War II and collaborated with Mercer on "Skylark," which is considered one of his greatest songs.

Carmichael continued to write songs and perform as an actor into the 1970s, though his popularity had waned by that time. He appeared on television, including a special that featured jazz-rock versions of his songs. He was also inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame and honored with a tribute concert at Carnegie Hall. Carmichael died on December 27, 1981.



*Carmichael wrote hundreds of songs during his career, including at least 50 that became hit records.*



*Carmichael's "Stardust" became an American standard and has been recorded over 1,500 times, with renditions by performers, including Nat King Cole, Ella Fitzgerald, Frank Sinatra, Willie Nelson, and Wynton Marsalis.*



*"Georgia on My Mind" was made the state song of Georgia in 1979.*



*Carmichael and Mercer collaborated on nearly three dozen songs.*



*Carmichael was an avid coin collector. His collection was valued at about \$500,000 when it was put up for auction in 1985.*

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