

Jimmy McHugh, Boston Tunesmith

Long Songwriting Career Started at Boston Opera House

By Richard Vacca

Jimmy McHugh was back in Boston in October 1948, preparing for the opening of his latest musical, *As the Girls Go*. Boston then was an important tryout town for Broadway-bound shows, and McHugh himself was in town to supervise the proceedings. George Clarke, the Boston Daily Record columnist, got McHugh talking about his early years, before he left for New York and the big time.

James Francis McHugh was a native of the Hub, born in Boston July 10, 1894, and his first teacher was his piano-playing mother. His first job in music was at the Boston Opera House on Huntington Avenue as an office boy in the press department, but his playing earned him a job as a rehearsal pianist, in about 1915. There he met the likes of Caruso and Toscanini. But, he told Clarke, he also used to amuse himself by playing opera in ragtime.

McHugh recalled competing for the \$15 prize in piano contests sponsored by a fight promoter named Miah Murray at a long-vanished South End hall. McHugh's clincher was "My Country 'Tis of Thee"-played with his nose. He learned some tricks from Roxbury piano man Bobby Sawyer. And he recalled playing the Crescent Spa on Revere Beach (he probably meant the Crescent Garden, a popular dance hall) for \$25 a week.

McHugh broke into popular music in 1917, working for the Boston office of Irving Berlin's publishing company. Its office was in the Little Building on Boylston Street, which at that time was Boston's answer to the Brill Building.

In 1921, he went to New York, where he worked for the music publisher Jack Mills. Among his early hits were "When My Sugar Walks Down the Street" and "I Can't Believe That You're In Love With Me." He also teamed for a time with Jack's brother Irving in the duo the Hotsy Totsy Boys. Irving Mills went on to manage Duke Ellington, and Jimmy McHugh started writing for the shows at the Cotton Club. It was McHugh who brought Ellington to the Club. "I heard Duke and I wanted him," McHugh told *Down Beat* in 1960. "For one thing, he and his men could read! The band I had to let go couldn't. I had to sit down at the piano and play every tune for them until they learned it. Not only could Duke read, he promptly went to work writing the orchestrations-at \$50 each-for the show."

In 1927 he met lyricist Dorothy Fields, and the two went on to write the Broadway hit *Blackbirds of 1928*, which included now-familiar standards like "I Can't Give You Anything But Love," "Diga Diga Do," and "I Must Have That Man." Then came *International Revue*, with "On the Sunny Side of the Street" and "Exactly Like You."

In 1930, McHugh went to Hollywood, where he worked with Fields ("Lost in a Fog," "Hooray for Love," "Lovely to Look at," "I'm in the Mood for Love"), as well as Ted Koehler ("I'm Shooting High"), Johnny Mercer, and Frank Loesser ("Let's Get Lost," "Murder, He Says"). His longest association (1936-1951) was with Harold Adamson ("A Lovely Way to Spend an Evening," "A Most Unusual Day," "I Couldn't Sleep a Wink Last Night," "Comin' in on a Wing and a Prayer," "Where Are You?").

McHugh's career was not without controversy. It is well known that Fats Waller sold away rights to his songs for next to nothing, decisions he later regretted when the songs became big money-makers. Waller's son Maurice included McHugh among those who profited in his 1977 book about his father, *Fats Waller* (Schirmer Books):

Many times Dad accused Fletcher Henderson, Irving Berlin, or other writers of stealing his material. The most vivid memory I have of one of those incidents dates back to the time when we lived on Morningside Avenue. Dad was listening to the radio one Sunday afternoon. Suddenly he became infuriated and smashed his fist through the living room's beautiful glass French doors. The song was "On the Sunny Side of the Street," a hit record credited to Jimmy McHugh. Dad had sold the song for a few bucks when he was broke back in the twenties. McHugh also "wrote" "I Can't Give You Anything but Love, Baby."



Jimmy McHugh, left, and Harold Adamson, collaborators on the show As the Girls Go.

Photo courtesy of Jimmy McHugh Music

True or not, these tunes do have an undeniable Waller feel.

Waller may have been on McHugh's mind when he bought Mills Music in 1945, "for sentimental as well as business reasons." He surely understood the importance of controlling royalties, and perhaps saw the Mills purchase as a way to regain the rights to his enduring early hits.

As the *Girls Go* marked McHugh's return to Broadway after a long absence, as well as something of a homecoming. Adamson was returning to Boston as well, having attended Harvard in the late 1920s. The show starred Bobby Clark, who McHugh probably watched at the Gaiety Theatre years before, when Clark was part of the vaudeville team of Clark and McCollough. And the show opened on October 13, 1948, at-where else-the Boston Opera House on Huntington Avenue. As the *Girls Go* indeed went on to Broadway the next month, where it ran for 414 performances. No McHugh-Adamson blockbusters came out of the show, but "I Got Lucky in the Rain" provided the title for the revival *Lucky in the Rain: the Jimmy McHugh Musical* in 2000.

McHugh had another noteworthy trip back to Boston a decade later, when Mayor John Collins declared February 16, 1960 to be "Jimmy McHugh Day" in the City of Boston.

It isn't accurate to call McHugh a jazz man; he was a writer of popular songs (almost 300 in all, five of which were nominated for an Academy Award between 1935 and 1944). But jazz sensibilities always marked his best work, and jazz always remained close to his heart. And generations of jazz players and singers in turn have kept McHugh close to theirs-they've been performing and recording his tunes nonstop for the past 80 years. At the point in his life when he wasn't writing much music himself, he was publishing it. In the 1960s his own company published music by Bob Cooper, Pete Rugolo, Jimmy Rowles, and Bud Shank, among others.

After over 50 years of making music, Jimmy McHugh died in Beverly Hills on May 23, 1969 of a heart attack. In his obituary in the *New York Times*, his own words from an earlier interview comprised his epitaph: "When I was an office boy in Boston, I was a hep kid with a beat. I'm still a hep kid with a beat."

More McHugh. Jimmy McHugh Music is in the early stages of building a site based on their voluminous archives. Find it at <http://www.mchughmusic.com>. McHugh was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1970; check out his page at their web site, <http://www.songwritershalloffame.org> (look under Inductee Exhibits). A third site, <http://www.jass.com/jimmymchugh>, has photos and images of sheet music covers.

New McHugh. A few years ago, McHugh's music was the subject of renewed interest on stage and on record (and yes, two disks do have the same name):

- *Let's Get Lost: The Songs of Jimmy McHugh*. Wesla Whitfield (2000, Highnote)
- *Let's Get Lost: The Songs of Jimmy McHugh*. Terence Blanchard with Cassandra Wilson, Diana Krall, etc. (2001, Sony Classical)
- *Lucky in the Rain: The Jimmy McHugh Musical*. Original cast recording (2000, DRG)
- *I Feel a Song Coming on: The Songs Of Jimmy McHugh, 25 Original Mono Recordings 1925-1943* (2003, Living Era)

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