

“Whispering”--Paul Whiteman and his Orchestra (1920)

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Essay by Don Rayno (guest post)*



Paul Whiteman

There have been hundreds of recorded versions of the song “Whispering,” but it was Paul Whiteman and his orchestra that put it on the path to becoming the beloved standard that it is today.

Whiteman, born in Denver on March 28, 1890, came from a musical family. His father Wilberforce was superintendent of music for the Denver public school system, and his mother Elfrida was an accomplished contralto singer highly praised throughout the city for her vocal abilities. Paul studied violin as a boy and by age 16 was playing viola in the Denver symphony as well as in various theater and hotel engagements in the greater-Denver area.

In 1914, Whiteman moved to San Francisco. By now a seasoned violist, he played in the orchestra for the Panama-Pacific International Exposition, and, by the following year, he was in the San Francisco Symphony under the baton of Alfred Hertz. The year after that, he was a member of the prestigious West Coast ensemble, the Minetti String Quartet. When the United States entered World War I in 1917, Whiteman enlisted in the Navy with the rank of first musician and, soon, he was leading his own band, the Naval Training Camp Symphony Orchestra at Mare Island.

After the war ended, Whiteman was offered the plum opportunity of leading his own musical ensemble at San Francisco’s upscale Fairmont Hotel, atop Nob Hill. This was the beginning of a series of hotel engagements for the bandleader, and within two years, he would become quite popular regionally.

“Whispering” came to Whiteman’s attention through his singular arranger, Ferde Grofé, in 1920. In order to understand fully how “Whispering” came to such popularity through Whiteman’s inimitable dance orchestra, and the important part that Grofé played in this, it is necessary to discuss the evolution of arranging for bands during the formidable era of popular American music of the early 1920s.

During this period, virtually all bandleaders used “stock” arrangements sold by music publishers, arrangements which were, recalled Bill Challis, an early dance-band arranger who later worked for Whiteman, “of prime importance to a new song’s exploitation.” The publisher, Challis explained, “would have commissioned a highly capable specialist” to make the stock arrangement. “This arrangement--the only one so commissioned--would be conceived to promote the song’s financial success by popularizing it through the medium of the dance band.”¹ Typical instrumentation for the stock arrangement of a popular song in the early-to-mid-1920s would be one or two violins, two or three saxophones, one or two trumpets, one trombone, along with parts for the rhythm section--banjo, piano, string bass and drums. Additional strings, reeds/woodwinds and brass would be included for the stock arrangement for songs in the popular repertoire of a more “symphonic” nature.

While these stock arrangements were of considerable value to the leader of a small dance band, they represented a particular musical interpretation of a song. It was, Challis said, “accepted as the publisher’s dance band interpretation of his song. The melody, harmonies and rhythm were presented as the composer(s) had written them and none was beclouded by the orchestral treatment.” Consequently, for this reason, and also due to the fact that the instrumental makeup of dance bands varied, it became common for the bandleader or budding arranger to “doctor up” the stock arrangements. “Any of its passages--the introduction, ending, first chorus, last chorus, special chorus, interludes, modulations, whatever--could be deleted and substituted for, or deleted and used elsewhere, with little or no difficulty,” Challis said, recalling his own days of arranging in the early 1920s. “Such interchanging became a widely-used time-saving device among arrangers that served well in many a hurried ‘cut-and-paste’ arrangement.”²

Grofé, however, as soon would Challis, decided that it was better to make his own arrangements. “Oh, you should have heard those arrangements that the publishers used to put out,” Grofé exclaimed in an early-1960s interview. “There was no imagination at all... The first published parts for alto saxophone were terrible.”³

Grofé had already had some experience arranging for small dance bands in California, most notably Art Guerin’s jazz ensemble, which played at the Portola Louvre, San Francisco’s largest restaurant that occupied the entire basement of the cavernous Flood Building, in the downtown area of the city at Market and Powell. This was in the fall of 1918 and the winter of 1919, when the Spanish Influenza, which would ultimately kill up to a million people in the United States and as many as 50 million people around the world, was raging through parts of California. Grofé had recently come from Los Angeles, where, he recalled, “every public place was closed--churches, schools, cafés--everything,” he recalled. “It was terrible. The people were dying like flies.”⁴

Grofé, then, readily responded to an offer from Mike Berger, manager of the Portola Louvre, to come up to San Francisco and play in Guerin’s band, replacing the piano player, who had died of the flu. Whiteman, whose band, wearing surgical masks--those not blowing instruments--by order of the local health officer, was still playing at the Fairmont Hotel, and he would often come down to the Portola Louvre on Sunday nights, when his band wasn’t playing, to hear the Guerin band. Whiteman listened to the Grofé arrangements that Guerin’s band played, and liked what he heard. One night he offered Grofé, on the spot, a job as pianist and arranger with his band.

“He was so interested in having me,” Grofé remembered decades afterward. “He asked me if I would like to play with him, and I said I would think about it. I was glad to get away from that grind because we had to work from six o’clock in the evening until one o’clock the next morning. It was a hard job--seven days a week, seven hours a day with no intermission.” Grofé soon told Whiteman he’d go to work for him at the Fairmont. “The job up there was much easier,” he said. “Not as many hours. I think we started about seven o’clock and quit about eleven or twelve, with intermissions.”⁵

When Grofé reported for work at the Fairmont Hotel, however, Whiteman was nowhere to be found. As it turned out, the load of duties at the Fairmont had overwhelmed the bandleader, and he’d had an emotional collapse, ending up in the hospital. In his absence, trumpet player Henry Busse was fronting the band. Grofé didn’t remain long at the Fairmont, and when Whiteman recovered in the winter of 1919, he was transferred to another California hotel, the oceanside Belvedere Hotel in Santa Barbara, which like the Fairmont, was owned by the hotel magnate Daniel Linnard. Here, Whiteman put together a five-piece ensemble. It was a less demanding job. The flu epidemic abating, Grofé made his way down to Los Angeles, where he found work as a pianist during the dinner hours at the Roma Café at 6th and Hill. He also played piano for lunchtime down the street at the Blue Bird Café and viola for the Los Angeles symphony. As if this wasn’t enough work, he also played “mood music” for silent film star Theda Bara on motion picture sets.

Through 1919, Whiteman worked at the Belvedere and then, beginning in the fall of that year, at another Linnard hotel, the Maryland in Pasadena. Then, three days before Christmas, he opened at the Alexandria Hotel in downtown Los Angeles with his largest band to date, a nine-piece ensemble consisting of a trumpet player, Henry Busse; a trombonist, Buster Johnson; two saxophonists, Leslie Canfield and Charles Dornberger; a banjo player, Mike Pingitore; a string bass man, J. K. “Spike” Wallace; a drummer, Harold McDonald; and a pianist, Charles Caldwell.

It was a high-profile engagement for Whiteman, who was gaining considerable notoriety on the West Coast. Canfield soon departed and was replaced by the New Orleans reed man, Gus Mueller. When it came to replacing Caldwell, who had died, Whiteman thought again of Grofé, who could not only provide him with capable piano playing, but could also supply him with arrangements tailor-made to his band. Grofé readily agreed, glad to have a steady, well-paying job, and also the opportunity to write arrangements for a nine-piece ensemble, which was a large dance band in those days.

Grofé thus became the first “special arranger” in a dance band--an arranger that was embedded with a particular musical unit. “Nobody had ever heard of special arrangements for a band,” he recalled. Bandleaders were still relying on stock arrangements. “From then on all the different orchestra leaders began to get their own arrangers.”⁶

When he joined the Whiteman Orchestra,” Grofé subsequently recounted, “they were using what I called the ‘huddle system.’ They would buy a piece of music or get it gratis from the publisher. These were regular stock arrangements. They would rehearse them once or twice a week, learning how to play the parts as written and to improvise around them.”⁷ Right away when he came in, Grofé began to write arrangements in the smooth style that characterized much of his

work. “Grofé’s arrangements created a recognizable, early-Whiteman sound,”⁸ this author has written. He most always included what he called a “harmony chorus,” a carefully-arranged musical layering. This chorus was, Grofé said, “smooth playing, sustained, like a quartet singing.”⁹ Grofé recalled: “I used the same principle, which I had studied in harmony--four-voice writing,”¹⁰ with the quartet consisting of the trumpet, trombone, and two saxophones. Together with the backing of the band’s formidable, solid rhythm section of piano, bass, banjo, and drums, with Whiteman adding his violin, it was a unique, smooth, and infectious sound.

The harmony chorus was, music critic Henry Osgood observed in the 1920s, “a blessed relief to the ear, torn with the noise and conflict of the usual huddle system arrangements, for even when the orchestras were playing ‘sweet’ and the noise of the brass was stilled, there was constant rhythmic restlessness.”¹¹ Osgood described the harmony chorus this way:

In the harmony chorus, when the melody did not need special emphasis, Grofé gave it to the solo saxophone, supporting it with sustained chords, *piano*, on the brass (used like horns); if the melody needed to stand out more, he reversed the process, giving the melody to the first trumpet and using the two saxophones and the trombone for the sustained harmonic support. The rhythm was lightly indicated by piano, the banjo, a light pizzicato bass or perhaps a whispered drum tap. That was an absolute innovation in jazz. The combinations sounded warm and luscious. There was no noise, no unrest. It was delightful to listen to and yet it was perfectly danceable. No wonder that it made an instantaneous and tremendous hit!¹²

Grofé’s special arrangements meant that the songs the Whiteman Orchestra played were entirely repeatable in their structure, character and emphasis, from performance to performance. “It didn’t take me long to make arrangements for only nine pieces,” Grofé later remembered. “I didn’t even make any scores. I used to take the piano part of the printed arrangement [stock arrangement] and scribble out the parts. Sometimes I’d make notations on the piano part itself. If I was going to write a countermelody, I’d write that in pencil.”¹³ Grofé would not begin to assemble scores for songs until later, when the band was larger.

“They were rehearsed and played,” Osgood recounted, referring to Grofé’s arrangements for the Whiteman Orchestra. “If you heard ‘Whispering,’ the popular tune of the year, at the Hotel Alexandria on Monday evening and enjoyed the novel beauty of the arrangement, you could go back on Tuesday evening and be sure of hearing the same thing.”¹⁴

To be sure, there were some adlib solos, or “faking,” as it was sometimes called, by the Whiteman musicians, for which Grofé made provision. “I allowed for these adlib choruses in the arrangement,” Grofé recounted. “They would play the arrangement just as it was written, and when it came to the adlib chorus, I would just have the melody written out for that instrument. The rest would have 32 bars rest, or sixteen bars, or whatever it was. I did this whenever the tunes would lend themselves to it, or where the instrumentalists felt like playing it, but not on every tune.”¹⁵ A certain amount of this kind of adlibbing can be heard on the Whiteman Orchestra recording of “Whispering,” where in the final 32-bar chorus, the solo trumpet, Busse, plays the melody in a syncopated style.

Whiteman and Grofé were always on the lookout for new songs that they could add to their repertoire at the Alexandria. On occasion, songwriters would bring in the music for songs they had written, in hopes that Whiteman might play them. One of these songwriters was 27-year-old John Schonberger, a violinist with local dance bands and a budding composer, who brought in a song that he had written. It was an instrumental number--as yet, there were no words. "Schonberger had made a lead sheet of it," Grofé recounted, "and brought it down to the Alexandria one day and asked us to play it. We really liked it."¹⁶ Grofé got right to work and wrote an arrangement of the song for the Whiteman, and it quickly became immensely popular with the Alexandria customers. With no title yet, they simply referred to it as "Johnny's Tune" for several months, it still being an uncopyrighted and unpublished song.

In 1920, Whiteman went east to Atlantic City, where he opened at the Ambassador Hotel at the beginning of June. "Johnny's Tune" went over well there also, and in July, Schonberger copyrighted the song, now with lyrics, listing himself as composer and Malvin Schonberger, presumably a relation of John, as lyricist. The song was published under the title "Whispering" by Sherman, Clay & Co. of San Francisco.

By this time, with Atlantic City's proximity to New York, the popularity for "Whispering" was spreading rapidly. Ray Miller's six-piece dance band recorded the song for Okeh Records on July 1, 1920. This appears to be the first recording of "Whispering," and the prominent trombone of the New Orleans jazzman Tom Brown can be heard throughout.

Whiteman's record of "Whispering" came next, thanks to the fact that the Victor Talking Machine Company, the biggest record label then, had signed the Whiteman Orchestra in July and arranged for it to record its first disks as soon as possible. The first session took place on August 9, 1920, and "Whispering" slated as one of the songs to be recorded. This was during the acoustic recording era, prior to May 1925, in which the musicians gathered before a large, flared horn which received the musical sound, causing a thin diaphragm to vibrate. The vibrations in turn moved a stylus attached to a diaphragm to cut into a wax platter, the cuttings corresponding to the sound waves from the music. With the narrow frequency range of acoustic recording, obtaining a superior, balanced recording was difficult; the placement of the instruments was critical, and the string bass was virtually unrecordable (tubas were used instead), as were bass drums and tympani (snare drums or wood blocks were employed).

Under these conditions, it is rather remarkable how well the Whiteman Orchestra's recording of "Whispering" came out. It did, however, take ten takes, spread out over three days of sessions in a two-week period, to come up with the record that was ultimately released (Victor 18690-A).

It is interesting to compare the two earliest versions of "Whispering," both instrumentals recorded in the summer of 1920, the Whiteman Orchestra's and the Ray Miller Band's (Okeh 4167-A). The recording by Miller was made with a smaller ensemble--this was the early days for his band--a sextet composed of Earl Oliver on trumpet, Tom Brown on trombone, Jim Helten on alto saxophone, Billy Fazioli on piano, Gus Lazaro on banjo, and leader Ray Miller on drums.¹⁷ It is a rather poor recording. Oliver carries the melody on trumpet throughout, but, due to his physical placement in the session--apparently too far back from the recording horn--he is considerably in the background. Tom Brown's swooping trombone is the dominant sound on the

record. With fewer musicians, the lack of the cohesiveness that a Grofé arrangement gave to Whiteman's rendition, and the poorly-recorded finished product, the Miller recording of "Whispering" falls somewhat flat, lacking the innovation, brightness, and musicianship of the Whiteman Orchestra, though it should be noted that the Miller band went on to make many fine recordings and is of seminal importance in American dance band history.

It is evident from Whiteman's polished recording of "Whispering," on the other hand, that this band had played the song numerous times in the live settings of the Alexandria Hotel in Los Angeles and the Ambassador Hotel in Atlantic City. Whiteman's nine-piece ensemble, bolstered by Grofé's fine arrangement, came up with a recording that was whimsical, innovative and memorable. Given the limitations of the recording process then, Victor's sound engineers--after the abundance of takes--did an exceptional job of capturing the inimitable Whiteman sound.

The record opens with the verse, with Busse on trumpet and Whiteman on violin doubling on the melody, which they continue into the first chorus, with Johnson diving and plunging about on trombone. The unique second chorus--one which certainly helped to give the Whiteman recording of "Whispering" its infectious appeal, features a 32-bar slide whistle solo played by 37 year-old Warren Luce, a house drummer and percussionist for Victor who played on various recordings for that label, including those made by bandleaders Clyde Doerr, Nat Shilkret, and Max Dolin. Luce's solo, played on top of a soft layer of saxophones and the rhythm section, with the brass and violin laying out, gives the record an aural effect that is both eerie and tantalizing. After this, there is a second verse, which leads into a solo chorus played by Busse. The final chorus is jazzier, with Busse playing a syncopated lead. It all added up to a consummate performance that introduced a unique sound heretofore unheard of on records.

The Whiteman Orchestra disk of "Whispering," coupled with "Japanese Sandman," written by composer Richard Whiting and lyricist Raymond B. Egan, on the other side, was released in November 1920. According to "The Book of Golden Disks," it sold nearly two million copies, making it one of the biggest-selling records in that period.¹⁸ Alec Wilder, in his excellent book, "American Popular Song," described "Whispering" this way in 1972:

It is said that, in terms of the number of record players in existence in 1920, the equivalent sale today of Paul Whiteman's famous record of this song would be in the neighborhood of twenty or more million singles.

The song is so very familiar that it is difficult to examine it without the bias of memory. There is no doubt about its being a strong song. Its step-wise writing never allows the singer to lose his way for an instant. Nor does it cease to be step-wise until the eleventh measure when it jumps up a fourth. But it drops right back and continues step-wise. From that point on there are only four more places where the melody moves more than a step away. And those steps, two of a third, and two of a fourth, are completely natural.¹⁹

In addition to Whiteman's disk of "Whispering," a flurry of other recordings of the song were made in the summer and fall of 1920 and into early 1921, on the Victor, Columbia, Brunswick, Edison, Okeh, and Aeolian Vocalion labels.²⁰ Various vocal renditions were waxed by both Broadway singers and concert-style or "salon" vocalists, including John Steel, Frank Crumit and

William Davidson, and the Crescent Trio, and instrumental ensembles like Art Hickman, the Vernon Trio, featuring the fine soprano saxophonist Bert Ralton and the emerging composer Vincent Rose on piano, and the Green Brothers' Novelty Orchestra.

When "Whispering" came up for copyright renewal in 1947, a court case arose, with two music publishing companies, the Miller Music Corporation and the Fred Fisher Music Company, battling over the rights to the now-valuable song. Fisher stated that John Schonberger and Malvin Schonberger, listed on the initial 1920 copyright, were the sole writers of "Whispering," and that the rights to the song had been assigned to Fisher in 1938. Miller, however, maintained that the song was actually written by composers John Schonberger and Vincent Rose (who died in 1944), and lyricist Richard Coburn, and that the rights had been assigned to the Miller company in July of 1947. Miller asked the court to rule "that Schonberger, Coburn and the late Rose are the composers of the tune, and that Miller owns their interests in the renewal rights."²¹ The US District Court in New York decided in favor of Miller, and thereafter, John Schonberger, Coburn, and Rose were credited with writing this colossal hit song.

The slate of hundreds of recordings of "Whispering" has continued through the decades since it was written. Among the many records of this evergreen song are those by: Red Nichols (1928), Clyde McCoy (1935), Jan Garber (1936), Benny Goodman (1938), Erskine Hawkins (1940), Lena Horne (1957), Al Jolson (1948), Morton Gould (1949), Harry Belafonte (1950), Gordon Jenkins (1950), Patti Page (1950), Les Paul (1951), Miles Davis (1951), Bing Crosby (1957), Russ Morgan (1958), the Kirby Stone Four (1958), Lawrence Welk (1958), Maureen O'Hara (1959), the Tommy Dorsey Orchestra, led by Warren Covington (1960), Billy Vaughn (1960), Chet Atkins (1960), Art Mooney (1961), Sammy Kaye (1961), Peter Duchin (1962), the Bachelors (1963), Nino Temple and April Stevens (1964), Steve Allen (1964), Joni James (1964), Wayne King (1965), Brenda Lee (1965), the New Vaudeville Band (1966), Teddy Wilson (1967), Mantovani (1971), Don Reno (1986), the Beau Hunks Saxophone Soccette (2003), Bucky Pizzarelli and Frank Vignola (2005), José Feliciano and Harry Stojka (2016), Jan Thompson-Hillier (2019), and many, many others. But, there seems little doubt that Whiteman's recorded version, which has taken its place in the National Recording Registry of the Library of Congress, will remain the definitive recording of this remarkable standard.

Don Rayno is the author of the two-volume biography, "Paul Whiteman: Pioneer in American Music," and has written many liner notes for Whiteman and Gershwin CD compilations. He lives in North Carolina.

Notes:

¹ Challis, Bill. 1979. "Final Report of NEA Jazz Category I Project R81-31-11N. 'Dusting Them Off Two at a Time,' a Personal History of Dance Band Arranging, with Examples." July 31. Personal Collection of Don Rayno.

² *ibid.*

- ³ Ferde Grofé Tape Archive, Reel 121. Walter D. Allen Library, Florida State University, Tallahassee. Quoted in Rayno, Don. 2003. *Paul Whiteman: Pioneer in American Music*, Vol. 1, p. 37.
- ⁴ Ferde Grofé Tape Archive, Reel 114.
- ⁵ *ibid.*
- ⁶ Ferde Grofé Tape Archive, Reel 121.
- ⁷ Ferde Grofé Tape Archive, Reel 114.
- ⁸ Rayno, Don. 2003. *Paul Whiteman: Pioneer in American Music*, Vol. 1, p. 36.
- ⁹ Ferde Grofé Tape Archive, Reel 119.
- ¹⁰ Ferde Grofé Tape Archive, Reel 114.
- ¹¹ Osgood, Henry O. 1926. *So This Is Jazz*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, pp. 168-69.
- ¹² Osgood, p. 169.
- ¹³ Ferde Grofé Tape Archive, Reel 114.
- ¹⁴ Osgood, p. 169.
- ¹⁵ Ferde Grofé Tape Archive, Reel 114.
- ¹⁶ Ferde Grofé Tape Archive, Reel 123.
- ¹⁷ Musicians playing on the Ray Miller recording session for “Whispering” are listed in: Rust, Brian. 1970. *Jazz Records, 1897-1942, Volume 2*. London: Storyville Publications and Co., p. 1129, and in Rust’s American Dance Band Discography, 1917-1942, Volume 2. New Rochelle, N.Y.: Arlington House, p. 1245.
- ¹⁸ Murrells, Joseph. 1978. *The Book of Golden Discs*. London: Barrie & Jenkins, pp. 11-12.
- ¹⁹ Wilder, Alec. 1972. *American Popular Song: The Great Innovators, 1900-1950*. New York: Oxford University Press, p. 453.
- ²⁰ Many of the recorded versions of “Whispering” made in 1920 (as well as dozens of others subsequently recorded up to the 1960s) are listed in the University of California at Santa Barbara’s online *Discography of American Historical Recordings* at adp.library.ucsb.edu.
- ²¹ *Billboard*. 1948. “‘Whispering’ Now a Clamor.” September 25, p. 18.

*The views expressed in this essay are those of the author and may not reflect those of the Library of Congress.