

## JOHNNY MERCER STATUE

Meaghan Walsh

In honor of his 100th birthday, the Friends of Johnny Mercer, Inc. Statue Committee commissioned a life-size bronze statue that is approved for placement in the new Ellis Square. In the 1990s, Savannahian John Thorsen suggested a monument be installed, based on a famous photograph of Mercer in New York City leaning against a fire plug, reading the newspaper. Johnny Mercer's niece, Nancy Mercer Gerard, who is the co-chair of the statue committee, said the pose was ultimately chosen for a number of reasons. "First of all, it is already outside," she says. "Also, I think it's friendly and inviting. It's adapted to Southern hospitality. And he's not on a pedestal. He was never that kind of guy."

The committee found the perfect sculptor in Susie Chisholm, a local artist who took classes at the City of Savannah. Chisholm began by researching various aspects of the photograph, including the fire hydrant. She found one, and US Pipe and Foundry in Chattanooga was kind enough to donate an actual plug to be part of the mold for the final statue.

Stratton Leopold arranged for the costuming department of Paramount Studios to loan some vintage clothing to be modeled on Steve Gerard, Johnny Mercer's great-nephew. Gerard donned the garments and posed on a nearby hydrant, unmoving for over an hour, while Chisholm measured distance, angles, wrinkles and cuffs. "As I stood there, I wondered what he was thinking about, reading the paper," Gerard recalls.

In addition to the family resemblance, there was also a lucky happenstance. Chisholm had noticed that Mercer knotted his tie in a very particular, and somewhat crooked, way. She pointed it out to Gerard who immediately recognized it as the way he tied his own, only in reverse. "I had to tie it on the costumer, then she slipped it off and put it over my head, so it would be the same as in the picture." Chisholm's attention to minute detail is so important for a statue of such a beloved man. "I hope I have conveyed his warm character," she says, "and his charm and friendly nature. I tried to give him that little twinkle in his eye."

The FJM Statue Committee wants to thank everyone – the Johnny Mercer Foundation, the Mercer family, those who sponsored fundraisers and individual donors. You have made the statue a reality.

### Johnny Mercer Statue Committee

Co-Chairs: Nancy Mercer Keith Gerard  
and Dianne S. Thurman

Stephen S. Gerard

George and Jackie Haberman

Stratton and Mary Leopold



Steve H. Gerard  
© Susie Chisholm



Susie Chisholm  
© Savannah Morning News



FJM Statue Fund event. L-R: Nancy Mercer Gerard, Paula Deen,  
Earl "Bubba" Hiers. © Dianne S. Thurman

[www.johnnymercercentennial.com](http://www.johnnymercercentennial.com)

## AN INTERNATIONAL CELEBRATION

Meaghan Walsh

Savannah began as a port city full of merchants, warehouses – and immigrants. Its rich, colorful past includes the stories of many cultures that influence the city even today.

Johnny Mercer grew up in a house at the corner of Lincoln and Gwinnett streets, in a nice, middle-class neighborhood that was home to businessmen, tradesmen and shopkeepers. It was also a fairly diverse area of town of European immigrants. The famous Leopold brothers, who had immigrated from Greece, had an ice cream parlor just a block away from Johnny's front porch. It's only fitting, then, that the Mercer Centennial be celebrated all around the world.

In Paris, Susanna Bartilla is focusing on Mercer standards in her vocal jazz repertoire. "A Johnny Mercer lyric always comes across as something authentically by him," she says, "a part of his real person, as lived and experienced by him – and us! He always strikes the right balance between nostalgia and optimism, between tenderness and passion; genuine emotion that we all can relate to."

Savannah native Tony Cope now lives in Kinsale, County Cork, Ireland, considered by many to be the Monaco of the Irish Riviera. He headed up a Mercer show for the annual Kinsale Arts Week. Prior to the festival, he said: "It runs for three nights in July at the Lord Kingsale (the town's original name). It is a musical tribute but also a look at the man and his life." He adds, "Johnny Mercer is one of those song writers where everyone, even here, knows his songs, but few know the man. Hopefully, our show will change that, at least a little."

Todd Gordon is a vocalist who has been touring a Mercer show throughout the centennial year. He put together the headline concert of the Glasgow International Jazz Festival, featuring British television's Sir Michael Parkinson as host. Gordon will perform November 18 at the London Jazz Festival. He discovered Mercer's lyrics at age 11, "but it was three years later following my parents' rather acrimonious divorce that music became my escape route from depression, and it was the simple line in "Dream" – "things never are as bad as they seem, so dream, dream, dream" – that became my mantra; Mr. Mercer's lyrics helped me a lot at that time," he remembers. Gordon, a Scot, was "intrigued to learn of Johnny Mercer's pride in his Scottish ancestry and the many links that existed between Savannah and Scotland." Yet another link in the truly versatile and varied strains in Mercer's music.

Johnny Mercer – London session © Laureate Company  
L-R: Pepe Loeches (engineer), Harry Roche (bandleader),  
Pete Moore (arranger/conductor) and Ken Barnes (producer)



*All Over the World*  
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