



## Mercer, Mabel (1900-1984)

by Patricia Juliana Smith

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Mabel Mercer.  
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Although she never achieved in her long lifetime the fame she so richly deserved, Mabel Mercer was one of the most respected singers of the mid-twentieth century, a most original stylist, and the toast of the New York cabaret scene.

Her career, which spanned seven decades, brought her to early fame in Paris, where she mingled with some of the most extraordinary gay and lesbian figures of the day, and in her later years she was a much beloved icon of gay New York.

Mabel Mercer was born February 3, 1900, in Burton-on-Trent, Staffordshire, England, to an English vaudeville singer and dancer. She was never to meet her father, an African-American jazz musician, who, according to some sources, died before she was born.

She was at first raised by her grandmother in Liverpool, and later educated at a Catholic convent school in Manchester. She left school at fourteen to join her mother, who had since married another vaudeville performer, as part of a touring company.

After the end of World War I, Mercer settled in Paris, where she met the celebrated Ada "Bricktop" Smith, an American singer and cabaret proprietor whose patrons included Gertrude Stein, Ernest Hemingway, and Zelda and F. Scott Fitzgerald. Mercer based her career at Bricktop's until 1938, when she fled in anticipation of World War II and the feared German invasion.

During her Paris years, Mercer became friends (and possibly more) with the notoriously eccentric lesbian heiress, speedboat racer, and womanizer Marion "Joe" Carstairs. Carstairs, who had settled in her own "kingdom"--Whale Cay, on an island in the Bahamas--paid Mercer's way across the Atlantic, fearing what the Nazis would do to the biracial singer.

Mercer resided in the Bahamas until 1941, when she married Kelsey Pharr, an openly gay African-American musician, and obtained an entry visa from the United States government. The marriage was clearly one of convenience, as Mercer and Pharr never lived together and rarely saw each other; however, Mercer, as a devout Catholic, would not divorce Pharr, and they remained legally married, if in no other sense, until his death.

Upon her arrival in New York, Mercer began a series of engagements in some of the city's most elegant supper clubs and cabarets; and, for the rest of her life, the metropolis was her sole venue. Here she became the particular favorite of gay men, who found in her a sympathetic interpreter of their lives and loves, even when those lives and loves had necessarily to remain mostly closeted.

Mercer was a sophisticated interpreter of show tunes and standards, particularly those of Cole Porter and Noël Coward. Although often classified as a jazz singer, her style, which involved movement and gesture along with "proper" English-accented intonations, owed as much to the British music hall tradition into

which she was born as it did to *le jazz hot* of 1920s Paris.

Carstairs admired Mercer for being "ladylike," and this quality, along with her tremendous warmth and sly wit, made Mercer a completely unique talent. She considered each song a story to be narrated, not merely to be sung.

Her interpretations of standard songs, such as Coward's "Sail Away" and "Mad about the Boy," frequently captured qualities within them that other interpreters might have missed, especially the pain and sadness, as well as the pleasures and joy, of the lives of gay men in the 1940s and 1950s.

Mercer's recordings are few, and all date from later in her life. While those fortunate enough to have seen her perform live report that the recordings capture only a fraction of her appeal, much of which involved body language and audience interaction, the recordings nonetheless convey a *joie de vivre* and a personality not to be found elsewhere.

Although Mercer performed well into her seventies, she increasingly preferred the privacy of her country estate in rural New York, where she gardened, created recipes that were often published, and lived with her many pets.

She became an American citizen in 1952, and, in 1983, was awarded the Presidential Medal of Freedom for her contribution to American Culture.

She died quietly on April 20, 1984, in Pittsfield, Massachusetts.

### **Bibliography**

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