

Song Title: **THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC**

Rating: **YES: Note**

REVIEWERS' NOTE

This song plays on the cultural trope that love can be generated or controlled through spells, witchcraft or enchantment. The use of the term “black magic” may be off-putting for some. A large part of American vernacular contains color symbolism that some argue is rooted in colonialism and oppression. The color white has a connotation of pureness or goodness. Whereas, things that are negative or evil are marked by the color black – “white knight” and “blacklist” for example. “Black magic” falls into this category, as well as being associated with the connotation that African-rooted religions are somehow evil ([see notes on Vodou here](#)). Performers might consider this in deciding whether or not to include this song in their repertoire. [Let's Talk About Black Magic: What It Is, Where It... | What Is Black Magic?](#)

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What year was this song written? 1942

Who wrote the lyrics? Johnny Mercer

What did your research tell you about the lyricist?

John Herndon “Johnny” Mercer (1909-1976) was a prolific lyricist and composer, with over 1,400 songs to his credit, as well as a popular singer and a record label executive. His lyrics combined a keen appreciation of American colloquialisms with a profoundly poetic sensibility. At their best, they have a richness and emotional complexity. Mercer’s many collaborators included Harold Arlen, Hoagy Carmichael, Duke Ellington, Jerome Kern, Gordon Jenkins, and Harry Warren. He also contributed to the scores of Broadway musicals and films. *Ella Fitzgerald Sings the Johnny Mercer Song Book* is the only one of Fitzgerald’s Song Books devoted to the work of a lyricist.

A native of Savannah, Georgia, Mercer moved to New York intending to become an actor, but turned to music when he failed to land a role in the *Garrick Gaieties* in 1930, contributing a song to the production instead. Winning an amateur singing contest in 1932 led to a job as singer and songwriter for bandleader Paul Whiteman. Mercer moved to Hollywood in 1933, and by 1938 was recording duets with Bing Crosby. He became a featured singer on Benny Goodman’s Camel Cavalcade radio program in 1939, and in the early 1940’s had his own radio show, Johnny Mercer’s Music Shop. One of the founders of Capital Records in 1942, he was its first President and chief talent scout. Mercer recorded his own songs for Capital Records as well as attracting such artists as Nat King Cole, Stan Kenton, Jo Stafford, Peggy Lee, and Margaret Whiting to the label. Mercer became the founding President of the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1969.

Four of Mercer’s songs received Academy Awards for Best Original Song: *On the Atchison, Topeka, and the Santa Fe* (1946 with composer Harry Warren), *In the Cool, Cool, Cool of the Evening* (1951 with composer Hoagy Carmichael), *Moon River* (1961 with composer Henry Mancini), and *Days of Wine and Roses* (1962 with Mancini). He was inducted into the Songwriters Hall of Fame in 1971. The Hall of Fame’s Johnny Mercer Award is that group’s highest honor, given as a lifetime achievement award to writers who have already been inducted into its Hall of Fame.

Research shows that at least one of Mercer's songs reflects problematic racial DEI concerns. See additional information and the song list in Mercer's bio on the [Songwriter Biographies page](#).

What other material has been written by this lyricist?

Songs include *P.S. I Love You* (1934, Gordon Jenkins), *Goody Goody* (1936, Matt Melneck), *I'm An Old Cowhand* (1936, words and music), *Bob White (Whatcha Gonna Swing Tonight?)* (1937, Bernie Hanighen), *Too Marvelous For Words* (1937, Richard Whiting), *Jeepers Creepers* (1938, Harry Warren), *Hooray For Hollywood* (1938, Richard Whiting), *Day In--Day Out* (1939, Rube Bloom), *I Thought About You* (1939, Jimmy Van Heusen), *Fools Rush In* (1940, Rube Bloom), *Blues In The Night* (1941, Harold Arlen), *Skylark* (1941, Hoagy Carmichael), *I Remember You* (1942, Victor Schertzinger), *I'm Old Fashioned* (1942, Jerome Kern), *That Old Black Magic* (1942, Harold Arlen), *Hit The Road To Dreamland* (1942, Harold Arlen), *My Shining Hour* (1943, Harold Arlen), *One For My Baby* (1943, Harold Arlen), *Ac-Cnt-Tchu-Ate The Positive* (1944, Harold Arlen), *Let's Take The Long Way Home* (1944, Harold Arlen), *G.I. Jive* (1944, words and music), *Laura* (1945, David Raskin), *Out Of This World* (1945, Harold Arlen), *Early Autumn* (1949, Woody Herman and Ralph Burns), *Autumn Leaves* (1950, English version of a French song, music by Joseph Kozma), *Here's To My Lady* (1951, Rube Bloom), *Something's Gotta Give* (1955, words and music), *Satin Doll* (1958, Duke Ellington and Billy Strayhorn), *Charade* (1963, Henry Mancini), *Summer Wind* (1965, Henry Mayer), and *How Do You Say Aug Wiedersehn?* (1967, Tony Scibetta).

Who is the composer of this song? Harold Arlen

What did your research tell you about the composer?

Harold Arlen (born Hyman Arluck, 1905-1986) was an American composer of popular music, and highly regarded contributor to the Great American Songbook. He wrote over 400 songs from 1924 through 1976. He worked with 31 different lyricists and composed scores for both Hollywood films and Broadway musicals. *Over the Rainbow* won him an Academy Award and was voted the twentieth century's No. 1 song by the Recording Industry Association of America (RIAA) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA).

He grew up in a musical family (his father was a cantor), and disappointed but didn't surprise his parents by dropping out of high school to become a musician. A stint as pianist and singer with a dance band, the Buffalodians, allowed him to escape Buffalo for New York City. Arlen stayed on after the band's demise; after some mostly unsuccessful attempts to conquer vaudeville or Broadway, Arlen stumbled onto a tune that, with lyrics by Ted Koehler, became *Get Happy*, his first hit. With Koehler as lyricist, Arlen became the staff composer for Harlem's Cotton Club, a premiere showcase for African American entertainers such as Cab Calloway and Ethel Waters. They wrote *I've Got the World on a String* and *Ill Wind*, among dozens of other songs. Arlen's second important collaborator was E.Y. Harburg, with whom he composed the score for *The Wizard of Oz*, celebrated specialty numbers for Bert Lahr and Groucho Marx, and two Broadway musicals.

He brought African American styles to the mainstream. Arlen worked in the Cotton Club and "he cultivated a fascination with jazz and the blues, bringing them into the Broadway and Hollywood mainstream. Arlen's harmonies were sophisticated, and the temperature of his ballads high, but his stream of melody ran deep: a sound at once alien and everyday. Most of his stage shows dealt with black subject matter, and even his singing—he made commercial recordings—overtly imitated black styles 'He looks white!' a confused Marlene Dietrich cried after meeting him. 'How can the man who wrote 'Stormy Weather' be white?' " (WSJ article)

Research shows that at least one of Arlen's songs reflects problematic racial DEI concerns. See additional information in Arlen's bio on the [Songwriter Biographies page](#). His being "Black-adjacent" as described above usually did not veer into disrespect or appropriation.

What other material has been written by this composer?

Over 400 songs, including classics such as *Over the Rainbow*, *Come Rain or Come Shine*, *I Love a Parade*, *Stormy Weather*, *Blues in the Night*, *Down with Love*, *If I Only had a Brain*, *It's Only a Paper Moon*, *One for My Baby*, *My Blue Heaven*, and *That Old Black Magic*.

Please provide a link to the original song lyrics.

[JOHNNY MERCER - THAT OLD BLACK MAGIC LYRICS](#)

Who and what is this song about, as originally intended by the composer and earlier performers?

It's a dream sequence of a soldier dreaming of his love object, a famous ballet dancer, dancing to the music of "That Old Black Magic". It expresses the captivation and whirling confusion sometimes felt when being in love.

What did you learn about the history OF THE SONG?

It was specifically written for the score of the movie *Star Spangled Rhythm*. Per the *Cafe Songbook Catalog of The Great American Songbook*:

"That Old Black Magic," is a show number in the show that is being rehearsed within the movie's plot. Johnny Johnston (a one-time band and radio singer) "sings it playing the part of a star-struck soldier who is having a dream about his love object, ballet dancer Vera Zorina, who comes to life in his dream and dances to Arlen's music for "Black Magic." (The dance is choreographed by George Balanchine who was Zorina's real life husband and places Zorina, dressed all in black, in a snow setting.)"

Harold Arlen wrote the music, which was longer than most songs of its time and uses a lot of single tone repetition. He played 72 bars of it for Johnny Mercer, who went off and wrote the words. Mercer loved the alliteration of "voodoo like you do so well" from "You Do Something To Me" by Cole Porter, which may have influenced his theme for the words of the song. <https://www.learnreligions.com/what-is-black-magic-2561871ng>. The ballet seems to have prompted the longer song, but it seems that Johnny Mercer's lyrics also required the longer song. It was popularized by Glenn Miller's Orchestra, Margaret Whiting and has been covered by many singers, including Frank Sinatra and Ella Fitzgerald.

Share a link to the earliest performance of this song that you can find.

["That Old Black Magic" from Star Spangled Rhythm - Johnny Johnston](#)

Does any illustration or other characteristic of the original sheet music reflect an inappropriate theme? No

Please explain why the illustrations in the sheet music ARE or ARE NOT problematic.

The cover illustration is pictures of the stars who are in the movie: <https://i.gyazo.com.jpg>

Did this song, originally or subsequently, demean a marginalized racial/ethnic group (a group considered at a social disadvantage) through idiomatic expressions, metaphors, jargon, or message? And/or does the song present a sanitized/idyllic or false narrative regarding the American South and the life of the enslaved or newly freed OR of other marginalized racial/ethnic groups and their history? No

Please supply the links to any sources you used for this section of research.

<https://www.britannica.com/biography/Harold-Arlen>
https://www.songhall.org/awards/winner/Harold_Arlen
<http://www.haroldarlen.com/abc.html>
<https://www.wsj.com/articles/that-old-black-magic-1449259790>
https://www.songhall.org/profile/Johnny_Mercer
<https://research.library.gsu.edu/c.php?g=115614&p=754312>
<https://www.georgiaencyclopedia.org/articles/arts-culture/johnny-merc-1909-1976/>
<https://performingsongwriter.com/johnny-merc/>
<https://SecondHandSongs.com>
<https://www.tias.com/stores/lbac/pictures/1109000a.jpg>
<https://www.johnnymercerfoundation.org/johnny-merc/johnnys-songs/music/>
https://adp.library.ucsb.edu/index.php/mastertalent/detail/103688/Mercer_Johnny
<https://acousticmusic.org/research/history/musical-styles-and-venues-in-america/tin-pan-alley/>
http://www.greatamericansongbook.net/pages/songs/t/that_old_black_magic.html

Additional Questions to Consider (do not pertain to Admissibility)

The remaining questions pertain to Diversity, Equity & Inclusion issues other than those of race. As such, **THESE QUESTIONS DO NOT AFFECT A SONG'S ADMISSIBILITY**. They are provided to encourage your group to consider factors that may affect members of your audience and/or your performers with regard to religion, gender, sexual orientation, age, disability, and more. ***Please refer to the Music Choices section of Chapter Choices to Address Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion*** (in the ***Chorus Toolkit***) ***for details and strategies related to these factors.***

Could the message/lyrics of the song, original or subsequent, limit any singer or audience member's ability to engage, related to the following? A YES answer does not imply that the song is demeaning or exclusionary. [Please see instructions here.](#)

Age: No

Disability: No

Gender: No

Religion: No

Sexual Orientation: No

Visible Physical Differences: No

Other? No

Are there any adjustments to the lyrics that would make it more inclusive or current to our chorus culture or societal norms?

I did not identify any lyrics that might be addressed.