Gene Lees
Jazzletter

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Letters

Before getting into records and radio as a conductor, I did some arranging for motion pictures, and got to spend some time with two famous songwriters. The Bob Crosby band was hired to do some off-camera recording for *Holiday Inn*, and I arranged most of Fred Astaire's dance numbers as well as duets with Astaire and Bing Crosby. In doing so, I spent some unforgettable moments with Irving Berlin. Victor Young told me then, "Stay away from the motion picture business, it'll break your heart."

But the most interesting day was spent with Jerome Kern after I received a call to arrange a number for *Cover Girl*, for which Kern was writing the songs. Kern, Gene Kelly, Morris Stoloff — then music head of Columbia Pictures — and I were in a meeting. Stoloff was telling us how Harry Cohn, the studio head, wanted to present one of Kern's ballads in the picture.

He started by saying they had decided to cut the verse out of the song. Kern immediately interrupted, loudly and aggressively demanding, "*Why?*" Stoloff got visibly nervous, and made one more attempt. Again came this rasping question, "*Why?*" With this, Gene got up and said, "Oh, I forgot, I'm due in wardrobe," and darted out the door. Stoloff mumbled something about going to see the director, and I was alone with this wonderful little fellow who was then and still is my favorite composer.

He turned to me and said, "Young man, if you're ever going to get your way in this motion picture business, you must learn to say, 'Why?' in an extremely irritated tone of voice, over and over again, until you wear them down."

Then he smiled as if we were co-conspirators. And the verse stayed right where he wanted it.

Paul Weston, Los Angeles

Truly loved your piece on Paul and Jo.

I'm adding two gift subscriptions, one for my Dad, Jules Herman, still leading a band in the Twin Cities. He's the greatest guy. He and my Mom are both musicians, and it looks like they're never going to quit!

The other is for my husband's dad, Hil Radtke, former pianist with Eddy Howard.

I know your shoebox will be overflowing. You are very much needed. I've told you before, I'm furthering my education with you. Don't quit now. I'm not ready to graduate. Fondly.

Bonnie Herman, Chicago, Illinois

Is there anyone in this readership who doesn't know that Bonnie is the lead voice of The Singers Unlimited?

Your comments on Gene Hall's letter superbly describe the dilemma that mankind is in: no future, deja vu, a nuclear end to the earth for profit or greed. Or shall it be a chemical end?

There are very few sources of serious premonition about the course of the earth. Your *Jazzletter* is one. *Acres USA* is another. It deals not so much with society (or does one call this sociology now?) as with "mother earth", the soil, food, public-milking schemes due to government promotion of pseudo-foods and pseudo-drugs from irradiated grains to fluoridated water. *The Absolute Sound* is the third pillar of integrity and wisdom among the periodicals. It deals with music and art and engineering, not nuclear or war engineering, but engineering for the joy of it, aural joy...

If the *Jazzletter* were to fold, only two magazines would be left to hold up the spirit and we, mankind, would be much closer to extinction.

Maybe we need to go, however. The earth's spirit may need or want to clean house. Who knows?

Frank Uhlig, Auburn, Alabama

Those were interesting letters and editor's biographical notes in the November *Jazzletter*. The implication is that there must have been quite a jazz-education program here in the 1960s. There sure wasn't anything in the '70s, though it's gotten better in the '80s.

Maybe someday I'll have time to talk to Breeden and Hall. Sounds like there might be an interesting essay on *How the authorities at Michigan State let an excellent jazz education program self-destruct.*

I really dug your piece on *Down Beat* days and on Ed Thigpen. From age two to twelve I lived on Bittersweet Place in Chicago, and remember the London House fondly from a slightly later period.

Mark Ladenson
Department of Economics
Michigan State University
East Lansing, Michigan

Take away my daily newspaper, but don't take away my *Jazzletter*!

I used to lend my copies to what I thought were avid jazz fans, but no more. I thought they would take the hint and subscribe for themselves. All I get from then now is, "Do you still read the *Jazzletter*?" My answer to that question does not make me popular. Enclosed is a gift subscription for my friend Ray Shiner, who was in the reed section of the original Sauter Finnegan Orchestra.

Johnny Reynolds, Syracuse, New York

Whatever the frustrations, I hope you derive some measure of the joy you bring your readers.

Anne Waldburger, La Jolla, California

A Gathering of Singers

In the computer room of the catalogue department at Sears, I explained to a tall elderly gray-haired woman why I was here. She looked me over carefully and finally said, "We can probably get her home phone number from personnel." And she told one of

the younger girls to call and ask for it.

"You know who she is, don't you?" I asked the woman who, having by now accepted that I was who I said I was, had become cautiously friendly.

"Oh yes," she said. "I keep asking her where I can get her records."

"They're available in reissue," I said. "In fact, she's one of the hottest sellers in that market. The only trouble is that she doesn't get a nickel from the sales." I was wrong, as it turned out; I learned later that she had been getting about $900 a year from Capitol.

"That's a shame," the woman said, seeming genuinely surprised. "She's such a nice person."

And, I mused, she's apparently one who does not lay her sorrows on others.

"Here it is," the younger woman said, and handed me a slip of paper on which she had written a telephone number.

"May I use your phone?" I said.

"Of course," the older woman said, and I dialed.

I got Ella Mae Morse on the phone. She apologized for missing our appointment. She'd received a call at work and had had to hurry home. Her husband was going into the hospital immediately for emergency surgery. I assured her that we'd do it another day. I hung up, looking at the bank of computer terminals registering mail-order purchases. I thanked the women for their help and went out into the cool sea air of Torrance. Torrance is one of those faceless divisions of Los Angeles in which industry thrives and the streets have unknown names. Los Angeles is so huge that no one knows it all, not even cops or cab drivers.

I headed north toward home on the coast highway, up through Santa Monica and Malibu, thinking about Ella Mae Morse working in catalogue sales at Sears in Torrance. And about Helen Forrest's rheumatoid arthritis. And the straitened circumstances in which Bob and Ray Eberly both died — and Bonnie Lou Williams as well. I passed Latigo Canyon, up whose twisted road Dick Haymes lived at the end.

My involvement had begun something over a year before at a party at Henry Mancini's house.

I ran into my old friend Andres Rabago at that party. I hadn't seen him in six or seven years, but he was unchanged. He never changes, he never seems to age. He is a living testimonial for the pure life. He has never smoked, never drunk, never done dope. He is a religious man, but quietly so, in and for himself. He has a grand sense of humor, a great white smile, an unfailing optimism, and a remarkable talent for happiness. He was one of the great singers the big-band era produced, with a superb voice, beautiful enunciation, and a comprehension of lyrics and their nuances. He was always at his best in ballads, which is odd when you consider that he was a drummer — for Gus Arnheim, Sonny Dunham, Stan Kenton, and Alvino Rey, among others. Andres Rabago was the first Chicano matinee idol — singer, actor, and also television star in the medium's early days.

"Andres!" I said when I saw him in a crowd of people with glasses in their hands, Sue Raney, Helen O'Connell, Gogi Grant, Paula Kelly and all the Modernaires, Kitty Kallen, Buddy Greco, Loree Frazier, Jerry Vale, Tony Martin, and various studio singers. Ella Mae Morse was there, too, but I didn't notice her. "You've been on my mind lately," I told him.

"And I've been wanting to get in touch with you," he said. "Where are you living?"

"Same place in Encino," he said. "Do you know who my new next-door neighbor is? Michael Jackson."

"I was in New York recently," I said. "I saw Chico and Lupe. They both looked great."

"I was in New York too," he said. "I had dinner with them. I asked Chico to write me some new charts."

Chico O'Farrill was our link. Chico had introduced us in Mexico City, in a recording studio, in February of 1962. They were mixing an album they had just completed. I was pleased to meet him. In high school I had a lot of his records, *Mam'selle* among them, all those old Capitol black-and-silver-label 78s that I played with cactus needles. In the United States, he had done Mexican tunes in English, things like *Besame Mucho* and *What a Difference a Day Makes*, and in Mexico he did American tunes in Spanish, his second career a strange mirror inversion of his first. And that a *gringo* could learn to speak and sing Spanish so well! It amazed me. I didn't know he had spoken it since childhood in Los Angeles. I didn't know he was not and never had been a gringo. I didn't know it until that day in Mexico City. Chico said, "I'd like you to meet Andy Russell."

Andres Rabago was born in the Boyle Heights district of Los Angeles, a poor and lower-middle-class melting pot that produced Norman Granz, Al Jarvis, the gangster Mickey Cohen, and, it sometimes seems, most of the prominent movie producers of today. His parents were born in Mexico, his father, Rafael Rabago, in Durango and his mother, Vicenta Perez, in Chijuajua. His father made good money as an extra in movies in the silent days, and it took good money to feed and clothe seven sons and three daughters. The neighborhood's population was made up of mostly of black, Jewish, and Mexican families, living together in harmony.

Andy wanted to sing from the earliest age. He worked with local bands for $2.50 a night. He was told finally that he was too expensive; he would have to double on an instrument if he wanted to get work. He considered what instrument he could learn quickly and settled on drums. He found a teacher, listened to Glen Gray and Benny Goodman records, and soon was playing gigs. He must have been a good drummer, too, because a few years later he almost took over Buddy Rich's chair in the Tommy Dorsey band.

The first important band Andy worked in was Gus Arnheim's. He was in high school when Arnheim hired him. In order to take him out of California, Arnheim had to adopt him legally. And so for a year, until he reached the age of eighteen, Andy was the legal ward and adopted son of Gus Arnheim. "Gus really was like a father to me," Andy said. "He's the one who gave me the name Russell. He said to me, 'Andy, you're beginning to get a lot of attention. Every time you come down from the drums to sing, the girls crowd around the mike, and when you play a drum solo, they crowd around listening to that. You're going to be a big success, but that name Rabago has got to go.' 'Can I at least keep

Notice

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Andy?' I said. We were playing Fort Worth, Texas, when he said to me, 'Andy, you remind me of a guy who used to sing for me and I'd like to see you take his name — Russ Columbo.' So that's how I got Russ Columbo's name, one of the great singers, and that's how I became Andy Russell."

Andy likes to tell a story about the drummer who replaced him with Arnheim. "The drum part was written for me," Andy said. "On my vocal numbers, there would be a four- to six-bar modulation to give me time to get down to the microphone. After I left the band, Gus told the new drummer, 'Listen, you do everything that's written there exactly, and don't do anything different.' The guy is playing his part, and at one point he puts down his drum sticks and walks down to the front of the stage and just stands there. And Gus says to him, 'What *are* you doing?' And the guy says, 'That's what it says on the music: *Walk to microphone.*'"

Andy went on to a succession of bands, including that of Johnny Richards with whom he was playing at the Hollywood Palladium during the early war years when some of the other musicians told him his idol, Tommy Dorsey, was sitting at the bar and wanted to talk to him. Andy thought they were putting him on. Dorsey told him he had come in to hear him on the last three Monday nights and he wanted him to replace Buddy Rich, who was going into the Marines. Andy told Dorsey, "I also sing, you know. I'm only playing drums so I can sing. That's the reason I'm with bands."

"I know," Dorsey said, "and you sing very well, but I've already hired a singer."

"Gee, Mr. Dorsey," Andy said, "I wish you'd give me a try. I think I can do a better job for you than this other fellow."

And that, Andy likes to say, is how he tried to get Buddy Rich's and Frank Sinatra's job at the same time.

His last band was that of Alvino Rey. "What a gentleman he was to work for," Andy says. At that time Pete Candoli and Billy May were in the trumpet section, and Skeets Herfurt, Les Robinson, and Vido Musso among the saxes. Andy had replaced Nick Fatool on drums. "It was one hell of a band," Andy says.

Andy's manager was Bullets Durgom, who began his career as Tommy Dorsey's band boy and went on to become one of the respected talent managers in the business. Durgom got Andy a contract with Capitol Records. He was to be paid $150 to record two sides. And he was allowed to choose his tunes. "Gus Arnheim told me years ago," Andy recalled, "'Andy, you do something a little different and you'll be a hit.' It was Gus who got me doing those Latin things, such as *Quiereme mucho*, which is a Cuban song that became *Yours* in English, and *Maria Elena.* When I would sing *Maria Elena* in Spanish, people would turn and say, 'What's he doing?' because that was new then. But they liked it. So when I had a chance to pick my own songs at Capitol, I recorded *Besame Mucho* and *Amor Amor* in English and partly in Spanish. Before you knew it, wham! That first record hit."

And so did all his other records. Dick Haymes had followed Sinatra into the Tommy Dorsey band and Andy followed Sinatra into *Your Hit Parade.*

Andy kept crossing trails with Sinatra and Haymes. "We were the big four of the singers in the 1940s," Andy said. "Frank, Perry Como, Dick Haymes, and me. I always thought Dick was the best of all of us. How I envied the way he could produce those rich, deep tones."

Andy's career went on soaring when Sinatra's seemed over. He had a network radio show with comedienne Joan Davis. When commercial television began, he and his first wife, Della Norell, an aspiring actress when he met her, had their own fifteen-minute thrice-weekly show, interviewing Broadway composers and performing their music. They seemed like the young Mr. and Mrs. America.

Then, in the mid-1950s, things began to go wrong. Andy had moved *Your Hit Parade* from New York to Los Angeles, to the bitter resentment of the advertising agency that handled the Lucky Strike account. George Washington Hill, the tyrannical president of the American Tobacco Company who took a deep and detailed and meddlesome interest in the show he sponsored, told them to let Andy have anything he wanted. But Hill died, and the ad agency lost no time firing Andy and hiring Dick Haymes. Then the word got out that Andy and Della were going to divorce. And suddenly Andy Russell simply disappeared. What happened?

"The Catholic Church was after me," he said. "They kept saying, 'Andy, you can't do this, you are an example to young Catholics.' And Louella Parson kept calling me, asking if this was true and that was true. On top of that, Elvis Presley was happening. I could see what was coming. And with the divorce and Louella calling, I got so nervous that I just ran off to Mexico to try to forget it. I arranged a one-week booking there and got on a plane. I guess that was in 1955. When the plane landed in Mexico City, there were mariachis and a crowd of thousands of people, and I wondered, 'Who the hell is this for?' I had no idea it was for me. I didn't realize that *Besame Mucho* and *Amor Amor* and all the rest were big hits in Mexico. I found out later that Capitol Records started their international division because of me.

"I found I had a whole new world down there, a whole new life, and I stayed."

And he became Mexico's biggest television star. He went to Spain and became Spain's biggest television star. He went to Argentina and became Argentina's biggest television star. He would spend six months in Spain, doing his Spanish shows, and six months in Mexico City, doing his Mexican shows. His records were selling throughout the Spanish-speaking world, an enormous market the scope of which is hardly even grasped by *Norteamericanos.* In Buenos Aires he had the biggest show in the history of Argentine television. And all the while there were the concerts, Madrid, Bogata, Lima, Santiago, Carracas, every major city in the Spanish-speaking world. Andy Russell walked away and the American public forgot him.

He would make occasional trips back to the U.S., to be sure. To California and Texas Mexicans — Andy does not like the word *chicano* — he was still a star. A year or two after I met him in Mexico City, he played the Shamrock Hilton Hotel in Houston, Texas. The publicist for the hotel wanted him to appear on a television show called *Midday with Ginny*, a celebrity talk show on KPRC. He didn't want to do it, but decided to watch the show. And he so liked the hostess that he changed his mind and was a guest on it. "I think I was in love with her watching her on television," he said. From Houston he went on to an Australian tour. He kept phoning her from Australia. When he got back, he asked her to marry him. She said, in effect, There's something I think you ought to know: I'm a widow with five kids. Andy married her and adopted all five of them. "They're like my own," he says now. "I'm the only daddy they've really known."

Not long after I met Andy in Mexico, he came up to New York to play the Chateau Madrid, a place that catered to a Spanish-speaking clientelle. I had never heard him live, and I marveled at his work, the effortless, beautifully supported, soaring and resonant voice. He told me that he had just played Las Vegas and been offered a long contract, which he had turned down because he disliked staying up late.

I next saw him in Los Angeles. He had moved back there to

raise his adopted children — and because it's his home town. And he became a pillar of the Hispanic community, always playing benefits for one Mexican cause or another. Now he'd become the Spanish-language spokesman for the Leukemia Foundation, traveling constantly in its behalf. His charities seemed endless. But you only heard about them from other people.

And so here was Andres Rabago at a party, and I was so glad to see him. "Are you working?" I said — that old music-business question, the answer to which in his case I knew in advance. Andy *always* works.

"I just got back from Lima," he said, "where I did a big television show and gala. They just called from Mexico for me to do something there, and I had to tell them that except for two weeks in November, I'm booked well into next year. I just did some concerts in San Antonio and Houston with Les Brown. Now I have to go back to San Antonio to do a telethon in Spanish with the mayor in behalf of the Leukemia Foundation, and then I do another telethon here in Los Angeles on Channel 34, the Spanish-language channel."

"I cannot get over how well you look," I said. "Tell me the truth: how old are you?"

He laughed. If Andy was still with Gus Arnheim at eighteen, then worked with Sonny Dunham, Stan Kenton, Johnny Richards, and Alvino Rey before signing with Capitol, he must now be in his early sixties. "You'd fall over if I told you," he said with that open-hearted smile of his. "When I played Buenos Aires a while ago, one of the newspapers had a headline, 'The Dorian Grey of Song Returns'."

Someone came over to take Andy's arm and tell him he was wanted for a photo. He went off, saying, "Call me," and I circulated for a while. I ran into Henry Mancini, looking a little lost with all his wife's singer friends crowding his living room. I have seen imposing houses in my life, but the Mancini residence is one of the most beautiful.

One of the voices on the old Artie Shaw Musicraft album of Cole Porter tunes, featuring the Mel-Tones, is that of a girl named Ginny O'Connor. The Meltones disbanded when Mel went out as a single, and she joined a group called the Mello-Larks, with the Tex Beneke band. She sang second, her preferred position. And she began dating the band's arranger, this unknown piano-player Henry Mancini. Thinking about that, I waved vaguely at the room's beamed high-vaulted ceiling and overhanging balcony and said, "Nice pad for an old road musician," and Hank laughed.

A great crowd of guests had gathered around the piano, and suddenly they started to sing — a grand chorus improvising voicings on some standard. They finished it and laughed, and sang another one. There must have been twenty of them, all falling into their parts as naturally as breathing. It helped that all the King Sisters were among them, but there were other experienced group singers too, including Gilda Maiken, who had sung with the Skylarks. Hank said to me, affecting indignation, "Do you hear that? Do you hear what they're doing? Do you know how long it would take me to get a sound like that on a record date? Do you know how much it would cost me?"

The singing ended amid laughter and self-applause, and Tony Martin made a speech. He said that some singers had been very lucky, but all too many — people who had contributed enormously to the character of the American culture and given great pleasure to millions of people — had not. He said he knew of one once-famous singer who now had no place to live and was sleeping on a friend's sofa. Somewhere in that crowd, Ella Mae Morse was squirming with embarrassment and shattered pride. Tony was talking about her, without naming her, but even in her anonymity, she found his comments too close for comfort. Tony said that this was the purpose of this party, to do something about the condition of people who surely deserved more than they'd got.

Ginny Mancini made a speech too. I knew her only slightly, a striking woman with something indeterminately exotic about her, a sort of Latin quality. Her grandmother Pilar was Mexican.

Ginny talked about the people who had been great stars and now were suffering, unable to get work or adequate medical care or even decent housing. They could get no help from the American Federation of Musicians, since singers as such do not belong to the AFM, and they were being overlooked by the other performers' unions. Ginny had a there-but-for-the-grace-of-God attitude about her, and she said, "I got lucky. I married this superstar!" And she waved a hand at Hank.

They married during the Beneke days, the Irish-Mexican California girl and the immigrant's son from West Aliquippa, Pennsylvania, who aspired to write film scores, a steel worker's boy who used to play flute in a Sons of Italy band. She didn't like life on the road and one day she told Hank she was going home and if he really wanted to take his shot at getting into film scoring, this was the time to do it. And Hank quit the road and wrote anonymously at Universal Studios with other people getting the credit for his music, scores or parts of scores for Abbott and Costello and Francis the Talking Mule movies. He once called Universal a salt mine. When I reminded him of it years later, he said, "Yeah, but it was a good salt mine. You can't get that kind of on-the-job training any more." I think Ginny had something to do with what Hank became, so it wasn't just luck. And he certainly wasn't a "superstar" when they were first married and worried about money and sat up nights with babies, three kids in all. For a long time she worked as a studio singer and vocal contractor. She left the business on one of Hank's own dates. He hired her to put together a vocal group for a session. She and her fellow singers arrived, and found no musicians there. Where were they? she asked Hank.

"Well that's the way we do it now," he told her. The rhythmic tracks were already down and now the voice tracks were to be laid. Not me, she said. She finished the session and quit the business, saying it no longer gave her what she wanted.

Ginny told her guests that an organization was being formed, to be called the Society of Singers, to do something about the dilemma of friends and colleagues. There was applause, and optimistic predictions were made and the party began to wind down. I wished her well and said that I would do whatever I could to help, and left. I forgot about it until a year later, when she asked me to be on the board of directors of the S.O.S.

Ella Mae went back to her friend's sofa that night. It's rough to be among successful friends when you're broke. And forgotten. Sometimes it seemed she alone had blown it, blown it all, including her fourth marriage, to Jack Bradford, an ex-trombonist turned carpenter while he researched and wrote a novel about early U.S. naval history, a task that had taken seventeen years. I always married nice guys, she would muse on occasion. So many of her old friends, particularly those from the Capitol days, seemed to have done well. Andy Russell looked wonderful. So did Helen O'Connell, who was living in Beverly Hills. Peggy Lee was still a big star and had a home in Bel Air. Jo Stafford lived happily with her husband in a condominium in Century City. Ella Mae's sister Flo was long and happily married to Al Cohn. As for Frank Sinatra, her old drinking buddy from the 1940s — forget it! Of course, some of them had ended up sadly, like Dick Haymes, gone now, of cancer. Everybody

seemed to die of cancer now. Bob Eberly too. Bob had been wasting away in a public charity ward in New York until Frank heard about it. Frank put him in a private room, and saw that he got the best of care, and paid all the expenses. And Frank and Bob Eberly had never even met. Frank was always doing that kind of thing for people, and then trying to hush it up, though everybody in the business knew about it. She could call Frank. Once when she had been unable to reach him, because he changed his phone number so often, she sent him a telegram from her hairdresser's in Beverly Hills, saying, "I thought we were half fast friends." He phoned her within ten minutes. So she could call Frank. Except that she couldn't call Frank, because she wouldn't call Frank.

Booze wasn't the reason for her condition. Booze is the drug of preference of singers, because the emotion it produces, at least in the early stages, is reconciliation. Are all singers crazy, as it was sometimes claimed? No, we're not crazy, she would say. We just feel things more deeply, and we look 'way beyond the surface, right into the soul. Every artist does. We try to make thirty-two-bar songs into one-act plays. You don't smile if you're singing the blues. I learned so much from Billie Holiday, when I got close to her. Billie could talk about the saddest things and make you laugh.

The sensitivity is awful, and so singers tend to drink. But Ella Mae had beaten that one ten years ago, hadn't had a drop since then, for which she was grateful.

She was in good health, had a good body and good legs — was in fact what used to be called a fine figure of a woman, quite handsome as she neared sixty. She was still singing a little, a gig now and then, but you couldn't live on that and the nine hundred or so dollars a year that trickled in from her old records. That's all. When she enquired of Capitol about royalties, they said she owed them money, these thirty years after she'd made her last record for them. Then why did they pay her anything at all? And when she said she'd like to look at the books, they said they were stored away in a warehouse and it would take a year to find them. And then there was the movie about Patsy Cline, *Sweet Dreams*. One of her records was played in the movie. She hadn't seen the picture, but friends said she had even been given a credit: *Cow Cow Boogie*, sung by Ella Mae Morse, courtesy of Capitol Records. She hadn't received a nickel for that, either. It makes you feel kind of helpless.

It was at this ebb in her life that Ella Mae Morse started looking for a job, just a job, a plain old day gig. Her father had always told her, People have to work. He seemed to mean that they had to do it not simply for a living but for their sanity, their sense of a place in the world.

The problem was that she didn't know how to do anything. Except sing. She'd begun doing that in Dallas, Texas, where she was born, the daughter of a drummer from England and a piano-playing Texan mother. At twelve, she had auditioned for the Jimmy Dorsey band, somehow convincing Dorsey she was nineteen. She got the job only to be fired a couple of months later when he found out her true age. Dorsey's pianist at that time was Freddy Slack.

And then came the years of *Cow Cow Boogie, Mr. Five by Five, Shoo Shoo Shoo Baby, Patty Cake Man, Buzz Me, House of Blue Lights, Milkman Keep Those Bottles Quiet, Tain't What You Do, Pig Foot Pete, Blacksmith Blues*, and all the other records. Johnny Mercer, bless him, had promised her that she would always receive royalties, even on those records she'd made with Freddy Slack. But Johnny and Buddy de Sylva and Glenn Wallichs had sold Capitol to EMI and John's promises meant nothing to the new regime. She remembered that Johnny was always bitter about the sale of Capitol. But that didn't do her any good.

And her fourth marriage was shot. She figured Jack Bradford was tired of her. There was no other man involved, no other woman, they had just stopped communicating. She was the talker, Jack was quiet, a very private man. They'd been married in 1958 and separated in 1983. The communication had just stopped. Every once in a while, she thought, the bad habits inside me come out. My self-obsession.

Always that fear, when I hit that stage: that I'm not good enough. Especially if there's a roomful of singers.

Well, let's face it, she had to do something. She went down to the big shopping center at Sepulveda and Crenshaw in Torrance, looking for a job.

Gilda Maiken thought there ought to be an organization to help all the people like the Eberly brothers. Ray had died a somewhat better death than Bob. He had been living in Atlanta and working a little now and then, more at least than his brother. Then one day he had chest pains. He checked into a hospital. They told him he had a heart condition. But his insurance was insufficient to cover the staggering cost of staying there. So he said he was leaving. The doctors told him that if he did, he'd die. But what could he do? He couldn't afford to stay there. So he went home and two days later died.

If they were going to have an organization, it had to be headed by somebody with energy, organizational ability, and connections. Who else? Her friend Ginny Mancini. Ginny had long been involved in various charities, and when Gilda approached her about the projected society, she thought, That's all I need, another cause. But the more she pondered the injustices the angrier she got, and next thing she knew she was giving a party and had become president of the Society of Singers.

The executive directors became: Ginny, president; Gilda Maiken, executive vice president; Tony Martin, first vice president; Bud Granoff, v.p. ways and means; Anthony Adams, v.p. special projects; Steve Johnson, v.p. membership; Tess Russell, v.p. artists relations; Jeanne Hazard, v.p. special events; Tom Cozzi, secretary; Doris Jacobs, administrative secretary; Bea Wain, treasurer; Gogi Grant, parliamentarian; Loree Frazier, historian, and myself.

The board of directors comprised Patty Andrews, Beryl Davis, Bullets Durgom, Anne Jeffreys, Herb Jeffries, Jack Jones, Kitty Kallen, Donna Manners, Helen O'Connell, Sue Raney, Jerry Vale, Randy Van Horne, Wally Weschler, and Lee Solters.

The honorary advisers were Ed Ames, Pat Boone, Glen Campbell, Diahann Carroll, Ray Charles, Rosemary Clooney, Vic Damone, Mike Douglas, Helen Forrest, John Gary, Helen Grayco, Buddy Greco, Paula Kelly, Peter Marshall, Johnny Mathis, the King Sisters, Jo Stafford, Kay Starr, Connie Stevens, Martha Tilton, Peggy Lee, Jack Leonard, Andy Russell, Mel Torme, Toni Tenille, Andy Williams, and Joe Williams.

Then the organization came across the saddest example yet of the system's neglect of singers — Bonnie Lou Williams. She had sung with Tommy Dorsey and Bob Crosby back in the 1940s, and with Gordon Jenkins. Everybody said she could have been a big star, but she was a shy person, as many singers are, and she was content to work anonymously in the studios. She was a particular favorite of the late Ray Heindorf when he was music director of Warner Bros, and he used her constantly. Through lip-syncing, she became the singing voice of Rita Hayworth, June Haver, Lana Turner, Alexis Smith, Bette Davis, Virginia Mayo, and Veronica Lake. She contracted cancer. Her money ran out. She had slipped through the cracks in the system, she was eligible for

nothing. Well, not quite nothing.

I started getting married very early. My mother was getting ready to take me back to Dallas after I got canned from the Dorsey band. We came out to California and I wanted to sing. My parents were divorced and my sister Flo was living with an uncle. We came out to my uncle's house in San Diego. My mother got a job and I immediately got a job singing with a local band. I sang all over San Diego, before Freddy Slack came to town. He came with his band. When I got canned from Jimmy's band, Freddy said, 'If you ever hear of me having a band, send me a wire and you're hired.' Which I thought was nice. But I didn't figure he meant it. In the summer of 1942, around May or June, I was working with Paul Smith, who is a great pianist, and a drummer and bass player, in a bar called Eddie's on C Street in San Diego. They'd have taken their license away forever, if they'd known I was fifteen. It was two o'clock in the afternoon, I'll never forget it. The doors were open because it was hot. It was five or six months after Pearl Harbor and the place was full of service men. And Freddy Slack walked by. And I grabbed the microphone, and called, "Freddy Slack!" He couldn't see this far in front of his face. He looked around and I said, "Freddy, inside here — here, here!" And he came in. And he sat down. And he ordered some drinks. Because he loved to drink. And he started requesting songs. He told me about this song, ***Cow Cow Boogie****, by Don Raye and Benny Carter, and I said, "What is it, a western?" It isn't even a boogie-woogie, you know. It's a blues. I learned it and I'd make trips up to Los Angeles and made a tour of the Sweets ballrooms up and down the California coast. God that was rough. I was married by then to a musician, a pianist, good musician, nice nice man, and we'd still be friends if I knew where he was. And I discovered I was pregnant with my first baby. Four marriages. Well why not? If you don't get it right, just keep doin' it until you do. I wasn't sixteen yet, and we recorded* ***Cow Cow Boogie****.*

Singers, dancers, comedians, actors are always being called upon to donate their talents to some cause or another — Jerry Lewis's telethon on behalf of muscular dystrophy victims or Andy Russell's for the Leukemia Foundation — and pleading that you contribute money to fight this disease or that, to fund the Public Broadcasting System or some other cause.

A small percentage of the money gathered in such events goes not to the cause in question. Under an equitable arrangement, it goes to Theater Authority, an organization in which various entertainment unions participate, including the American Guild of Variety Artists (AGVA), the Screen Actors Guild (SAG), Actors Equity, the American Federation of Television and Radio Artists (AFTRA), and the extra's union. The money thus obtained is dispersed to the associated guilds proportional to their number of paid-up members, to be put into the emergency relief fund of each organization.

AGVA's fund is divided into two parts, the Sick and Relief Fund East and the Sick and Relief Fund West. In 1984, there was nearly $500,000 in the S&R Fund West, and several millions in the New York account. (The preponderance of AGVA members are in the New York chapter.) Virtually everyone who has ever sung professionally has been a member of AGVA. And a clause in the S&R fund's charter says that you are eligible for its assistance even if you are no longer a member.

So Bonnie Lou Williams applied for help from the AGVA western fund. And got fluffed off. She told Gilda Maiken about it. Gilda got angry and told Ginny Mancini about it. Ginny called a meeting at her house — Bonnie Lou Williams, Gilda Maiken, and Tom Cozzi.

Tom Cozzi, a comedian by profession, is a soft-spoken white-haired man of gentlemanly manner. He is also a former secretary-treasurer of AGVA — and former administrator of that very S&R Fund West to which Bonnie Lou Williams was being denied access.

Tom told her exactly what she should do: ask for an appointment and take all the bills for her expenses to AGVA's west coast office.

Two weeks later, he learned that though Bonnie Lou had followed his directions, AGVA had done nothing to help her. So Tom Cozzi got his successor at AGVA on the phone. Tom was told there was nothing the west coast office could do, since all decisions and checks had to come out of New York.

Tom, who understood the fund and its workings better than the man he was talking to, got tough. He said, "What are you talking about? That's illegal. The money is supposed to be in a western bank account under the name of the AGVA Sick and Relief Fund West. What you're doing is outside the legal guidelines set up by Theater Authority, and AGVA has signed a paper to the effect that it will uphold and operate within those parameters. Now, would you like to answer my questions now on the telephone — or later, under oath?"

A week or so later, AGVA released the money to Bonnie Lou Williams. And she also received somewhat smaller amounts from Theater Authority and the Actors' Fund. Knowing her days were few, she told Gilda Maiken and the others in the fledgling S.O.S., "Use me. Tell my story."

In Tarzana, California, a San Fernando Valley community long since absorbed into the city of Los Angeles, one of those abstractions like Torrance, on March 3, 1986, with her two sons at her bedside, quietly and rather peacefully and with her bills paid, Bonnie Lou Williams died.

About Joining

Persons interested in joining the S.O.S. should write to Mrs. Ginny Mancini, c/o Society of Singers, 1741 Ivar Ave # 220, Hollywood CA 90028, for further information and membership application. The membership is open to anyone with an interest in the organization's purposes and already includes a good many arrangers, composers, and business people.

Ella Mae got off work at one p.m. that day. She was wearing a bright yellow skirt and patterned jacket. We went to some anonymous nearby restaurant, where she ordered tea, just tea.

There was a certain self-mockery in the quick short rhythms of her speech, as if it were important to her that you know she did not take herself all that seriously. We talked about her childhood, when her mother, after the divorce from her father, worked in a Dallas textile mill. "God, it was awful," Ella Mae said. "It nearly killed her.

"And you began singing professionally at nine?"

"I worked on weekends, five bucks a week. With local bands. With Lee Layton. And Dale Evans was his favorite. When he couldn't get her he'd get me. I worked country clubs and ballrooms. Jimmy Dorsey tried out four hundred singers. I auditioned in Dallas at the Adolphus Hotel. I tensed up, and I got hoarse. Bob Eberly, God bless him, he had such a sense of humor, he kept me laughing all the time. And I got the job."

"How long have you been at Sears now?" I asked.

"It'll be a year in a couple of months."

"And you hadn't been singing much?"

"I was working Disneyland one week a year with Ray

McKinley, and I went back east once a year, I was working maybe three times a year, singing, and it was the only time when I came to life. The rest of it was going around kind of in a daze. And it was breaking up with Jack. I wanted *something* to happen in my life. And, boy, everything started happening. Once I got away from the protection of a husband, and I was on my own, baby, it scared the living daylights out of me. But a person has to work at *something*. You can't just sit and vegetate. First I went to work in a gambling house here in Gardena, a card place. I was working switchboard, and I hated it. But it was a job, J-O-B. I lasted about three months, working from eleven at night until seven the next morning, and my days and nights got all screwed up. I wanted something to make me feel like a person, a human being. So then I decided to make the rounds of this whole mall, every store. Three days later, Sears called me. I went to work in the courtesy booth, just as you walk in the store. It was fun, I was dealing with people. Nobody knew where anything was, and I found out by walking around the store. A lot of times it would be an elderly couple asking me for directions."

She laughed at this, saying, "My mind doesn't know how old my body is! I did that for six months, and then they put me over in ladies' fashions, and then over in lingerie, then back to ladies' fashions, then catalogs. I thought that I would like to work up in the office, auditing and receiving and like that, and then they called me to come up to the office. And it's interesting, and I'm using my *mind* for something besides what I was locked into. And I'm not *afraid*!"

"Did it bother you to go to work in a day job?"

"I'd never done anything but singing, always singing. So when I went to work at Sears, it was so strange. I found it absolutely fascinating. And people are so nice to me."

"How many of them know you?"

"Just about everybody, except the very young. People in their forties and up, they all know. And, like, when I started there, and they saw that time card, the head of security said, 'My God, do you know who we've got working here?' I heard him say it, and I thought, 'Who've they got?' And he was talking about me. It's made a *person* out of me. It really has. Not just a singer or somebody who's *in* show business. I'm seeing the other end of the spectrum now. I'm beginning to know what the people in the audience think. Like, I'm in the audience *and* on the stage. I've got the best of both worlds. People who come to see you come expecting to be entertained. I used to say, 'I think they applaud when they buy a drink.' But they're so appreciative. I've said that a thousand times, but now I really know it. By being at Sears and by being with just ordinary people, I really know I'm no different. And I always felt different. And that can make a person very lonely. If you're *that* different. Being different is not all that much fun. It's lonely at le top, as Miss Piggy says. I mean, if you are on top, you wonder, 'Do they really like me because I'm a neat guy?' Or, 'What do they want of me?'

"When I was married to a doctor, back in 1946, his family treated me as a star. He loved *me*, I know that today. But they treated me as a celebrity, I felt a little uncomfortable, and then I began to wonder about *him*. And he in turn started being very rude to my show business friends. Like, he was very rude to Sarah Vaughan. And he was rude to Ella Fitzgerald. And I thought, Is it because you just don't like them? Or is it *because* they're in show business? And he couldn't answer that. He got bored with all this glamor show-business stuff. Because he was a doctor, and he was saving lives. And every once in a while he'd lose one. And I didn't understand. Like, What's the problem? It's in God's hands anyway. But, you see, he was a scientist, and he couldn't go along with that. If he lost a patient, it was because he wasn't a good enough doctor. And I didn't understand. My grandmother used to say that it's all that stuff you learn after you know it all that's gonna count in life."

"You know," I said, "I asked Frances Wayne years ago, when she wasn't singing any more, 'Do you miss it?' She said, 'Desperately.'"

"Oh yes," Ella Mae said. "I always miss it when I'm not doing it. Helen Hayes said something that turned me on. She said, 'Have you ever noticed how people say he *gave* such a wonderful performance.'? He *gave*. It's a giving profession. We give, and the audience gives it right back. Even when you can't see their faces, you can feel those vibrations. I want the audience to know I love *them*, it doesn't matter who loves me."

I walked with her to her car. She had to get home. Jack was recovering from his surgery. That was another thing that had come to pass as a result of the job at Sears. She had realized that Jack Bradford wasn't bored with her at all, it was all in her mind, and now they were back together.

A week or so later she told me on the telephone that it was confirmed: she was to do a tour of Australia with three other singers, Martha Tilton, Herb Jeffries, and Art Lund, all members of the S.O.S. And the band was to be led by Billy May — Andy Russell's old band-mate from the Alvino Rey days. She was elated. And she was going to do an evening at the Vine Street Bar and Grill in Hollywood. Just to get warmed up.

Singers are cut from a different cloth than instrumentalists. And instrumentalists rarely understand them. Some players are contemptuous of them, and every singer is aware of a hostility common in the pianists on whom they reluctantly depend for accompaniment. (Girl singers have shown a tendency to solve the problem by marrying them.) I once heard a noted New York jazz composer say, "A singer ought to be able to do anything a horn player can do." This from a man who has studied the orchestration textbooks and would not normally write for flute a figure not natural to it. A sequence of intervals easy for trumpet might be difficult for voice, although such people as Sally Stevens, Bonnie Herman, Annette Sanders, Ann Ruckert, and Sue Raney seem serenely unaware of it.

All five are essentiall studio singers, a separate breed from the solo singers who aspire to and sometimes achieve stardom. They are indifferent or at most lukewarm to public recognition, and have a passion for blending their voices with others. They insist there is no greater musical fun. They have pride of craftsmanship, sometimes fierce pride, yet they're curiously lacking in look-at-me ego.

But solo singers live lives of constant insecurity. If a studio singer has the 'flu, he or she can usually send in a substitute. Not so the star. And when a solo singer makes a mistake onstage, the error seems monstrous. If a pianist hangs a singer somewhere in space, the public hears only that the singer blew it. The humiliation is theirs alone.

By the nature of the craft, the solo singer is a loner, no matter the entourage that is accreted with fame; indeed the entourage is a consequence of the solitude. But group singers are inherently co-operative, team people, and far the happier breed.

Almost certainly the reason the Society of Singers came into effective being is that so many of its founding members were group singers, including Ginny Mancini, Gilda Maiken, Sue Raney, Sally Stevens, John Bahlor, Randy Van Horne, and Steve Johnson of the Modernaires.

The organization, everyone agreed, needed a chairman of the board, one with a big name. Who else? The ultimate solo singer, the man who defined the art for two generations of the best professionals. Ginny and the others wrote to Frank Sinatra.

In July, 1986, they got this letter:

Dear Gang:

Thank you for your invitation regarding my joining the group as chairman. I'm more than proud to accept.

Keep me posted on how goes it and if there's anything further I can do.

Much love to all of you.

Affectionately,

Francis Albert

The Aging Baritone

Ginny gave a party on September 8, 1986, to announce the organization and its goals to the press. Caterina Valente flew in from Europe, agreeing to perform. The guests began to show up -- Patty Andrews, Earl Brown, Peggy Clark of the Clark Sisters, Rosemary Clooney, Tom Cozzi, Bullets Durgom, Margie Evans, Loree Frazier, Arthur Hamilton, Jeanne Hazard, Kitty Kallen, Tony Martin, Sue Raney, Roberta Sherwood, Al Martino, Giselle McKenzie, Rose Marie, Nancy Sinatra, Joannie Sommers, Kay Starr, Kay St. Germaine, April Stevens, Art Lund, Gilda Maiken, Ella Mae Morse, Bea Wain, Andy Williams, and Randy Van Horne. No Andy Russell. Andy had just done a benefit concert for a college, and now he was gone again on the road; Andy *always* works.

The press came. The television cameras were there. People with tape recorders were interviewing other people. But nobody cared, and there was a lot of laughter.

I saw Ella Mae. "Are you ready for Australia?" I said.

"You bet!"

"When are you going?"

"December."

Paul Weston and Jo Stafford arrived. Jo looked over this glorious house and said so dead-pan that for a moment it slipped by me: "Sears did a pretty nice job, didn't they?"

Paul and Jo found seats in deep armchairs. Nancy Sinatra, in blue jeans and a gray sweater, spied them. "Ah the Westons," she said, voice full of affection. Jo remembers the 1940 June night she was born -- while Jo and Frank were with Tommy Dorsey. Frank was so excited that he and the Piped Pipers piled into his car and drove from New York to Asbury Park and back again, for no reason. That's not in the Kitty Kelley book.

With TV lights washing out the colors of the room and a camera staring at her, Ginny briefly recapitulated the story of the S.O.S. She looked over at Jo and said, "And I still remember, in 1943 or '44, when Jo Stafford used to leave passes for us at the theater box office."

On November 18, 1986, the Los Angeles *Times* carried a news item reporting that Betty Hutton, whose last recording was released by RCA in 1954, who retired from show business completely in 1957 and is now a teacher of theater arts, was enjoying a comeback. Her Capitol hits from the 1940s, *A Square in the Social Circle, It Had to Be You, My Rocking Horse Ran Away*, and others, have been remastered and released in an album in France. EMI in England -- the parent, since Mercer, de Sylva and Wallichs sold it, of her old Capitol label -- has issued an album of her 1940s hits. The sound track of her Paramount film *Somebody Loves Me*, along with her *Satins and Spurs* sound track, has been reissued in Canada on the *Motion Picture Tracks* label. MCA Records was preparing to reissue her sound track of the MGM film *Annie Get Your Gun*. The newspaper reported that, according to rack jobbers, her albums were selling in the tens of thousands. The Tower Records stores had reordered *A Square in the Social Circle* six times.

What the paper did not report is that Hutton was receiving not a penny from all this interest and activity.

Tony Martin was talking to Helen O'Connell. He said when he leaned on his record label about reissue of his material and the non-payment of royalties on the sales, they told him they didn't have his address.

"That's what they told me!" Helen said. "They said they hadn't been able to find anyone who knew me -- for four years!"

Ella Mae Morse went to Australia in December. The tour was a success, and when she returned, she gave up her job at Sears.

And Capitol sent her a Christmas present: a statement for twelve thousand dollars. They said that that's what she owed them

Kirstein on Melody

The following is reprinted from the newsletter of the Popular Music Research Center of the University of Nevada, 4505 S. Maryland Parkway, Las Vegas NV 89154, Arnold Shaw, editor.

In a *New Yorker* profile, dated December 15, 1986, Lincoln Kirstein, general director of the New York City Ballet and president of the School of American Ballet, makes the following comment regarding popular music:

"The music departments of Columbia, Princeton, Harvard and the advanced universities have made an absolute orthodoxy in which they have eliminated melody and attempted to experiment with sonority. Sonority has taken the place of melody, and the only place that contemporary music seems to me to have any vitality is in popular music."

In addition to dance, Kirstein's 473 published works deal authoritatively with drawing, painting, sculpture, architecture, photography, film, music and literature. He goes on to say:

"There's very little musical theater. There hasn't been a repertory opera written in the last twenty-five years. And the loss of any interest in the human voice except in popular music is due entirely to the teachings of the academies, and the kind of music that is produced by the most exalted academicians for an academic audience. It has no place in the theater. If you take a list of the contemporary operas that have been produced at the Juilliard School, they'll all have been done as a kind of honorific obligation to people who represented something at one time or another in their lives. But they're unlistenable, and they've been produced once or twice."

Of the current interest in treating the Gershwin-Porter musical theater as a discipline and form that ought to be studied with the same concentration and intensity as dance or painting, Kirstein comments:

"It's just the same kind of thing the academies love -- to cannibalize anything they can cannibalize. The whole point about the songs of Gershwin and Porter was they were sung. And it was a necessity to sing them; they corresponded to a popular need and a popular interest. And when the academies take them over they always tear them to bits, justify them from the point of view of their own vanity, and make them absolutely useless."

Kirstein adds: "Melody is a gift. It isn't something you can learn. These people can't teach it. The *technical* skill of the people who are turned out in the music schools is very high, probably higher than ever. But their execution has nothing to do with composition. You're not going to teach somebody how to write a Cole Porter song, because too much of it had to do with the life Cole Porter lived, the life that Gershwin lived, and these kids don't live that life. All they can do is make a reduction or dilution of it. The only person who was successful in opera in the early twentieth century was Kurt Weill, and he came out of a very honorable tradition of German opera where it was alive. It's never been alive in the United States."

-- AS