



Francis Craig

(1900-1966)

Written by [Robert W. Ikard](#)

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In 1947, the most popular song in the United States was “Near You.” It was listed for a record-setting seventeen consecutive weeks as the nation’s number one song on Billboard magazine’s Honor Roll of Hits. It has been called the biggest ever short-term recording. The composer and most popular performer of the song was the Nashville society bandleader Francis Craig.

Considering his background, education, and family business orientation, Craig seemed an unlikely composer of such a smash song. Born in Dickson, Tennessee, on September 10, 1900, he was the son of Robert Craig, a Methodist minister, and Fannie Frost Craig, a talented pianist. Their family was raised in several Middle Tennessee towns, following the Reverend Craig’s postings. Two of Robert Craig’s brothers founded the National Life & Accident Insurance Company in 1901, a business that would help establish Nashville as an insurance center.

Francis was a natural pianist, performing songs “by ear” at an early age. His jazz playing was anathema to his straight-laced parents. At Vanderbilt University in 1921, he formed his first orchestra. The band quickly gained popularity, playing dances throughout the mid-South. Craig met his wife, Elizabeth Gewin, while performing in Birmingham. They married in October 1924.

The Craigs returned to Nashville in 1925 for Francis to pursue a career in popular music, a choice looked upon with disfavor by his family. Based on a number of assured engagements, his orchestra was fully employed. It was favored on college campuses, especially at Vanderbilt, throughout the 1930s. His consistently reliable performance jobs though were at the Hermitage Hotel, radio station WSM, and the Belle Meade Country Club. Craig played lunch and dinner music at the Hermitage’s Grill Room for two decades. His orchestra performed on the 1925 opening program of WSM, a powerful and influential radio station owned by National Life and managed by his cousin, Edwin Craig. In addition

to local radio appearances, the orchestra had a Sunday night NBC network program. Craig was ubiquitous at Belle Meade, providing music for club, fraternity, sorority, and debut dances.

Except for a year spent in a sanitarium for treatment of tuberculosis in 1930-31, Craig's steady work continued through World War II. His orchestra's music reflected the personality of its demure, sophisticated, polite leader. Unlike some of its upbeat Dixieland recordings made in the late 1920s, the orchestra's music was now sweet, danceable, and noncontroversial. He did not seek national fame, preferring his comfortable, profitable life in Nashville. The era of dance band popularity waned after the war, and Craig's Hermitage and NBC contracts ended in 1947.

Yet Craig's career was not over. He was asked by record producer Jim Bulleit to record a popular song for his company, Bulleit Records. In addition to Craig's theme song, "Red Rose," the band recorded "Near You." Craig had written that melody as a gift to his grandchildren, and New Yorker Kermit Goell wrote the lyrics. The recording featured Craig on the piano and blind singer and trumpet player Bob Lamm doing the vocals.

From the unlikely combination of a nationally unknown musician and an obscure, independent record company, "Near You" became a phenomenal hit. It gave Craig fame and showed that the recording business could succeed in Nashville. That capability added to the already present writing, publishing, and performing skills assured the city's status as a music mecca.

There are twenty records in Craig's discography. His catalog contains over thirty songs. Though "Beg Your Pardon" brought some success, none of his other works were as remotely popular as "Near You." Craig's orchestras always had outstanding performers. Many became stars. Vocalists included Irene Beasley, Phil Harris, Jimmy Melton, Kenny Sargent, Dinah Shore, Snooky Lanson, and Kitty Kallen. Among his noted musicians, some of whom formed their own bands, were Jimmy Gallagher, Clint Garvin, John Gordy, and Red McEwen.

Craig's career was important for many reasons. His ensemble, formed at the beginning of the big-band era, was Nashville's best society orchestra. They played on WSM's first broadcast. The maestro's run at the Hermitage Hotel may have been the longest ever for a hotel orchestra. "Near You" was an extraordinarily popular hit that was a catalyst in the development of Nashville's music business. Francis Craig ceased performing in the early 1950s and died November 19, 1966.

Suggested Reading

Robert W. Ikard, *Near You: Francis Craig Dean of Southern Maestros* (1999)

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