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Other Voices

I just finished reading the latest four issues. How do you do it? Issue after issue of intelligently written, intellectually stimulating, and emotionally affecting pieces. I thought by now the well might have started to get a little dusty, but here we are, 15 years later, and I read, nod my assent, mutter to myself about the stupidity and senselessness that gather around the edges of the music we all love and yes, even cry, shamelessly while reminiscing about Gerry Mulligan. Unfortunately, I was listening to a soon-to-be-released album by Jeremy Lubbock which contains a beautiful rendition-arrangement of *Londonderry Air* at the same time as I read *Jeru*. What a devastating experience! Keep this up and you'll have to start rating your issues for emotional and intelligence content.

Jules Chaikin, Studio City, California

Jules, a former trumpet player, is a contractor in Los Angeles.

Your Mulligan piece touched me beyond words. The pain, the sense of agonizing personal loss, was almost too much to bear. I'm not certain that "congratulations" is an appropriate expression of appreciation, so I'll instead say "thank you."

Richard M. Sudhalter, Southold, New York

Dick is a prominent writer and cornetist.

Your tribute to Gerry Mulligan touched me deeply. I've met Jeru on three or four occasions in France, the first time in 1956.

He was a fantastic musician, a gentleman with great culture.

Alain Tercinet, Paris, France

The Unfunny

Musicians endlessly float bits of humor, and with the ubiquity of the fax machine, the circulation of these things seems to be on the increase. One, for example, is a cartoon from the *New Yorker* in which a scruffy-looking rodent, cigarette dangling from his mouth, sits at a grand piano on whose top rests a beer stein, an overflowing ashtray, and some sheet music. From off-screen, as it were, comes a cartoon balloon containing the words "Mendelssohn worked himself to death," to which the rodent replies, "So who got the gig?" It's funny the first time you see it, but on repeated exposure — and it's come my way six or seven times now — it becomes a serious generalized insult to musicians whose usual compassion for each other is one of those little things that occasionally tempts me to think the human race isn't totally devoid of redeeming qualities. And do you know a jazz pianist who would *ever* put a beer stein on a grand piano?

Another thing that seems to be in endless circulation is a handwritten pay sheet for the Paul Whiteman band, containing, among others, the names of Bing Crosby and Bix Beiderbecke.

One that I found amusing, for a time, is a flier containing the plea, in Gothic lettering, **Help Stamp Out In the Mood**. And one that I treasure is a *Peanuts* cartoon in which, during a snow-storm, Linus is negotiating with Lucy to shovel her sidewalk. She produces a piece of paper from which she reads a set of stipulations that sounds like a record contract reserving everything to the company and nothing at all to the artist. Linus listens patiently through all the panels and then, in the last one, says, "Fuck you." The cartoon appears to be authentic, the handwork of Charles Schultz, not an imitation, and where it originated, I have no idea.

But there are three little goodies that I do not like. And they concern Buddy Rich.

Buddy was peculiar, no one would deny that. One musician, a comparative veteran at the time, recalled to me an incident that occurred after a gig in San Francisco. Buddy was particularly pleased by the way his young musicians played that night. When they got on the bus for the return to Los Angeles, they found Buddy had stocked it with all the booze and beer and food they could consume. And yet part way to L.A. he let fly one of his diatribes at the band. After this had gone on for a while, he stopped the bus, got off with my informant, grinned, and said, "Don't let them know I didn't mean it. I wouldn't want to lose my authority."

("Let's just say Buddy had mood swings!" said Johnny Mandel, who worked for him twice, started out hating and ended up loving him.)

A musician once taped one of these band-bus rants of Buddy's and set it in anonymous circulation throughout the music business. Supposedly it is funny. I didn't find it so. As Buddy's voice grows more manic, as he tells them that they're all lousy musicians and he feels like firing the lot of them, that the audiences don't come to see them, they come to hear him, that he had worked with the greatest musicians in the world, and so on and so on, I found myself increasingly uncomfortable. I remember asking Henry Mancini if he'd heard this tape. "Oh sure," Hank said. "Everybody has."

Someone took that diatribe and turned it into a cartoon. It is a nasty bit of work of the kind you see in those "alternative" weekly newspapers that circulate for free in small restaurants and record stores, in which untalented and ugly drawing seems to be a style and an end in itself. The cartoon goes on and on, quoting the tape, and the rant becomes no funnier for this transfer to paper.

Now another one's in circulation. It appears to have originated as a half page in some "alternative" newspaper. Its title is *Everybody's Buddy* and in it shows Buddy demanding to know, "Who's the world's greatest fucking drummer?" One of the musicians, drink in hand at a bar, says, "Gene Krupa?" Buddy then says, "I got two guys over there who are gonna break your fuckin' arms unless you tell me who the greatest fuckin' drummer in the world

is." The musician says, "Louie Bellson?" And Buddy grabs him by the collar and says, "You fuckin' punk! How dare you fuck with me! I'll break your fuckin' head open for you, you son of a bitch."

Then, as someone tries to restrain him, he says, "You wanna fuck with me? Who the fuck do you think I am?! I'm Buddy Rich, the best fuckin' drummer there is, ever! Fuck Gene Krupa." Etc. etc.

Do you have any idea in how much respect and affection Buddy held Gene Krupa? (And vice versa, incidentally.)

I called Jack Tracy, who was Buddy's friend for years and, some of the time, his record producer, and read that passage to him. I said, "Jack, do you remember Buddy ever talking that way?"

Jack said, "No. He knew all the words, as we all do, but Buddy was never foul-mouthed." And Jack concurred with me about Buddy's love and admiration for Gene Krupa.

The final panel says the following:

"Buddy Rich died in 1987. A day after he died, a musician who had played for Buddy called his home and spoke to his wife. 'Is Buddy home?' the musician asked. 'Buddy is dead,' his wife answered. The next day the man called again. 'May I speak with Buddy?' he asked. Again his wife repeated, 'Buddy is dead.' The next day he called again. 'Is Buddy in?' His wife, now clearly annoyed, barked back, 'This is the third time you've called asking for my late husband. Buddy is dead.' 'I know,' said the man. 'I just like hearing it.'"

It's inconceivable that a musician would do that. And no one who has known Buddy's wife, Marie, can imagine her "barking back" under such conditions. But more to the point, this is an old joke, one that long predates Buddy's death, told about all sorts of people who supposedly were widely disliked. It's a phony.

The cartoonist who did this piece of work, copyrighted 1990, is someone named Drew Friedman. I hold him beneath contempt, whoever he is.

First of all, I know drummers who think Buddy *was* the greatest drummer in the world (although the late Connie Kay told me he thought Mel Lewis was the greatest big-band drummer he'd ever heard). Ed Thigpen, for one, used the word "genius" as applied to Buddy. And Buddy had deep respect for other drummers, including his particular favorites Jo Jones and Philly Joe Jones. Indeed, for a while Philly Joe played with Buddy's band. Count Basie said his band never sounded better than when Buddy was with it. He could get *inside* the sound of a band and lift it miraculously. Once Artie Shaw was playing me some old airchecks of his band. "Now, at this point," Artie said, "Buddy came into the band. Notice how the sound of the band changes." And the Tommy Dorsey band caught fire when Buddy joined it.

Buddy and his band were hired once to perform for the Toronto local of the American Federation of Musicians. They played in a ballroom at the Royal York Hotel. You couldn't get into the place: standing room only. Musicians were even seated on the edge of the stage. I found myself standing in the last few square feet of space, on the riser behind the band, and right behind Buddy. Lined up there with me, it seemed, were all the drummers in Toronto. And when Buddy began, his playing, seen from behind, took on dimensions of the miraculous; indeed, of the mystical. It was like some eerie exercise in Zen.

When I mentioned this to Jack Tracy, he said, "Oh yes! You really had to watch Buddy from behind!"

For one thing, his hands didn't seem to be moving as fast as the sounds he was drawing from his equipment. Nor did he seem to be hitting as hard as the volume of his playing suggested. He did not raise his arms very high. Furthermore, the sounds seemed to come from the snare drum *before* the stick hit the head. I suspect this had to do with his wrist motion. He may not have been making huge, long arm strokes, but in the split second at the end of a stroke, I think, his wrist flicked, enormously accelerating the stick, and specifically its tip. I think this action happened so fast that you couldn't see it. The drummers watching him were in awe; I assuredly was. The economy of motion was incredible.

Later, I talked to Buddy about all this. He said, "Well, it's as if the man upstairs said to my hands, 'Be fast, and they were.'" He said that to other persons too. In other words, he didn't understand the phenomenon of his own hands.

One of the miraculous things about Buddy, as a musician, was his memory. It was legend. He told me once that he thought the reason his memory was so good is that he couldn't read music. Therefore he had to memorize. Whatever the reason, his method of rehearsing a new chart was to sit in front of the band, not playing, as they ran it down. Then he would go to the drums, having memorized in one hearing every detail of the piece.

Jack Tracy said, "When I was producing him, and they were about to record a new chart, he would sit in the booth with me while the band ran the number down. He'd be talking, socializing, seemingly paying no attention to the music. Then he'd say, 'Well, I guess I'd better go to work.' And he'd go in and catch every detail of the chart. It was amazing."

The trumpeter Lee Castaldo, who changed his name to Lee Castle when he formed his own band, was in the Dorsey band with Buddy. Lee recounted an incident that occurred at, I think, the Paramount theater in New York when the band had to play for various acts, as well as its own music. One of the acts was a Hungarian (if memory serves) knife-thrower, whose assistant was his wife. At one point he would strap her, spread-eagled, to a big wooden wheel, spin it, and sink his knives into it as she turned. This was all carefully timed to music. And when, at the rehearsal, Tommy Dorsey told the knife-thrower that Buddy couldn't read, the man went into near-hysterics, saying, "But I'll kill my wife, I'll kill my wife!"

Dorsey reassured him. Buddy sat on a chair and listened as the band played the music. He memorized it instantly and perfectly. And they played the show. Afterwards, Lee said, the knife-thrower

was hugging Buddy and kissing him on the cheek and telling him what a genius he was.

Jack Tracy said: "Did you ever see that old Jackie Gleason television show where Buddy and the Tommy Dorsey band played for acts? Man, you haven't lived if you never saw Buddy play act music. For singers, dancers, jugglers, anything. He was incredible."

It was indeed true that Buddy could be irascible, to put it mildly. "Buddy could get hot," Jack agreed, and I told him the following story. He started laughing immediately, recognizing its authenticity from the very tone of it. I got it from the now prominent television producer Barbara Corday years ago in New York, when she was hardly out of her teens.

Barbara is Buddy's niece.

Buddy was visiting family, including his parents, in Florida. Barbara was there too. Buddy said he was driving back to New York. Barbara asked if she could ride with him, to save a fare. Buddy said, "Well, it's just a little car, you won't be comfortable."

Barbara assured him that she didn't mind.

Then Buddy said he was going to drive straight through, without a stop. Barbara said she didn't mind that either.

So they got into Buddy's sports car. Buddy said, "I'm going to drive with the top down. I don't want you complaining if it gets cold."

Barbara assured him that she would not complain. And they set off. It was autumn.

Somewhere about the north of Georgia, as the night came on, it began to get seriously chilly. "I suppose you want me to put the top up!" Buddy groused.

"No, Uncle Buddy, I'm fine," Barbara said.

Several times more he complained that she probably wanted him to put the top up. And several more times she denied it.

Finally, half frozen, he slammed to a stop on the roadside and said, "All right, I'll put the goddamn top up for you!" And he proceeded to pull on it. He broke it, and in a rage he tore it off, threw it on the roadside, and drove on.

They drove all the way to New York, gelid, with the top down. And Barbara never said a word.

That was Buddy. Barbara told the story with amusement, not anger, to someone she knew was as fond of Buddy as she was.

Remember the young man who took rifles to the top of the Texas Tower in Austin and slaughtered many persons before being killed himself?

His name was Mark Chapman, and an autopsy revealed that he had a brain tumor.

So did Buddy. We cannot know to what extent it was responsible for aberrations in his behavior in his later years.

I wish they'd stop circulating that tape and that abysmal cartoon of Buddy's diatribe. They dishonor a great musician — and, to those who were on such terms with him, a good friend — who deserves better.

To quote an old radio show, "T'ain't funny, McGee." ■

Portrait of a Lady

Part One

The roads of North Dakota, like those of the other prairie states and the Canadian provinces of Saskatchewan and Manitoba that lie just across its northern border, run in straight lines, north to south, east to west. Even in the western part of the state, where the Missouri River, long ago the highway of discovery of the Lewis and Clark expedition, is in the early stage of its journey to the Mississippi, the roads just cross it in those never-ending straight lines. Their occasional jogs are arbitrary, made by man, who wrote all these straight lines on the map. There is nothing to impede the roads or the wind. It comes whistling out of the west, never slowing even at Chicago to the east. And, much of the time in winter, it comes out of the north, whipping the dead grasses that protrude from the frozen earth and its bleak skin of old snow and slashing whatever flesh is in its way like a stream of razor blades. The last winter before Norma Deloris Egstrom left North Dakota, the temperature went down to 63 below zero Fahrenheit; the following July it rose to 120. Once, when she was a little girl, she froze both her hands.

On a shelf of her home there is a book inscribed: "To a gallant and gifted survivor of the hard times. With admiration and affection, Studs Terkel." Other books and pictures bear other autographs, including that of Albert Einstein.

Her father, Marvin Olaf Egstrom, was born in New York City of mixed Norwegian and Swedish immigrant parents. He married a Minnesota girl of Scandinavian stock named Selma Andersen when she was sixteen years old. They had seven children, two boys and five girls. Norma Deloris was born in Jamestown, North Dakota, on May 26, 1920. Olaf Egstrom, called Ole, worked for the Midland Continental Railroad, which had only a hundred miles of track but linked the Great Northern and Northern Pacific railways and the Sioux Line.

"I was born in Kennedy Hospital, Fifth Floor, in Jamestown," Norman Deloris said.

"When I was between four and five, I had an imaginary playmate called Greencida. I think it was a girl. And I had some imaginary chickens. I used to feed them all the time.

"I would follow my daddy to work at the depot. I was crafty enough to follow him just far enough back so he couldn't say, 'Go home.' But one day he walked very fast, and he took big steps, because he was tall, six foot one or two.

"When he would let me walk along with him, I would run and hold onto his finger, like a handle. And then down at the depot, he was very busy. He was the station agent. He would be there with a green visor on his head. He gave me paper and those ink-pad stampers. I'd stamp everything I could lay my hands on. I actually learned a lot.

"There was a little boy in Jamestown who used to play with me

at the depot. Our big pastime was to go into the warehouse and find this huge box of jelly beans. We must have eaten a lot of jelly beans. I loved the black ones.

"We'd watch the trains come in and out. Then Daddy would take me home.

"One day, when I didn't quite get a hold of his finger, I got so far behind I got lost. I was sitting on the sidewalk, crying, and a lady came out and took me in the house. She was so nice. She gave me some toys to play with. I felt a little strange, because I didn't know her and I didn't know where I was. She took care of me till Daddy came for me after work. I was mystified how he knew where to come. It took me years to figure that out. She must have had a telephone, but I didn't know what telephones were.

"When I was a little older, I was riding on the train one day. In those days the coaches were old, funny things. You pulled the windows open to get some air. There was a bottle of some kind of soda on the window. Maybe it was root beer. Root beer was very big. We used to make it. I loved it! I left my seat for a moment. When I came back, the root beer was gone. I think that was my first experience with a little bit of paranoia. Who did that? I looked from face to face. I thought about it for several years, and finally realized that it just fell out the window."

"Oh, those train windows were so hard to open," I said.

"Yes they were," she said.

"And the trains were sooty!"

She said, "I often wonder how we kept ourselves clean. But we did.

"I was a happy child in spite of everything. Basically, I think, because my mother had already established the main principles of my character. My mother was musical and she used to sing, 'You need sympathy.' She played piano, I don't know how well. But she had her own piano, which was her pride and joy. I think that's where the music came from mostly. My daddy sang. They all sang, though not professionally. They say your character is pretty firmly set by the time you're five. I still remember things of when I was two."

Her mother took seriously ill when Norma was four. She remembers her lying in a coma in a hospital bed set up in what we would now call the living room but in those days they called the parlor, a word descended from the French verb *to speak* and meaning a place for conversation. Her mother fell into a coma, and died in August. The bed was replaced by a coffin. The child watched as men carried it out. Afterwards she asked:

"Where did they take Mama?"

She was told: "To heaven, with God."

And she said, "Where's heaven?" and they said, "Up there."

"I can remember that," she said, "and writing my first lyric. I don't remember singing before that. I was sitting on the floor. Everything that was happening was so traumatic that I remember it vividly. I made up a lyric to that song called *Melody of Love*: "Mama's gone to dreamland on the train." That was my first lyric. Something inside made me feel not only sad but comforted, in a releasing kind of way.

"After that I began to look up at the clouds and look for Mama."

Four months or so after her mother died, her father built a roaring fire against the night's cruel cold. He and his children went to bed. She remembers sitting on her father's bed when her brother Millford came running into the room to say the house was on fire. The family fled the house in whatever clothes they were wearing into a swirling blizzard. The temperature was 35 below zero. Volunteer firemen arrived, threw furniture out the doors and windows, and poured water into the house, as well as the scattered furniture.

The family spent the next nights with friends. And soon her father was paying attention to Min Schaumberg, who had been her sister Della's nurse. She was kind and friendly to Norma. That ended the moment Min married Ole Egstrom. The child was immediately put to work. She remembers standing on a box washing dishes when she was five years old. Min began beating Norma and her sister Marianne for even minor offenses. Norma would never understand why her father married her in the first place.

Then her father was demoted by the railway, possibly because of his drinking, and posted as the station-master at Nortonville. "We moved from Jamestown to Nortonville when I was six," she told me during one of our countless conversations. "When we moved out of Jamestown, we got into the old world. No electricity, no gas. Just kerosene lamps and candles, then gas lamps. Nortonville was only a hundred and twenty-five people, 28 miles south of Jamestown. It was an entirely different kind of life. The town, frame houses, was made up partly of farm people and partly people just living there. We had animals to raise, two cows, a Guernsey named Billy and a Jersey named Sally. A lot of chickens, and a dog named Peggy.

"I saw a tremendous amount of violence, and sadness, and later on I could always understand about singing the blues.

"I used to find Indian mounds 'way, 'way back out. I'd sit there and cry, because I knew they'd fought there. But I hadn't been to school enough to even know, so I must have known it intuitively. I found things like arrowheads and tomahawks. Just the heads, the handles were gone. Relics. I think because of Mother, and because I was looking for God, the mounds signified to me that Mama had gone to heaven with God. I was always trying to see Mama's face peeking out over the clouds. And looking off into the far, far horizon, wondering what was out there. There were very few trees or anything."

One of her closest friends was a boy named Everold Jordan, called Ebbie. One day when they were out picking beans, they saw a car half hidden in long grasses. It looked like that of a man they knew. When they approached it, they saw him dead in a cloud of flies in the front seat. Apparently he had been there for days, in severe August heat, and he was well along in decay. He had rigged

a pipe from the exhaust into the car. No one ever found out why.

"We were in between eight or ten. I remember that we had a friend who was also killed. He was riding along on a bicycle with a shotgun, and it went off. I remember that we went to the funeral home to visit him, and you could see all the black marks on his face.

"Ebbie and I used to ride around on this wonderful old plow horse named Beans. I think he was a Belgian percheron. He was so big that you almost couldn't fall off. Ebbie had another horse. He was riding it one day, and the horse stepped in a gopher hole and threw Ebbie over his head and fell on him and crushed him."

Ebbie died.

"You saw a lot of death," I said.

"Yes, I did. I didn't make the connection when I was little, but now I believe we go on, I believe we live in another dimension where we're free of the physical encumbrances of this existence.

"Some of these remembrances are getting dimmer now, which is what I want them to do.

"I used to look at the horizon, and I suppose I felt a little like Columbus, wanting to find out what was beyond it. Something in me knew that I would be going out there, and I would find it, whatever it was. I knew because of the radio, that there was music, and there were other cities . . . .

"I can't remember *not* singing. They told me that I hummed instead of cooed. Later, music always saw me through things. All kinds of things. When I'd go out after the cows, or clean the separator, or scrub the floors, do the laundry, hang it on the clothesline, I would sing all the time and keep myself happy.

"I used to wash clothes until my knuckles were red, using Fels Naptha soap."

"I remember Fels Naptha," I said. "Did you use a scrubbing board?"

"Oh yes! And I remember the old washing machines, the wooden ones, with a handle that pumped back and forth. It didn't go around like a crank.

"I was alone most of the time, and singing took me through all my daydreams that would later come true. I didn't realize that this was visualizing.

"I was hearing Count Basie and Bennie Moten from Kansas City. Those were my true roots. In first grade, in Jamestown, we had a little rhythm band. It always fascinated me that I could keep time. And a lot of them couldn't. To have your hands the right distance, so that when you clap, they come together at the right time. I used to look around at everyone and think, 'I wonder why they can't do that.'

"I used to hear music in my head, in my mind. I still do."

She showed an aptitude for learning songs, memorizing lyrics on one hearing. "I must have been picking them up off the radio. We had a Victrola with a crank, and those Edison cylinders. I played it in Jamestown, before we moved to Nortonville. I learned, 'When the red red robin goes bob-bob-bobbin' along, along, there'll be no more sobbin' when he starts throbbin' his own sweet song. Wake up, wake up, you sleepy head. Get up, get up, get outa bed, the sun is red. Live, love, laugh and be happy.'"

The song was brand new: it came out in 1926.

"Music has never stopped being a consolation to me," she said.

"The first airplane I saw was when I was eight years old, I think. The trains we knew are gone now. The pot-bellied Benjamin Franklin stoves, and the coal ranges with the flat tops, the oven on the right and the water heater on the left. And the crystal sets. We didn't have electricity in Nortonville until I was ten years old. My maternal grandfather, who came to live with us when he was losing his sight, used to tell me about the Indians, and Custer, and Calamity Jane, and all those people.

"I used to be fascinated by the striped caps the railway engineers and brakemen wore. They had trains they called specials. They had a school bus, and a model A ford on railroad wheels, and they ran on the tracks. That was for carrying mail.

"I had a fierce, fierce allegiance to that railroad. Later on, when I was editor of the high-school paper, people would laugh at the Midland Continental Railroad. I would defend it in the paper. I would get so angry, because I thought of all those wonderful dear things that train did. Like, a mother was going to have to go to a hospital or something. She would stand by the track, and the train would stop for her and take her to the nearest hospital.

"It was a big event to see that train go by every day. It was something to break up the flatness of the prairie, that everlasting flatness.

"Along came the various cars, the Model T, the Model A, the V-8, the Essex, the Studebaker, the Hudson Terraplane, the Packard.

"Finally we got the big prop planes. The airlines wiped out all the railroads where I lived. The Superchief is gone.

"Then we went on to the jet, the 747s, global travel, the Concorde, then to the moon. This has all been in our lifetime."

Like many very bright children — she skipped third grade — she didn't think she was. "I thought I was stupid. Spelling was my favorite subject, and the roots of words. I had a photographic memory. I didn't have to study anything. That made it so pleasurable for me. I could look at something and see it. It still helps me. I loved history. I loved reading about the Indians and the Pilgrims. Geography, I loved it, but I couldn't get it in my head."

She had a deep love of animals, which she would never lose. One of them was for a stray dog she took in and named Rex. "Rex was beautiful," she said. "He had amber eyes. He was my object of love.

"There was a pack of hounds. I don't know what family owned them. They went after Rex. I remember carrying him, bloodied, up into my little room, and I tried to care for him. He thumped his tail and he died. The ground was frozen, and I couldn't dig a hole for him. So I laid him down under the railway bridge and found some old army blankets and fastened them over him with rocks,

until the spring, when the ground thawed, and I buried him. I used to go down and visit him once in a while, say hello, cry. I missed him a lot. I had to be about eight years old.

"When I was a little older, I saw an advertisement in a paper or catalogue that said if you sold Cloverleaf salve, you'd get a diamond watch. So I sent away for it. They would sell you, say, twelve cans of this salve. You would sell that, and they would write to you and say, 'You have now sold so many cans, and if you sell another twelve, now you will really get the diamond watch. You almost made the mark but you didn't quite.' It was a come-on. Of course," she said, laughing, "I never got the diamond watch, but I certainly sold a lot of salve.

"I believe that, subconsciously, I always had a desire to show Min that I was going to be like my mother. And I refused to call her Mother. In fact, she beat me for not doing it. The most I would every say was Mom, then made a bargain with myself that that didn't mean anything to me. Just so I wouldn't get beaten. But I would never call her Mother or Mama. Isn't it funny how we will make little deals with ourselves?

"That led me into an avid pursuit of studying in Bible school. That was allowed. I could take the train to Jamestown from Nortonville and go to Bible school, even though I couldn't quite believe the things they were teaching. It was a German Lutheran church, and I later heard that the pastor was a Nazi and a bund leader.

"I was sort of at the head of my class, because of two things. One, I was finding out where my Mama went. The other was that it took me away from Min for a day or two and I wouldn't get those beatings. I went maybe once a week, but not every week.

"My stepmother's home was fairly nice, and so was the rest of her family. The grandfather was all tied up with Hitler. He used to get newspapers from Germany and they would tell about this man coming up and getting the people all excited. I told him it was wrong. I knew that there was something evil about that man. I find that a little interesting for a child of ten in North Dakota to know that that was an evil man. I *knew* it."

Min's depredation's continued. She would hit Norma over the head with a cast-iron skillet, beat her with a razor strap, claw her with fingernails, drag her around by her hair, and shake her confidence by telling her that her head was too small. "She was always doing a number about my hands," she said. "That they were too big. I'm still self-conscious about my hands. I force myself to forget it when I perform. And when I used to do the Revlon shows, they always took close-ups of my hands.

"A lot of things happened between the ages of eight and twelve. One of them was knowing that I would be a singer. I just knew it. There was no buildup to it. There wasn't anyone I saw and thought, 'That's what I want to be.' I just knew it. I do remember that it always felt comforting, and somehow cleansing, to sing. I'd go out to get the cows or something, especially early mornings. This is when I worked on other farms. We didn't live on a farm. In summertime until harvest, I would work with other people.

"When I had a particularly hard day's work — when I worked for other people, sometimes I cooked for 30 men — I would start a big daydream, and I'd work my way through it during the work. My biggest daydream was that one day I'd be famous, and I'd have a big car, and I would buy all these wonderful gifts, and I'd fill the car with them, and go and get my brothers and sisters. This was after they'd left Nortonville. I'd see them in my daydreams and say, 'This is for you,' and they would be fabulous things, and they would be so happy, and I would be so happy.

"I didn't know how I was going to get there. I couldn't imagine. Why is it so hard to get away from nothing? I would look out at this vast expanse of flat land. There wasn't any mountain climbing going on there!

"I used to talk to animals. I was really talking to God, wasn't I? The first conversation with God I remember was under a tree, and I remember it gave me so much comfort and courage. That always kept me sort of happy. Love is included, and wisdom, and strength, and principle. I didn't know all of that then, of course. But I realized later that that was what I was learning, and that kept me happy.

"I'd sing in the fields and I'd talk to the trees. I talked and lived with animals a great deal. I wore overalls all the time. Little girls didn't wear jeans then. I was barefoot all summer. I stepped on nails and stones. The bottoms of my feet abscessed. I lanced my own feet with my Daddy's razor. And then I tied bread and milk poultices on them. There were no doctors.

"All that time I only wanted to sing. There was one movie star who used to fascinate me, and that was Clara Bow, the It Girl. I think I was caught by that catch phrase, It Girl. And I saw a double bill at the Nortonville town hall, Ginger Rogers in *The Thirteenth Chair* and Al Jolson in *The Jazz Singer.*

"When I had appendicitis, the nearest doctor was 18 miles away at Edgely. Later, after the operation, when I came home, Min kicked me in the stomach and opened the stitches.

"This time I thought I should tell my father. Again it was blizzard. We had lots of those. So Daddy really got into it with Min. She started beating him. She knocked him on the floor and broke a rib. She chased us both out the door with a poker. I had one overshoe. I remember Daddy saying, 'Leave it there, don't go back.' So I went with no overshoe into the blizzard. He took me to the house of some people named Bucholtz and they locked me into their house. They slipped table knives into the doorjamb to lock it. They used several, and they kept it that way for three days.

"Even the men in Nortonville were afraid of Min, and the people in the town were strong and sturdy Nordic stock.

"Daddy went back to the railroad office. Min met him down there. She missed me cleaning the house and doing all the work. So she promised faithfully she wouldn't do it any more. That's always such an empty promise with people that are cruel like that. I think somewhere in their minds they hope it might be true, but

I think they also know that it's not going to be true. So Daddy came back and said she'd promised. I went back. It started again the next day."

In 1934, the railway transferred the family to a slightly larger town, Wimbledon. In the winter Norma would haul coal into the station and stoke its fires, and part of the time she ran the depot. She was now fourteen, and she was singing such songs as *Moonglow* and *In My Solitude*. Then a young man, a college student named Doc Haines, played Wimbledon with a band he led. Somehow she got him to hire her to sing with his band in Valley City.

"I would get a ride with a bread truck to sing with them," she said. "Then I got a radio program on KLVC." In our age of disc-jockeys and pre-recorded radio, it is hard to remember, and the young don't even know, that radio stations in those days generated their own music, hiring local musicians and singers. Radio was a vast and superb training ground for talent. "I don't remember anything else I did there," she said. "Doc paid me fifty cents a night. And then the most money I'd ever made was for that sponsored radio program. It was for a restaurant. I got five dollars and all I could eat."

The moment she finished high school, she left home and, in Jamestown, got a place of her own, in the corner of a basement, with a bed and an orange crate. In those Depression days, wooden orange crates were common items of furniture, sometimes painted, sometimes skirted with cloth. Stood on end, the crates were used for storage, or as bookshelves.

She sang on radio station KRMC, and then a friend arranged an audition for her on WDAY, the largest station in Fargo, a hundred miles from Jamestown. Terrified, she faced her opportunity. The station manager, a man named Ken Kennedy, summoned a pianist, presumably the station's staff pianist. With his accompaniment, she sang *These Foolish Things*. Kennedy hired her; indeed, he put her on the air that very afternoon. Such was radio in those days.

She returned to Jamestown, packed her few belongings, and left for Fargo, where she rented a room in a girls' boarding house and found several jobs. She wrapped bread in a bakery for 35 cents an hour from 4 p.m. until 4 a.m. She would go to bed about 5:30 a.m. and sleep till 9. Then she would shower and dress and hurry to WDAY and rehearse for its *Noonday Variety Show*, for each of which she was paid $1.50. Ken Kennedy, who obviously liked her, sometimes arranged for her to read commercials at 50 cents a line.

She worked briefly as a waitress in a Greek restaurant, wrote commercials for a local jeweler, played a character named Freckled Face Gertie on a show called *Hayloft Jamboree*, and did some filing work at WDAY.

"One day I was singing, in this glass-enclosed studio," she remembered. "I sang some up tune. I finished and said, 'Yeah!' That may not sound like anything now. But I said to myself, 'If you ever do anything like that again, I'm going to flog you.' And I never did. Always after that I was very careful about what I'd say at the end of a song or the end of anything. It had better be funny, or loving, or touching. But it can never be phony."

She would always remember Ken Kennedy: tall, with reddish hair and a dimpled chin. He did more than give her an opportunity to sing regularly. Evidently foreseeing, if only dimly, the career ahead of her, he said, "You have to change your name. Norma Egstrom doesn't sound right. 'Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Norma Egstrom!' No, that won't do at all. Let me see. You look like a Peggy. Peggy Lynn? No — Peggy Lee!

"That's it: 'Ladies and gentlemen, Miss Peggy Lee!'"

A friend named Gladys Rasmussen who had moved to California urged her to join her there. Still dreaming of the cities and songs over the far horizon, she began telling friends she was going to go. She was certain her father would withhold his permission. To her surprise, he gave it, and even got her a pass on the railway. Now she had no choice but to go: it was a matter of her word. She sold her graduation watch for 30 dollars to her landladies in Fargo. Either it was a very good watch or her landladies were very generous. She was seventeen.

A masher tried to make time with her on the train; a Mormon woman protected her and took her sight-seeing in Salt Lake City, telling her when she left to come back, if things didn't work out in California, and stay with her family.

When Norma reached Los Angeles she had eighteen dollars. She shared a room with Gladys Rasmussen, worked for a while as a waitress in Balboa, improbably became a barker at a place called FunZone, then got a job singing at a Chinese restaurant called the Jade on Hollywood Boulevard. One night a customer offered to drive her home, but instead and over her protests took her to a sleazy club in downtown Los Angeles. Another man moved into their booth and as her abductor got drunker, said, "I'm going to get you out of here." But as they tried to leave, the drunk roused himself and started a fight with her protector who, fortunately, won it. He took her to his car and, when they had left the area, told her she had barely missed disappearing forever into the world of white slavery. He left her at her rooming house. She never learned his name.

She made only two dollars a night at the Jade and, finally, ill, decided to go home. She lived with her sister Marianne, who was supporting their siblings, in Hillsboro, North Dakota. Then she moved back to Fargo. Her mentor Ken Kennedy introduced her to the family who owned the Powers Hotel and Coffee Shop. They gave her a job singing for $15 a week, and she moved her siblings to Fargo to live with her.

With Peggy Lee, as she was now known, as their singer, the Powers Hotel was attracting audiences. The rival hotel, grandly called Le Chateau, hired a singer from Minneapolis to compete with her. Instead of competing, they became very close friends and would remain so for life. The singer's name was Jane Larrabee, but professionally she was known as Jane Leslie. Some years later,

Peggy would introduce her to jazz critic and songwriter Leonard Feather, and she would marry him.

Again Ken Kennedy affected Peg's life. He told her he thought he could get her a job singing with a band led by his cousin, Sev Olson, in Minneapolis. Jane by then had returned to Minneapolis. Peg auditioned for Olson and made the move to the bigger city, living in what seemed to her wanton luxury at the Radisson Hotel. Then the Will Osborne band came to town. Osborne auditioned and hired her, and she went on the road. In St. Louis she fell ill again and underwent a tonsillectomy. While she was in the hospital, the Osborne band broke up, and she drove to California with the band's manager and pianist. She was welcomed by her old friends at the Jade, and met a lyricist named Jack Brooks (who wrote *Ole Buttermilk Sky* with Hoagy Carmichael). He recommended her for a job at a Palm Springs restaurant called the Doll House. There she was heard by a couple named Freddie and Lois Mandel, of Chicago. Freddie Mandel owned Mandel's department store in Chicago and, as well, the Detroit Tigers. Impressed by her singing, they arranged for Frank Bering to hear her. Bering and a partner owned the Ambassador East and West hotels in Chicago. Bering hired her to sing in the Buttery at the Ambassador West.

"I called Janey or I sent her a wire," she remembered. "I think I said something about coming to Chicago right away and bringing *Wishing. Wishing* was her big number. That was our running joke.

"She came to Chicago. I was overjoyed. I hadn't eaten. I didn't have any money. In fact the night before I left Los Angeles, I had my ticket but I had no money. I hadn't thought to ask for that. I remember spending the night in an all-night theater downtown, on skid row, with all the bums and smoke. I was so frightened. I had maybe a couple of dollars, but I had put it in my bra."

She laughed. "That wasn't a very good place to put it. I don't even remember having a purse."

Bering had given her rooms at the hotel.

"The hotel was beautiful," she said. "I was always impressed by carpets. Thick carpets always stood for something. I was shown to the suite. I don't know how grand it was, but to me it certainly was. Janey came in the next day, and she didn't have any money to speak of either. Her mother had sent along a box of date-filled cookies, and we lived on them for however long they lasted, maybe two or three days. And all we had to do was pick up the phone! We could have had anything under glass.

"She must have had a *little* money, because we went out once and had some kind of a dinner at a place called the Cotton Patch.

"We were living in the lap of luxury, but we weren't eating. I could have ordered room service *ad infinitum*, but I didn't. I thought I had to pay for it, and I didn't have the money. I must have been really funny, with all that extreme naivete.

"Two of the maids used to bring food in from room service — hot rolls and coffee and butter. Fifteen or twenty years later, I was there to play at the Chicago Opera House in a musical review, and I saw these two maids in the hall. They were named Iris and Tillie. Now I was a guest there. And I was going to make spaghetti for my musicians. I went to get the maids to get a knife to cut the onions or something. And there they were, and I said, 'Come on in, and let's have some coffee.' They were so sweet. They came in and sat down and I said, 'There's something I've been trying to figure out all these years.' One of them had a very Irish accent. She said, 'What was it?' I said, 'How did you know we were hungry?' And she said, 'Well, we didn't see nothin' goin' in and we didn't see nothin' comin' out. So we decided we'd better feed you.'

"The Mandels introduced me to Chicago society. They had a party for me at their house in Lake Forest. It was my first champagne, and it made me sick.

"Mlle Oppenheimer lent me gowns to perform in. I think Lois Mandel was a very good customer. And I was like a model for the clothes. I felt very elegant.

"I remember that one night an artist came in to the Buttery. He was sitting in the front row, sketching me. I had no idea that he was the famous Diego Rivera. And he did a portrait of me. But he made my bust so large that I gave it away! Oh, the fortunes I have given away!

"The audience was one big ear. It was wonderful.

"Down the street from the Ambassador West, there was a little coffee shop or something. I was sitting at a table drinking a Coke and the jukebox was playing Sinatra's *This Love of Mine*. I stopped cold. You know how it is when you hear someone and know you're always going to love their work. It plasters you up against the wall. I had no idea that I would meet him, become friends, and neighbors. I had no idea I was going to meet any of those people."

During this period she would slip over to the nightclub area of Rush Street, a short distance away, where she made friends with, among others, the drummer Baby Dodds. And she was beginning to be discovered. Glenn Miller, Claude Thornhill, Charlie Barnet, and others were coming by the Buttery to hear her. One night Benny Goodman came in with Lady Alice Duckworth, who had been married to a member of the British aristocracy. Her maiden name was Hammond. She was related to the Vanderbilts, and her brother was John Hammond, the record producer and discoverer of talent. Goodman would eventually marry her, to the eternal mystification of musicians who liked her but didn't like him.

With Goodman and Lady Duckworth was pianist Mel Powell, who was playing in and writing for the Goodman band. He was a seasoned musician; and he was eighteen years old.

Goodman was about to lose his star vocalist, Helen Forrest, to the Artie Shaw band. Peg was sure that Goodman hated her singing; he simply stared at her, his face blank, then left.

(To be continued)

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