



A Hep Kid With a Beat

The Early Years of Songwriter Jimmy McHugh

By Richard Vacca

If you are unfamiliar with Jimmy McHugh, the first thing to know is that he was a prolific Boston-born songwriter who prospered between the early 1920s and the mid 1950s. He had a way with a tune, and he composed some truly memorable contributions to the Great American Songbook. He was also an accomplished pianist, and made a living at it for a time, but that was always secondary to his songwriting.

The second thing to know is that he was a born promoter. It didn't matter what it was—a song, a show, a good cause, himself—he promoted it with gusto. He was a born salesman, blessed with a personality brimming with energy, enthusiasm and charm. McHugh would have understood today's marketing practices intuitively. He carefully tended the Jimmy McHugh brand.

His highly compatible talents for music and promotion were formed in his home town of Boston, where he lived for the first 25 of his 74 years. James Francis McHugh was born on School Street in Jamaica Plain on July 10, 1893, the son of James, a plumber, and Julia, his music-loving mother. It was Julia who taught Jimmy how to play piano. His father wanted Jimmy to take up the trade, and he did try it for a short while, but he was destined for a career in music. His mother was his first teacher, and a fine one. Jimmy would noodle around on the piano while Julia listened, and the story he later told was that if she heard something imitative, a copy, she'd give him a rap across the knuckles. But if she heard something new, something original, she gave Jimmy a nickel. It was Jimmy's first experience with being rewarded for a good tune.

McHugh and the Piano: Inseparable

Jimmy always was a go-getter, and as a teenager he was determined to find work in the music business. His opportunity came in 1910, at the Boston Opera House on Huntington Avenue, at the site where Northeastern University's Speare Hall now stands. That year he was hired as an office boy by Henry Russell's Boston Opera Company. He was 16 years old. As he told the *Boston Globe* in 1948:

It was an errand-running job for the most part, but the people I ran errands for! (Enrico) Caruso, (Nellie) Melba, (John) McCormack, (Luisa) Tetrizzini, (Jean) de Reszke, (Geraldine) Farrar. Then there was a theater manager from Haverhill who used to come backstage a lot and he'd give me a half-a-dollar for some little chore or other I'd perform, like getting him a newspaper perhaps. His name was Louis B. Mayer—the 'Mayer' of Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer studios on the West Coast.

In those days there were about 50 pianos scattered around rehearsal and dressing rooms for the opera singers to practice with, and it was a big temptation for me to sit down and mess around on the keys myself.



The Boston Opera House on Huntington Avenue

McHugh often yielded to that temptation. He liked to amuse himself, and the opera stars, by playing arias in ragtime. Henry Russell caught him at it one day, and McHugh thought he was about to be fired, but Russell actually promoted him to the publicity department. There he learned the art of promotion, and he was an astute and clever student. He remained on Huntington Avenue until the Boston Opera Company went bankrupt in March 1914, and McHugh, months shy of his twentieth birthday, was out of a job.

McHugh turned down a scholarship to the New England Conservatory and instead spent the summer and early autumn of 1914 playing piano at the Crescent Spa on

Revere Beach Boulevard, an ice-cream parlor on the first floor of the Crescent Garden, a popular dance hall. There was a piano player on every corner and the competition for listeners was intense. The competition among players was elsewhere, too. His regular playing and practicing had turned McHugh into a capable piano player, and he competed with other young pianists for a \$15 prize put up by a fight promoter named Miah Murray¹ who staged contests at his South End hall. McHugh often claimed the prize: his clincher was to play “My Country ’Tis of Thee”—with his nose.

At the Crescent Spa, Jimmy played the popular tunes of the day, which he learned from sheet music salesmen called song pluggers. In the days before radio, the song pluggers served a critical role. If McHugh liked a plugger’s new tune, he played it at the Crescent Spa, and if his listeners liked the tune, they bought the sheet music and played it at home. Sheet music sales determined what became a hit, and song pluggers drove those sales. McHugh soon joined their ranks.

Tremont Street Song-Pluggers

By 1915 McHugh was working as a song plugger at the firm of Waterson, Berlin, and Snyder for \$8 a week. “Berlin” was none other than Irving Berlin, already one of America’s leading songwriters. Each morning, all the musical acts appearing around town would gather at Waterson’s Tremont street office, where McHugh and the other song pluggers would run through new songs. Then they went out to sell, moving around town on company-supplied bicycles. McHugh wrote in the memoir that was unfinished at the time of his death:

We traveled on bicycles from theater to dance hall to cafe. We marched in parades with megaphones. Anything for a plug. We gave managers of movie houses chorus slides to four or five songs—he would flash them on the screen and the audience would sing them. Backstage in the vaudeville houses we tried to get our song used as the background to an acrobatic act, to a dance, to a dog act. Saturdays I doubled at the music counters of dime stores. Everywhere we went we competed with pluggers from other firms, clamoring for the same favors. It was a desperate struggle, but it paid off.

During his time with Waterson, McHugh published his first song, “[Caroline, I’m Coming Back to](#)

1. This might have been the 1880s-era big-league ballplayer from Boston, catcher Jeremiah J. “Miah” Murray (1865–1922).

You,” in 1916. He sold it for \$15. It was also the first of his tunes to be recorded, by the Peerless Quartet on Victor Records in 1918.

In August 1917, McHugh enlisted in the army, joining the 101st Massachusetts Regiment, but appendicitis kept him stateside. He was discharged in 1918, and went right back to song plugging. His musical talent distinguished him among the Waterson men; he had a good ear, and not only could he sight-read, he could transpose any song into any key, making him the ideal accompanist for a singer or an act trying out new songs. Sometimes the company would send him out with two other song pluggers as “The Ted Snyder Trio,” and Jimmy would play while the others sang. By 1920, he was supervising other song pluggers and earning \$25 a week. But he had reached the limits of what his home town could offer professionally.



McHugh as a Boston song plugger.
Photo from Alyn Shipton.

McHugh wasn't going to make it in the music business if he stayed in Boston, and he knew it. The center of the industry was New York City. That's where the music publishers were, and the musical theater. And there was jazz in New York, and that excited the young songwriter.

Next to nothing is known about McHugh's encounters with jazz in Boston. *Boston Daily Record* columnist George Clarke mentioned that McHugh learned some tricks from Roxbury piano man Bobby Sawyer, but he provides no further information on their meeting. There must have been other encounters. He was on that bicycle, moving around the city with his songs, and he certainly traveled the commercial thoroughfares of Columbus Avenue and Tremont Street where jazz could be heard. Among the notable jazzmen working in Boston then were banjoist Charlie Dixon, pianist Tom Whaley, and drummer Kaiser Marshall. All would gravitate to New York. We can only speculate about where McHugh went and what he heard while making his musical rounds.

McHugh might have heard New York calling, but he was not free to go. He had a family. While on Revere Beach, Jimmy met Bess Hornbrook, and they married in 1914. Their son Jimmy was born the following year. McHugh first broached the idea of New York to Bess in 1918, but she wasn't interested—she didn't care for his line of work or its lifestyle. In early 1920, music publisher George A. Friedman offered Jimmy a job in New York that paid a salary of \$100 a week, but Bess still wasn't interested. McHugh took the job anyway, leaving his wife and five-year-old son behind. He never lived with Bess again, but they would not divorce until 1945.

Climbing the Ladder in New York

McHugh arrived in New York just in time for the Roaring Twenties, the decade of bootleggers, financial speculation, flappers, Babe Ruth and Charles Lindbergh. Radio was just getting started. There were no networks until late in the decade, but individual stations were going on the air and McHugh saw every one of them as a place to plug a song. And sound recordings were taking off. In 1920 Paul Whiteman sold a million copies of “Whispering,” an extraordinary number of sales. McHugh saw potential in records, too. He envisioned multiple artists recording the same tune, each producing a stream of sales at the same time. When Friedman sold his business in 1921, Jimmy went to work for Mills Music, the music publishing house owned by Jack and Irving Mills, where he could put some of his ideas into action.

McHugh became a very successful song plugger working for Jack Mills. He was a genius at generating publicity, getting the firm's name (and his own) in the papers regularly, and getting its songs played in public settings. He put songs on the radio, then mailed stacks of postcards to music sellers telling them

how to order it. He wrote topical songs—something that was news today was a song in the music stores tomorrow. A noteworthy example: when the actor Rudolf Valentino was on his death bed, McHugh and Irving Mills composed “There’s a New Star in Heaven Tonight,” and they had the song in circulation within hours of Valentino’s death.

We can’t forget McHugh’s personality as an ingredient in his success. Always dapper, always positive, always energetic, McHugh was welcomed up and down Broadway as he sold his songs. And he was a born networker, meeting people where he lived, at the National Vaudeville Artists club on West 46th Street, and where he worshipped, at St. Malachy’s church on West 49th, called the “Actor’s Church” in those days, where he helped organize the 4 a.m. Sunday morning mass for the late-night crowd.

Jimmy always was a go-getter, and his hard work made him a partner and stockholder in the Mills firm in 1923. But no matter how successful he was representing Mills, he wanted to write songs.

The first song Jimmy wrote in New York, “Emaline,” was recorded by Isham Jones in 1921. His second tune, written with Ferde Grofé in 1922, was “[Stop Your Kiddin’](#),” heard here played by the Original Memphis Five, and in 1924 he had a big hit, “[When My Sugar Walks Down the Street](#),” heard here played by the Wolverines that December. In 1926, he had an even bigger hit with “[I Can’t Believe That You’re In Love With Me](#),” heard here played by Duke Ellington in 1927.

Each one of these tunes takes McHugh further away from sentimental songs like “Caroline, I’m Coming Back to You” that marked his time in Boston. McHugh’s biographer, Alyn Shipton, wrote of the first of these New York songs, but could just as well have written about any of them:

The melody of “Emaline” and its regular but attractive chord structure demonstrated that from his very first effort as a New York songwriter, McHugh was in tune with the Jazz Age. He understood how to create pieces that stood independently as songs but that could also form a basis on which improvising musicians could jam. His day-to-day work brought him in contact with all manner of performers as he plugged the Mills catalog, but an increasing percentage of his customers were members of the burgeoning jazz scene in the city.



Jimmy McHugh and Dorothy Fields, about 1930.

This is where we’ll leave McHugh—successful in the music business, and starting with “Sugar,” writing the songs that would make him famous to this day. His early development was complete. In 1927, he started writing music for the Cotton Club in Harlem and hired Duke Ellington and his Orchestra to play it. He also began working with Dorothy Fields, the lyricist who matched his skill as a composer, and McHugh and Fields would write landmark song after landmark song over their eight-year collaboration: “I Can’t Give You Anything But Love, Baby” “Diga Diga Doo,” “I Must Have That Man,” “On the Sunny Side of the Street,” “Exactly Like You,” “Lost in a Fog,” “Hooray for Love,” “I Feel a Song Comin’ on,” and “I’m in the Mood for Love” are near the top of any list of great American songs. McHugh’s final years in New York, and his Hollywood years following his move there in 1930, are themselves stories to tell another time.

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Jimmy McHugh was back in Boston, which was then was an important tryout town for Broadway-bound shows, in October 1948, preparing for the opening of his new production, *As the Girls Go*. It

opened on October 13, 1948, at—where else—the Boston Opera House on Huntington Avenue. The critics panned it, though, and the show required a major overhaul to get it ready for Broadway.

McHugh was busy, but overhaul or no overhaul, he found time for the reporters. He *always* found time for the reporters. He told the *Boston Globe*, “When I was here in Boston with the Berlin outfit I was just a song-plugger. I played at baseball parks, theaters, fairs, conventions, banquets, everywhere the publishers could find to introduce and ‘put over’ a new number. There was no radio or talking picture then to sell a new song.” And then he said the widely copied words that even ended up in his obituary following his death on May 23, 1969: “I was a hep kid with a beat then. Now? I’m still a hep kid with a beat.”

Whatever the hep kid and his colleagues did in Boston, it worked: *As the Girls Go* opened on Broadway in December as planned, and ran for 414 performances.

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The definitive work on McHugh is the biography written by Alyn Shipton and published by the University of Illinois Press in 2009: *I Feel a Song Coming On: The Life of Jimmy McHugh*. Online sources of information on McHugh and his music include the [Songwriters Hall of Fame](#), to which McHugh was inducted in 1970, and the [McHugh Music website](#) and affiliated [blog](#), maintained by members of the McHugh family.

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